

This Way For Black Empowerment... Who Are Our People?

BY DR. LENORA FULANI

Last week I saw two movies by Black filmmakers. The first was *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, by 19 year old Matty Rich. The other was Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*.

Matty Rich is new on the film scene; his movie about his life experiences growing up in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn was financed on a shoestring budget and took five years to make. Once it was released, it received enough praise to land this talented young artist a contract with a major distributor. Spike, of course, has a series of films already to his credit, each one an insightful look at different aspects of our lives as African Americans (and often about themes many other artists avoid, like sexism and class conflict).

These two films make some pretty definite statements by and about the African American community, which contains countless different (and strong) points of view, including my own! Both of these films have provoked strong responses about lots of issues, and that's great; our community must be free to express all of those responses in a positive and open way. I'd like to share some of the things these films got me thinking about.

I saw *Straight Out of Brooklyn* with my 14 year old son Amani, and I thought it was a realistic, uncleaned up, straightforward account of the lives of poor Black folks in this country. Having grown up in a working class community, I saw people I recognized, people I could feel for, was touched by and could be angry at.

I was also struck by the reactions of Amani and my 18 year old daughter Ainka to the attempt by the three teenagers who are the central characters to bypass the poverty, pain and humiliation of their lives by ripping off the local drug dealer. Both of my kids laughed at how these young men could

be dumb enough to commit so foolish an act in a neighborhood where they'd be easily recognized, found and most likely murdered.

I actually thought that was one of the most powerful aspects of the movie. Much of the death that occurs in communities involving our young people killing each other grows out of scenarios that are dangerous, deadly and very dumb. And a lot of the dumbness that permeates working class culture is covered over by posturing, styling and "cool" talk. However, there is nothing cool about working class youth, Black, Latino or white, killing each other or performing suicide missions to impress each other even if it's in an attempt to escape the ugly racism and classism of their lives. Actually, a tribute to the young brother who made the movie is that he presents working class youth culture minus the sickness and the hype while preserving the humanity of these young Black working class men. I loved it!

As you no doubt know, the plot of *Jungle Fever* centers around the relationship between a married Black middle class businessman who lives on Strivers Row in Harlem and his Italian American secretary, who comes from Bensonhurst (the neighborhood where young Yusuf Hawkins was murdered by a mob of white youth, and where the Reverend Al Sharpton was almost killed by a would-be assassin who attacked him just before we began a NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE! march through the community; the movie is dedicated to Yusuf).

There's quite a difference in how our community is portrayed in *Jungle Fever* and *Straight Out of Brooklyn*. Matty Rich's brilliant and moving use of realism in capturing real working class people in the Black community was rather astounding. I like realism in the movies I watch and I don't mind squirming with its impact. Spike uses

his technique of fantasy and caricatures to portray class differences in the community in a whole different way. I began thinking about the white male fantasies and dreams of what Black life is about; infuriating and dehumanizing portrayals like Bill Moyers' commentary on the "vanishing Black family." I thought about some of those fantasies that many of our folks learn to accept, like what it means to be a "junkie." I think Spike's over-simplified working class characters, like the "crack-head," serve to reinforce these fantasies.

I grew up in Chester, Pennsylvania. Over the years, Chester has become the drug depot of the state. Alcoholism and drugs, racism and poverty have swallowed up much of the community (especially the young). I have worked as a therapist in Harlem since 1983 and I've treated, inspired, fought with and fought to empower many Black and Latino folks who visit the Taj Mahals of our communities. But what does it mean for the "junkie" in *Jungle Fever* to keep insisting that he's a "crack head" simply because he likes to get high? Do drug dealers rip off their families and communities and steal from their mamas and exploit the pain and humiliation of our families? Absolutely yes. But is that all of who they are, or all of who poor people in our communities are? Absolutely not! But our communities, our people, are not the poor Black folks we see on things like Bill Moyers' commentary on the "vanishing Black family."

So who are our people? I admit that sometimes I have to guard against my protectiveness of Black poor and working class folks primarily because their dignity is usually what is easily, and unfairly, sacrificed. However, like the youth in our communities, they don't need to be protected; they need to be challenged to do something more with the pain and humiliation of growing up Black and poor in America!



Perspectives

By Professor McKinley Burt

Don't Lay Back 'Cause It's Summer!

I love it; the response of those parents, teachers and students who read my article on the "Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition" of 1895 (Perspectives, 6/26/91). You are quite right, African Americans seem to have forgotten (or ignored) the greatest of their contributions to world civilization, both technical and cultural. And, yes, we cannot go on in this way. Never mind that we may have been manipulated.

Let me round up a few more facts about this exposition. They may answer some of your queries. There were many such gifted and literate black congressmen as George H. Murray, a principal sponsor of the exhibition and who displayed eight (8) "patented" inventions of his own; there were 92 patented inventions by African American men and women on the list he submitted to the 53rd Congress, second session. The stature of Mr. Murray is extremely important because there have been so many pejorative and negative comments about the intellectual and moral stature of the blacks who served in congress following the Civil War.

We need to understand the reasons for this perversion of history which continues to this very day. There is a terrible and ugly dichotomy in the American psyche which demands at the same time the concept of a republic which early on was the world's symbol for freedom and liberalism, and the resulting concomitant, SLAVERY

WAS JUSTIFIED. Ignorant, intellectual children could not possibly in the first generation have produced those statesmen and competent legislators, and the engineers, who gave America among other things, the first legislation for Federal Aid for Education, Land Grant Colleges that endure today, and hundreds of inventions that supported America's industrial advance into the 20th century. BUT THEY DID, DIDN'T THEY. So it is denied.

This example of U.S. many instances of perverted establishment folklore and pseudo-history should provide further understanding of why I constantly advance the cause of relevant "Black History" as a key motivational force in developing a desire and commitment to education in our confused youth: "You are somebody-YOU ALWAYS WERE SOMEBODY." I certainly demonstrated the worth of this approach in these eleven years on the faculty of Portland State University, where I integrated the relevant historical component into every course taught; Business, Economics, Science, Humanities. And it certainly worked; the gifted were further inspired and the recalcitrant and street persons were turned around. And still they come back to visit me, the C.P.A.s, the engineers, the executives from industry and the public sector, the business owners, and the many professionals. "HEY, LOOK AT ME, MR. BURT-I REALLY WAS SOMEBODY!" (My collection of baby pictures grows apace.)

So when I write articles addressed to you, "Whom shall we educate, Parent or Student?" or "Parents Must Bridge The Gap," it is this segment of the education process that is pushed just as hard as a meaningful and structured curriculum. At the very same time I constantly beseech the schools and related community programs to bring me in to provide structured input and methodologies for achieving such real-time results (for staff and or clientele).

So don't "lay back" this summer. Fall will soon be here and your help is needed if I am going to get more of this work done. And by the way, continue to build that library so necessary to this structure. Get the following free tabloid-size catalog listing thousands of books on every subject imaginable from race and science, to fiction, do it yourself, history, travel, health and business: Edward R. Hamilton, Falls Village, CT 06031-5000 (most very reasonable, from \$2.95 up).

It occurs to me that some readers may be interested in material that deals with that "Atlanta Exposition" and for related events like the black congressmen and inventions of the period. Try the following: Eyewitness to Black History, Katz; Up From Slavery, Booker T. Washington; Roll Jordan Roll, Genovese; From Plantation To Ghetto, Meier & Rudwick; A History of Negro Education In The South, Bullock; In Black America Books Inc. 1970), and Black Inventors of America, Burt.

Black Support Priority For Handgun Control Bill

A major campaign is on around the country to heighten awareness among African-Americans and to press for their Senators to vote for the BRADY BILL, said Kevin Jefferson, National

Minority Affairs Coordinator for Handgun Control, Inc. (HCI), based in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Attorney General concedes that it would take years before an

instant check system at a national level can be in place. However, by that time, at the rate of homicides taking place in the black community so many lives will have been taken away.

Community Leaders Mobilize Against Racism

In a press conference held during the Mayor's Forum cable program on Wednesday, June 26, leaders from throughout the community came together to speak out against bias hate crimes and to urge citizens to help stop racism. The press conference, organized by City Commissioner Mike Lindberg, served to send the message that Portland's citizens and leaders are united in their efforts to prevent the spread of hate crimes. The press conference also helped raise awareness of racist Skinhead and Neo-Nazi efforts to target Portland as a base of operations. Commissioner Lindberg stated such groups are "part of a national and international movement" and that there has been "a dramatic increase in the number of hate crimes" in the first three months of this year.

Police Chief Tom Potter announced that two detectives have been assigned to investigate bias hate crimes. Resources available to help citizens recognize, report and stop the spread of racism were also discussed at the press conference. One such resource is a highly recommended guide produced by the Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program and drafted by a multi-ethnic Task Force of grass-roots volunteers entitled, "A Citizens' Guide on How To Establish the Climate Where Racism Cannot Occur." [To order copies, call S.E. Uplift - 232-0010]. The Metropolitan Human Relations Commission [Telephone 796-5136] also has pamphlets available printed in many different languages to assist citizens in reporting hate crimes.

Those attending the press conference included Mayor Clark and all City Council members, Police Chief Tom Potter, District Attorney Michael Schunk, Urban League President Darryl Tukufu, and Marsha Congdon, Oregon Vice President and CEO of

U.S. West Communications. Representatives from S.E. Uplift, Black United Front, Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, Coalition for Human Dignity, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Community Relations, were also in attendance.

"Silence in the face of bigotry and racism means acceptance. By not speaking out against it, you are speaking for it. Go public with your commitment to establish the climate where all citizens can live in harmony."*

*Quoted from "A Citizens' Guide On How to Establish the Climate Where Racism Cannot Occur," produced by Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program, 9/90.

In the USA:

- A fire occurs every three minutes of every day.
- This totals a national annual average of 560,000 fires resulting in approximately 6,000 deaths.
- Smoke inhalation is responsible for 75% to 80% of those deaths, as well as for contributing to long-lasting serious health problems and injuries sustained by many survivors, such as cancer, asthma and other pulmonary problems.

Littler Ants Can Be Big Trouble

A summer picnic wouldn't be complete without a parade of ants. But when ants parade indoors to our homes, the picnic is over. Besides being an annoyance, they can contaminate foods and spread plant disease.

Unlike some other bugs, ants are active both day and night, which makes them a double pest. They are especially attracted to moist and dark areas in the home.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Take A Walk Sununu

Dear Editor,

John Sununu is like the federal budget --fat, overweight, and out of control. Sununu should do more walking. Walking would be beneficial to his health (less weight). Walking would also be beneficial to "us po tax payers" who are already overburdened with perks by public officials. As (Chief of) staff, Sununu is not accountable to anyone. Where is George? Julius Stokes NE Portland

Portland Observer encourages our readers to write letters to the editor in response to any articles we publish.

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Reinvestments in the Community

YOUTH GANG DIVERSION PROGRAM SIGNALS SIGNS OF SUCCESS

MYCAP (Minority Youth Concern Action Program), a project funded by CSD and is fastly impacting the Northeast Community with its innovative youth gang diversion program. Less than three months old, MYCAP is currently listing forty youth who are former gang members, or "Wanna B's", who are now actively involved in diversion activities.

MYCAP is the brain child of six community activists heavily involved in youth gang diversion. The six (Lonnie Jackson, Kathy Martin, Sam Pierce, Roger Wilder, Jimi Johnson and Luther Irving) met informally at McClaren school for boys some three years ago and decided to attack the surging gang problem in N/NE Portland through more

positive efforts, such as direct contact. After months of negotiating with public agencies, funding for MYCAP was finally secured through Childrens Services Division in the amount of \$100,000.

Executive Director Sam Pierce states the program was extremely lucky to secure quarters in inner Northeast Portland and after some improvements, officially opened for business this past summer.

Referrals to MYCAP are approximately 65% from McClaren and the remainder from parents and encouragingly some walk-ins.

Once referred, youth are involved in counseling, job referrals, GED education and sports activities. MYCAP currently has a staff of

three, assisted by 10 volunteers.

Tuesday and Sundays are devoted to intervention meetings with Sundays also designated as family day.

MYCAP's uniqueness has triggered inquiries from Detroit, Washington D.C., New York, Virginia, Chicago, and other states.

In addition to Sam Pierce, other staffers are Warren Ogden, live-in supervisor, and Steve Hoffman activities coordinator.

MYCAP is seeking donations for office supplies and equipment and to bring the program up to its full contingent of youth which is 100.

Donations may be mailed to the Main Branch YWCA which is the umbrella agency.

Youth Poverty On Rise

by John E. Jacob

It's time Americans stopped congratulating themselves about their affluence and about the great opportunities available here as opposed to other nations, because for all our affluence and for all our accomplishments compared with others, there is one aspect of American life that is nothing less than shameful.

Child poverty in America is outrageously high--and it is on the rise.

Almost one out of four American children under the age of six are growing up poor.

Among African Americans, half of

our young children are poor.

That should be an incredible scandal--one that ought to be shaking the Congress and the public. Instead, it's just another statistic to be ignored.

But so far I haven't seen anyone in Washington crusading for policies to end child poverty. There are plenty of talented, intelligent people fighting to cut capital gains taxes or crusading for other measures.

But no key figure in the Administration or the Congress is making an issue of the fact that almost one of every four American children is poor.

That's a serious abdication of responsibility. Especially since the problem is even worse than it appears.

According to Census data, not only are over 5 million children living in families with annual incomes below the poverty line--but another 2.7 million are in families just above that artificially low "poverty line."

That means one of every three young children in America is poor or near poor. The poverty line itself is an understated, arbitrary figure. But, however one may define poverty, there can be no disagreement that those kids are growing up in hardship.



"Reinvestments in the Community" is a weekly column appearing in API publications throughout the USA.

PORTLAND OBSERVER

(USPS 959-680)

OREGON'S OLDEST AFRICAN AMERICAN PUBLICATION
Established in 1970

Alfred L. Henderson
Publisher

Joyce Washington
Operations Manager

Gary Ann Garnett
Business Manager

The PORTLAND OBSERVER is published weekly by Exie Publishing Company, Inc. 4747 N.E. M.L.K., Jr. Blvd. Portland, Oregon 97211 P.O. Box 3137 Portland, Oregon 97208 (503) 288-0033 (Office) FAX#: (503) 288-0015



Deadlines for all submitted materials:

Articles: Monday, 5 p.m. -- Ads: Tuesday, 5 p.m.

POSTMASTER: Send Address Changes to: Portland Observer, P.O. Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208. Second-class postage paid at Portland, Oregon.

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