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'Do the Right Thing': Issues and Images

LEAD: Spike Lee's new film, "Do the Right Thing" - which depicts racial tensions on the hottest day of the summer in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, ending with the killing of a black man by the police and a riot - has generated considerable discussion about its portrayal of blacks, racism and violence.

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The participants were Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, New York City's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs; Henry Louis Gates Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois professor of education and sociology at Cornell University; Nathan Glazer, professor of education and sociology at Harvard University; Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, associate professor of psychiatry and associate dean for student affairs, Harvard Medical School; Burton B. Roberts, administrative judge of the State Supreme Court in the Bronx; Paul Schrader, who wrote the screenplays for "Taxi Driver" and "The Last Temptation of Christ" and directed "Patty Hearst"; Dr. Betty Shabazz, an administrator at the Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York and the widow of Malcolm X, and editors of the Arts and Leisure section. Here are excerpts from the conversation. **GATES: I think the film is an allegory of the melting-pot myth in the United States. The brilliance of the film to me is in how well it re-creates the way in which all these ethnic groups are interacting on this corner in an American inner city. It's a war of culture fought out at the level of economics. Economic relationships, which are at war with each other in the society, are masked through their cultural manifestations.** **POUSSAINT: I agree with some of the things Henry says. But you can't escape the fact that the movie's primarily about race and poverty. Sal in the pizzeria. The Koreans. The animosities that develop. But it's not simply done; it's very complex, and the climax comes with a riot focused around a racial confrontation.**

Everybody in the film is a racist. It has to do, in addition to race, with an inner city in a ghetto situation, where there's been a lot of frustration. The police clearly are representatives of an oppressive society in the film. And the oracle [Smiley, a stuttering, retarded young man who tries to peddle copies of what is said to be the only existing picture of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. together], whatever he is, smiling, talking about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

The issues [Spike Lee] brought up I could identify with political positions in the black community. Cultural political positions, from the boom blaster to the fellow with the haircut [Buggin Out, who stirs up the customers at Sal's Pizzeria by demanding that portraits of blacks be included among the photographs of Italians on the pizzeria "Wall of Fame"] to the three corner men who sit around talking, and the frustrations.

But I didn't feel, as a psychiatrist, that the movie got to the bottom - at least not to my satisfaction - of where the anger and frustration was coming from. **SCHRADER: I hope someone here doesn't like the movie, because I came to defend it. It's not going to be any fun if everyone else likes it. Being a film maker myself, I naturally am prone to think it's about a film maker's vision. And it is. It is a film about very real immediate social issues, but it's also a personal statement by an upper-middle-class educated black trying to figure out what the right thing is, and all the ramifications of that title. And so that you can see the film [as] one man's dilemma about where he stands at this particular time and place, not only as a citizen of a specific community but also of a larger community.** **SHABAZZ: We have a problem, those of us who are in education and**

particularly in higher education, with the attrition rate in our colleges. Very bright students somehow drop out, and students don't finish. And I thought it was an excellent way to get an inside track on the thinking of some young people. For instance, that young fellow with that big whatever it was. POUSSAINT: Boom blaster. SHABAZZ: Boom blaster, it was exactly that. And I found it very humorous that he needed 20 D batteries. Twenty! But what you have to do is find out what makes some people tick. He said, "I like it. It is the only thing I like." So that you were able to really get inside some of the people. I felt like it was what I needed to see in order to do what I'm supposed to be doing better.

I saw this film as for all of those people who live in ivory towers, who don't get into the inner city. It says that we need to do something. Stereotypes or Cultural Touchstones? CAMPBELL: Dr. Gates used the term allegory. And after I came out of the film, I thought of the word parable - the sense that it was a film about - that kind of stood for - the whole illogic of racial virulence. We really don't talk about it. We leave it as a kind of a subtext, but it's there all the time. The film pierced the surface of that, laid everything on the table.

I must say, though, in the first half of the film, I was exasperated by a certain simplistic presentation of the ideas. Everything was kind of flat, almost cartoonlike. And it was black, white, love, hate, Malcolm, Martin, old, young. And I got the feeling that we were going to be dealing in something very naive.

But as the film builds up, and as the heat seemed to get increasingly intense, those clear separations seemed to become less distinct. And what then became clear was that there was a whole esthetic being used in the film. The music, the opening strands, I think, were "Lift Every Voice and Sing." And then you go into "Fight the Power." And then the juxtaposition of these wonderful jazz passages, in between the rap and reggae songs, that sort of carry you around. So that by the scene where Radio Raheem puts the boom box on the counter and Sal takes that baseball bat and smashes it, you feel as though someone has been murdered, that he was literally killing his music, that something very sacred had been destroyed.

By the time Smiley tacks on the Malcolm and Martin photograph, all of a sudden all that history that all of us know comes rushing in and their words at the end have this incredible fullness. ROBERTS: I think one of the messages was that the only thing homogenized in our society is milk. Nor should we be a completely homogenized society. Our strength lies in the admixture of our various cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

But [Mr. Lee] gives out certain messages - for example, the song "Fight the Power." Well, maybe we should stop emphasizing the negative, maybe we should emphasize the positive. Why can't we fight for power, rather than fight the power?

I believe it was Dr. Poussaint who said that everybody in the movie is a racist. I didn't see it quite like that. Is Sal a racist? Sal certainly liked Mookie. Sal adored Mookie's sister. Mookie's sister - certainly not a racist. And Mookie himself - I don't know that Mookie is a racist. Being proud of being black and decrying individuals who are intolerant, such as Sal's son, doesn't make Mookie a racist in my book. It makes him a smart fellow.

I don't expect different ethnic or racial groups to stop being chauvinistic. I think it's good; our country has been based on that. But we all have to respect and understand each other and try to work with each other. And if we don't - if we decide to go our own way, and we burn down the businesses of strangers in our neighborhood - then we're going to continue to be polarized. The View From the Audience GLAZER: I want to comment on an aspect which hasn't come up, oddly enough, though some of us are involved in race relations, and that is how would [the film] be viewed? How would it be viewed by whites and how it would be viewed by blacks? For example, the only people who are working in it are the Koreans, the Italians and Mookie. Now I realize one of the reasons the others are not working, are hanging around, is that it's Saturday. You worry about that if you consider what sort of picture is being given.

Mookie's a very ambiguous character. He is the man who Sal can get on the block to work. You have the

impression the others would not be as reliable. Or they wouldn't want the job. Or something. But Mookie does it with an awful lot of grudgingness. He doesn't exactly run to deliver his pizzas; there's always a conversation along the way, there's always some time out after he delivers it. At the end, there's this ambiguity. Which side is he on? He starts the riot. Well, Sal starts the riot. Or Radio Raheem starts it. ROBERTS: What caused Mookie to throw that ashcan through the window was not the busting up of the radio by Sal. He can understand Sal busting up that radio. What bothered him was the brutality of the police in killing Radio Raheem.

What worries me is whites are going to look at this movie in an unthinking fashion and suddenly increase fear, hate, whatever for the black community.

The black community is going to look at this in an unthinking way, too, and they're not going to see Sal. They're going to see Sal's son, who's a miserable creature. And they're going to delight in the fact that this thing ended with not necessarily Sal but Sal's son being booted out of this neighborhood, and the whole pizzeria leaving the neighborhood. SHABAZZ: What I found interesting - for lack of a better word - was that it sharpened our sensitivities in directions that perhaps we should be going in, or we should already be there; that the human life is important whether it's in an inner-city ghetto or on Park Avenue. I found it interesting that you cited the throwing of the can as opposed to the death of this young man. GATES: I think the most controversial aspect of the film is that it seems to be saying that people make their own fates, that people have a choice. And that they and the choices they make determine the outcome of their lives, rather than the other way around, which is that the environment determines their fate. POUSSAINT: The throwing of the can is the loss of Mookie's ambivalence. He chooses sides. He got very deliberate and said, "This is what needs to be done to this damn place," and he threw the can. Now if that message comes through - that doing the right thing was choosing your sides and knowing that these people, even with their kindness, were your enemies - then that would be a little bit dangerous. CAMPBELL: What makes the film work is that there is no confusion between what we want to see happen and what happens. And that happens right up until the last. [Mr. Lee] doesn't permit Mookie to come away as a hero. What I hear is your concern that somehow we're not putting a good lesson at the end of that parable. It's not being instructive.

But that is exactly why we come away with the feeling that this is authentic. Because it doesn't permit any of that romance. For Black Film Makers, A Higher Standard GATES: I don't think we should ask our artists to worry about the lowest common denominator, or indeed the average common denominator of the response of the American public. I think it's a type of implicit censorship. SCHRADER: It's a truism that blacks have to outperform whites in similar situations. More is called for on the part of a black than a white. He cannot have the kind of personal controversy in his life that a white person has. The black is always, particularly in the position of power, held to a higher standard. It's interesting vis-a-vis Spike as a film maker, because I think the film is marked by extraordinary restraint and responsibility; that the temptation to vent must have been almost irrepressible. And yet he does hold back.

I remember when I was young and very angry, I wrote this movie "Taxi Driver." Spike Lee does not have that privilege; he doesn't have the privilege to be that angry. Society won't let him. It's too dangerous for a black person to be that psychopathically angry at whites, the way that white character in "Taxi Driver" was at blacks. It's just not allowed to him. Art doesn't need to be responsible. Art can be incendiary. Art can be inflammatory. Spike has been held to an extraordinary level of responsibility, and he has risen to it. Which was more than we should ever ask of any artist, and to his great credit that he did. POUSSAINT: One thing I think there should be no question about: the movie clearly is an indictment of police brutality in the black community. He dedicates the film to [Eleanor] Bumpers and to Michael Stewart and five or six people who were killed by policemen under controversial circumstances. That's very clear. SHABAZZ: I think, though, that it's across the board about racism. POUSSAINT: Oh, I think all that's in it, but I'm just dealing with the police piece. ROBERTS: What I wish could have come across clearer [was that] a large number of the people in the law enforcement community possibly understand that problem, and understand the problems confronting the people in the ghetto area more than do people in other disciplines. Because they feel it, they

live it, they're part of it. **POUSSAINT**: I think he showed the police difficulties. The police came in and who did they have to subdue? Radio Raheem, the biggest, huskiest dude. So there was an issue in how to control him, right? And then it got completely out of hand. It wasn't as if they came in with the intention of killing him. **ROBERTS**: Do you remember the nicer police officer saying, "Enough! Enough, Mike." **POUSSAINT**: "Enough," that's right. So he was showing one policeman saying it was enough and another policeman being carried away with his own fear, or the need to subdue this big guy and killing him. In fact, what happens in reality. **Image and Responsibility** **ROBERTS**: Spike Lee gave some nuances to these characters, he gave nuances to the situation. You take the 30's and Odetts's "Waiting for Lefty." What are the nuances of that? Remember the kid coming out of medical school, came out tops in his class, he wants to get into a hospital as an intern? It happens to be a Jewish hospital and they turn him down because he's not socially well connected. The term that was used, "When are you going to learn, there's no difference between Christians and Jews. The difference is whether you're rich or poor." Here there are nuances. **GATES**: But that shows how sensitive Spike Lee is, all these little nuances - not only from that kind of thing but the way he reveals the inner workings of black culture. When the women are doing each other's hair one says, "Oh, I'm tenderheaded, everybody in my family is tenderheaded." How many times has every black person heard that, or watched his or her mother get hair done? He brings to life black vernacular culture in a way that nobody that I can think of in either the written or film tradition has done. **CAMPBELL**: The other thing that strikes me about this conversation is that all of us remember precise pieces, so that every piece of the dialogue opens up another corner of that culture. **GLAZER**: I'm no defender of censorship but I'd like to push a bit more. We've been hearing about these things and [Spike Lee] resists these temptations to dress things up.

But I'm surprised that no one does want to take seriously the impact on images, visions, race relations, or the notion of accountability and responsibility. **SHABAZZ**: Paul Schrader said something that I think Spike Lee understood very well: that blacks are not allowed to be as angry at whites as whites are against blacks. And to me that's a statement that a lot of black people perhaps feel but have not verbalized. I think that the message about those helpless people in that inner-city hot community who used fans and ice cubes to cool themselves was that in order to live, in order to breathe, they had to fight what they perceived as power. Which might be different from someone else higher on the economic ladder. **GATES**: I want to address the question of the incendiary nature of the film. I think that is the importance of the ambiguity - not only at the end, but throughout. He could have made a coercive movie that would show only one side of all the larger questions here, but he didn't. This is a porous movie, this is a movie about choices. The moviegoer is even left with a choice, put there literally through the two quotes of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. That's why it's not, I think, incendiary. It allows you to bring choice and interpretation to it. And that's what I think will keep it from causing social problems in the hot summer. **SCHRADER**: I just want to interject one final thing on this inflammatory issue. The last time we heard this argument was on a movie called "Colors," and nothing happened. It's hard to know. **CAMPBELL**: Talking about this movie being incendiary, New York City had riots in 1935, in 1943, in 1964, and there was no Spike Lee. **ROBERTS**: And in '68 and '69. **CAMPBELL**: So there are other forces that have nothing to do with Spike Lee. And the movie is about those forces. You could take that phrase, "fight the power" and you could put it in Malcolm's voice, you could put it in Martin's voice. The phrase begins to take on a different flavor, you know, depending on who says it. And it's O.K., it's not necessarily negative. It really does become an act; it becomes a way of defining yourself and making choices. **POUSSAINT**: Looking at the film, you could argue that some of it is not realistic. For instance, he doesn't show black people in that neighborhood doing drugs. Yet that's a reality in Bed-Stuy. He doesn't show black people robbing from each other. The only time there's robbing is in the riot with the whites - he doesn't show black people acting violent toward each other. Most of the interaction, the abuse, is verbal. **CAMPBELL**: I think one of the reasons is that it is not only about that one street in Bed-Stuy, it is about a basic condition in this country. And every one of us who went [to the film] can buy into some part of it, some aspect of it. By taking all the other stuff away, the crack and the drugs, all of that, and leaving you with just that clear definition, it becomes very vibrant. **GATES**: I wanted to go back to the question about the relationship between this film and positive images. There's no simple relationship between the representation of images of ethnic groups and social relationships. I read an article recently that said that the most popular TV show in

South Africa was "The Cosby Show." And "The Cosby Show" is the most popular TV show in the United States precisely when we have the highest black unemployment rate, the highest black birth-out-of-wedlock rate, that we've had in my lifetime. There was a time in Afro-American cultural history when we thought if only we could have an image represented to the bulk of Americans that showed a refined Afro-American doctor, married to a refined Afro-American lawyer, who's a partner in a Wall Street law firm - POUSSAINT: That would cure us all. GATES: And obviously that hasn't happened. POUSSAINT: The message that Da Mayor gives at the end is that everybody loses with violence. You could even interpret an antiviolent message [in the film] : When it comes to this, when there's blood and killing and burning, everyone is hurt by it. There should be some other way. But that's the way it's been happening in this society. CAMPBELL: At the end of the movie, nothing - POUSSAINT: Nothing was solved by it. ROBERTS: But there is a resolution. The resolution is that we have to resolve it, and if we don't resolve it then we remain losers. SCHRADER: There is the disturbing conclusion at the end that the way to solve it is to close up places like Sal's because they don't really belong there. SHABAZZ: If you're saying that white business doesn't belong there, then you're saying that life will go on as usual. And I think we have to look at the fact that t in a pluralistic society there must, on both sides, be a degree of respect and trust. And to me that's how the film ended, and this is going to be very difficult for a lot of people who only respect themselves and their own ethnic group. [Sal] didn't even want to put a picture of a black person on the wall because, as he said, it was his wall. But he made his money from the black people there. GATES: Right. The movie was a plea for multiculturalism. . Sal is the man who is the keeper of the Western canon. He's the person who decides who the all-time greatest hits are on the wall. And this becomes the gate to be stormed.