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RECONSTRUCTING BLACK MANHOOD:
MESSAGE AND MEANING IN
SPIKE LEE'S *GET ON THE BUS*

BY ELVIN HOLT AND WILLIAM H. JACKSON

*We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will
be leveled by our attempts to gain it.*

—Ossie Davis

In a speech delivered at the University of Texas at Austin, filmmaker Spike Lee asserted that he and his co-producer, Monty Ross, wanted “to make films with a message and . . . try to make entertaining what was thought-provoking” (qtd. in Lubiano 101). And as William Harris observes, Lee’s films “are challenging and thought-provoking with didactic messages for several segments of his audience” (Harris 4). *Get on the Bus*, Lee’s tenth feature-length film, is the quintessential “message film.” Filmed in only three weeks on a budget of 2.4 million dollars that Lee raised from a group of black male investors (White 78), *Get on the Bus* celebrates the spirit of unity, hope, and atonement that informed and energized the Million Man March (October 16, 1995), but more importantly, the film challenges African American men to reconstruct black manhood in ways that will allow them to transcend divisive cultural, social, and political differences.

African American expressive culture is replete with meditations on the meaning(s) of black manhood. A noted historian suggests that “black manhood in the United States is rooted in the slave experience” (Hine and Jenkins 1). The link between slavery and the black man’s quest for a sense of manhood is evident in Frederick Douglass’s classic 1845 slave narrative. When Douglass decides to fight his abusive overseer, Mr. Covey, rather than submit

to another humiliating whipping, the young slave experiences a profound transformation. In simple, powerful words, Douglass marks his transformation from a passive piece of property to a self-assertive man. He writes: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (*Narrative of the Life* 77). Describing this transformation in a later version of his autobiography, Douglass declares: "I was nothing before [the fight with Mr. Covey], I was a man now" (*Life and Times* 143). Clearly, a key aspect of black manhood for slaves like Douglass entailed a willingness to resist the dehumanization that often undermined the slave's sense of personhood. After emancipation, black men and women continued to explore the nature and meaning of black manhood. For example, the mulatto protagonist in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) gains access to financial security and freedom from racial discrimination when he decides to pass as white, but he is still haunted by a sense of unfulfilled manhood; for instead of embracing his blackness and joining the struggle against racism, he denies his racial identity and assimilates an alien culture.

Meditations on the meaning of black manhood are not confined to autobiographies or novels. African American playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson have turned the spotlight on the black man's quest for a sense of manhood. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Wilson's *Fences* focus on two black husbands and fathers who are struggling to assert their manhood. Walter Lee Younger, the main character in *A Raisin in the Sun*, feels trapped by poverty and a lack of job skills, while chafing under his mother's benevolent, but emasculating dominance as head of the household. Hansberry dramatizes Walter's painful movement through frustration, despair, and self-loathing to a feeling of hope and self-satisfaction. Walter begins to reconstruct his manhood when his mother gives him the responsibility of dealing with the

representative of the racist neighborhood association. When Walter firmly rejects the neighborhood association's attempt to discourage his family from occupying their new home, he begins to feel like a man. Observing Walter's confident affirmation of their right to move into the previously all-white neighborhood, his mother declares: "He finally come to manhood today" . . . (105). Similarly, Troy Maxson, the central character in August Wilson's *Fences* (1987), constructs his definition of manhood around the notion that a real black man must accept responsibility for his wife, children, and other dependents. Consequently, Troy takes a job as a garbage collector even though his dream was to play professional baseball. Troy expresses his perspective on black manhood when he tells his son Cory, "A man got to take care of his family" (Act one, 38).

Through a skillful use of cinema, Spike Lee extends the cultural critique of black manhood that continues to engage black writers as diverse as Frederick Douglass and August Wilson. Cultural critic bell hooks insists that "changing representations of black men must be a collective task" (113). In *Get on the Bus* Lee examines crucial issues that he believes must be addressed before black men can collectively reconceptualize and reconstruct black manhood while challenging the prevailing negative representations of black men.

Color consciousness, a legacy of slavery that often pits dark-skinned blacks against light-skinned blacks and vice versa, is a key factor in the reconstruction of black manhood. Lee highlights this issue in the following scene. Flip, a dark-skinned actor on the bus, questions Gary, a light-skinned policeman:

Flip: Man, if you don't mind my asking, are you Mulatto or light skinned?

Gary: You mean biracial.

Flip: Biracial? Oh, that's a yes.

Gary: I consider myself black.

From Flip's socio-cultural perspective, Gary's skin color calls his racial solidarity into question. Significantly, Gary, whose father is black and mother is white, feels compelled to define himself as black and assert his right to participate in the Million Man March with his darker skinned brothers. But Flip challenges Gary's claim to a black identity and tries to use Gary's skin color as a reason to exclude him from the fellowship of black men on the bus. When a white bus driver replaces one of the black drivers, Flip expresses his resentment by signifying on Gary:

Flip: I guess you [Gary] don't have a problem with him [white driver] though?

Gary: Huh?

Flip: You share that white thing.

Gary: Man, I already told you I consider myself black.

When Flip continues to harass Gary about his skin color and biracial identity, Jeremiah intervenes:

Jeremiah: Hey, wait a minute. Miss Hollywood. The man is black, why don't you just let him be?

Flip: He is also white.

Jeremiah: If this was slavery, you think master would care that he was half white? He'd just be a slave just like the rest of us.

Flip: Yeah, he'd be a house slave pimping around the big house. He'd have the breast of chicken; we'd be eating neck-bones. Our women would be all blistered up and stanking from picking cotton; his would be all bathed, smelling good. And 9 out of 10 the honey he be hitting skins with, she be a white girl.

Clearly, Flip's antagonistic attitude toward Gary is rooted in a legacy of color prejudice that began in slavery when mixed-race slaves typically were assigned light work in the big house and were accorded privileges generally denied to the darker skinned field slaves. Consequently, Flip is convinced that Gary's light skin gives him access to

opportunities that are unavailable to dark-skinned men like himself. According to Kathy Russell, et al., the dynamics of color consciousness that underlies Flip's resentment toward Gary traditionally involved a lighter skinned black person rejecting a darker one (2). But perhaps in a preemptive strike, Flip attempts to exalt dark skin over light skin in a reversal of the received cultural practice. The idea that one shade of blackness is superior to or more desirable than another shade is divisive and counter productive. Lee challenges black men to move beyond the color consciousness and the resultant intraracial prejudice that prevent black men from working together in unity for the enrichment of the black community in general.

If color consciousness, intraracial prejudice based on skin color, can prevent black men from developing a sense of ethnic/racial solidarity, homophobia, Lee argues, can be an even more insidious and intractable impediment to the establishment of unity among black men. When rapper Ice Cube declares that "Real Niggahs ain't gay" (qtd. in J. Price), he highlights the tension between blackness and sexual identity that Lee examines in *Get on the Bus*. The sense of unity and brotherhood that organizers of the Million Man March hoped to foster among black men is threatened by the homophobia that permeates many black communities. This crucial point is illustrated when Randall and Kyle, a gay couple, reveal their sexual identity. Frustrated by Kyle's reluctance to make a serious commitment to their relationship, Randall signifies on Kyle, saying: "You're not man enough to admit you love me." In other words, Randall is doing what some African Americans call "loud talking." Significantly, Randall implicitly questions Kyle's manhood, suggesting that a "real" man would not be afraid to acknowledge his love for another man. But as Randall forces Kyle out of the "closet," they become targets of homophobic harassment.

By publicly admitting their homosexual relationship, Randall violates long-standing black social norms that discourage gays and lesbians from explicitly avowing their sexual orientation (Herek and Capitanio 103). Not surprisingly, Randall's revelation invites swift and caustic responses from other men on the bus. For example, Smoove voices his disgust: "Cool, dad, we going to the Million Man March with a bunch of homos." From Smoove's socio-cultural perspective, black manhood and homosexuality are mutually exclusive identities. Therefore, Smoove sees Randall and Kyle as unwelcome intruders, disgusting "homos" who have no right to participate in a march dedicated to the celebration of authentic black manhood. Expressing a more virulent degree of homophobia, Flip opines: "So, we have faggots on the bus." These anti-gay sentiments reflect the larger black community's widely held notion that homosexual conduct is "abnormal, undesirable, and unblack" (Hutchinson 30). Clearly, Smoove and Flip represent the vast majority of black heterosexual men and women whose strict construction of black manhood offers no space for black gay men. To the typical black heterosexual, the phrase "black gay man" is an oxymoron simply because "Real niggahs ain't gay."

Lee challenges his audience to recognize the detrimental effects of homophobia on social, cultural, and political unity in the black community. Like a good teacher, Lee delivers his message simply and directly. His message is apparent in Xavier's question to Flip: "Gays don't have a role in the black community?" Traditionally, the black community has provided opportunities for gays to serve their community as long as they concealed their sexual identity (Herek and Capitanio 103). The tension and conflict emerge when an openly gay man like Randall insists upon assuming an active role in his community while affirming his sexual identity. Homophobia prevents men like Smoove and Flip from recognizing the positive impact

that well-educated, socially aware black gay men like Randall and Kyle can have on the black community.

Because Flip does not value Randall and Kyle as men and brothers, he harasses them until Kyle, a former U.S. Marine, reaches the limits of his endurance and whips his tormentor in a fistfight. After Kyle demonstrates his physical prowess, Flip begins to get the message: a man can be both black and gay. By dramatizing the conflict that anti-gay attitudes engender among the men on the bus, Lee calls upon heterosexual black men and women to accept the fact that "black gays exist and are an integral part of the black community" (Hutchinson 40). Furthermore, homophobia, Lee insists, "leads to discord and political fragmentation . . ." (Hutchinson 30). *Get on the Bus* forces black viewers, especially black heterosexual men, to confront the legacy of sexual oppression that limits the black community's ability to pursue social justice, the right to self-determination and self-definition.

While homophobia undermines the collective political power of black men, irresponsible, absentee fathers imperil the survival of the black family. Lee identifies three fathers on the bus: Jeremiah; Craig, a bus driver; and Evan Thomas, Sr. Two of the fathers, Jeremiah and Craig, worked hard to maintain viable, intact families. But Evan Sr. represents black fathers who abandon their children, leaving black women to fulfill both parental roles. In *Black Men Speaking*, John McCluskey and Charles Johnson assert that 57 percent of black children live with only one parent, and 70.3 percent of black women who are unmarried when their first child is born can expect to rear their children without a father in the home (McCluskey xi). One of the goals of the Million Man March was to inspire neglectful black men to take responsibility for their families.

Evan Thomas, Sr., boards the bus with his seventeen-year-old son, Evan Jr., aka "Smooove," tethered to him by a chain and handcuff. Evan Sr. explains to the disapproving

men that a judge ordered Evan Jr. to wear the handcuff for seventy-two hours as part of his punishment for stealing money from a store. Because Evan Sr. is committed to rescuing his son from the crime and violence in Smoove's neighborhood, he wants to expose Junior to the positive energy that he expects the Million Man March to generate, to heighten Jr.'s awareness of what it means to be a black man. Junior's arrest was a wake-up call for Evan Sr., who had ignored his parental obligations. Understandably, Junior resents Evan Sr.'s belated assertion of his parental authority and concern. Consequently, Junior engages in a "name game" as he attempts to redefine his relationship with Evan Sr. Junior insists on calling Evan Sr. his "Dawg," a term used in contemporary parlance to denote a casual friend, a homie. By "naming" his father "Dawg," Junior distances himself from the father-son identity that Evan Sr. claims as his right. But Junior intuitively understands the difference between a father and a "dawg."

Moreover, when Evan Sr. refers to his namesake as Junior, the younger man insists on being called "Smoove," the name his peers in the neighborhood gave him. Evan Sr. understands the implications of the "name game" and firmly rejects Junior's efforts to assign him an identity other than that of father. Although Junior attempts to distance himself from the father to whom he is literally chained; his most earnest desire is to experience the love and discipline of a father. But before father and son can reconcile, Evan Sr. must admit that he made a mistake in abandoning his son, declare his love for Junior, and fully accept his parental obligations. When Evan Sr. removes the tether to allow Smoove to use the restroom, Junior tries to run away; however, the father discovers that his son is missing and finds him hiding in a nearby woods. In a private moment in the woods, father and son confront the pain and sense of loss that Evan Sr.'s abandonment of Junior has caused. After Evan Sr. expresses his love for Junior and asks for forgiveness, father and son move to-

ward reconciliation. Significantly, the chain that bound them as they boarded the bus in Los Angeles is discarded. Now, father and son are linked by the stronger ties of love. On the return trip to Los Angeles, Evan Jr. is shown sleeping with his head resting on his father's shoulder. Evan Sr. is no longer Evan Junior's "dawg." Lee's message is clear: black manhood is inextricably linked to responsible fatherhood.

Self-hatred is another insidious threat to the well-being of black communities and the unity of black men that Lee exposes in the film. In one of the most compelling scenes in the film, Wendell Perry, the obnoxious owner of a Lexus dealership in Memphis, engages in a subtrope of signifying, a cultural practice that Claudia Mitchell-Kernan defines as "putting down" or "low-rating" an opponent (328). Perry, who boasts about his Phi Beta Kappa key from Vanderbilt University, quickly reveals a misunderstanding of and a contempt for African American culture and institutions, but more importantly, Wendell displays a disturbing self-hatred occasioned by his acceptance of racist stereotypes. Engaging in an increasingly racialized discourse, Wendell tells the men, "You would never catch me at one of those nigger schools, like Tennessee State or Fisk. All those niggers know how to do is step and sing." Because he has internalized the values of a majority culture that has historically devalued African American institutions, Wendell is convinced that only predominantly white schools deliver a quality education. He fails to appreciate the important contributions that black institutions of higher learning have made and continue to make to the advancement of society in general and of the black community in particular. Moreover, he seems to be totally ignorant of the struggles and sacrifices that made his matriculation at Vanderbilt possible.

Wendell further antagonizes the other men when he declares that "Niggers ain't going to do a god-damn thing." Perry represents the black skeptics who dismissed the

Million Man March as an irrelevant media event. Untouched by the spirit of hope and possibility that informed the March, Wendell cannot envision black men as agents of change. Therefore, he distances himself from blacks he perceives as “ignorant, lazy, begging Niggers.” The extent of Wendell’s detachment from the black community is made apparent in the cavalier manner in which he admits that the March is nothing more to him than an opportunity to sell cars. He further isolates himself from the fellowship of the men on the bus when he declares, “This is the 1990s, and racism is a figment of the black man’s imagination.” In *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, Ellis Cose offers a thoughtful response to Perry’s perception of racism:

For most blacks in America, regardless of status, political persuasion, or accomplishments, the moment never arrives when race can be treated as a total irrelevancy. Instead too often it is the only relevant factor defining our existence. (28)

Understandably, Wendell’s lack of social awareness infuriates the men, prompting them to label him an Uncle Tom.

When Wendell tells a disparaging joke linking lesbians and the Million Man March, the men have reached the limit of their tolerance. Gary, the Los Angeles police officer, signifies on Wendell’s joke:

Gary: Hey, Wendell, I got a joke for you. What do they call a black man with a Lexus dealership?

Wendell: What?

Gary: Nigger!

Wendell has been royally “capped.” With the “N” word ringing in his ears, Wendell is unceremoniously ejected from the bus and left on the side of the road. Although this scene is played as comic relief, its serious subtext scene sends a message to blacks who accept the racist myths and stereotypes that engender self-hatred and devalue black institutions. Ultimately, the joke is on Wendell. While

the men on the bus appear willing to transcend barriers (negative attitudes and stereotypes) that separate black men based on skin color and sexual orientation, they have absolutely zero tolerance for pathetic, self-hating sell-outs like Wendell.

Unlike the arrogant, naïve Wendell, who is preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth and social status, Jeremiah, who has literally “been there and done that,” understands the pitfalls that await those who worship at the altar of materialism. Jeremiah had been one of countless black men (like Wendell) who are “content to pursue material success and ignore social concerns . . .” (Nicholson 168). For thirty-three years, Jeremiah was a loyal company man who worked tirelessly to achieve financial success. However, despite his dedication to his job, he was repeatedly passed over for promotions in favor of white workers that he had trained. But in order to keep his job and maintain his middle-class lifestyle, Jeremiah quietly accepted the job discrimination. And when he lost his job in the wake of a corporate merger, he felt obliged to assume the mask of Uncle Tom, “grinning and kissing white asses” to get his job back. Although he was rehired, he was forced to accept a thirty percent reduction in pay with no benefits. Not surprisingly, Jeremiah’s life falls apart when he is fired again due to corporate downsizing. He loses his wife, children, home, and his self-esteem, and he is now a homeless man who, like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, feels compelled to share his experience as a cautionary tale intended to help others avoid his mistakes.

Jeremiah is homeless, but he is not hopeless. Even though he missed the 1963 March on Washington because he did not see its relevance to his life, an older and wiser Jeremiah is determined to participate in the Million Man March because he now has a clearer vision of his connection to the larger black community, but he also sees the Million Man March as an opportunity to redeem himself, to make a fresh start in life. By sharing his story with

Xavier, the young film student, Jeremiah provides useful moral instruction, offers an object lesson regarding the consequences of racism in the workplace, highlights difficulties associated with the misguided pursuit of material success, and challenges black men to maintain a meaningful involvement with their community. Like Jeremiah of the Old Testament, who brought prophecies of hope to his despairing people, Jeremiah Washington becomes a prophet of optimism for the men on the bus and, by extension, for all black men in America.

However, the spirit of optimism that Jeremiah Washington imparts to his cohorts is undermined in a well-crafted *mis en scène* that dramatizes the impact of institutional racism and white male dominance on the construction of black manhood. Prior to this *mis en scène*, Lee has focused on homophobia, color prejudice, social class, and black self-hatred, issues that alienate black men from each other. But the scene involving the state troopers forces the men to acknowledge racism and white male dominance as major threats to their manhood and sense of self. The scene begins with a close-up of a silver moon in a clear, tranquil night sky. The normally talkative men are quiet as the bus rolls swiftly along the interstate. The next close-up shows George's face as he reacts to the sound of police sirens and the approaching patrol car's flashing lights. The calm, restful scene is shattered when two Tennessee State Troopers board the bus. In a voice over, Curtis Mayfield can be heard singing "People Get Ready / There's a train a-coming / You don't need no baggage / You just get on board." Mayfield's lyrics recall the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. But his soothing voice and slow tempo contrast sharply with the tension and apprehension that the men experience when the troopers stop the bus.

Throughout the film, Lee uses camera angles that make the viewer feel as if he or she were actually on the bus. In this scene, Lee films the action from the back of the bus, allowing the viewer to observe the troopers through the

men's eyes. The men see the uniformed officers, the flashing lights on the patrol car, and the police dog and recognize them as emblems of institutional racism that portend trouble. One of the troopers sets the tone for the encounter when he justifies the unwarranted intrusion by saying: "Lots of boys been smuggling drugs through our state." By referring to black men as "boys," the trooper shows disdain, disrespect for black manhood. Ironically, one of the goals of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s that Curtis Mayfield's song evokes was to insure that white America would recognize and respect the manhood of black men. Because George knew that a group of black men on a bus would attract the attention of law enforcement officers, he issued a stern warning to the men before they departed from Los Angeles. He tells the men: "Most importantly and this I ain't bull shittin' about, no using or possessing illegal substances."

Hoping to spare his fellow riders the indignity of a drug search, Gary, the Los Angeles policeman, steps forward cautiously and presents his badge to one of the troopers. But instead of according Gary the respect and courtesy due a fellow law enforcement officer, the trooper shines the flashlight in Gary's face and orders him to sit down. To suggest the power relationship at work in the scene, Lee films with the white troopers standing, giving them the position of dominance, while the seated black men appear marginalized, subordinated to the more powerful white men. As the troopers exit the bus, one of them degrades black manhood again, remarking sarcastically: "Okay boys, it's been my pleasure." Just as Flip defines black manhood in terms that exclude gay men, the troopers' construction of manhood excludes black men. Significantly, Lee frames this scene with references to black men as "boys." Even as the men travel to Washington, D.C., to affirm their manhood by participating in the Million Man March, they encounter racist law enforcement officers who remind them of the continuing struggle to be treated like

men. The men suddenly realize that the troopers make no distinctions based on their sexual orientation, social class, skin tone, occupation, or educational attainment. To the troopers, black men are all “boys,” suspected drug dealers.

Near the end of the scene, Lee exploits the expressive power of contrasts between light and dark. When the troopers leave with their flashlights, darkness and silence engulf the men. However, occasional flashes of light from the headlights of passing vehicles illuminate the men’s faces, which are framed in darkness. The close-ups of their faces reveal an overwhelming weariness and a profound sense of despair that run too deep for words. Even Flip, the most outspoken and aggressive member of the group, sits mute, lost in his thoughts. The unspeakable sadness in the men’s eyes is almost too painful for the viewer to contemplate. The effect is intensified as the camera pans the men’s faces, capturing the pain and shared history that bind them.

Not surprisingly, some reviewers failed to recognize Lee’s successful blending of his message with the entertainment values (interesting characters, exciting plot, etc.) that audiences demand. For example, Jonathan Coe, writing in *The New Statesman & Society*, describes the film as “long on idealism and hot air, and short on everything else, including dramatic interest” (43). Apparently, Coe and many other viewers expect a film featuring black males to be either a comedy or a ghetto-action adventure (Guerro 397). In *Get on the Bus* Lee frames the black male image in a way that opposes the reductive representations of black men as celebrities (athletes, movie stars, pop entertainers, etc.) or “criminals, dependents, or victims” (Guerro 397). Commenting on the media’s construction of black manhood, George tells Xavier, “Hollywood think they got us figured out. . . .” Xavier indicates that the media portray black men as rappers, rapists, robbers, and rioters. But Lee’s construction of black manhood in this film reveals the “intellectual, cultural, and political depth

and humanity of black men . . ." (Guerro 397). Moreover, Coe misreads the film when he argues that "what could have been a vigorous analysis of political diversity degenerates into propaganda for the Nation of Islam" (43). A more thoughtful assessment of the film suggests that it is not about the Nation of Islam, but rather it explores issues that divide and immobilize African American men; it highlights the divisiveness that prevents black men from dealing creatively and effectively with problems that threaten to overwhelm black communities.

Lee calls attention to two familiar sites, the black barbershop and the black church, where black men traditionally meet to discuss problems facing their communities. Shortly after Jeremiah Washington boards the "Spotted Owl," he comments on the conversation in the local barbershop: "Them fools back in the barbershop wanted to know what I hoped to accomplish by going to the Million Man March." In the weeks leading up to October 16, 1995, black men in barbershops across America debated the pros and cons of participating in the March and struggled to grasp the significance of that event for them individually and collectively. Historically, black barbershops have served as sites of political debate and community organizing (Hine and Jenkins 28). As a cultural insider, Lee understands the important role that the black barbershop continues to play "in the construction of black male culture and identity" (Hine and Jenkins 28). Significantly, Jeremiah mentions the black barbershop while sitting on a bus parked in front of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. Again, Lee deliberately references a site that has a strong historical and cultural relevance to the experiences of black men. For as historian William H. Becker suggests, "the definition and assertion of black manhood [have] been a conscious motive and dominant theme throughout the history of the black church" (323). Thus, by invoking the images of the black barbershop and black church, Lee places his film and the Million Man

March within a larger historical and cultural context, suggesting that one of the purposes of the film is to foster a serious, ongoing conversation among black men about “atonement, reconciliation, and responsibility” while exploring the nature and meaning of black manhood.

Lee ends the film with reflections on the death and legacy of Jeremiah Washington, who dies just as the bus rolls into D.C. amidst throngs of black men jubilantly heading for the Capital Mall. As evidence of the bonding that has occurred en route to the Million Man March, the men on the Spotted Owl come together as a unit, putting their obligation to Jeremiah above their desire to participate in the activities occurring on the Capital Mall. Several of the men watch the March on TV in the hospital lobby, while waiting for the doctor’s report on Jeremiah’s condition. Like Moses who was allowed to see the Promised Land but not possess it, Jeremiah experiences a brief glimpse of the March before he dies of a heart attack. But he leaves a deeply moving message of hope in his prayer, which conveys the black man’s desire for a job, a second chance, not a handout, firmly rejecting the lazy, ignorant, dependent image of black men that the black Lexus dealer accepts as reality.

Inspired by Jeremiah’s eloquent prayer, George puts the March in perspective, assuring the men that the “real Million Man March won’t start until we black men take charge of our own lives, start dealing with crime, drugs, guns, gangs, children having children, children killing children, all across this country.” Calling on the men to begin the process of reconstructing black manhood, George challenges them “to stop being apathetic; take back control of the black community—stop being boys, and start being the men that our mothers, wives, and children are waiting for back home. . . We got a lot of work to do.” George articulates the fundamental message embodied in *Get on the Bus*: Black men must become men of action.

Houston Baker offers some insightful observations on Lee's work as filmmaker that illuminate his achievement in *Get on the Bus*:

Lee's films are not devastatingly original, telling us always things we do not know. What is striking about his work is that it is thoroughly grounded in what we all know, but refuse to acknowledge, speak, regret, or change. (p. 252)

In *Get on the Bus*, Lee again tells us what we already know: Black men must seek self-liberation through the reconstruction of their manhood. A reconstructed black manhood will free black men from the divisive and hurtful grips of intraracial color prejudice, and homophobia. Moreover, a reconstructed black manhood will insist upon a return to responsible fatherhood and active involvement in the political struggle for justice and equality. In short, black men, Lee asserts, must transcend the politics of difference and intolerance to rebuild and sustain our communities, endowing our efforts with the strength and insight derived from the reinvigorating "scent of water" that Jeremiah's powerful prayer evokes.

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