



This PDF is a continuation to a blog post “[Media & Black Adolescents Series: A Look at the Tragic Mulatto in Spike Lee’s Crooklyn](#).” Read about the movie “Crooklyn” and more about the tragic mulatto on the original blog post leading to this continuation.

The Tragic Mulatto Continued...

Lee remains limited in his exploration of Song’s world—but a bike ride Troy and Viola take through her neighborhood does reveal a plethora of Black neighbors. In other words, Song is not passing as White amongst White people, yet her preferential lean toward Whiteness, signified through dolls and hair styles, perhaps indicates such an aspiration. In mediating through iconography, Lee presents a distinct contrast between Song’s family and the Carmichaels. Braided, beaded hair becomes a signifier for not only Blackness, however Lee would define it, but also for embracing Blackness, without caving to “socially ascribed” connotations of race. Viola’s straight hair, and her dolls, become signifiers of Song’s dilemma, that she seeks to not only maintain her own sense of Whiteness but also project the same “privileged whiteness” upon Viola. Viola’s inner dislike for her adoptive mother opposes this projection—“I say it’s white, she says it’s black,” Song ironically asserts in a squabble with Viola (Lee, 1994, 1:16:36).

Lee’s most poignant metaphor comes with the death of Song’s dog Queenie. Lee aptly names Queenie in contrast to the Carmichaels’ Mutley; Mutley, though only a dog, may represent the Carmichaels’ own acceptance of the difficulties of navigating a racially-mixed world. Queenie symbolizes Song’s own glorification of her “privileged” aspirations. It is no surprise that Queenie’s accidental death reinvents Song as a “morally enfeebled plebeian” (Jackson, 2006, p. 35), which Jackson (2006) uses to characterize the passing mulatto’s failure to conform to Whiteness. Her wailing upon the grave of Queenie—the only time Song ever dirties her clothes—marks an “enfeebled” collapse.

Reinforced Internal Racism

Graves (1982) states that “Television plus an adult equals increased learning” (p. 55), which indirectly implies that Song’s role in presenting Whiteness to Viola could have potentially long term effects. Graves too identifies the process of negative representations of race building “negative racial attitudes” (p. 61). Simply replace Graves’s media of “television” with the media of “hairstyles” and “children’s toys,” and suddenly Song reinforces Viola’s “learning” that Blackness is not desirable. The fact that Viola only speaks loudly and acts playfully when Song isn’t around suggests Song has made a negative correlation between Blackness and childishness,

a correlation that Graves's identified process makes possible. Troy's eagerness to leave their household as quickly as she can evinces her own unique course of "learning" back in Brooklyn.

Though the Carmichaels struggle financially, Carolyn and Woody never attempt to extract or undermine their children's Blackness. "I'm not a slave," Carolyn proclaims—indeed, though her family may work her to near-death, she does not ultimately succumb to any "socially ascribed" Blackness. Carolyn raises her children to be themselves, while Song raises Viola to be, first, like her adoptive mother and, second, like that outside world of "whiteness" that seems to exist just beyond the film's periphery. In other words, Song is the "adult" Graves mentions, albeit one that reinforces negative representations of race. Viola's future is left unknown as the film shifts its main focus back to the Carmichaels, but the possibility that Viola may internalize the anti-Blackness and racism Song espouses is not shut off.

Lee's Lesson

Aunt Song ultimately represents only a brief digression in the film's course. The scene isn't crucial to the story, but Lee's decision to include it comments on those who may deny their Blackness. In reference to Lee's 1988 film [School Daze](#), Jackson (2006) writes that Lee creates a dichotomy between Black characters either proud or dismissive of their African roots (p. 35). Crooklyn's Aunt Song certainly denies her roots—she quite literally tries to strip Troy of her African roots by detangling the roots on her head.

Lee's contrast of Song and the Carmichaels functions as a message to Black parents that they shouldn't deny their own roots nor those of their children. To put Graves (1982) in practice, watching Crooklyn together as a family could mark one tactic for parents wanting to reinforce their children's pride in their skin. The only hiding parents may need is covering their kids' eyes as the beloved Queenie rockets out of that futon.

For parents or educators who may choose to use this movie as a teaching/learning tool, here are some possible **discussion questions**:

- Why might "socially ascribed blackness" be more influential in socializing Black children than their own perception of race? Does that perception even take root before socialization begins?
- Viola does not visit Brooklyn, though she wants to. How might her perception of "Crooklyn" differ or align with Troy's view of Song's home?

References

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