

from the pages of **Z**MAGAZINE

On Death and Patriarchy in Crooklyn

bell hooks

Hollywood is not into plain old sorrowful death. The death that captures public imagination in movies, the death that sells, is passionate, sexualized, glamorized violent death. Films like *One False Move*, *True Romance*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Menace To Society*, *A Perfect World* bring us the sensational heat of relentless dying. It's fierce, intense, with no time to mourn. Dying that makes audiences contemplative, sad, mindful of the transitory nature of life, has little appeal on the big screen. Films like *Philadelphia* advertise their pathos so audiences can come prepared. Even before tickets are bought and seats taken everyone knows that tears are in order, that the crying time will not last long.

The racial politics of Hollywood are such that there can be no serious representations of death and dying when the characters are African Americans. Sorrowful black death is not a hot ticket. In the financially successful film *The Bodyguard*, Rachel Marron's (Whitney Houston) sister is accidentally assassinated by the killer she has hired. There is no grief, no remembrance. In most Hollywood movies, black death is violent, often trivialized and mocked, as in that viciously homophobic moment in *Menace to Society* when a young black male crack addict holding a fast food hamburger while seeking drugs tells the powerful drug dealer, "I'll suck your dick" only to be blown away for daring to suggest that the hard gangsta male would be at all interested. Pleased with the killing, he laughingly offers the hamburger to onlookers, a gesture that defines the value of black life. It's worth nothing. It's dead meat.

In *Paris Trout*, audiences witness the prolonged brutal slaughter of a gifted southern black girl by a powerful sadistic racist white man. The black males who are her relatives are depicted as utterly indifferent. Too cowardly to save or avenge her life, for a few coins they willingly show the lawyer who will defend her killer, the blood stained places left by her dragging body, the endless bullet holes in the walls and furniture. Her life is worth nothing.

Audiences are so accustomed to representations that depict the brutal death of black folks in Hollywood films that no one is outraged when our bodies are violently slaughtered. There is collective cultural agreement that black death is inevitable,

meaningless, not worth much. That there is nothing to mourn.

This is the movie culture Spike Lee confronts with his new film *Crooklyn* which superficially represents issues of death and dying in black life as though our survival matters and our living bodies count. Lee has made both a provocative and controversial film. *Crooklyn* differs from Lee's previous work primarily because the major protagonist of this film is a ten-year-old girl Troy (Zelda Harris). Positively radical in having a black female child as the star, *Crooklyn* looks at black experience through Troy's eyes.

Lee's magic as a filmmaker has been best expressed by his cinematic construction of an aesthetic space wherein decolonized images (i.e., representations of blackness that challenge and oppose racist stereotypes) are lovingly presented. However, this radical intervention is usually framed by a conventional mainstream narrative and reinscribed stereotypical norms. The laughing darky family portrait that advertises the movie is one example. Moviegoers want to see this image rather than those that challenge it. This contradictory stance tends to undermine Lee's ability to subvert and/or alter colonizing representations of blackness. His radical images are overshadowed by stock characterizations and can be easily overlooked, particularly by viewers who are more accustomed to looking for predictable stereotypes. Even progressive viewers may be so fascinated by the funky funny "otherness" of black images that they refuse to "see" any representations that challenge conventional ways of looking at blackness.

J. Hoberman's review of *Crooklyn* in the *Village Voice* is a perfect example of how our standpoints can determine how we see things. Hoberman did not see a film highlighting issues of death and dying. To him, "the grittier specifics of the Lee family drama" are exemplified by arguments at family dinners, and witty disagreements about TV programs. Indeed he saw the movie as having "no particular plot." Never mentioning the mother's death, he did not see that this event, more so than any other, leads to a black girl's coming of age. Hoberman is much more engaged with the comedic aspects of the film, especially those that center around the eldest child, in this family of four boys and one girl, Clinton (Carlton Williams), the character who most resembles Spike Lee. Like the moviegoers I talked with, Hoberman seems much more fascinated with the antics of Spike Lee, controversial filmmaker, than with the content of this film.

Crooklyn is most compelling when it represents images of black subjectivity rarely seen in mainstream cinema, images that both counter racist stereotypes as well as facile notions of positive images of "the black family." The property owning, artistic, progressive black family portrayed in the film in no way represent the conventional black bourgeoisie. They are not obsessed with being upwardly mobile, with the material trappings of success. Counter cultural--a mixture of the nationalist movement for racial uplift and a bohemian artistic sub-culture, they represent an alternative to the bourgeois norm. A 1970s black family that dares to be different. Woody (Delroy Lindo) the father is an aspiring jazz musician and composer; the mother Carolyn (Alfre Woodard) is a non-traditional schoolteacher. Their five children are all encouraged by progressive hands-off parenting to be unique

individuals, with their own particular interests and passions. These are not your average kids; they take a democratic vote to see which television show will be watched. They participate equally in household chores. Though black nationalist thinking shapes the family politics, the world they live in is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. Italians, Latinos, gays and straights, young and old, the haves and have nots are part of the mix. This is the real world of cultural hybrid and border crossing extolled by contemporary progressive critics.

Beginning in a documentary style (enhanced by the refreshing cinematography of Arthur Jaffa which disappoints as the film progresses, taking on a sitcom like quality), Lee offers visual images of black community that disrupt dominant representations. Highlighting scenes of play and pleasure, the beauty of black bodies, the faces of children and old men, bodies engaged in everyday life, we see joy in living and not the usual stark images of racial dehumanization and deprivation.

Lee engages a politics of representation which cultural critic Saidiya Hartman describes in an essay on black photography "Roots and Romance," as "a critical labor of reconstruction." At rare moments throughout the film this strategy is realized. It is marvelous to catch sight of such empowering images. Seduced by this rare radical intervention, by the way it shifts paradigms and requires new ways of seeing, the viewer can sit in a daze of delight through the rest of the movie, failing to experience ways the cinematic direction and narrative structure which follow counteract and undermine these initial subversive representations. A distinction must be made between oppositional representations and romantically glorifying and valorizing images of blackness which white supremacist thinking renders invisible. Visibility does not mean that certain images are inherently radical or progressive.

The counter-hegemonic images we see at the beginning serve to mask all that is "wrong" with this picture.

Since Spike Lee's cinematic genius is best revealed during those moments when he documents familiar aspects of a rich black cultural legacy, it is easy to overlook the fact that these counter-hegemonic representations are constantly countered by stock stereotypical images. When these images are coupled with Lee's use of "animal house" type humor appropriated from mainstream white culture, a carnivalesque atmosphere emerges that seems more directed towards mainstream, largely white, viewers. This cultural borrowing, which gives the movie crossover appeal, is most evident in the scenes where Troy travels south to stay with relatives in a Virginia suburb. These scenes appear stupid, especially the mysterious, death of the pet dog her aunt dotes on. Lee works overtime to create a comedic atmosphere that will contrast with the seriousness of the Carmichael household, but it simply does not work. The switch to an anamorphic lens confuses. No doubt that is why signs were placed at ticket booths telling viewers that this change did not indicate a problem with the projector. Lee caricatures the southern black middle class (who appear to be northerners in drag); Hollywood screwball comedy in black face. It is predictable and you can't wait to return to the Carmichael family. While he strategically constructs images and scenes to normalize the dysfunction in the

Carmichael family, he insists on making them pathological.

The Carmichael family, without putting on the rose colored glasses, is seriously dysfunctional. We see eating disorders (one of the children is forced to eat, so that on one occasion he vomits in his plate); an excessive addiction to sugar (dad's pouring of half a bag of the white stuff into a pitcher of lemonade, his cake and ice cream forays, his candy buying all hint that he may be addicted to more than sugar even though he is not shown to be a drug user in the film) along with the lack of economic stability signified by the absence of money for variety in food choice, the shutting off of electricity, as well as the dad's mismanagement of funds (the film never lets us know what he does with this money) are all indications that there are serious problems in the Carmichael household. By normalizing the family image, Lee does not engage the issue of psychological abuse. All interactions appear natural, ordinary, comedic. The autobiographical roots of Crooklyn may account for Lee's inability to be other than "objective" reporter. Working with a screenplay collaboratively written with his sister, Joie and his brother, Cinque, Lee may have felt the need to distance himself from the material.

To write the screenplay, Joie Lee stated that she "drew from the few memories I have of my mother" who died of cancer when she was 14. Yet the children in Crooklyn are much younger and clearly deeply ambivalent about their mother. Portrayed as a modern day Sapphire, with direct lineage to the "Amos n' Andy" show, Carolyn responds to the family's economic crisis with constant nagging and irrational states of anger and outrage, making her mean and at times abusive. Even though the economic problems the family face are caused by Woody's unemployment, he is compassionately depicted. Seductively portrayed as an aspiring artist who just wants to be left alone to compose music, Woody is laid-back and calm. Although Carolyn is glamorous in her Afrocentric style, she is portrayed as a bitch goddess. In keeping with sexist stereotypes of the emasculating black matriarch, Carolyn usurps her husband's parental authority by insisting that as the primary breadwinner she has the right to dominate and shame Woody in front of their children. His irresponsibility and misuse of resources is portrayed sympathetically as an artistic non-practical mindset. He cannot be held accountable. Since Carolyn's rage is often over-reactive, it is easy to forget that she has concrete reasons to be disappointed and angry. Portrayed as vengeful, anti-pleasure, dangerous, and threatening, her moments of tenderness and sweetness are not sustained enough to counter the negatives. Even her sweetness is depicted as a manipulative gesture, whereas Woody's "sweet" demeanor is a mark of his artistic sensibility, one that enhances his value.

Always portrayed as gentle, Woody's mild-mannered response to life is infinitely more compelling than the work ethic Carolyn lives by. Being responsible seems to make her "crazy." In one scene the children are watching a basketball game when she encourages them to turn off the television to do schoolwork. They refuse and she goes berserk. Woody intervenes, not to offer support or reinforcement, but rather to take sides. Carolyn becomes the bad guy, who wants to curtail the children's freedom to indulge in pleasure without responsibility. Woody, as the

good guy, responds to her rage by being physically coercive. Domestic violence in black life is sugarcoated--portrayed as a family affair, one where there are no victims or abusers. In reality, Carolyn has been humiliated and physically assaulted. Her demand that Woody leave makes him appear to be the victim and the children first attend to him, pleading with him not to go. Her pain goes unnoticed by her male children. It is Troy, acting as caretaker, who assumes the traditional feminine role.

In sharp contrast to Carolyn, Troy is concerned with femininity. Her mother expresses rage at not being able to "take a piss without six people hanging off my tits," repudiating conventional sexist thinking about woman's roles. Troy, flirtatious and cute, manipulates the men with practiced charm. It is she who advises her dad to take Carolyn on a date to make up. Troy embodies all the desirable elements of sexist defined femininity. Indeed, it is her capacity to escape into a world of romantic fantasy, that makes her and everyone else ignore her internal anguish and torment. When she lies, steals, and cheats her acts of defiance have no consequences.

Taken to the hospital to see her mother, Troy is given instructions on how to assume the caretaker role. Contemporary feminist thinkers are calling attention to girlhood as a time in female life when we have access to a greater sphere of power than that offered us in womanhood. The interruption of her girlhood stands in sharp contrast to her brothers' freedom to maintain their passions and spirit of play. Clinton, the oldest boy, does not have to relinquish sports to become responsible because his mother is sick and dying. He can still be a child. Becoming a mini-matriarch requires that Troy relinquish all concern with pleasure and play. Sexist/racist thinking about black female identity leads to cultural acceptance of the exploitation and denigration of black girlhood. Commenting on the way in which black girls are often forced to assume adult roles in her work *In the Company of My Sisters: Black Women and Self-Esteem* Julia Boyd asserts: "Without fully understanding the adult tasks we were expected to perform, we filled shoes that were much too big for our small feet. Again, we did not have a choice and we weren't allowed to experience the full developmental process of girlhood." In keeping with the denigration of black girlhood in this society, Spike Lee romanticizes this violation by making it appear that it is a "natural" progression for Troy to become a matriarchal figure, that sexist gender politics are not coercively imposing this role via a process of socialization.

As if to highlight patriarchal thinking that females are interchangeable, undifferentiated, and therefore one can replace another, the film suggests there is nothing wrong with a ten-year-old girl assuming an adult role in the household. Indeed, the mother's dying is upstaged by the passing of the torch to Troy. The seriousness of her illness is announced to the children by their father who commands them to turn away from their gleeful watching of "Soul Train" to hear the news. Even in her absence the mother/matriarch spoils their pleasure.

Throughout *Crooklyn* Lee shows the importance of television in shaping their identities, their sense of self. While the boys panic when they hear the news,

bursting into tears, Troy's feelings are hidden by a mask of indifference. The fact that the children obey the father in the mother's absence (not complaining when he tells them to turn off the TV) suggests that he is better able to assume a responsible parental role when she is no longer present. Woody's transformation into responsible adult reinscribes sexist/racist thinking which suggests the presence of a "strong" black female necessarily emasculates the black male.

Carolyn's death is treated in a very matter-of-fact manner. We learn about it as the children casually discuss the funeral. We never see them grieve as a family. When Troy, who is emotionally numb, confronts the death, she does so when jolted from sleep by what she imagines is the sound of the mother's angry raging voice. Bonding with the father in the kitchen, her suppressed grief does not unleash tears, instead she vomits. This ritual cathartic cleansing, is the rite of passage that signals her move away from girlhood.

Taking her mother's place, Troy tends to the needs of her brothers, being the "little woman." Gone is the vulnerable, emotionally open girl, and in her place is a hard impenetrable mask. Just as no one mourns the mother's death, no one mourns the loss of Troy's girlhood. Troy becomes a spectator, standing behind the gate looking out at life, a stern expression on her face.

Though dead, Carolyn re-appears to reassure and affirm her daughter. This reappearance is yet another rejection of loss. The controlling dominating mother remains present even when dead, visible only to her girl child, the ghostly guardian of patriarchy who gives approval to Troy's submission and subjugation. While the male children and the grown-up dad continue to lead their autonomous lives, Troy is stifled. Since she is always and only a mother substitute, her power is more symbolic than real. Powerful black mothers, the film suggests, who work outside the home, "fail" their families, as Carolyn does by not fulfilling the sexist defined feminine role. Their punishment is death. Yet even when she is dying of cancer and in serious pain, she takes the time to give lessons in sexism 101 to her daughter. While her career had ensured the family's economic survival, she does encourage her daughter to think about a work future. The conventional sexism Carolyn expresses in later scenes runs counter to the values she has expressed earlier. So where Crooklyn attempts to counter racist assumptions about black identity, it also completely valorizes and upholds sexist and misogynist thinking about gender roles. Order is restored in the Carmichael house when the dominating mother figure dies. The emergence of patriarchy is celebrated, marked by the subjugation of Troy. After the mother dies, all problems in the Carmichael household "magically" disappear. Life not only goes on without her, it is more harmonious.

Crooklyn constructs a redemptive narrative for black life where the subjugation of the black female body is celebrated as that rite of passage which is restorative, which ensures family survival. Whether it is the grown woman's body erased in death or the little girl body erased by violent interruption of her girlhood, the sexist politics of this film often go unnoticed, as viewers are riveted by the exploits of the male characters. In this way, audiences tacitly condone the patriarchal devaluation and erasure of rebellious black female subjectivity that this film depicts. Lee

constructs an ahistorical narrative of the 1970s in which there is no meaningful convergence of black liberation and feminist politics. At the time, black women active in nationalist black power groups were challenging sexism and insisting on a feminist agenda.

Death and dying are merely a sub-text in Crooklyn, a diversionary ploy that creates a passive emotional backdrop onto which Lee imposes a vision of black family that is fundamentally conservative and in no way in opposition to the beliefs and values of white mainstream culture. Lee's own life story is most interesting, but when he exploits those memories to advance patriarchal thinking, the narrative loses its appeal. Testifying that writing this script was cathartic, Joie Lee declares: "The emotional things that happen to you as child, they're timeless, they stay with you until you deal with them. I definitely cleaned up some areas in my life that I hadn't dealt with before--like death." However, the film Spike Lee made does not confront death. In Crooklyn death and dying are realities males escape from. There is no redemptive healing of a gendered split between mind and body. Instead Crooklyn echoes the patriarchal vision celebrated in Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* where the hope is that "unrepressed man" would be rid of the nightmares... haunting civilization and that "freedom from those fantasies would also mean freedom from that disorder in the human body." The messiness of death is woman's work in Crooklyn. Expressing creativity, engaging pleasure and play, is the way real men escape from the reality of death and dying. In the space of imaginative fantasy, Lee can resurrect the dead female mothering body and create a world where there is never any need to confront the limitations of the flesh and therefore no place for loss and abandonment. In such a world there is no need for grief since death has no meaning.
