

“WE’RE STILL STANDING”: BAKHTIN’S *BILDUNGSROMAN*, COMMUNAL GROWTH,
AND MOOKIE’S TRANSFORMATIVE EVOLUTION IN SPIKE LEE’S *DO THE RIGHT*

THING

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Abstract

This paper revisits Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* through the lens of the *Bildungsroman* as Bakhtin understands the genre. Using Bakhtin's specific notion of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre involving both personal and social growth, this paper argues that the protagonist, Mookie, and the multiethnic community he resides in both undergo a transformation that aligns with Bakhtin's conception of the genre. This transformation leads to a level of measured progress within the community as the community pushes back against the racial hierarchy and police brutality they face. Though there is a measure of progress, Lee resists the temptation to give the film a 'happy' ending. Instead, Lee merely hints towards the progress that minority groups within America demand. In so doing, Lee emphasizes the bit-by-bit nature of progress, which starts within the individual and the community and grows outward.

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The *Bildungsroman*, a literary term Karl Morgenstern (1770-1852) coined in 1819 in his lecture “On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*” (*Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans*) has developed a rich history within the Western literary world (Boes 647). Since the inception of the term, it has evolved in myriad ways, but most pertinent to this discussion involving personal growth, race, and the power structures of society in near-contemporary America is Russian intellectual and critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the divergence between the conventional *Bildungsroman* and the *Bildungsroman* of emergence.

Mikhail Bakhtin categorized the *Bildungsroman* into distinct subsections: among these subsections, he pinpoints a distinction between two sets of stories. He distinguishes novels without emergence, where “the image of a hero lacks development” from novels with emergence, where “the image of a person develops”; notably, this latter definition includes “both individual and social change shaping each other” (Morson and Emerson 412-413). While the conventional *Bildungsroman* features a protagonist’s development through “growth” and “the expansion of one’s self,” (Moretti 46) the world around them is “represented as stable” and unchanging (Morson and Emerson 410). Rather than evolving and growing with the world, the protagonist’s growth marks their approval of and acceptance into a static and unchanging world. Deviating from this notion of the *Bildungsroman* is, according to Bakhtin, the novel of historical emergence. This category of the *Bildungsroman* concerns the emergence of a youthful “hero” who evolves “along with the world” and shapes their world just as their world shapes them—thus, unlike in the conventional *Bildungsroman*, the relationship between the world and the protagonist works mutually (413). Though Bakhtin saw Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as the novelist who explored this conception of the genre to its fullest potential, there have certainly

been novels and films¹ since Goethe's to continue what has become, in many respects, the most significant sub-category in European historical fiction.

Through the *Bildungsroman* and the emergence of a leader who transforms himself and his community, Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing* explores the rising tensions of race in an urban Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood over the course of twenty-four swelteringly hot hours.² Although these racial tensions cost Sal (Danny Aiello) his pizzeria and Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) his life, this paper focuses on Mookie's evolution and how it inspires a legitimate hope for progress and an awakening within the multiethnic community he resides in. At first glance, the film seems to fit the genre of the conventional *Bildungsroman*: Mookie, the film's "youthful" protagonist (Moretti 3), undoubtedly undergoes an individual transformation that coincides with the film's climax, as he garners a fuller awareness of the social structures hemming him in and chooses to "fight the powers that be" (Public Enemy) rather than remaining a "wavering hero" (Bartley 14). Though he refrains from outrightly defining the genre of the film as a conventional *Bildungsroman*, Bartley's article implies as much by comparing it to Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, a *Bildungsroman* as well as a "historical romance" (10). Perhaps most pertinent to the conversation of genre concerning the film is the typical endings of the

¹ For a fuller breakdown of the *Bildungsroman* genre in American film from the 1950s to the 1990s, which I am grateful for, see Matthew P. Schmidt's dissertation, *Coming of Age in America: Modern Youth Films as Genre*.

² Though I have not provided as in-depth of an introduction to African American film as I have to the *Bildungsroman*, a rich and broad literary history does exist. Foundational works such as Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness* (1993), Manthia Diawara's anthology *Black American Cinema* (1993), and more recent works such as Paula Masood's *Black City Cinema* (2003) and Michael Boyce Gillespie's *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* all highlight the scholarly attention that has been paid to African American film. These works, however, are, for the most part, silent on the matter of the *Bildungsroman*. So too is Ed Guerrero's short book on *Do the Right Thing* for the British Film Institute's "Modern Classics" series (originally published in 2001, it was revised and reissued in 2020).

conventional *Bildungsroman*, which Moretti argues are resolute, provide finality, and “always conclude with marriages” (Moretti 22).

Contrary to these aspects of the conventional *Bildungsroman*, Lee’s film resists offering a resolute conclusion, and Mookie does not, at least for the moment, end up marrying Tina. Like several aspects of the film, Lee leaves viewers in a continuous state of wonder; come the conclusion, viewers must ponder whether or not Mookie will sustain his newly acknowledged sense of fatherhood and continue to grow at the trajectory Lee establishes for him. Moreover, while his trajectory ascends, Mookie’s growth as an individual is by no means complete come the end of the film. Likewise, viewers are left to wonder whether the community can not only pick itself up; but also, whether the community can continue to stand against the racial hierarchy, racial oppression, and police brutality that they have been subjected to. Lee’s conclusion resists finality and offers very little concrete resolution, embracing ambiguity rather than nailing down an optimistic conclusion.

While the conventional *Bildungsroman* provides a solid starting point to investigate the film and Mookie’s evolution within the film, Bakhtin’s extended notion of the *Bildungsroman* as he understands Goethe’s significant development of the genre proves better suited to analyze the film. Bakhtin’s idea of the *Bildungsroman* provides a meaningful lens in gauging Mookie’s growth; Mookie’s transition is not merely a coming-of-age story that explores his “individual becoming,” rather, his transition leads to a “social becoming” for the entire community (Morson and Emerson 409). As Bakhtin states regarding the conventional *Bildungsroman*, a genre that fails to fully apply to *Do the Right Thing* because it ignores the dynamic interaction between the individual and social environment—it demands an adjustment of the self to the social, breeding an essential conformity between the two and a sacrifice of self from the protagonist:

Man's emergence proceeds against the immobile background of the world, ready-made, and basically quite stable; if changes did take place in this world, they were peripheral, in no way affecting its foundations. Man emerged, developed and changed within one epoch. The world, existing and stable in this existence, required man to adapt to it, that he recognize and submit to the existing laws of life. Man emerged, but the world itself did not. On the contrary, the world was an immobile orientation point for developing man. Man's emergence was his private affair, as it were, and the results of this emergence were also private and biographical in nature.

(Bakhtin, *The Bildungsroman and Its Significance*, 23)

Bakhtin then opposes this definition of the conventional *Bildungsroman* with a richer and more elaborate notion of personal and communal emergence, best embodied by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* but much more applicable to Lee's film. He states:

Human emergence is of a different nature. It is no longer man's own private affair.

He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. (Bakhtin 23)

Throughout the film, Lee emphasizes the interplay between the community's awakening and Mookie's personal evolution. Instead of simply providing a "background to events," (Morson and Emerson 416) the outside world and the community influence Mookie in a multitude of ways. Of equal importance is an awareness that, as a character caught between multiple forces³

³ On the one hand, radicals (represented by characters like Buggin' Out and later Radio Raheem) intent on fighting the power through quasi-political action that the community largely ignores, and on the other, Sal, who, whether fairly or unfairly, represents the white status quo.

categorized by race that eventually collide, Mookie transforms himself and the community he resides in.

Like Bakhtin's definition suggests of a protagonist, by stepping into maturity, Mookie's personal evolution and its impact on his community is a step beyond the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. While Lee is reluctant to definitively answer what we are left with once the dust settles, Mookie propels himself and the community towards a transition point that promises change, however locally and however minutely. As Bakhtin posits regarding the novel of emergence, by stepping into maturity, Mookie's personal growth and evolution leads to a remodelling of their locale, creating new dynamics between those in the community and positively altering the social space of the community. Furthermore, Mookie's growing independence and his will to rebel against the state-sponsored police brutality his community faces suggest that instead of conforming to the "existing laws" of American society (Bakhtin 23), he will, in standing with his community, attempt to alter them.

As the film progresses, various members of the community call on Mookie to "Wake up!," "Fight the power," "Stay Black," and "Be a man" (*Do the Right Thing*); ultimately, all of these appeals push him towards becoming the leader the community needs and doing "the right thing." Nevertheless, as the frayed and perhaps even shattered relationship between Sal and Mookie at the film's conclusion exhibits, Mookie finds himself morally entangled, caught between doing the right thing for his community and doing the right thing for his private and personal interests. By radically choosing to side with the community, Mookie demonstrates his understanding that the choices he makes are no longer confined to private consequences. Rather, they alter the social and political fabric of the community and its relationship with the broader world. In fashioning a communal response and leading his community to challenge Sal's

pizzeria, “an impoverished symbol of the racist power structure,” (Bartley 15) Mookie incites change and does do the right thing despite opposing Da’ Mayor’s call to the community to return to their homes. Mookie simultaneously reflects the changes of a world which is altering and drives it, yet that process and the progress twenty-first-century viewers and those eager to see racial injustices properly punished clamour for is frustratingly gradual, even glacial.

Though the film leaves much to the interpretation of viewers, Lee confirms the impact of Mookie’s decision at the end of the film as the community comes together to protest the unjust killing of Radio Raheem at the hands of NYPD Officers Ponte (Miguel Sandoval) and Long (Rick Aiello). Mookie’s transformation not only affects himself and his community, but it also affects his relationship with Tina and their son, Hector. After largely spurning his responsibilities as a father throughout the film, Mookie’s *Bildungsroman*, and more poignantly, his sobering realization that he must emerge and fight the power, overhauls his priorities as a man, a father, and a member of the community.

While the film’s climactic moment renders viewers heartbroken due to Radio Raheem’s death, Lee emphasizes a quality of awareness that arises for members of the community that was not present before by portraying the community as unified in their calls for justice against racism and police brutality. The level of unity within the community ascends to new heights at the film’s conclusion, as the community first grieves Radio Raheem’s death and then protests his death in a collectively chaotic manner. Community members outside of the Black community join in the cries for justice, while Sal, like the rest of the community, grasps that personal property “is secondary to life” (Hanson 59). The unity within the community gives hope for a better future, as it demonstrates the community coming to a sobering realization that affirms family, both neighbourly and familial. Though Lee resists the temptation of illustrating the

community as one big happy family, by transitioning from a divided community into a community that stands in unity in their calls for justice, the neighbourhood, like Mookie, grows and evolves into a multitude, capable of standing up for themselves and collectively pushing back against an oppressive racial hierarchy.

Although Mookie's choice signals a level of individual growth, it also inspires progress between individual members of the community, leading to a social becoming for the community itself. At face value, the destruction of Sal's Famous seems divisive; however, Mookie's impulsive decision to hurl the trash can through the window diverts the crowd's attention from Sal and his sons while also unifying the community to fight for justice against police brutality instead of verbally quarrelling with each other. The community awakens to the reality that living in a multicultural and multiracial neighbourhood is an insufficient safeguard to racism and the abuse of police power that grows out of that racism. Despite Sal and his pizzeria symbolizing the racist system, the destruction of his restaurant suggests the beginning of the community's awakening rather than its destruction. Radio Raheem's death and Mookie's subsequent decision to incite a riot leads to a shift in the community; Lee signals this shift at the end of the film as characters who previously engaged in a racially charged montage of epithets directed towards each other now speak on the death of Radio Raheem in a sympathetic, and, more importantly, unified manner.

Though the riot sets things in motion and is the first step in creating change, further change depends on "sustained" action by both Mookie and the community (Bartley 16). By placing the community on the cusp of a transition, Lee both resists a simple resolution to the conflict while simultaneously beckoning towards the future endeavours necessary to overcome the social structures supporting racism and police brutality, stressing that both Mookie and the

community's story is not over. Instead, their story is in its infancy. The film's conclusion ambiguously emphasizes this, as the progress the future demands has not quite arrived, and the past may still claw its way back into the neighbourhood.

Despite this collective communal progress coming at the “woefully disproportionate” cost of a young Black man's life (Bartley 15), the emergence of Mookie as a selfless agent of change foreshadows the community's collective efforts in demanding justice for Radio Raheem and rioting when their voices go unheard. Through both Mookie and the community's emergence, Lee gestures towards the notion that progress is possible, even if it comes at an exorbitant price and requires the support and actions of more than one individual. Mister Señor Love Daddy's final words, reminding the community to “register to vote,” as the “election is coming up,” (*DTRT* 1:51:00) signals that the community is on the verge of political action⁴ and that progress, however incremental, is possible, though it relies on “sustained” action from all members of the community (Bartley 16).

Throughout the early portion of the film, Mookie positions himself on the fringes of the community through his employment at Sal's and an individualistic outlook on life centred around accumulating wealth and “comfort” (Hooks 174). Initially, Mookie's ambition reaches no higher than to “get paid” as he prizes economic capital over his standing in the community and his interpersonal relationships. Lee highlights this during the iconic scene where Buggin' Out challenges Sal regarding the lack of representation on his walls. By first questioning Mookie and then Sal “how come there ain't no brothers on the wall” (*DTRT* 19:58) and insisting that Black people ought to boycott the restaurant until Sal gives in to representing Black individuals,

⁴ Lee seemingly wields this call to vote as a means of looking ahead to the upcoming primary in which David Dinkins, the first African American Mayor of New York City, defeats Ed Koch in the Democratic primary.

Buggin' Out expresses his distaste for what he feels is a form of blatant racism, particularly considering "Black folks" make up most of Sal's customers. However, before the situation escalates towards violence, Sal orders Mookie to escort Buggin' Out out of the establishment. Standing outside the restaurant, Mookie conveys his fear of reprisal from Sal because of Buggin' Out's troublemaking (20:40). Buggin' Out eventually acquiesces to Mookie's demand to leave Sal's Famous unharmed and accept a one-week ban, but not before reminding Mookie to "Stay Black" (22:00). Along with taking Sal's side in the argument to save face and maintain his position as a pizza delivery man, the fact that Buggin' Out feels inclined to remind Mookie to remember his heritage and communal responsibilities places Mookie on the outskirts of the community.

Moreover, this scene emphasizes Sal's fragile standing within the community. Although Sal senses he plays an integral role in the community and has even helped shape the community, his lack of empathy and understanding for Buggin' Out's call for representation on the wall suggests he does not understand the plight of some Black members within his community who frequent his restaurant. In the scene above, where Buggin' Out confronts Sal about a lack of Black representation, Lee purposefully leaves Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith), a "young man" who suffers from "cerebral palsy" and sells pictures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., (McKelly 217) lingering outside of the restaurant holding up his pictures to the window (*DTRT* 21:19). By barring Smiley and his pictures from entering the pizzeria, Sal's Famous becomes symbolic of the racist power structures Buggin' Out, Radio Raheem, and eventually Mookie, seek to topple. Along with ostracizing Mookie from his own community, Sal and Pino (John Turturro) exclude Mookie from their insular community within the pizzeria as they tell him to talk "some brother talk" to Buggin' Out about (22:17). Though Sal seems to respect Mookie and,

at times even love him “like a son,” (1:29:15) his positioning as a “sympathetic racist” (Flory 67) ensures that the only way for Mookie to follow through on Da Mayor’s (Ossie Davis) purely “ethical” (Christensen 586) advice to “always do the right thing” (*DTRT* 23:00) is to choose his community over Sal’s Famous and the economic capital it affords him.

By setting Mookie up as a “wavering hero” situated between two distinct historical and social milieus, “caught between past, given circumstances and future possibility,” and “perpetually negotiating between them,” (Bartley 14) Lee provides Mookie with the room to grow and emerge into an unlikely leader for his community when it needs it most. Mookie finds himself navigating an impasse between his friends from different sects of the community; he speaks with Vito (Richard Edson) about his brother Pino, telling him he needs to stand up for himself; he defends Vito to Buggin’ Out when Buggin’ Out questions him about hanging with the “white boy,” telling him “Vito’s down” (*DTRT* 34:40). Further emphasizing Mookie as a character caught between two increasingly divergent and hostile camps, Lee portrays Buggin’ Out and Radio Raheem as wholly unwavering in their beliefs and calls to action. Likewise, Pino’s resolute view of white supremacy makes him, and to a lesser degree Sal, wholly unwavering in reconciling with any of their wayward and racist views. By illustrating a lack of compromise between the feuding characters, Mookie’s becoming necessitates the becoming of the community itself; tensions run high, and perspectives remain stubbornly static. Ultimately, once “mediation is no longer possible,” (Bartley 15) Mookie must either embrace his employer or his community, as change, for both himself and his community, relies upon him making an impossible decision between two contradictory and irreconcilable positions.

While the feud between Buggin’ Out and Sal provides the main arena for exploring the rising racial tensions in the community, Buggin’ Out’s call to boycott Sal’s Famous exasperates

the already crumbling relationship between community members of different races. Buggin' Out becomes further entrenched in his call to boycott Sal's when Clifton (John Savage), a white man wearing a Larry Bird jersey, scuffs Buggin' Out's brand-new Air Jordans. As Buggin' Out confronts Clifton, he threatens to "fuck him up two times" and questions Clifton on why he wants to live in a Black neighbourhood, to which Clifton responds, "it's a free country," and he has lived in Brooklyn his entire life (*DTRT* 35:00-37:00).

Clifton draws Buggin' Out's rage without overtly challenging him because, as an African American man, Buggin' Out knows all too well that America is not a free country for everyone and racial barriers such as segregation and gentrification ensure that not everyone can live where they desire. As Dan Flory posits about the white characters in the film, Clifton, like Sal, Vito, and Pino, is "oblivious to how matters of race have had and continue to have an impact on" the lives of Buggin' Out and others (Flory 71). Not only are these characters oblivious, save for Sal, they never emerge from this state of ignorance. While Mookie attempts to maintain balance within the community and help tempers from boiling over, members of the community become increasingly enraged with each other through these micro-aggressions⁵ as the day progresses.

Similar to Sal and Buggin' Out's lack of a relationship, Radio Raheem's unwavering position necessitates that he and Sal cannot maintain a relationship in the current setting; though he speaks very little, Collette Lindroth characterizes him as "almost totally inarticulate," (28) Radio Raheem speaks through his boombox and Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power" to protest racial injustice, even if he fails to fully grasp and live up to the meaning of the lyrics. As a "metaphorical prop," (Totaro 8) the boombox ties Radio Raheem's identity to the lyrics of

⁵ In his article dedicated to the numerous conflicts between characters at the heart of the film, Ted Kulczycky asserts "there are at least one hundred and twenty-four separate confrontations in the film's screenplay." (49)

“Fight the Power”; lyrics that underline the need to overcome stereotypes and challenge the status quo facing Black individuals in American society. Like many of the characters, Lee depicts Radio Raheem as a static and stereotypical representation of Black youth culture that contrasts with Sal’s old-school Italian archetype. His “Bed-Stuy Do or Die” T-shirt, his necklace outlining the continent of Africa, his knuckle rings reading “LOVE” and “HATE,” his Nike Air-Force Ones, and his haircut, a high-top fade, added to Lee’s filming techniques—he is generally “shot from both an extreme low angle” that makes him feel even more imposing and from “askew Dutch angles” signalling his “destabilizing role” (Fabe 198)—portray Radio Raheem as a powerful presence. Yet, despite challenging “systematic racism,” (Gibson 193) even he cannot combat racial hierarchies on his own.

By illustrating these characters with broad strokes and pitting them against one another, Lee forces Mookie to initially play the role of mediator within the community; in doing so, Lee complicates what doing the right thing means and ensures that Mookie cannot do the right thing until he relinquishes his role as mediator (Bartley 15). Thus, while the community relies on Mookie, Mookie relies on the community just as much in evolving to realize his identity and place within the community.⁶ Even though *Buggin’ Out* and *Radio Raheem* hold an awareness of the racial injustices plaguing the community, neither character seems to have a feasible plan of action. Though they both possess the will to change the community, neither character inspires much confidence in their ability to follow through on these wishes, and up until his actions outside of *Sal’s Famous* following Radio Raheem’s death, neither does Mookie. However, by the film’s conclusion, Mookie transforms himself, with the help of his community, and becomes a

⁶ Using “Bakhtin’s terms,” Gary Saul Morson notes in his article “Bakhtin and the Present Moment,” “people and their society undergo ‘genuine becoming’ as they impinge upon each other.” (217)

leader, something that Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out attempt to do in their own ways yet ultimately fail to do.

Though he may not possess the means to incite quantifiable change, Radio Raheem's monologue regarding love and hate portends the polarizing relationships between members of a disjointed community; consequently, Mookie's eventual transformation into a leader of his community by inciting the riot ultimately ushers a sense of unity and cohesion into the community. In a short conversation with Mookie that quickly becomes a monologue directed towards the camera and the audience, through a direct reference to Charles Laughton's 1955 film *Night of the Hunter* (Fabe 204), Radio Raheem tells his tale of good and evil, or love and hate.⁷ He immediately employs hip-hop vernacular, linking his story of life to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, noting it was the left-hand, the hand he wears "HATE" on, that Cain "iced" his brother (*DTRT* 50:30). The right hand, adorned with the ring reading "LOVE," reaches into the souls of all people. Radio Raheem interprets the story of life as being one of "Static! One hand is always fighting the other. The left-hand hate is kicking much ass, and it looks like right-hand love is finished." The audience sees this hatred and inability to coalesce throughout the film, as different sects of the community divisively confront each other.

As Radio Raheem continues to give his explanation, he evokes the sport of boxing, linking the biblical and historical past to the present moment as love "got the right hand on the ropes" and eventually "KO[s]" hate (51:00). At the moment, love defeats hate and wins out; however, Radio Raheem quickly tells Mookie, "If I love you, I love you. But if I hate you..."; although the two characters go their separate ways, this scene, the only meaningful dialogue

⁷ Marilyn Fabe notes Radio Raheem's "brass knuckles... are scarily reminiscent of the psychotic minister played by Robert Mitchum" in *The Night of the Hunter*; Fabe argues Lee perhaps does this to blur the lines and make Radio Raheem a less sympathetic character (204).

between Radio Raheem and Mookie, ultimately aids in inspiring Mookie's evolution into a leader for his community. Though he may not realize it in the moment, Radio Raheem's speech foreshadows the necessity to pick a side in a neighbourhood that becomes increasingly polarized as the day wears on.

The fracturing of the community occurs gradually, but it is most apparent in the "racial slur montage" (Palis 6) that comes nearly halfway through the film. The scene features Mookie, Pino, Stevie (Luis Antonio Ramos), Officer Long, and Sonny (Steve Park) all breaking the fourth wall, directly addressing the camera and hurling racial insults at each other (*DTRT* 48:00). The scene concludes with Mister Señor Love Daddy calling for a "Time out!" to stop the verbal carnage (49:00), but as different minorities challenge one another using racial stereotypes and insults, the community finds itself on the verge of a breakdown; notably, rather than keeping the peace, the police heighten the tension. By depicting the neighbourhood as a community at odds with each other and the police, Lee underlines the devolving relationships between community members. This depiction insinuates a bleak future for a struggling community.

The rising racial tensions point towards the community's faltering state; however, rather than further dividing the community, the tragic death of Radio Raheem and Mookie's subsequent actions unite the community in a unified call for justice, as community members flood the streets to protest the unjust killing. Correspondingly, unifying the community comes at the cost of expelling Sal and his two sons, as well as the restaurant and what it has come to represent to the community. By electing to side with his community and incite the riot, a decision that does not "emerge from spontaneous rage" but is instead a "carefully considered response," (hooks 174) Mookie makes the only choice possible once the brutality of a city and country built on racism renders reconciliation within their locale impossible. Mookie's response to Radio Raheem's

death and the community's pinpointing of Sal, whether fairly or unfairly as the one to blame, grants the community a collective target to exercise their anger and anguish. However, Lee carefully separates Sal from the true object of rage—the property and the protection of the property by the police officers, which causes Radio Raheem's death. By coming together, the community relocates from a place of static tension towards collective action aimed at progress.

Lee mirrors the racial slur montage from earlier in the film moments before Mookie decides to throw the trash can through the window; however, rather than insulting or blaming one another, as the camera pans the faces of several side characters, they state their frustration and despair regarding the unjust killing of Radio Raheem. Stevie exclaims, "It's murder. They did it again, just like Michael Stewart," and another shouts, "murder, Eleanor Bumpurs, murder." By "evoking the memory of two 1998 real-life instances in which black people" unjustly died at the hands of police officers (Fabe 192), Lee emphasizes the threat of racism and police brutality to not only Black communities but all minority communities in America. Cee (Martin Lawrence) responds, "damn man, it ain't safe in our own fucking neighbourhood," to which Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison) replies "never was, never will be"; Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris) turns the blame towards Sal, who becomes the only figure left to account for the police's actions, stating "we ain't gonna stand for this shit no more Sal, you hear me, we ain't gonna stand for no mothafuckin' police," and M. L. (Paul Benjamin) concludes the grievances of the men by solemnly voicing his disappointment, saying "it's as plain as day, they didn't have to kill the boy" (*DTRT* 1:36:30-1:37:00).

Radio Raheem's death extinguishes the discord and racial tensions between minorities in the community, as they instead direct their anger towards Sal, who becomes synonymous to a spokesperson for the whites. Sal's Famous becomes the object of blame because the pizzeria,

along with Sal and his two sons, are the only people available to blame after the police flee the scene with Radio Raheem's body (Bartley 15). The police, standing in opposition to the community, arrive on the scene to protect Sal and his property, and in the process, they choke Radio Raheem to death. Lee illustrates the scene with a disturbing yet "powerful close-up of Radio Raheem's feet dangling several inches off the ground" as the police strangle him to death, an image that symbolizes "the helplessness and vulnerability of even the most powerful black man in the face of institutionalized white power" (Fabe 206).

By emphasizing the threat of racial hierarchy and racism, Lee appears to symbolically side with Mookie's choice to fight violence with violence. As Lee writes in the companion volume to *Do the Right Thing*, "Am I advocating violence? No, but goddamn, the days of twenty-five million Blacks being silent while our fellow brothers and sisters are exploited, oppressed, and murdered, have come to an end." (Lee 282) He concludes by noting "We have a choice, Malcolm or King. I know who I'm down with." (282) Although Mookie's *Bildungsroman* leads him to a similar conclusion as he comes face to face with the threat that racism poses to himself and his community, it would be a mistake to impose Mookie's situation and choices on Lee as a director. More likely, Lee's statement is an equivocation: though he appears to be stating a definitive position on the matter, like so much of the film, Lee's claim that he knows "who [he is] down with" is ambiguous when taking into account Da Mayor's response to Radio Raheem's death and the ensuing riot (282).

Acting with haste in the face of the community's threats, Da Mayor, another character who grows in stature throughout the film, pleads with the group to "go home" because "Sal and his boys had nothing to do with what the cops did" (*DTRT* 1:37:45). As both a vector who aids in defining Mookie's becoming and a character who becomes increasingly important to the

community as the film progresses, Da Mayor's pleas carry weight. However, despite spending much of the film in close proximity to Mookie, both narratively and physically⁸, Mookie and Da Mayor's actions diverge; Mookie disregards Da Mayor's call for peace because doing the right thing for the community requires him to directly challenge the status quo, rather than ignore what Sal's Famous has come to represent and "go home" (1:37:47). By choosing radical action instead of attempting to rescue Sal's relationship with the community or showing continued solidarity with Sal, Mookie demonstrates that action remains imperative to making progress for both the community and for himself. Although Mookie understands that Sal is not personally at fault for the death of Radio Raheem, his decision to affirm the anger of the community by kickstarting the riot, perhaps without necessarily intending to, signals a transition from maintaining an "intimate" and civil relationship with Sal and his sons despite "*always*" challenging their "racial outbursts" (italics original; Bartley 13) to taking necessary action aimed at provoking change. By awakening to the fact that if Radio Raheem were white, the police would have treated him differently, both Mookie and the community realize the necessity of pushing back against an unjust and unequal status quo.

By standing with the community, characters such as Stevie and Sonny exemplify that, despite their racial differences, the community solidifies in their calls for justice after Radio Raheem's death. Even before Mookie instigates the community's reaction, Stevie's transparent comment about the police, "it's murder," places him within the broader calls for justice coming from Black community members (*DTRT* 1:36:40). His positioning in this scene contrasts his

⁸ Sal employs both Mookie and Da Mayor; the film begins with Da Mayor waking up to Mister Señor Love Daddy's WE-LOVE radio show and concludes with Mookie waking up in a similar manner; Da Mayor's retributive path throughout the film mirrors Mookie's emergence as a neighbourhood leader, and both characters act as benefactors to their communities at different points in the film, with Da Mayor saving a child from being struck by a car.

character arc throughout the early portion of the film; his first scene places him and his Puerto Rican friends in direct opposition to Radio Raheem, as they have a battle of the boomboxes to assert whose music is louder and thus, whose music gets to play (Gibson 194). Additionally, in the concluding shot, amidst the debris from the previous night's riot, the audience sees what appears to be Stevie passing a basketball with a Black member of the community, signalling a bond within the community that was not present in the opening of the film (*DTRT* 1:52:00). Radio Raheem's death galvanizes the Latin-Americans within the community, as they stand with Radio Raheem and their Black neighbours to confront Sal's Famous as an oppressive symbol of racial hierarchies within the community.

Likewise, the Black community initially sees Sonny, a Korean American man who owns a vegetable stand in the community, as an outsider. He comes under fire from the Cornermen (Sweet Dick Willie, Coconut Sid, and M. L.) because he owns a successful business despite recently immigrating to New York. Moreover, Radio Raheem verbally attacks him early in the film after a miscommunication due to Sonny's troubles with the English language. The Black members of the community repeatedly question his status and place within the community, and after burning down Sal's, the angry mob targets his vegetable stand as the last remaining "symbol of external exploitation" (Jong Lee 749). However, in an attempt to ward off the angry crowd, Sonny claims a shared identity with the black community, shouting back, "I Black! You, me, same" (*DTRT* 1:40:38). While the crowd scoffs at Sonny's claim and leaves his grocery stand untouched, his assertion of a unified identity is not altogether wrong. As Jong Lee points out, rather than denoting "a specific racial category," for Sonny, being Black signifies "that he is also a person of color who is struggling for survival at the bottom of US society" (749). This level of solidarity diverges from the initial depiction of the relationship between Korean

Americans and Black Americans and shows a transition within the community towards acceptance and empathy of those suffering from similar oppression, regardless of their skin colour.

Further evidence of Sonny's claim to a shared identity comes from his actions immediately following the death of Radio Raheem. As Jong Lee notes, Sonny immediately recognizes the atrocity of Radio Raheem's death at the hands of the police, chasing after the squad car and slamming his hand on the trunk in frustration as the police flee the scene (749). Like Stevie's consciousness of the racial divide between the whites and everyone else, Sonny's resentment towards the police stems from his awareness that the police are the state's chosen perpetrators of racial oppression. By aligning themselves with the community and pushing back against police brutality and inequality, both Stevie and Sonny show that Radio Raheem's death marks a transition point for the community; rather than fighting with each other, the community realizes the need to stand in unity and fight the powers that uphold an unfair and unjust racial hierarchy within their community. This mutual convergence is an example of the measured progress that Lee emphasizes throughout the film, as Radio Raheem's death creates new relationships between community members who were previously at odds with each other.

Following suit with Bakhtin's definition of the *Bildungsroman*, as the community awakens to the necessity of standing together to oppose racial oppression, so too does Mookie. Sal's inability to quiet the crowd plays into Mookie's sudden but rational decision to throw the trash can through the window of the pizzeria; Mookie, along with Da' Mayor, saves Sal and his two sons from suffering any bodily harm by shifting the focus of the rioters towards the restaurant. Furthermore, by instigating the attack on Sal's Famous, Mookie breaks free from his dependency on Sal as his employer. By committing to his grieving community through the

radical action of kickstarting the riot, a reaction by the community even Mookie may not have anticipated, Mookie grows into a character who is no longer solely concerned with himself.

Instead, he recognizes his place within the broader community and through his actions, he moves his community towards a transition point, signalling that progress has been made, even if it comes at a steep price. Although the community loses Sal's Famous, a cornerstone of the community for "twenty-five years," the community grows closer after the death of Radio Raheem. By acting as a catalyst and protesting the unjust treatment of Radio Raheem, Mookie asserts a central value of the community; lives are more important than property and, from the community's perspective, Radio Raheem's death trumps the loss of Sal's pizzeria. Mookie's evolution and the community's awakening coincide, as Radio Raheem's death pushes both towards violence and the most radical gesture available.

Although Mookie and the community violently react to Radio Raheem's death, several characters, most notably, Da Mayor, Mookie's sister Jade (Joie Lee), and Mother Sister (Ruby Dee), push for non-violence throughout the film; these calls for peace and reconciliation rather than the upheaval of the status quo emphasize the range of possibilities available and the deciding nature of Mookie's reaction for both himself and the community. Before Radio Raheem's death and the subsequent riot, Buggin' Out presses Jade to join in his boycott. She refuses, instead stating she is "down" for positive change rather than Buggin' Out's divisive call to boycott Sal's (*DTRT* 1:05:10). Jade's response demonstrates her awareness that the pictures on Sal's wall are not oppressing the community; rather than taking the situation personally, like Buggin' Out does, Jade pushes Buggin' Out to think bigger and broader and direct his energies "in a more useful way" towards creating positive change (1:05:10).

Although Buggin' Out fails to heed Jade's direction, her statement emphasizes the community's growing awareness that change is necessary, even if members of the community disagree on what precisely that change entails. This awakening to the reality of their collective situation shows the community's growing awareness that, in order to do the right thing and fight the power structures supporting racism and police brutality, the community must stand as one. For both Mookie and a majority of the community, doing the right thing by standing in unison in the face of racism and police violence comes all at once, in a radical and instinctive gesture to fight violence with violence.

Though Mookie grows throughout the film and begins to grasp his role within the broader community, Lee only hints at Mookie's growth as a father and family man. Throughout the early portion of the film, Mookie seems youthful beyond his years, ignoring Tina's pleas for him to spend more time with her and their baby, Hector. Instead, he clings to an adolescent mindset, placing higher value in working for Sal, "getting paid," and flirting with the women who frequent the pizzeria (1:18:45). Additionally, Mookie displays a lack of responsibility by failing to keep his word and spend time with Tina, who, rightly so, feels he regards her as a sexual object rather than a partner. Tina resorts to ordering a pizza from Sal's, knowing Mookie will deliver it; she does so because she has not seen Mookie "for a week" (1:18:40). Further underlining Mookie's failure to provide, he forgets to bring Tina the ice cream he has promised her (1:18:50). Once inside of her place, Mookie pressures Tina into "doing the nasty," telling her to sit still as he rubs ice cubes over her body. Mookie's problematic treatment of Tina reveals his lack of maturity concerning their relationship. As both a partner and father, prior to the protest, Mookie fails in his commitment to his partner and his son and shuns the responsibilities that traditionally accompany these roles.

However, like his growth into a neighbourhood leader, Mookie transitions towards becoming a more supportive father and partner by the film's conclusion. After the riot, Mookie spends the night with Tina and Hector, waking up early when he remembers Sal still owes him money (1:45:30). After engaging in an argument littered with explicit language shouted by both Tina and Mookie, Mookie promises to return as soon as he gets his money. Although Lee concludes the film before the audience sees whether Mookie returns home, Mister Señor Love Daddy advises Mookie to “go on home” to Hector and Tina (1:51:15). As an authority within the neighbourhood and a narrative voice for the film, Señor Love Daddy’s call to Mookie suggests he will answer Tina’s call to “be a fucking man” and at least attempt to fulfill his familial and fatherly duties. By inconclusively concluding Mookie’s story, Lee intimates that while Mookie has grown and transitioned, his growth and transition, as both a family man and a leader of his community, must continue past the film’s conclusion; he must continue to independently develop, both financially and personally. By signalling Mookie’s growth through various facets of his personal and social existence, including his break from depending on Jade which Lee visually represents by having Mookie spend the night at Tina’s, Lee firmly entrenches Mookie’s story in the *Bildungsroman*.

While perhaps emphasizing the ambiguity of Mookie’s growth and positioning within the community, Sal and Mookie’s final encounter amidst the debris of the riot and the burnt down pizzeria signals that Mookie and the community have, however minutely, changed. By publicly living up to what becomes a communal obligation, Mookie shifts the status quo of the community. Although Sal still fails to grasp the bigger picture, blaming Radio Raheem’s death and the loss of his pizzeria on Buggin’ Out, Mookie, speaking on behalf of the community at large, reminds Sal of a central value the community has come to learn; lives are intrinsically

worth more than personal property. As a physical object carrying profound meaning for Sal, the pizzeria clouds his judgement and bars him from seeing his complicity in the racial oppression of the community.⁹ Though he attempts to steer the conversation towards friendly banter after initially arguing with Mookie, the events of the previous night have forever altered the relationship, and Sal knows it as he nervously taps his hand to his leg and steps in place. Despite not being the reason Radio Raheem's tragic death occurs, Sal effectively exiles himself from the community by placing his life's work, his pizzeria, on a level parallel to Radio Raheem's life. Though the relationship is not severed, a point which Lee emphasizes by having Mookie arrive still wearing his work clothing, the transition in Mookie and Sal's relationship echoes the community's awakening. It suggests the heavy weight of the event within the community, even if the protest is too local to draw national attention.

Mookie portrays further evidence of his growth by not immediately picking the money up after Sal throws it at him; this seemingly minor gesture emphasizes that the changes Mookie undergoes throughout the film are not merely superficial. Instead, they are changes that he will carry forward with him, and this mirrors the changes within the community. Although Mookie accedes to Sal's offer after some back-and-forth and accepts double his weekly wages, by not immediately stooping to collect the money, Mookie departs from the financial covetousness that informs his character throughout the film. Moreover, Mookie's farewell to Sal shows his personal evolution, as he tells Sal he must return home to see his son (1:51:00). Sal's surprised reaction to Mookie prioritizing fatherhood points towards Mookie's growth as both a man and a father. Mookie and the community's actions etch a line in the pavement, and the characters

⁹ As Totaro points out, there is a link between the physical object of Radio Raheem's boombox and Sal's Pizzeria as a physical object; for both men, their identities are deeply rooted in these physical objects, as the objects represent their "self-worth and sense of manhood." (Totaro 8)

within the community find themselves on new ground, somewhere between a landing place and a launching point, even if Lee avoids defining what precisely the changed landscape entails.

Mookie supports this change by taking radical action; rather than keeping the peace, his decision ensures that both the status quo of the community and his personal status quo, at least in the confines of the neighbourhood, cannot remain as they were.

Mookie's evolution and the community's awakening foreshadows Malcolm X's quote from his essay "Communication and Reality" that appears at the end of the film; because the "situation" calls for action, Malcolm X proclaims that individuals must "preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation" (Malcolm X 313). By answering the call and pushing back against a racist status quo, Lee illustrates the evolution of Mookie and the awakening of the community. Though Lee understates the effect of the riot, the collective growth of Mookie and the community will shape the future "world's emergence" (Morson and Emerson 411). This reading of the film ties into Moretti's work on the *Bildungsroman*, as he asserts that the genre explores worlds and agents of change who seek their meaning "in the *future* rather than in the past" (italics original Moretti 5). As the genre of the *Bildungsroman* necessitates, the change to the status quo is not "just a mechanical or inevitable result of the past," nor are the agents of change merely the "passive vehicle[s] through which innovation takes place (Morson and Emerson 411). Instead, Mookie and the community collectively create this change by physically and verbally expressing their inhibitions regarding the status quo. By acting violently, albeit intelligently, (Malcolm X 313) Mookie and the community shape each other and the future.

By placing the onus of the narrative in the future, Lee's film eschews the paradigms of the conventional *Bildungsroman* and leans into Bakhtin's reading of the novel of emergence.

Whereas the classical *Bildungsroman* “ends as soon as the intentional design [of the story] has been realized,” (Moretti 55) Mookie and the story of his community is only just beginning. While the film nods towards a past that emphasizes the multiethnic struggle against racial oppression, the characters, most notably Mookie, create change through their present actions. In choosing to side with Malcolm X’s quote at the end of the film and incite change through a violent act rather than Martin Luther King’s quote, besides ensuring change, Mookie and the community’s actions confirm the efficacy of violence in this specific instance. As James C. McKelly posits:

In the bilaterally configured semiotics of political discourse, the figure "King" has come to signify the ethics of reform: justice, integrationism, passive resistance, patience, forgiveness, constructive engagement, and an altruistic faith in democracy and in the basic goodness of the individuals who compose the dominant majority. By contrast, the figure “X” has come to signify the ethics of revolution: power, separatism, proactive resistance, decisiveness, responsibility, autonomy, and a realistic awareness of the systemic failures of democratic capitalism and the complicity, whether intentional or de facto, of the individuals who comprise America's capitalist society. (McKelly 217)

McKelly deftly delineates the split between the two major political figures, and by siding with Malcolm X at the most crucial point, whose language, incidentally, echoes the Declaration of Independence, Mookie and the community choose their own version of revolution over reform. By electing to vehemently oppose systemic racism and police brutality in a unified yet spontaneously violent and forceful manner, the community’s reaction provides hope for the future, even if it comes at a steep price. Mookie’s deliberate choice to destroy Sal’s Famous

emphasizes the community's feelings regarding Radio Raheem's death; "forgiveness" (McKelly 217) will not come easily if it ever comes at all, and the community has laid the foundation to protest and redefine how they can protect themselves from racial injustices and police brutality.

Mookie's *Bildungsroman* leads him, his community, and attentive viewers towards a sobering realization that defies the oft-quoted American ideal. As Theodore R. Johnson affirms in his recent article "Racism's Existential Threat to the American Ideal,"

Racism, however, resists the American idea and the progress it demands. The idea can survive alongside declining racism so long as the nation inches away from racial hierarchy and toward equality. But once racial backsliding begins, America is in danger. And should the United States step into a double-armed embrace of racial revanchism, the life will be squeezed out of the American idea. The threat is a result of a fundamental truth: our founding principles of equality, liberty, and opportunity cannot coexist with racial hierarchy. We cannot believe that all of us are created equal while also subscribing to the view that white citizens are "more American" than black ones. (Johnson 2021)

Johnson's article ties into Lee's film and Mookie's *Bildungsroman* by clarifying the consequences of racism within America and emphasizing the necessity of combatting racism within America. By portraying both Mookie and the community's burgeoning realization of the pitfalls of racism, Lee provides an ugly snapshot of America that continues to captivate audiences even thirty years after its release. As Mother Sister espouses regarding the state of the community, they are "still standing," only now the community stands in unison, with a fuller awareness, from young to old, of the threat facing not only minority members of the community

but every American citizen.¹⁰ While this realization and the subsequent actions of Mookie and the community does not promise a rise in equality for minority members of America, nor does it guarantee the toppling of power structures supporting a racial hierarchy, it does affirm the fact that the community's status quo cannot remain as it was. Although progress is glacial in the case that Lee presents, through Mookie's *Bildungsroman*, the community takes a necessary step towards unity. This initial step towards the "founding principles of equality, liberty, and opportunity" (Johnson 2021) promises positive change, even if the change remains at a local level. Here, Lee postulates that social change always begins locally, in neighbourhoods, with neighbours interacting dynamically.

Though Lee has come under scrutiny for including the riot scene and "injecting the militant rhetoric of the 1960s into films of the 1980s" (Hanson 49) and taken at face value, the "climax of the riot" changes "nothing of substance" (Radtke 218); it does allow the community a space to grieve Radio Raheem's death while also "giving voice [and action] to those who have been repeatedly silenced and marginalized" (Johnson 34). Moreover, by initiating the riot and siding with his community, Mookie exercises his agency while still wearing Sal's jersey and refuses to allow racial oppression to silence or ignore him and his community. Mookie's *Bildungsroman* incites growth within his community, as characters such as Sonny and Stevie overcome their differences in their calls for justice. While both Mookie and the community will have to heal after the death of Radio Raheem, Lee provides the film with a positive conclusion as the community grows closer through the death of Radio Raheem while Mookie simultaneously comes to understand better his place within the community as well as his role as a father and

¹⁰ While this is a threat for every member of the community, minorities clearly bear the brunt of the consequences.

partner. Though the film avoids an inflated sense of hope, by concluding the film with Mister Señor Love Daddy's appeal to get out and vote, Lee encourages the entire audience to do the right thing by creating legislative and political action aimed at curbing racism and inequality while also challenging racism and inequality through personal behaviour.

Through both the subject matter of the film and Mookie's unconventional *Bildungsroman*, Lee invites comparisons to the present-day climate regarding race in America, inviting those "outside of academic circles" (Lubiano 256) to take a stance and form their own opinions while also reminding present-day viewers of the fraught relationship between Black Americans and the police. Lee's own commentary on the riot in the film reminds viewers and readers of the current moment and so many other instances of police brutality against Black Americans, as he ponders:

What will cause the riot? Take your pick: an unarmed Black child shot, the cops say he was reaching for a gun; a grandmother shot to death by cops with a shotgun; a young woman charged with nothing but a parking violation, dies in police custody; a male chased by a white mob onto a freeway is hit by a car...the script is evolving into a film about race relations. This is America's biggest problem... We're not just talking about Howard Beach: It's Eleanor Bumpers, Michael Stewart, Yvonne Smallwood, [Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd,] etc. (Lee 33)

Frustratingly, Lee's musings regarding the film's direction expose the lack of a breakthrough regarding racial relations with the police and, more broadly, White America. Rather than providing an answer through his film, Lee instead intends to reveal to audiences the resilience of Black communities in general. As Mookie's unconventional *Bildungsroman* demonstrates, the role the community plays in shaping the individual, and vice-versa, speaks to the importance of the community in both good times and hard times. Though the steps taken by the community to

unite reminds viewers of the cost and the bit-by-bit nature of progress, even the largely symbolic action of expelling Sal's Famous from the neighbourhood signals that both the community and Mookie are veering towards a transitional point. By depicting Mookie's ascendance into a neighbourhood leader and the community as united in their calls for justice, Lee emphasizes how Americans might continue to address "America's biggest problem" even thirty years later (Lee, "The Journal," 33).

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