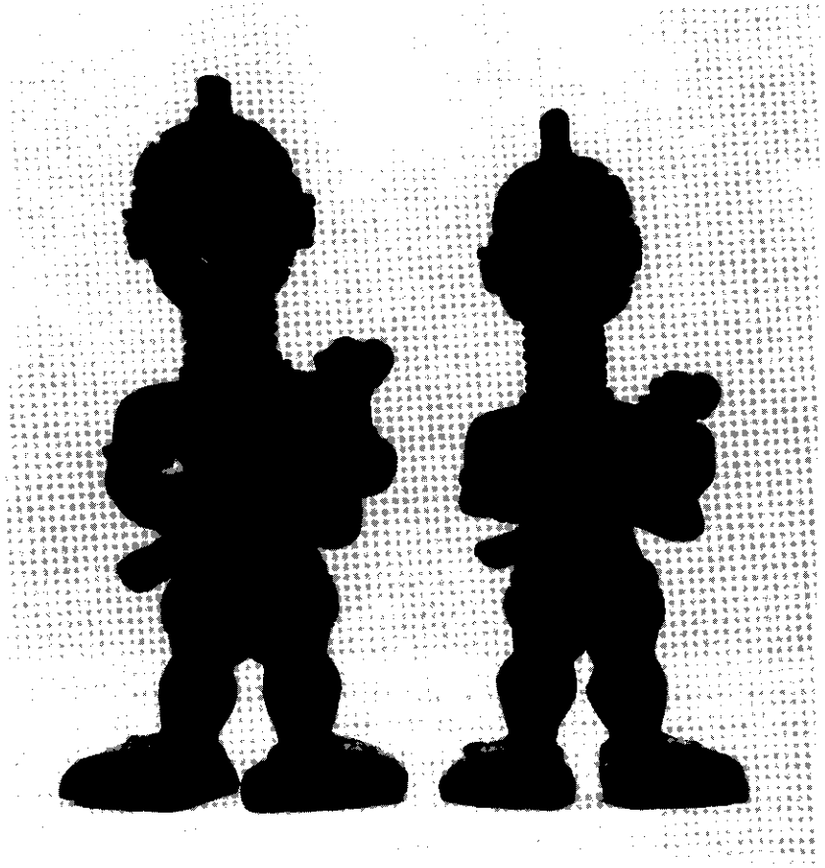

Twin Congo fertility figures carved by Sidimé Nkai, Sidimé Laye's cousin. (Photo by Elisabeth van der Heijden; courtesy of *October* magazine.)

as my mother and father used to do. May this year's rains bring us a good harvest; may we prosper and fructify; may we be protected from famine and shame at the hands of our enemies; may Africa be the continent of the new millennium. I have found Sidimé Laye. May the gods, the masks, and the statues keep us together; may our children grow up proud, self-sufficient, and generous toward the rest of the world.

SITUATION IV

HOMEBOY COSMOPOLITAN

The same transformative energy at play in Sidimé Laye's work is found in hip-hop, a transnational cultural form that started with young African Americans. Just as Sidimé Laye comes out of Sékou Touré's revolution, and just as his stubborn insistence on carving masks and statues reveals the limitations of such work, young black Americans coming out of the civil rights movement have used hip-hop culture in the 1980s and 1990s to show the limitations of that movement—its inability to satisfy the aspirations of the masses. Up to now in this book, I have been concerned with the need to overcome Afro-pessimism. In this concluding chapter, too, I would like to help change a prevailing attitude: the perception that black people and their culture are pathological.

When I moved from Philadelphia to New York in 1992, the main elements of hip-hop had already permeated the youth culture of both blacks and whites. By "hip-hop" I mean the youth culture associated with rap musicians, their dress styles, 'hood movies, and spoken-word poetry and graffiti art (Rose, 1994). It seemed to me right away that, like rock-and-roll, hip-hop was infused with rebellion and driven by the market economy. But the fundamental difference between the two movements lies in the fact that young whites have been able to coopt and dominate rock-and-roll by making it reflect their social concerns and aesthetics, while young blacks have retained financial control over hip-hop, reducing the rest of the world to consumers of its social concerns. Like rock-and-roll, hip-hop is vigorously opposed by conservatives because it romanticizes violence, lawbreakers, and gangs. To a greater extent than rock-and-

roll, however, hip-hop is criticized by feminists for its misogyny, by the Left for its black nationalistic viewpoint, and by nationalists for allowing the cutting edge of its resistance to be dulled—an edge that was associated with the early songs of the groups Public Enemy and Africa Bambata. Some denounce it for promoting violence and misogyny; others, for falling away from the ideals of the civil rights struggle.

Still, I was uneasy when I saw the convergence of attacks against hip-hop by otherwise oppositional camps. After all, the late twentieth century places a premium value on systems with the potential for globalization. Rap music, and other forms of entertainment which were packaged as hip-hop ('hood movies, homeboy fashion, basketball), were assuming a dominant place in the world market, challenged only by Hollywood blockbuster films, their accompanying toy industry, and computers and other tools of the information highway. Hip-hop also created and maintained a heroic space for the wretched of the earth, which should have endeared its message to leftists and others concerned with issues of human rights.

The packaging of hip-hop as a commodity in the marketplace, and the worldwide spread of hip-hop as a market revolution, are an expression of poor people's desire for the good life. It seems to me that the search for the good life not only is in keeping with the nationalist struggle for citizenship and belonging, but also reveals the need to go beyond such struggles and celebrate the redemption of the black individual through tradition.

Thus, the unrelenting criticism of hip-hop from the Left, the Right, feminists, and nationalists kept me wondering about W. E. B. Du Bois's powerful indictment of Western society, when he stated that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line. The convergence of these attacks on black people through attacks on hip-hop and the attempts to remove it from the marketplace are symptomatic of the problems that the twentieth century has had with race. They are scarcely justified by the sexism and dehumanization that characterize certain segments of hip-hop culture.

After all, Hollywood action movies, the information highway, and the toy industry are equally sexist and dehumanizing, yet they have not provoked nearly as much protest and indignation from civil society and the state. Indeed, President Ronald Reagan liked to compare himself with Rambo, one of the antisocial, lawbreaking, macho protagonists of the blockbuster action films of the 1980s. Furthermore, gangster rap, as the

name indicates, inherited its sexist attitudes and dehumanizing violence from such films as *The Godfather*. Why do we still consider action flicks and computers as valuable commodities, yet try to exclude hip-hop from the marketplace?

Perhaps the answer to this question will get us beyond Du Bois's dictum, which seems to have prefigured and determined most of the discussions, policies, and events involving black people in the twentieth century. But first, let's look at one method that young blacks use to escape the Du Boisian dilemma and the trap of racial immanence—their exclusion from all social roles not conventionally associated with blackness. I call this method "homeboy cosmopolitanism," and have observed it most closely in my neighborhood of Greenwich Village in New York City.

The physical mobility of young blacks, which is aimed at removing obstacles to black Americans' pursuit of material wealth and pleasure, has been represented in the media as pathological and a menace to society. At the same time, residents in predominantly white urban areas tend to be suspicious of young blacks who move into their neighborhoods, viewing them as homeless loafers, drug dealers, and felons of other sorts whose presence brings down property values. In 1993, white residents of Greenwich Village, in order to curtail the influx of hip-hop culture, began linking the fluid activism and *flâneur* styles of homeboys to whites' received notions of criminals and drug dealers.

An August cover story in *New York Magazine*, "The Village under Siege," invoked racial stereotypes to scare naive white people and to justify militarizing the police so as to stop the free movement, strolling, and shopping of young blacks and Latinos in the Village. The cover of the magazine was itself revealing. The camera had been placed in front of the arch in Washington Square Park; the World Trade Center towers and other downtown skyscrapers were illuminated in the background, and a dark Washington Square Park occupied the middle ground. The arch was enlivened with colored lights: its top was green, and its bottom, where the statues of George Washington stood, was ivory. The name of Michael Gross, the author of the article, was printed in red in the middle of the cover. The play of red, green, and white on the dark middle ground of the illustration suggested the fear of what Gross called "other urban pathologies": the menace of darkness against civilization—or, simply put, the fear of black men. In the article, Gross stated that a "battle for a civil Village" was being waged. The residents "are afraid of the drug dealers who set up

shop in the streets around Washington Square Park. They're afraid of the hip-hoppers from outer-borough neighborhoods whose urban update on *American Graffiti* finds them cruising the Village streets in expensive cars fitted out with trunk-mounted speakers blasting rap music" (Gross, 1993: 32).

Gross concluded by invoking the image of a war zone in which New York's police force prevailed over the intruding homeboys. He celebrated the militarization of the police: "The last word this evening belongs to the cops of the Sixth [Precinct]. A few moments before, I'd left a whole roomful of them singing the stirring Wagner passage that Francis Coppola used as music for the helicopter assault in *Apocalypse Now*" (37). Gross described the young blacks and Latinos as "denizens of rap culture" and characterized them as street peddlers, vagrants, drug dealers, armed robbers, and people who defecated and urinated on the sidewalks.

Gross left out the fact that white youths from New Jersey had always converged in the Village to drink beer in the streets and occasionally urinate on the sidewalks. He also avoided mentioning young blacks' consumer habits, which at that time accounted for the most energetic cultural life in the Village. Had Gross considered the way in which they diffused hip-hop culture through clothing styles, street art, basketball in the parks, and multiculturalism in this predominantly white enclave of the city, the homeboys' image would have been quite different in his article.

By the summer of 1993, black youth culture was becoming quite visible in the Village. Every afternoon there were vibrant gatherings of homeboys around parks, stores, restaurants, vending stands, and subway stations between Sixth Avenue and Broadway. It became clear that stores like Tower Records, the Wiz, Footlocker, the Gap, and Urban Outfitters, restaurants such as BBQ, the convenient subway stops, and the basketball courts were doing more to attract young blacks and Latinos to the Village than the drug dealers and the incense vendors. Young Asians and whites also came dressed like homeboys to participate in the strolling and to take back new sounds, slang, and styles to the suburbs.

Consumption around these new public focal points made the Village a battleground for integration and multiculturalism, to the dismay of property-owning residents. The shops tailored their merchandise to the tastes of the hip-hop generation. Stores and restaurants owned by new immigrants were proliferating, and were transforming the baby boomer culture of the Village. The traditional book peddlers were replaced by black vendors

who were savvy not only about hip-hop culture but about the black intellectual tradition, from Du Bois to Malcolm X. Usually, in front of the NYU library one could buy Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* and *Siddhartha,* or Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Now the Sixth Avenue vendors were displaying the latest works by Cornel West and bell hooks, *The Isis Papers* by Dr. Frances Cress Wesling, and a slew of books describing conspiracies against black people. One such vendor, who told me his name was Hakim, engaged his customers in discussions not only about the content of each book, but also about the plight of black intellectuals, the Senate hearings involving Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, and the topics of conferences held at NYU. Hakim and other vendors carried works that could not be found in neighboring bookstores like St. Marks, Shakespeare, and Barnes and Noble. They also provided homeboys interested in political and social issues with the latest gossip and theories about antiblack actions taken at City Hall, Columbia University, City College, and NYU.

Hakim's relations with the people strolling along Sixth Avenue revealed other characteristics of the homeboys. He was a book vendor and street intellectual who considered Sixth Avenue, from Bleecker to Eleventh Street, as his turf. He thus knew all the store owners, newcomers, old people, and cops (which of them were good and which were bad). He knew the political differences between the former mayor and the current one, and how these could affect the homeless, the homeboys, and black people in general on Sixth Avenue. He had definite opinions about black intellectuals—which ones were saying things that were relevant to the lives of black people in the city, and which were not, and were therefore simply selected by the white press to maintain the status quo against the homeless and the homeboys. He was convinced that Rudolph Giuliani had been elected mayor to "clean up" the city, which meant that all the homeless and homeboys would soon disappear from Sixth Avenue.

Hakim was the type of professional conspirator who reminded me of what Paris must have been like in the *feuilleton* era, in the nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin described the *flâneur,* one of the types of professional conspirators in Paris at the time, as an unwilling detective with artistic sensibilities: "He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant . . . He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist" (Benjamin, 1983: 41).

Hakim often said that he had many powerful lawyer friends in the

neighborhood. He constantly looked left and right before talking to people who stopped by his table. He was fond of introducing people to each other by stating that so-and-so was an author, a lawyer, or a professor. He wanted to go back to school at NYU, to take a law degree or a master's in sociology. He addressed me as "Professor Diawara," and told me about his most recent intervention to stop unlawful harassment of black and Latino youths by the police in the Village. He said that something had to be done, because all these blacks and Latinos were coming to the Village and they did not know their rights.

Hakim was also a race man, devoting his life to the uplift of his people. Not only did he address me as "Professor Diawara," but he always spoke in proper English, and never cursed or used an ungrammatical sentence in front of me. He had read every book on his table, and used to tell me how ashamed he was of some of the black authors, whose knowledge and scholarship left a lot to be desired. Hakim read the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* and all the book review magazines. He followed with great interest the creation of Harvard's "dream team" of black professors by Henry Louis Gates Jr. He used to ask me whether Robin D. G. Kelley or Michael Eric Dyson was coming to teach at NYU, and if we too were going to create our "dream team." But Hakim reserved his harshest criticism for the Afrocentrists at City College. He did not believe that they were interested in scholarship or that they cared about the real problems facing black people in America. Every once in a while, he would interrupt our conversation to tell me that Stanley Crouch, or bell hooks, or Derrick Bell had recently stopped by his stand.

I began to see the Village through Hakim's eyes. I came to understand, for example, how consumerism related to political activism among young people in the Village. For me, as for Hakim, police actions came to seem a form of aggression by the state against civil society. I realized that the only reason *New York Magazine* and the landlords of the Village were siding with the police was that the youths in question were black and Latino. The young people coming to the Village as *flâneurs*—dudes who dressed up to be seen, and to see themselves being admired by others—were enjoying the black good life: a freedom and energy associated with individual fulfillment that had been denied black people, in spite of the gains of the civil rights movement and integration. The Village provided secular spaces for pleasure—spaces that no longer existed in the homeboys' neighborhoods and that had to be conquered.

After *New York Magazine* published Gross's article, my black students at NYU who wore dreadlocks and dressed like homeboys often complained of police harassment. One day, my class on Pan-Africanism was discussing the police's attempts to keep blacks out of the Village. A student with dreadlocks reported that his claim to be an NYU student had been disputed by a policeman. The class then talked for a long time about activism and civil rights, with particular reference to the right to shop and stroll in the Village.

Of course, Greenwich Village has always been considered a gathering place for young people and a haven for avant-garde cultures. Students at NYU, the largest private university in New York City, often intersect with these youth cultures, even participate in them. Compared to people living in other neighborhoods, residents of the Village have traditionally been more willing to embrace youth culture—in spite of the noise it brings, and the seemingly messy and disorderly behavior—because of the vitality that characterizes lifestyles on the cutting edge. New trends are often tested in the Village, where they are either rejected or turned into fashions for the rest of the world to follow. Hip-hop culture, too, is helping to shape the phantasmagoria of life in Greenwich Village.

In 1993 the homeboy look was popular among black, Asian, and white students at NYU. It consisted of a loose shirt, oversized jeans, dreadlocks or a haircut called the "fade," and a baseball cap; a small radio–cassette player with headphones was an essential accessory. Having just arrived at NYU, I was afraid that my white colleagues would subscribe to the stereotype of black masculinity presented in the *New York Magazine* article and would dismiss the homeboys as drug dealers and lawbreakers. At that time, hip-hop was the most important multicultural youth movement in America. The fact that it was being spearheaded by young blacks did not make it less American or less appropriate for the Village. My criticism of the *New York Magazine* article here is intended to persuade people to take a closer look at this youth movement, so that they can distinguish the creative members from those that stagnate, the homeboys from the drug dealers.

The artistic philosophy of hip-hop is reflexive. It produces laughter through ironic and parodic re-representation of black history and desire from a black point of view. It is as if every image in hip-hop were a retelling of the story of Cain and Abel from Cain's point of view. The "in your face" retelling of the original story with bright colors and laughter nullifies the discursive elements that once kept the black image in captivity.

Since the rise of the hip-hop movement, the word "homeboy" has acquired new currency in popular culture, influencing the meaning of maleness among black and white youth. The image of the homeboy constitutes a shift of the stereotype of black maleness from the margin to the center—from crude criminals in the ghetto to cosmopolitan *flâneurs* and MTV trendsetters. One can see, then, how hip-hop's re-thematization of the myth of Cain has enabled the emergence of new and complex characters, such as Easy Rawlins in Walter Mosley's mystery novels, Doughboy in John Singleton's film *Boyz N the 'Hood,* and new styles and behaviors engendered by the music of Public Enemy, KRS One, and Wu Tang Clan and by the films of Spike Lee and other directors.

The Homeboy and the Myth of Cain

The story of Cain and Abel in the Book of Genesis is interesting because Cain's character is associated not only with fratricide and eternal sin, but also with eternal mobility, invention, and self-fashioning. Yahweh tells Cain that death will be crouching at his door, always ready to catch him. Cain flees from the vicinity of Eden to the distant land of Nod and becomes the first founder of cities. Yet the Bible warns us that there is no peace to be found in cities, because they will never come near the perfection of the City of God. As Saint Paul says, "There is no permanent city for us here. We are looking for the one which is yet to be" (Hebrews, 13:14). Finally, the Bible says that Cain is an angry man, envious of Abel for being the focus of Yahweh's esteem. He is out for revenge.

Writers like Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin have already linked this image of the cursed Cain to modernity and modernism. In Benjamin's view, "Cain, the ancestor of the disinherited, appears as the founder of a race, and this race can be none other than the proletariat" (Benjamin, 1983: 22). He also links Cain's passion for revenge to heroic acts against the race of Abel—the race that, as Baudelaire puts it in "Le vin du chiffonnier," eats and sleeps in peace.

I, too, wish to claim Cain—claim him for the black race, in order to contribute to the Marxist rereading of the story of Cain and Abel, and, in the process, remove blackness from the captivity of negative signs. The resemblance between the situation of Cain and that of black males in American society also helps explain why hip-hop culture creates rebellious art forms that combat racism, calls for more options in life for blacks, and

demands the right for blacks to live in peace as individuals in the city. The myth of Cain is a powerful metaphor for the way relations between blacks and whites are represented in the media. In the American imagination, no figure is as evocative of Cain—condemned to be a wanderer and a pariah—as the black man, who struggles to find a home and to participate in the public sphere that whites consider their private property.

It is no exaggeration to say that the modern city has replaced Eden and that the black man has been indelibly marked by the curse of Cain. The image of the hip-hop generation as a group to be feared and avoided is always fixed in the mind of the nation. All young black men are equated with thugs who wear dark sunglasses, gold chains, basketball sneakers, and jeans from the Gap or Urban Outfitters; drag their feet when walking; carry knives, guns, beepers; verbally assault women as bitches, white men as motherfuckers, black men as niggers.

The homeboy's antisocial behavior supposedly justifies society's contempt for him and the police's brutal efforts to control him. The homeboy, like Cain, is reduced to mere appearance, the sum of selected formal signifiers; he is scapegoated for the current crisis in America's cities. The desire by the police and the media to control the homeboy's image keeps relations between blacks and whites at a level of tension which is always threatening to erupt. The black man is always guilty, no matter who perpetrates the crime.

It is thus one of hip-hop's cultural and artistic achievements to have redefined the homeboy. Hip-hop artists create new meanings for the image of the homeboy by providing him with functions that contradict the mainstream media's construction of him. Hip-hop culture gives aesthetic pleasure through ironic and parodic play with mainstream images of black people. It forces us to rethink how Cain and sin exist in our society, to ask who the criminal is and who the victim.

Hip-hop music, literature, and film practice an aesthetic of resistance which disarticulates the meaning of stereotypes through what I call the parodic reclaiming of the stereotype. One could actually extend the history of the re-thematization of the myth of Cain in black culture to black folklore, slave narratives, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts movement, and Blaxploitation films. It is odd that no serious effort has been made in art criticism to link the hip-hop movement to the existential morality of these earlier artistic movements, and hip-hop art to the desire for mobility, revenge, and the reappropriation of the image of black people

from racial stereotypes. The inspiration for the homeboy image itself can easily be traced to Malcolm X, who also rebelled against a tradition perceived as ineffectual, and who was a cosmopolitan homeboy in Boston and New York when jazz was a popular art form.

The Construction of Mobility in *Superfly* and *Shaft*

The film *Superfly* (1972), directed by Gordon Parks Jr., is an action-adventure movie typical of the Blaxploitation films popular in the Seventies. Centering on a drug dealer named Priest, who is seeking escape from his life of crime and degradation, the film resonates in a number of ways with the myth of Cain. Like Cain, Priest is a man toughened by his experience as prey and predator, seeking revenge and redemption at the same time. Indeed, the opening sequence of *Superfly* is extraordinary for the way it evokes Cain's envy and resentment of the society that has disinherited and abandoned him. The camera work and the soundtrack help create a magnificent narrative of romantic loneliness and heroism.

The opening shot is a bird's-eye view of a street corner in Harlem, which will later be identified as the intersection of 125th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. The camera zooms in slowly, in order to focus on two men meeting on the crowded street corner. One asks, "Did you get it?" The other answers, "No! She wouldn't give it to me." The first man says he hadn't expected her to hand over the money, so he's come up with a second option—and this time he intends to do things his own way. He ends by saying, "You hear me, nigger!" At this point, Curtis Mayfield's song "Little Child, Running Wild" comes on the soundtrack. The two men walk down 125th Street in rhythm with the music, as if they were listening to it. Thus, the music serves right away to naturalize the existence of people at the corner of 125th Street.

The camera follows the men at a distance, from the other side of the street. They pass by cigar shops, clothing stores, a Florsheim shoe store, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and peddlers on the crowded street, before coming to a garbage dump, fenced lots, and abandoned buildings. Men who look like drug dealers are hanging about, and scary people are lurking in the doorways. The two men enter one of the buildings and go down a dark hallway; the camera follows them inside until the screen turns completely black. It then fades to an extreme close-up of a man's hairy chest, on which rests a gold chain with a crucifix pendant. As the camera pulls

back, we see a pensive man reclining in bed with a naked white woman. The camera tilts up a bit to frame the man's face in a tight medium close-up, which indicates that he has been thinking and that the previous street scene was filmed from his point of view. He snorts some cocaine with his crucifix pendant, and gets up to dress and to leave.

The soundtrack, meanwhile, has been describing the meaning of street life in Harlem and the philosophy of the pusher (drug dealer). "Little Child, Running Wild" attempts to explain the sociological significance of the images passing before our eyes. As the camera focuses on the two men walking down the street in search of their next victim, the song informs us that the world we are being introduced to is filled with broken homes, children whose fathers have run away, and mothers who are tired of raising them. They are all alone, kind of sad, kind of mad, thinking that they've "been had." They constantly feel the pain of abandonment and betrayal, which they try to take away with drugs. As the camera moves along the street, we are introduced to several characters who look like drug dealers, before we get to the man in the bed. We know by then how dangerous the pusher is. "Finance is all he understands," according to the song.

But the pensive image of Priest, the man in the bed, shows that he is not like the other pushers. He identifies with his victims, and in fact considers himself a victim, too. His victim status is confirmed when he leaves the apartment of his white girlfriend in Greenwich Village and finds the police towing away his car. Back in Harlem, he is mugged by the two men seen previously.

I saw *Superfly, Shaft,* and other Blaxploitation films in Monrovia (Liberia) in the early Seventies. I remember being particularly struck by the opening sequence in *Superfly*—it seemed an extraordinary cinematic event. I had been living in Monrovia for almost a year, and was fascinated by the lifestyle in that West African city, which identified more with America than with Africa. People spoke English with a black American accent like the one I heard in the movies, on television (in shows like *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son*), and in rhythm-and-blues and gospel songs. The cities in Liberia have names like Virginia, Maryland, Greenville, and Harper. I lived on an avenue called Randall Street. All the people in Monrovia liked to trace their family origin to the United States. Most of my friends had already been to America at least once, or were getting ready to join a cousin, a sister, or a friend there. Some referred to America as

"home." It was in Liberia that I first learned to speak English, and developed a yearning to go to America myself one day.

The early Seventies were also a time when many black Americans visited Monrovia. Some were Black Muslims, and some were members of the Black Panthers or the Black Power Party. I was familiar to some degree with the civil rights struggle in the United States. In particular, I'd heard

My friend Yassoun Camara, a.k.a. Blanc, in his *Superfly* outfits, 1975 (left) and 1976. (Photos by Hamidou Diarra; collection of Manthia Diawara.)

about Muhammad Ali's refusal to fight in Vietnam, the incarceration of Angela Davis and the Jackson brothers for political reasons, and the defiance of Malcolm X and the Black Muslims. But I was more fascinated with the movies, the music, the hairstyles, the hats, and the leather jackets that were popular among black Americans.

Looking back now, I can see why the opening of *Superfly* had such an impact on me. First, there was what seemed to be the realism of the street scene: many people wearing leather jackets and hats, a multitude of stores full of merchandise, retail signs and advertisements, and the bustle of urban life. The fact that the street was full of black people also reinforced my identification with the scene. It reminded me of Monrovia's Broadway, where the movie theaters were located, the only difference being that the scene in *Superfly* had a lot more people and neon signs. People were also speaking nearly the same English as people in Monrovia, using expressions like "You hear me, nigger!" and "Dig it!" The focus on the meeting between the two hustlers was also important. For a moment, they were the heroes of the film, moving freely in the crowd, unafraid. I identified with them because they symbolized familiarity with the city, and therefore my own cosmopolitanism in Monrovia.

But Curtis Mayfield's song was the most significant reason for my identification with the film's opening. I was already familiar with Mayfield's work, since he'd sung with a group called the Drifters. His voice pierces one's heart and makes one feel like a warrior, or just puts one in a state of feeling invulnerable. His songs contain the right words for defining situations and images; they evoke nostalgia and create bonds between people, so as to mobilize them in the same groove. Thus, I felt praised and elevated by the song at the beginning of the film. Sitting in the movie theater, I felt enriched for a moment by Curtis Mayfield and believed that, like the two hustlers on 125th Street, I was at home in the city. For a moment, I felt that Monrovia belonged to me.

The opening sequence, to me, was better than some of my favorite spaghetti Westerns—*Once Upon a Time in the West, A Fistful of Dollars,* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.* Like them, *Superfly* was filmed in Technicolor; it was full of the kind of actions that define the loneliness of the romantic hero. But in addition to these narrative pleasures, the opening shots also made Harlem and 125th Street available to me. I already knew that the Apollo Theater, where James Brown had recorded the live versions of "Please, Please, Please!" and "It's a Man's World,"

was on 125th Street. The opening sequence, along with the songs of James Brown and Aretha Franklin, contributed to my image of Harlem as a desirable city, and of 125th Street as a locus of the black good life, mobility, and heroism.

The long takes and wide camera angles help create the powerful effects at the beginning of *Superfly.* First we see the street corner as if we were looking down on it from the top of a roof—lifelike, in color, and full of the movement of people and cars. A narrative is then created out of this shot, as the camera shifts its focus from the general street scene to zoom in on the meeting between the two men, then turns sideways to follow them in their quest. From here on, a classic linear narrative develops from one long take to another, the camera voyeuristically documenting the journey of the two men in the crowd. I say "voyeuristically" because we are introduced to Harlem by being allowed to follow two of its native sons. Finally, the editing is rhythmically motivated by Mayfield's song, which seems to generate the images the way songs do in music videos.

What I call the realism of this sequence contrasts with the abstract style of a famous scene in *Shaft* that takes place on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. Shaft meets a racist Italian at a restaurant called the Café Reggio, in order to be taken to the hotel where kidnappers are holding a woman. The Italian man is dressed like a square, in a blue suit, and cares about nothing but business. Shaft, in contrast, is relaxed and looking cool in a leather jacket—a cosmopolitan. He sits comfortably in the café and drinks a cappuccino. When Shaft and the Italian guy walk out of the café, the camera follows them from the point of view of Ben (Shaft's childhood friend) and his revolutionist gang members, who trail them. The camera peers at them from shopwindows, from inside restaurants, and out of basements. Some of the shots reveal Ben and his men looking like stalkers in the shadows; others are deliberately blurred to make the scene look weird, or as if the view is coming from behind a glass window. The soundtrack is also interesting. In its comical abstraction, it is reminiscent of the fear-inducing sound effects in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho.* But this kitsch music also accords with the cosmopolitanism of the film and its *noir* style of rendering Greenwich Village.

Although the scene in *Superfly* and this one in *Shaft* both depict mobility in the city, they made different impressions in me as a spectator in Monrovia. I identified more with the two men in the opening of *Superfly,* because the scene seemed real to me, while the MacDougal Street scene in

Shaft was more cinematic—that is, more formal, more stylized, and better structured as a pursuit scene. These formal aspects of *Shaft* had a distancing effect. Also, the fact that I didn't know Greenwich Village was a famous neighborhood in New York, comparable to Harlem, increased the feeling of distance. Curiously enough, my place in New York was being shaped along racial lines even before I left Africa. I saw myself in the opening frames of *Superfly* because Harlem and 125th Street mirrored my ideal image of Monrovia. The fact that the sequence was also accompanied by Curtis Mayfield's music, which in Monrovia was heard in nightclubs and shops and drifting out of people's windows, helped to naturalize it for me.

Now that I live in New York City, a few blocks from MacDougal Street, and teach *Superfly* and *Shaft* at New York University, I have a different reaction to both films. To my students, these films are at best corny, and at worst celebrations of black men's macho, violence, and misogyny. They also find exotic the fact that although I was living so far away and in a completely different culture, I could identify with Blaxploitation films. I think that they are to some extent right: these films are indeed symptomatic of America's cultural hegemony over the rest of the world, and bear all the negative implications of this imperialism. But my students tend to overlook the elements of empowerment and pleasure and the subversive strategies that these films, and black American culture in general, make available to people oppressed because of the color of their skin. It is also important to point out the influence of Blaxploitation films on directors like Quentin Tarantino, the Hughes brothers, Spike Lee, and John Singleton, and on actors such as Ice Cube, John Travolta, Bruce Willis, and Tupac Shakur.

What interests me today in *Superfly* is the narrative conflict between Priest and his friend Eddy, which centers around the moral satisfactions inherent in the life of a drug dealer. *Superfly,* by glorifying drug dealers as heroes, indirectly criticizes the civil rights movement for failing to provide better opportunities for people in black communities. The stigmatization of blacks as a race trapped in an urban ghetto, with drug dealers controlling their lives, is an indication of the uncompleted mission of efforts toward integration and civil rights. The film derives its moral weight from this indictment of the civil rights movement and black nationalist struggles. At the same time, it reveals to Priest the limitations of his drug-dealer lifestyle.

Priest's problems begin when he becomes conscious of his condition—his role as a commodity—and decides to change it. He is tired of

being the pusher who has irrevocably broken the social contract and forever abjured virtue and law. He no longer takes his nice clothes, his Cadillac, his abundant supply of cocaine, and his white girlfriend as signs of security and the good life. His skepticism about the indestructible power of the pusher reveals the irony of the title song: "Superfly, super cool . . . How long can a good thing last? . . . Making money all the time." Priest informs Eddy that he wants to be free of this existence; he want to be able to choose what he wants to do, and "not be forced into things." This means that he is ready for a higher level of social consciousness. He no longer wants to be the man in bondage.

Eddy, on the other hand, is less conscious of the fact that he is trapped in the ghetto, and of the role that race and class play in keeping him there. He is intoxicated with the consumer goods that his "pusher man's" trade affords him, and with which he identifies. Here is how he rationalizes his lifestyle to Priest: "You gonna give all this up? Eight-track stereo, color TV in every room, and you can snort half a piece of dope every day! That's the American dream, nigger! You better come on in, man! I know it's a rotten game. But it's the only game the man left us to play." For Eddy, this is the life. This is what he and his homeboy Priest are supposed to do, and they should enjoy it.

Priest's attempt to open Eddy's eyes to social reality and the commodified nature of their life in the ghetto reminds me of Walter Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire as a petty bourgeois. Benjamin argues that men like Baudelaire will one day become aware that they are blinded by consumerism, and will run from it. But, Benjamin continues, "the day had not as yet come. Until that day they were permitted, if one may put it this way, to pass the time. The very fact that their share could at best be enjoyment, but never power, made the period which history gave them a space for passing time. Anyone who sets out to while away time seeks enjoyment. It was self-evident, however, that the more this class wanted to have its enjoyment in this society, the more limited this enjoyment would be. The enjoyment promised to be less limited if this class found enjoyment of this society possible" (Benjamin, 1983: 59).

Priest desires precisely the kind of enjoyment that I call the black good life, which rejects the imprisoning and policing of black bodies by a racist and capitalist system. Eddy, in contrast, has learned to enjoy the ghetto; he is content to destroy other people's lives with drugs, and to be destroyed himself one day. Every one of Eddy's relationships with people contains a

measure of hurt, betrayal, and vengeance. Yet Priest understands Eddy, because he has been there, in the ghetto, with him; and he knows the power of the external forces that conspire to keep Eddy in bondage. In this sense, *Superfly,* like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* captures the real essence of the homeboy. This homeboy, too, is seeking the black good life even when his behavior is most destructive. His pleasures are simultaneously an affirmation of life and a celebration of the ritual of resistance against racism. The homeboy is someone you empathize with, someone you cannot condemn totally without sentencing yourself. Eddy's argument that this is the "only game the man left us to play" expresses the failure of integration, and the lack of opportunity for black people.

Clearly, the homeboy motif is deployed in black films in order to highlight important aspects of the black good life in America. In the first place, the motif is invoked in the spirit of fraternity—to signify the structures of feeling known to characters who share the same background, be it cultural, historical, or racial. For example, the relationship between Malcolm X and his friend Shorty transcends Malcolm's political differences with his homeboy. In fact, Malcolm cannot imagine freedom for himself without freedom for Shorty as well. The same desire to share one's success with a homeboy complicates the decisionmaking of such film characters as Priest, Shaft, Tre (in *Boyz N the 'Hood*), and Cane (in *Menace II Society*). Regardless of the political ideal, to die for one's homeboy is often a revolutionary statement in these narratives.

To look at the relation between Priest and Eddy in terms of the homeboy ethic is also to invoke their affinity with Cain, who built a city and tried to hide in it. Homeboys move through the city bearing the mark of Cain—their very blackness—which they cannot shake off. Interestingly, Priest becomes a conversionist, like the Reverend Jesse Jackson. He gets tired of running and of always watching out for the enemy; he wants a change of life. Thus, Priest is a man who also is tired of his identity—a man who wants to be able to walk the streets without raising suspicion. But it is only after Priest and Eddy reach the top as pushers that Priest feels the need to stop selling drugs in Harlem.

The myth of Cain and the story of the homeboy come together here in a powerful configuration of immanence—of blacks' inability to escape a stereotypical identity. Just as Cain struggles to find the ideal city and free himself of the sin of killing Abel, the upwardly mobile homeboy is always endeavoring to overcome the stigma of racism in America. Homeboys are

perpetually on the move, looking to make progress and achieve individual redemption. In this pursuit, they desire what I call transtextuality—that is, transcendence of imposed stereotypes and recognition as individuals in the city, both of which run counter to immanence. They want to assume individual identities which they have shaped themselves, out of bondage, and be acknowledged for their contribution to global civilization.

When I look at *Shaft* today, I focus more on the successful integration of John Shaft into all areas of the city—an integration that is typical of the film's cosmopolitan narrative. In *Superfly,* Priest is confined to Harlem. When he is in Greenwich Village, he seems like a vampire or an urban Apache, passing furtively in his long coat and large hat. He walks the streets under police surveillance, or spends most of his time in his car, which becomes his abode. Shaft, on the other hand, feels at home everywhere, in every crowd, like a *flâneur.* It is significant that the film opens in midtown Manhattan, in the theater district, with Shaft emerging from the subway. The theme song on the soundtrack declares him "the Man," who is solicited by everyone. Shaft moves with ease on the crowded avenues, recognized and appreciated by a wide range of people: a blind newspaper salesman who is white; a barber who is black. In a sense, Shaft is *the* native son of New York, an identity that derives from experience and transcends race.

Shaft's office is located midway between Harlem and the Village. He serves as a mediator between white and black, between the powerful and the disempowered. The plot revolves around Shaft's attempt to prevent a race riot by rescuing the daughter of a black gangster, Bumpy, kidnapped by an Italian Mafia boss who is determined to maintain control of underworld activities in Harlem. Shaft is tough, likable, and committed to fairness in his relations with both blacks and whites. He wants to uphold law and order by cooperating with the police, yet he is determined not to overlook the civil rights and nationalist struggles of the brothers and sisters uptown—people like the Black Panthers and the Young Moors, the latter led by his homeboy, Ben Bufford.

Shaft is a film that seesaws between the black and white points of view. Although Shaft himself seems to have transcended race by being less menacing in attitude and appearance than other black people in the film, or Priest in *Superfly,* the film does not go far enough toward eliminating racial stereotypes. Indeed, one could say that it participates in them, by presenting Shaft as an exceptional and benign black man. The scene in the Café Reggio, for example, in which the Italian mobster says, "I'm looking

for a nigger called Shaft," is meant to be read against Shaft's appearance as nonthreatening and cosmopolitan, and therefore unlike that of a "nigger." As viewers, we appreciate Shaft's polished manners, which distance him not only from the uncouth Italian criminal but also from black people uptown. The scene creates a spectator position which associates black people who live uptown (unlike Shaft) with criminality.

In yet another scene, we see the way in which *Shaft* positions white viewers in its narrative of integration. Shaft takes a trip uptown in search of Ben Bufford, who is suspected of playing a role in the kidnapping of Bumpy's daughter. The sequence is reminiscent of the beginning of *Superfly,* where the two hustlers attack Priest and he runs after one of them to retrieve his wallet. Such sequences abound in Blaxploitation films; they function as tourist guides to Harlem. The obligatory soundtrack romantically describes the toughness of Harlem—its drug dealers, prostitutes, and abandoned children. The images always include clichés of 125th Street: churches, nightclubs, people sitting on doorsteps. In *Shaft,* we are treated to the same boring tour of Harlem. Clearly, such scenes are intended for outsiders, and serve only to reinforce the stereotypical image of folks uptown.

When it comes to addressing white people's concern about integration, *Shaft* is a safe film because it tries to balance its treatment of white criminals and that of black people who are unlike Shaft. Shaft's cosmopolitanism is nonthreatening because it presents "the other" as exotic, instead of emphasizing the originality of his identity. What impresses me in this film is less its ability to destabilize racial signs and more its inscription and valorization of the pleasure that is associated with Shaft's own freedom and mobility between Harlem and Greenwich Village.

It is this linearization, or movement from point A to point B, that constitutes the pleasure of recent 'hood films. The influence of *Shaft* and *Superfly* on these films is indisputable, but clearest of all in the way they have established the pattern for constructing mobility in the urban landscape.

Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*

When I first saw *She's Gotta Have It* in 1986, at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, my reaction to it was negative. I was participating in a film conference devoted to the application of the theories of Third Cinema to independent films from Africa, Europe, India, and the United States.

Third Cinema was a movement that had grown out of the work of the Argentinian directors Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino in the late Sixties. They believed that the camera was a revolutionary weapon: that every film by a conscientious director should contribute to the liberation of the people of the Third World, and to the demystification of First Cinema (the commercial cinema of Hollywood) and Second Cinema (the bourgeois cinema of Europe). The Edinburgh conference had been organized by intellectuals at the British Film Institute who were seriously invested in Lacanian film theory, feminism, and anti-essentialism.

Spike Lee's reputation had preceded him. *She's Gotta Have It* had already been screened at Cannes, to rave reviews, and the director was being celebrated in the European press as the newest and most talented black kid on the block. It was said that his approach to sexuality was liberating, even though some of my colleagues had warned me about his stereotypical treatment of black women. I saw the film late one evening in the company of filmmakers and specialists in black and Third Cinema. There was total silence during the screening, except for a rare outburst of laughter by some of the women in the room, and the buzzing sound of the projector.

I did not like the film because I could not read it as a Third Cinema project. It was too stereotypical in its representation of black men, and it seemed to condone violence against women. I also—like a number of other people—was uneasy about the way in which the white press had elected Lee as *the* black filmmaker. After all, we who were participating in the Third Cinema conference were supposed to deconstruct stereotypes that had a negative impact on cultural and sexual relations. How could a *ménage à quatre* of the kind depicted in *She's Gotta Have It,* not to mention the reductive title of the film, help us in this endeavor?

I was also in Edinburgh to help promote a film: *The Garbage Boys,* by Cheick Oumar Sissoko. It tells a bittersweet story about children growing up in Bamako, Mali. What had endeared this little film to me was the way it presented its human story against a postcolonial backdrop, demonstrating how African nation-states have been forced to cut spending on education, health care, and other means of protecting citizens against injustice and corruption. *The Garbage Boys* showed young people fighting these obstacles daily—as they carry their own schooldesks to the classroom, pick up garbage to earn a living, play in the streets and learn vices (as do neglected children everywhere in the world), and watch their mothers die in childbirth.

I had seen *The Garbage Boys* several times in Bamako, at different movie theaters. I'd been surprised to notice that, in middle-class neighborhoods, people cried throughout the screening. They identified with the children's pain to such an extent that they felt guilt, fear, and shame, which they expressed through tears. Weeping was also a way for them to show that they understood; it was their way of suffering. At screenings in poor neighborhoods, in contrast, the viewers had interacted with the children on the screen and frequently laughed at their expense. Some had even shouted comments like, "You ain't seen nothing yet!" and won laughs from the audience. I had asked a taxi driver in Bamako why people liked the film so much, and why they laughed instead of being sad and angry. "Because it is a good film," he had told me. "It tells the truth like it is—it is the truth itself." So the film made them laugh because it was, for them, a statement of the truth that must be learned by everyone, like a ritual, in order to exorcise the pain within.

As a Malian myself, I was fascinated by the way this film divided Malian society in two—by the way its popular message made some people cry, while driving others to laugh uncontrollably. I suddenly wanted more films like *The Garbage Boys* for African audiences. For me, it was a watershed film: not only was it ahead of its time, but its fast and exciting narrative meant the death of boring, ahistorical, and culturally unrepresentative films by well-known African directors.

In retrospect, I wonder how I was able to find new cinematic truth in *The Garbage Boys,* but no merit in the equally energetic *She's Gotta Have It.* Was it because I looked at one with practical eyes and at the other with theoretical tools? I'm not sure. But when I look at *She's Gotta Have It* today, I am amazed at how many new elements it contributes to black and popular film language. To begin with, it was the first movie of the 1980s to place the fulfillment of individual desire at the forefront of the black liberation struggle, just as the individual is at the center of the hip-hop revolution. Second, it gave blackness a universal face, through the character of Mars (played by Spike Lee himself), and a universal home, Brooklyn.

She's Gotta Have It is the story of Nola Darling (played by Tracie Camila Johns), a young black woman about whom everybody in the film —and, to judge from its reception, out of the film—has something to say. *She's Gotta Have It* creates its narrative challenge and pleasure from the competing points of view on who Nola Darling is. Who really knows her

secret? The film gives us two main sources for narrative points of view: the bedroom, where Nola speaks, and the park, where one of her lovers, Jamie (Redmond Hicks), shows that he is the most reliable of all the male voices.

The whole controversy over Lee's sexism in *She's Gotta Have It* rests on the viewer's reluctance to accept Nola Darling's point of view as authoritative. Trusting Nola entails buying into the coherence of the filmic discourse, which opens with a young and independent black woman with transgressive views about sexuality, who promises to tell everything on camera and on open microphone. Can the black men in the film accept such individuality and sexual freedom on the part of a black woman? And can Lee, a black male author, pull off such a feat? A related question, but different in its intention, is: Can the viewer separate *She's Gotta Have It* from Lee—that is, separate the text from the author?

I now believe that it was hasty on our part in Edinburgh to have dismissed the film as merely the projection of a black male fantasy onto a black woman. Nola is one of the principal contenders for narrative authority in *She's Gotta Have It.* The articulation of her point of view can be supported by a formal analysis of the narrative conventions deployed by Lee in the film. For example, because Nola promises at the beginning to tell us her story, we can say that everything in the film is depicted from her point of view; and that because she has already framed the people who are trying to frame her, her level of narrative consciousness is higher than theirs.

It is clear to me now that a large part of the success of the film depends on the audience's desire for a modern and independent character like Nola in the black community. Nola's role is threatening, yet attractive, because she appropriates the stereotype of the promiscuous black woman and redeploys it as an expression of her modernity. The audience identifies with Nola because she symbolizes the individual against the group; she makes us realize how far behind the black community is when it comes to the sexual revolution. The three principal male characters consider her a "freak" for wanting what men in the black community have always had: multiple sexual partners.

The filmic representation of these ideas also surpasses anything previously seen in black independent cinema. To begin with, there is no female precedent for Nola Darling in black independent cinema. Perhaps Ganja in Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* is as invested in her own sexuality as Nola is. But one has to turn to the jazz scene and to hip-hop to encounter the

independent and revolutionary spirit of women like her. The use of space is also novel in *She's Gotta Have It.* Nola's bedroom represents the narrative source of most of the episodes in the film. It is there that she imagines the different types of black men and women who have come into her life. It is also interesting that when the other characters try to construct their image of Nola, they always end up in her bedroom, under her control. The bedroom, in this sense, contrasts with the park not only in terms of male and female spaces, but as narrative spaces, locations of truth and falsehood.

Interestingly, Tracie Camila Johns's career has not gone beyond *She's Gotta Have It.* Does this mean that her character merely reinforced the stereotype of promiscuous black women in viewers' minds? Or that viewers remain uninterested in any black woman who is not a stereotype? It seems to me that Spike Lee's talent has consisted in reclaiming the stereotype and redeploying it in a subversive way. Mars, played by Lee himself, is a stereotype of the homeboy, or the next-door neighbor who re-presents the immanent and unchanging image of blacks in mainstream cinema. As such, Spike Lee reached fame as an actor, just like many of the male actors that Lee-the-director discovered. With regard to black women actresses, the condition of immanence must have even deeper roots in our minds. We categorically refuse them any transtextual capacity; and—as in the case of Nola—if they subvert the stereotype, we ignore their talent.

Nola's attempt to escape labels (and here the myth of Cain and his "mark" comes to mind again) is challenged by the three principal male characters in the film, who undermine her authority and the truth of her narrative. "She's bogus—she's not dependable," Mars tells Jamie. As proof of his statement, Mars says he had a rendezvous with her at a basketball game, but she didn't show up. Greer Child (John Canada Terrell) persuades her to see a therapist, telling her she's a nymphomaniac and a freak. And Jamie accuses her of being incapable of love. In fact, each of the three male characters thinks she's abnormal simply because he cannot keep her to himself.

Jamie's is the most compelling of the three male voices, and therefore the one most capable of exposing Nola as an unreliable narrator. In fact, Nola's sexuality, which is expressed through masturbation, the desire for multiple partners, lesbian relations, and sado-masochism, is so threatening to black male viewers that they automatically identify with Jamie's point of view. He is the nicest guy in the story; he wears simple short-sleeved shirts, and has a deep voice that evokes such screen icons as Tony Curtis and Jeff

Chandler. Indeed, he is Nola's favorite lover; the other two men serve as comic relief.

But the male viewer's identification with Jamie is not without problems. It is an expression of both misogyny and guilt. Jamie, unable to control Nola and keep her for himself, stops being Mister Nice Guy and finds himself another girlfriend. When Nola telephones and asks him to come over, he takes the subway to her house and seethes with rage the entire time. The film depicts the subway ride as a succession of still images in which Jamie's face and movements are distorted in an expressionist way, to make him look monstrous. When he arrives at Nola's home he rapes her, because he believes that it is not love she needs. He commits rape to punish her, and to take his revenge on her.

Male viewers back away from Jamie at this point, feeling guilty and ashamed. Some blame Spike Lee, the director, and some point the finger at black men in general. They leave the text behind to discuss nihilism, violence, and other clichés in American society. Most of them never come close to realizing what is in Nola's mind or what motivates her transgressions, because they are as backward as Jamie.

Nola's integrity is surreptitiously challenged even by the implied author of the film. The most effaced narrator in *She's Gotta Have It* is the person behind the camera, who is carrying out the investigation of Nola's life. But we can feel the presence of this omniscient narrator—for example, when the characters speak facing the camera, as if they were talking to a person beyond the fourth wall of the screen; when Mars makes his first appearance in the film, running toward the camera and thus making us aware of its presence; when Mars joins Jamie sitting in the park and says, "Are you still talking to them about Nola?" We feel it, too, in certain stylistic choices: in the acting, the camera angles and movements, and the use of black-and-white film stock.

These stylistic choices are interesting on more than one level. The black-and-white stock helps to create the effect of a 1940s suspense and psychological drama. Alfred Hitchcock reverted to black-and-white in *Psycho,* to give the film its haunting, primitive, uncanny feeling of *déjà vu.* Sometimes, when Jamie talks in the park about Nola, he uses the past tense, as if she were dead. In one scene, he describes how Nola used to like his poems; then we see a flashback showing Nola reading one of them.

The low-angle camera positions are sometimes used for comedy, as in the love scene with Greer and Nola. But they can also be used for artistic

effect, as in a scene where the camera is placed on the ceiling of Nola's bedroom, to give a bird's-eye view of all four main characters on Nola's bed. Nola and Jamie are stretched out on the bed in each other's arms; Greer and Mars are curled up at their feet. The white bedspread serves as the background to what seems like a quote from a black-and-white collage by Romare Bearden. The shot has all the qualities of an improvisational jazz composition: each image assumes a pose in order to communicate in a cool way with the others. All these stylistic devices call attention to the presence of an omniscient narrator in *She's Gotta Have It.*

But Nola's voice is, above all, the most revolutionary element in the film. That I and other black American intellectuals and critics missed it in 1986 in Edinburgh reveals our adherence to certain received ideas, such as the theories of identity politics. Spike Lee understood this only too well. He marketed his film in Europe first, knowing that Americans feared black art and sexuality. Even before he began making films, black Americans had come to rely on liberal European institutions for the display, distribution, and promotion of their art, which was suppressed by racism and discrimination in America. Lee knew that in order for *She's Gotta Have It* to survive, he had to first garner praise and accolades at festivals such as those in Cannes and Edinburgh. It was essential that European critics recognize the innovative aspects of his film before it was released in the United States, where it might have been dismissed or killed by racism—or even by black critics who feared Nola Darling's novel recuperation of sexual stereotypes.

The 'Hood in Spike Lee's Cinema

With *She's Gotta Have It,* Spike Lee created a new kind of cinema, whose visual pleasures are associated with home. From *She's Gotta Have It* to *Do the Right Thing* and *Crooklyn,* Lee's films assign narrative functions to home imageries, symbolism, and metaphors. For Lee, "home" stands for black nationalism, the black community, and black people's celebration and ownership of their cultural products. *She's Gotta Have It* and *Do the Right Thing* describe Lee's attempt to valorize Brooklyn as a vibrant neighborhood—as a black Mecca with as much cosmopolitan and universal appeal as Harlem and Greenwich Village.

With a production company, a house, and a store in the Fort Greene section of the borough, Spike Lee continues to contribute to the mystique of Brooklyn. When young black people move to New York, they are more

likely to seek refuge in Brooklyn than in Harlem or the Village. Many people feel that Spike Lee is the black Woody Allen, and that he has done for Brooklyn and black culture what Allen has done for Manhattan and Jewish culture. Like Allen, Lee has embraced the stereotypes of his culture. He himself has usually portrayed one of these in his films: the black man as a heroic, loving, and essential element in the neighborhood's history and everyday life. In the 1980s, Lee's identification with black male stereotypes coincided with the success of the hip-hop movement, which was dominated by these images. His depiction of racial issues showed him to be several years ahead of other black independent filmmakers, and way in advance of Hollywood.

In *She's Gotta Have It,* Lee creates the Brooklyn mystique by using space as a narrative device and by portraying Mars as the quintessential homeboy. As the opening credits roll, we see still-photos of children playing in the park, residents sitting on the steps of brownstones in all kinds of weather, men and women at work, people standing around in front of their houses. We see graffiti on a wall: "Bed-Stuy, Inc. Brooklyn Secedes from Union." These black-and-white stills tell the story of a community that calls attention to itself. They and the epigraph from Zora Neale Hurston, which makes reference to ships, create a romantic visual association between the history of the film's Brooklyn and the experiences that inspired Hurston's book *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Through one stroke of editing, Lee appropriates the history of black America for his Brooklyn. Some might even say that he reduces the black experience to his history of Brooklyn. But, in truth, Lee has discovered the secret of modernity through editing—taking shortcuts to get to the point, or to get the job done. Other independent films from Africa and the diaspora are painfully long and literal in comparison.

Lee is also able to link associations and spaces by the way he edits the stills, showing children playing, seasons passing, adults working, people strolling. This kind of editing produces the same effect as going through a family album, and positions the spectator to feel a sense of belonging to the place. Lee develops his metaphor of public-space-as-home throughout the film. The most fantastic scene and the only one filmed in color, Nola's birthday celebration, takes place in a park. The sequence begins with Nola and Jamie in her apartment. Jamie, through a deliberately cinematic reference to *The Wizard of Oz,* asks Nola to close her eyes and say, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home."

When she opens her eyes we are in Fort Greene Park, and the film has changed from black-and-white to color, as if to signal the transition to a dream. The setting contributes to the further privatization of the park: in the background is a monument inscribed with children's graffiti; in the foreground, a couple dances modern ballet to the music of an old-fashioned phonograph. The park thus takes the place of home, becoming the site of a private celebration and adorned with household objects and furniture, such as a phonograph, a table, a flower basket, and edibles.

All of Jamie's interviews take place in the park, where he seems most at ease. Lee also uses the park as the locus of uncensored male gossip about women. It is there that Jamie, Mars, and Greer project their sexual fantasies onto Nola. Mars says to Jamie, "She left me for you because you're taller than me." Greer chimes in, "Nola saw the three of us as one: a three-headed monster. We let her create us." And Jamie adds, "It was bad enough, Nola and all her male friends. But there was one particular female friend that was a bit too much." Jamie and Mars are fans of the New York Knicks and the Brooklyn Dodgers, whereas Greer is mocked because of his admiration for the Boston Celtics—a symbol of his desire to be white. The park in this sense is not only a space for leisure, but also a cultural space for black men.

Lee makes the park inviting for black viewers by representing Jamie comfortably sitting on a bench. Jamie considers himself a poet, and he likes reading to Nola in the park. All of these spatial denotations help define the park as the property of black people, and as a cultural and humanizing space for black males. It is the spot in which people and behaviors are designated "not black enough." To drive home this point, the film sets the Brooklynites Jamie and Mars, who are "down" (genuine, real), in opposition to the Manhattanite Greer, who seems superficial in his obsession with his body, stylish clothes, and white women. The park and, by extension, Brooklyn thus constitute a black nationalist space which is contrasted with Manhattan, across the bridge. According to the myth, black men feel at home in Brooklyn and do not have to resist stereotypes there. In Lee's Brooklyn, blackness is associated with being "real"—with the simple life, the working class, and sports. Greer refers to Mars and Jamie as "ignorant and chain-snatching Negroes from Brooklyn." It is precisely this type of prejudice, which whites have always hurled at blacks, that unites Jamie and Mars: though very different in their sensibility and outlook, they come together in their wish to claim Brooklyn. It becomes the space where the

homeboy can freely participate in the black good life, away from the prying eyes of white people.

It is interesting to contrast this space, so welcoming to black viewers, with the claustrophobic and threatening one depicted in *Do the Right Thing,* a film in which Lee uses space choreographically and rhythmically. The whole story takes place in twenty-four hours: tension rises as the sun reaches its zenith, and the culminating tragedy coincides with the red fire of sunset. The action takes place on the hottest day of summer, which has traditionally been associated with rioting and arson in major American cities—a signal that blacks have had enough. In *Do the Right Thing,* Lee skillfully employs the classical notion of the unity of narrative time. He gives every moment its mood and color according to the position of the sun in the sky, and extends the interpretation of the fire at the end of the film to the expression of a historically identifiable black rage.

In contrast to *She's Gotta Have It,* where space is constructed as a neighborhood and a microcosm of black nationalist identity, *Do the Right Thing* presents a contested space: the characters are defined through their attempts to lay claim to their environment. Most of the film is set in one location, an urban neighborhood centered on a particular intersection of streets. The landmarks include a pizzeria, a Korean grocery store, and a red wall. In front of the wall sit three black men under an umbrella. Down the street, between the pizzeria and the grocery store, is a radio station. On the other side of the street, across from the pizzeria, is a large mural. What is remarkable about the setting and the construction of space is that whenever one of these landmarks occupies the foreground, we see the action that is taking place at another landmark in the background. For example, from the windows of Sal's pizzeria we see the sidewalk dwellers go in and out of the Korean grocery store. When Sal's son, Peno, has a fight with a fellow named Smiley, we hear the voices of people across the street interfering. Through this mutual visibility, all four corners of the neighborhood are connected.

The characters are divided by age, race, and class. Each group thinks that it is more entitled to the space than the others. The black men sitting under the umbrella watch a police car go by as if it is intruding in their private space. The police officers, in turn, look at the men with contempt and rage. When Peno looks out of the window of the restaurant and sees the men sitting under the umbrella, he says, "I hate this place." One of the black men accuses the Koreans of having built a business in "our neighbor-

hood." Buggin' Out, one of the characters who organizes a boycott of Sal's pizzeria, confronts a white man who owns a brownstone: "Why don't you go in your own neighborhood?"

The conflict over space is also described in terms of a generational shift (to borrow a concept made famous by Houston Baker Jr.). The younger generation is no longer respectful or tolerant of old black men, such as the character Da Mayor. In one scene, the young men try to run him out of the neighborhood by calling him an old drunkard. Da Mayor endeavors to explain the conditions that led to his present predicament, but he fails to win their esteem. They insist he should have fought to win his dignity back; he should have found a job by any means necessary; he should not have used racism as an excuse.

This scene, which depicts the younger generation's scorn for the achievements of their elders and for traditional values, reminds me of the book *Black Power,* in which Richard Wright has difficulties identifying with African traditions. There is also a nearly identical scene of generational conflict in the film *Menace II Society.* Consider the sequence in which Cane defies his grandparents. The opposition between inside and outside, between Cane and his grandfather, is interesting. "Outside" is secular, dangerous, and characterized by black-on-black crime and police brutality. "Inside" is religious, oriented toward family and survival; but it is also framed by claustrophobic architecture, and colonized by the outside. Cane's grandfather asks him to choose between inside and outside. But knowing that the boy will opt for the outside, he adds, "Do you want to get killed?" To which Cane answers, "I don't know." It is possible to interpret Cane's answer as a critique of what the grandfather considers a better life than the one in the streets. Cane and the other homeboys want more out of life than their grandfathers got, and they will not let high moral authority persuade them to settle for delayed gratification.

In *Do the Right Thing,* space is also reclaimed through close-ups. The film opens with a young woman dancing to a Public Enemy song, "Fight the Power." The volume is high, and most of the shots are extreme close-ups of her body in motion. She is literally in the viewer's face. It is through an extreme MTV-style close-up that we are also introduced to Radio Rahim, a character who goes around with a boom box always playing the same song. In one scene we see territory being contested: Radio Rahim raises the volume of his boom box to cover the sound of a Latin song being played on a radio nearby.

Another instance of the use of sound to appropriate space is seen at the beginning of the film, when the disk jockey Senior Love Daddy wakes the whole neighborhood up with his sound system. The radio station becomes a tool for community building, through the way in which it unites people. It gives them the weather forecast, sends out birthday greetings, and makes music part of their community. Sound is one of the means by which space becomes lovable or hostile.

Images, too, contribute to the definition of space. The character named Smiley walks around with a photograph of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., heroes who symbolize the struggle of black people for citizenship. At the end of the film, Smiley finally succeeds in putting this picture on the wall of Sal's pizzeria, which previously had displayed photographs only of white Italian heroes.

In sum, the space in *Do the Right Thing* is a negative space: it resists viewers' efforts at identification. As a young boy says toward the end, "It ain't safe in this fucking neighborhood." The characters in the film seem lonely. Most of the time, they are in danger from passing cars, from violent youths, from racism, and from the police. In *She's Gotta Have It,* Lee uses space to make the viewers identify with the black good life. In *Do the Right Thing,* he creates a dangerous space to awaken the viewer to hostile and destructive social conditions.

Homeboys and the Reclaiming of Stereotypes

It is surprising to me that Tracie Camila Johns has not gone on to bigger roles, like all the black males who started their careers in Spike Lee's films. In *She's Gotta Have It,* her character adds a new twist to the stereotype of the sensual black woman. Most of the male characters in Lee's films, including the ones played by the director himself, also embody stereotypes. But this has not prevented the actors from going on to greater success. It is unfortunate not only for Johns's career but also for the future of black film that the hip-hop movement of the 1980s and 1990s has been restricted to the deployment of black male stereotypes.

For—as we have seen with contemporary African masks and statues, and with the Blaxploitation movies—reclaiming stereotypes can be subversive, and therefore redeeming for the individual. By making many masks and putting them on the market, Sidimé Laye not only claims the profits generated by the sale of his art, but also resituates the audience

vis-à-vis the meaning and aesthetic of each individual mask. He imparts additional meanings to the stereotype; he gives it mobility and a transtextual value. By carving mask after mask, Sidimé Laye is multiplying himself, and redefining himself as he does so. It is in this sense that I call Sidimé Laye's determination to go on carving a form of resistance: it frees the masks from their old stereotypical immanence.

Similarly, black male actors wear masks when they put themselves in the marketplace, so as to repossess and redefine the stereotypes that they embody in films. Every time actors like Spike Lee and Ice Cube appear on screen, they are not only repeating the stereotype of the homeboy—they are also giving the term new currency. They are making it a fashion statement, a customized item, a familiar element in our living rooms. This is ironic because just around the corner from Spike Lee's films (so to speak), the homeboy is viewed as a chain snatcher. I believe that Lee's films afford a degree of transtextuality to black actors who reclaim the stereotype. But only black males have so far been allowed to enjoy this freedom of movement from text to text inside black culture.

A quick look at Mars in *She's Gotta Have It* and Doughboy (Ice Cube) in John Singleton's *Boyz N the 'Hood* will suffice to show how black artists reclaim and redeploy stereotypes. Mars's status as the stereotypical homeboy in *She's Gotta Have It* is first of all indicated by the characters in the film. Greer calls him a chain snatcher from Brooklyn, a hoodlum, and an ignorant Negro. Mars has all the visible traits of someone who is stuck in childhood, a case of arrested development. He wears loud clothes with writing on them and tennis shoes that look like toys; he rides a bicycle; he is unemployed. Jamie cannot see what Nola sees in Mars; and she herself, toward the end of the film, tells Mars to grow up.

But the old stereotype of the homeboy stops there. Mars comes across in the film as someone we all know as our next-door neighbor. Right away, we see that there are two kinds of stereotypes. First, there is the one that is a stranger to us and that must be avoided at all costs. This meaning of the stereotype has no substance by itself. It can be conjured up in the shape of a bad wolf, a boogie man, or a black man. Then there is the one who is familiar to us—the one we know and love. Nola says to Mars, "There's something funny about you." Clearly, Nola loves Mars because he makes her laugh; he is witty and irreverent. Yet he also seems familiar to her. He is like a brother or a childhood friend. Others may not appreciate Mars or may treat him as a nobody, but Nola identifies with him.

Mars also embodies the community's feelings toward its heroes, history, and culture. His identity is bound up with images of cultural icons and superstars, such as Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Michael Jordan, and Bernard King. At one point he says that it was he who gave Jesse Jackson the idea to run for president of the United States. This reference to actual people in the fictional world of the film gives Mars an aura of realness and credibility: he addresses the concerns of black viewers. Lee's subsequent films contain references to political heroes like Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., and to contemporary social issues such as the Rodney King beating, the Howard Beach incident, Tawana Brawley, Michael Stewart, and Eleanor Bumpurs.

In *She's Gotta Have It,* Lee also uses the character of Mars to engender nostalgia for black culture. Consider the scene in which Mars asks Nola to grease his scalp. We are projected into a romantic black past with quaint forms of courtship, as we watch Nola massaging Mars' head with her oily fingers. As Mars converses with Nola, sitting at the foot of the bed with his head between her knees, the film creates an intimacy between them that surpasses her sexual relations with Jamie and Greer. It is interesting that Lee also has scenes focusing on hair in his other films. In *Do the Right Thing,* for example, a character named Mother Sister has her hair done by a friend in the same old-fashioned way, as she sits on the front steps of her brownstone.

Mars's character sets the stage for Spike Lee to play more homeboy roles. It makes sense, then, to compare Lee to Woody Allen, because both have added new archetypes to the American cinematic repertoire. And in the process, they have created a new film language. Lee has fused his screen personae with his real-life activities as a director, businessman, and cultural figure. He has profoundly transformed black film—and American film in general—through the alteration and dissemination of stereotypes.

Ice Cube, who plays Doughboy in *Boyz N the 'Hood,* also embodies the Homeboy both on screen and off. He combines an ordinary appearance and a scruffy style of dress with the musical flair of a fiery preacher. In his music videos, Ice Cube is known as a rebel who lives (in the words of Todd Boyd) "outside of varying sectors of both black and white society." His antihero persona—not flamboyant, yet capable of getting the job done—binds him to segments of the black community that identify with lawbreakers. Ice Cube's "critical cypher treats both African American and

the dominant society as equal culprits in the continual destruction of African American culture" (Boyd, 1997: 52).

In *Boyz N the 'Hood,* Ice Cube is the toughest and most dangerous character, yet the one that spectators identify with most closely. Perhaps this is because he is the older brother in the neighborhood, who defines himself through protecting the younger and weaker ones. The viewer also identifies with the character of Doughboy because he delivers the best lines in the film, and saves the life of Tre at the end. But, more crucially, Doughboy constitutes a new character in the depiction of African Americans on screen. He frees the homeboy from the pathological space reserved for him in mainstream cinema, and creates new possibilities for character development for the black male. With Doughboy, the homeboy becomes a critical intellectual, and a resistance leader in the community.

There is a scene in *Boyz N the 'Hood* where the received image of homeboys as unreflective criminals comes face to face with Singleton's new image of homeboys as struggling to maintain a community. The scene takes place on Crenshaw Boulevard, a popular hangout. It opens with a rap song commenting on the militarization of the police against young blacks in Los Angeles. We see Doughboy in a convertible, interacting with his friends, and many young people hanging out in the background. Doughboy and his friends talk about religion, feminism, prisons, and the existence of God. Then a rival gang passes by and the gathering turns into a shootout, with everybody running for cover.

What is special about this scene is that it is a replay of the stereotype of dominant cinema's representation of black-youth mobility in the city. But Singleton renders it in a metafilmic way—that is, the characters play their roles while reflecting on the cinematic representation of blacks in these same roles. Thus, while remaining within a dominant mode of representation, *Boyz N the 'Hood* deploys a didactic language that is critical of violence, misogyny, religious hypocrisy, and black-on-black crime. It is in this sense that Singleton's depiction of homeboys, and particularly of Doughboy, stands as an original contribution to the black male image in film.

The movement toward linearization and gratifying endings, instead of resistance narratives or narratives of high moral persuasion, characterizes the pleasure of 'hood movies. The characters who wind up as winners achieve aesthetic, political, or economic success by overcoming obstacles placed in their way. A film like *Boyz N the 'Hood* is a good example of

black youth culture's propensity toward linearization and the development of secular pleasure structures. When I taught *Boyz* in my film class, most of my black students declared that they knew someone—brother, cousin, friend—just like Doughboy. Now, the question is not whether my students actually knew such a person. Doughboy is only a fictional character. What matters is that my students felt the need to link him to their past, in order to justify their identification with the film and, by extension, their identification with the structures of feeling that his actions create. In a romantic sense, Doughboy symbolizes the 'hood as many people imagine it. He is tough and loving toward other black people; yet, like the heroes of Blaxploitation films, he sells drugs to black people. Most important, he is a street intellectual without a job. Doughboy delivers the best line in the film when, at the end, he states that the media and the system "either don't know, or don't show, or don't care" about black life. Doughboy is a new archetype in black cinema who could not have existed without the hip-hop movement, and without the mobile black lifestyles evident in places like Westwood (in Los Angeles) and Greenwich Village.

White males, too, use black stereotypes as their domain of transtextuality. But transtextuality cannot be examined without also considering immanence. By "transtextuality" I mean the movement of cultural styles from character to character in films, and from text to text in written works. And by "immanence" I refer to the trapping of a character in a cultural role. When black maleness becomes transtextual, as it does in the case of Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), it is not only a source of amusement and role playing, but also a means of revalorizing white characters' cultural capital. It is interesting that *Pulp Fiction* was widely reviewed as fun—a film in which people are just playing—and therefore not homophobic, misogynistic, or racist.

Pulp Fiction is an important film because it brings into play some of the heavily contested themes and representations of black masculinity. The film provides narrative pleasure by deploying some of the most visible signs of black male pathology, black nihilism, and antisocial black youth. These signs include black male vernacular speech, black styles of dress, the black aesthetic of "cool," and black violence. Quentin Tarantino thought that black men were having all the fun in their films, and said that *Pulp Fiction* was his attempt at having fun. Following this logic, we can say that *Pulp Fiction* is a black male film. The film is full of "nigger this, nigger that," which can refer to both black and white characters. Indeed, Tarantino uses

the word "nigger" in an enormous range of contexts in *Pulp Fiction*. Furthermore, many of the white actors in the film were previously known for their roles emulating black manhood: Bruce Willis as a rhythm-and-blues singer in *Die Hard,* Christopher Walken as a drug dealer in *The King of New York,* Travolta as a disco dancer in *Saturday Night Fever,* and Tarantino as a fan of Pam Greer and Blaxploitation films in *Reservoir Dogs*.

Pulp Fiction also brings onto the scene several definitions of "cool," in order to determine who is the master of the black aesthetic of cool. According to the film, to be cool one has to learn to survive without such emotions as fear, confusion, naïveté, and stupidity. Cool, as an aesthetic of death, mimics death itself. In the film, the characters Yolanda and Ringo are the least cool, because they don't know how to play the game; they lose control of the situation. Jimi, played by Tarantino himself, is married to a black woman; but he is not cool because he is afraid of his wife, and he panics in the face of death. Butch, played by Bruce Willis, is cool only as a white boy; it is not cool to revisit the scene of a crime. The new capitalist godfather Marcellus is cool, but he cannot keep his woman from falling for the likes of the hit-man Vincent. Vincent must be cool because Jules, an authentic black man, calls him his homeboy; he is also cool because of his quiet, unshakable demeanor. But he plays with death when he tries to make love to Marcellus' wife. He also dies in the film, killed by Butch. Jules is a gangster-liberation theologist with high moral authority. As a gangster intellectual who derives his rhetorical power from the Bible, he has the best lines in the film. He is very cool because he can control very delicate, potentially explosive situations; he knows when to quit. But Winston Wolf (played by Harvey Keitel) is the coolest of all. Other characters, including Marcellus and Jules, defer to him. Most of all, he does a clean job and leaves no traces behind.

Here we have it—Tarantino's characters playing at being cool and out-cooling each other. In the same spirit, one might say that Orson Welles had a lot of fun playing with the *film noir* genre in *Touch of Evil.* And Jean-Luc Godard and his New Wave colleagues had lots of fun playing with the characters and styles of B-movies. Tarantino's discovery is that white characters can play Blaxploitation roles, and that black maleness, as embodied in the aesthetic of cool, can be transported through white bodies. Black films like *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N the 'Hood* are not accorded the same latitude of playfulness and reflexivity. In fact, to criticize *Pulp Fiction* is to be radically uncool.

This brings me to my other category: immanence. Unlike white characters, black people are trapped in their skin. When they play the role of a gangster or a prostitute, spectators see them as playing themselves. They are locked in pathological identities and are not taken seriously when they try to play white roles. A serious look at recent films by black directors also reveals a preoccupation with wearing masks—with playing different roles and infusing stereotypes with new energies. Nola Darling had the potential for opening the door to inverted stereotypes, ones that would enable black women to wear masks and assume new roles. But it seems that no one wanted to go down that dangerous road.

Toward a New Common Ground

Young blacks today are more aware than their parents were of the political issues surrounding consumption in American society. Thus, they do not view consumption negatively, as a form of alienation. They are less concerned than their parents about the cultural content of their blackness, and more concerned with instant gratification. They do not feel driven to seek success, to advance instantly, to consume in the venues that white people want to reserve for themselves and their children. Homeboy activism places mobility and consumption at the very center of the struggle for the black good life. Homeboys refuse to be restricted to black enclaves or to be defined by racial stereotypes. Instead, they put those very stereotypes of blackness in the marketplace, and obtain the highest prices for them. Mobility and consumption have thus become the vehicle through which young blacks control prevailing stereotypes and regain their individuality in the crowd.

Homeboys under the age of thirty-five are less passionate than their elders about the traditional values of the civil rights struggle. For most of them, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X seem like legendary television heroes. The messages of these leaders have become so distant from the homeboys' reality that the people who are still preaching their values also seem unreal and out of touch. The reality of today's homeboy is shaped by consumption, movement, and information, which define new rights and which are in turn shaped by globalization and immigration.

Globalization and immigration have complicated the meaning of such civil rights concepts as integration, the melting pot, racism, common

ground, and common struggle. Some of the most virulent songs from gangster rap and 'hood movies sell better abroad than in the United States. They thus defy the moral outrage of such civil rights organs as the NAACP and the black church. Recent immigration laws favoring blacks from Africa and the Caribbean have also enabled these new Americans to move into the social space created by the civil rights movement. The Caribbean and African immigrants are black, but they do not share all of the values of African Americans, who came out of the civil rights movement. Unlike African Americans, they arrived in this country as individuals searching for freedom and the American dream.

Africans and Caribbeans may build coalitions with African Americans around certain issues such as racism and discrimination, but they may also differ on issues such as the meaning of history, social justice, moral authority, nationalism, and black people's relation to mainstream culture in America. Africans and Caribbeans are to African Americans what post–Soviet bloc Jewish émigrés are to American Jews. Neither Africans and Caribbeans nor these new Jewish immigrants care seriously about the civil rights coalition against Jim Crow racism. In their disregard for history and their inclination toward individual mobility and profit in the market economy, African and Caribbean immigrants share the same mentality as the hip-hop generation.

There is therefore an emerging common ground defined by the declining significance of history and the increasing importance of global-market ideologies. The hip-hop generation and the new immigrants take for granted the privileges won by the civil rights struggle; and they see no need to continue fighting to further these rights, because they want to use the already-won space to do other things.

The activism of young blacks in the 1990s has its own specificity. Their goals are separate from the mainstream agendas of the Left, but closer to the aspirations of recent immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and of young Latinos and whites. Their activism is threatening both to whites and to a certain segment of the black middle class, because it does not emphasize upward mobility through the upholding of a higher moral authority as taught by the civil rights Left or the black church. The values of young blacks, like those of new immigrants, are shaped in the public sphere, where performance and competition define the individual's worth.

The common ground shared by homeboys, by young Latinos, Asians, and whites, and by recent immigrants also complicates the American Left's

definition of itself in the context of globalization. For example, the Left, like every other movement in the world today, needs to become transnational in order to save itself from narrow nationalism and ethnocentrism. Without this transnational perspective, it is easy to oppose immigration on the grounds that working-class blacks and whites are losing their jobs to low-wage Mexicans, Asians, and Caribbeans; or to argue against imported cheap commodities in favor of domestically made products. In fact, a ban on immigration affects people along racial lines as well as class lines, which are structured by the global economy. Americans are losing their jobs not to immigration, but to the gradual transformation of America from a producing nation into a consuming nation. A genuinely transnational Left, instead of always equating consumption with alienation, would therefore include the new societies structured through consumption as an essential part of its understanding of globalization. The question of who consumes and who cannot is as important today as the working class's relation to production was in the period of American industrialization.

Everything the Left does today seems to be a maneuver to keep white men in their position of leadership and privilege. The much-publicized problem between blacks and Jews is really not an issue between blacks and Jews, but a national problem complicated by globalization and immigration: recent immigrants from the former Soviet bloc and the Caribbean are less sensitive to the history of black and Jewish unity in struggle. Jewish immigrants simply inherit the dominant American tradition of discriminating against blacks, while black Caribbeans may blur the distinction between Jews and whites who block their access to the American dream. In sum, it is naive for blacks to direct all their grievances toward Jews; Jewish people cannot by themselves solve the problems of black America. It is also cynical of Jews to single black people out as the fountainhead of anti-Semitism in America. There are criminals on both sides who should be dealt with by the law. But the real issue is whether globalization, in restructuring systems of domination and racism, has also changed the common ground of Jews and blacks. A real political coalition would thus do well to move away from analyzing racism and anti-Semitism, and toward building economic and cultural alliances between these two groups.

The transnational mentality shared by the hip-hop generation and new immigrants also challenges such traditional liberal ideals as the melting pot and the existence of common ground. Recent immigration and the trans-

national flow of capital have revealed that to live in the United States and participate in civil society, one need not necessarily share any of the melting-pot philosophy. In fact, as the example of Japanese and Arab landlords and businessmen in America reveals, one can be as different as possible from one's neighbor and still share an interest in the market economy and the state. The civil rights Left shows a facet of its nationalism and ethnocentrism by insisting that all Americans partake of one identity, albeit melted, instead of celebrating difference, be it geographic or cultural. The global situation has appropriately exposed these types of Leftists as the neoconservatives of American society.

Black nationalists, especially, have seen their values labeled archaic by the transnational hip-hop culture and by recent immigrants. Let's face it: blacks have not been any better consumers in the new global market system than they were previously, because both the black church and the Left, the two institutions most privileged by black intellectuals and political institutions, are suspicious of the market economy and consumption. The hip-hop movement has done a better job than anyone of explaining the needs and wants of the homeboys.

In this global context, racism too has been redefined. Today, it is not so much regarded as a withholding of citizenship and voting rights, or a denial of other types of entitlement such as housing discrimination. Rather, it is seen as the denial of access to competitive tools in the marketplace, the stigmatization and demonization of young blacks in search of individual identities, and the refusal to see that black people have made and can make a positive contribution to world civilization.

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