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FOREWORD

This issue of *Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies* tackles the broad theme of culture. Given the multitude of definitions available — more than 200 alone in Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn's *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (The Museum, 1952) — and informed by recent theoretical projects of writing cultural difference, we have decided to focus on culture in a performative context. The cover of this issue, an original collage by Micol Biasetti, illustrates the rich world created when culture finds a tangible shape through performance. Biasetti, an Italian born in Peru, raised in Venezuela, and now living in the United States, offers us an image of culture in which numerous cultural references and models coexist: “the Egyptian head symbolizes culture while the hands indicate the performance. The head contains places, people, food, art styles, writers’ names and famous works of art.”

The five essays and one interview collected here explore a similarly wide range of cultural performance. The first voice belongs to Nancy Savoca, renowned filmmaker. In this exclusive interview she does not shy away from direct questions on performance and courage, on being *defined* and opinionated as opposed to neutral and correct. She instead speaks openly about the duty of an artist to address the marginal, to be honest and curious, and not to be afraid to ask questions. Culture for her is asking questions through her film performances.

The next four articles take various vantage points to explain various concretizations of culture, when culture becomes art. Aryn Bartley's “Creating Difference: Language Use in Interracial Cop Movies” retains a focus on film culture, interrogating a specific genre to determine how racial differences are maintained and even reinforced by the linguistic aspects of film performance. Still in the domain of film culture, Joanne Taylor's article “‘Here’s to plain speaking’: The Condition(s) of Knowing and Being in Film Noir” posits the genre of film noir as a privileged space in which to construct knowledge and to question the construction of identity. Next, Michael Modarelli's “Performance and the Power of Redefinition in The Vagina Monologues” takes the analysis to the living stage where, decade after decade, Eve Ensler's controversial *Monologues* continues to raise consciousness about a specific feminine version of culture. From the stage to the art world of painted quilts, the last article tackles the complexity

of cultural crossing: Leslie Atkins Durham's "Performing Gertrude Stein: Faith Ringgold's Signification on Primitivism in *The French Collection*" reads the surprising superimposition of Ringgold's African American character, Willia Marie, and the figure of Gertrude Stein through an optic of liberation.

We hope that the reader will profit from this performative methodology of cultural analysis.

**AGAINST THE MELTING POT:
PERFORMING CULTURE IN THE WORLD OF CINEMA
AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY SAVOCA**

ILARIA SERRA

For Nancy Savoca, American film director of dual Argentinian and Italian heritage, filmmaking is predicated on the questioning of culture. Savoca takes seriously the role of cinema in the effort to preserve differences of identities from the grinding effect of cultural assimilation. Her first movie *True Love* (1989), filmed when she was a young director of 30, immediately revealed her interest in ethnic communities, targeting as a subject the wedding preparations of an Italian American couple in New York. Her subsequent movies maintain the same interest in the psychology of young adults and their marginal identities: the wonderfully delicate *Dogfight* (1991) chooses a young soldier and plain waitress as protagonists; the debated *Household Saints* (1993) sets a provocative story of modern sainthood in an Italian American community. Savoca is also well known for her work in such television series and made-for-TV movies as *Dark Eyes* and *Murder One* (1995), *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996), *Third Watch* (2000) and *The Mind of the Married Man* (2001). She completed her most recent movie, *Dirt*, in 2003. For this last effort she uncovered the hidden world of illegal immigrants from South America. In her research, she did not hesitate at the chance to *perform* herself: she passed herself off as a maid and worked in the house of a rich New Yorker to unearth first-hand material for her work.

What is your role in performing Italian American culture?

I think that when I work with Italian American culture I am usually working with a story that resonates with me and my personal life. It's interesting to see how I can find Italian American culture both in my Italian side, and in my Latin American side because I am half Argentinian. There are in fact many similarities between these two sides, since Sicilian culture has felt many Spanish influences. I work with stories that resonate within me strongly, whether it is *True Love*, an original script about the experience that we were going through in my neighborhood at the age when I was married, or *Household Saints*, based on a novel, but which spoke about many

situations, beliefs and feelings that were with me when I was growing up. And what is your role in performing American culture?

I feel I come in as an anthropologist. It's hard for me; I can't make a movie if I don't distance myself a little bit from the subject. It's a contradiction in terms; I am very involved and very emotionally impacted by the subjects I work on, but at the same time the reason why I am making a movie is that if I can put it up on the screen, I can look at it from a distance and maybe understand it a little bit better. I do it when I am dealing with my own culture, but also with American culture, which is so hard to define because... what is American culture when there are so many different kinds of us here? I try to understand the identities of the people that I am portraying on screen, who they are and where they are coming from. For example, in *If These Walls Could Talk* where there are "white people," I try to find out their origin, their social class. Most of the time I present the working class because I don't see them depicted in movies in a way that is honest, so I like to work with them a lot. Similarly, I like to work with women because of my hunger for seeing women depicted in a way that rings true to me. I work with the outsider, with the person who is on the margins of the accepted group, for the same reason. I always study these people, characters, and situations socially before I commit them to the screen.

What is the importance of speaking about ethnicity in America today? Do you think it is important to say we are all coming from some place?

Sure. I think people are talking so much about ethnicity these days because if you think you don't have any, you go looking for it. If you don't have one, you need one. It's interesting, I was speaking with a creative writing professor and she said that the kids who consider themselves white, who can't say "I am Irish, Italian, Latin American, African American," would also say, "I don't have anything to write about. Because who am I? I am white." See? What is your culture? "White." Where did your family come from? "I don't know, somewhere like... my grandmother... I have no idea." Well, I think this is a loss.

Is ethnicity sacrificed to becoming “American”?

In fact, now we are learning that the Melting Pot theory doesn't work. Melting doesn't work. It used to scare me when I heard it in class when I was young. I remember thinking it was scary: what does it mean, we are all going to melt? And my parents being immigrants I was very aware that we were supposed to be assimilating. My family did not do it, though, especially my mother, who held on to her culture fiercely. She never learned English.

But you must have tried to “melt” at some point?

Oh yes. Especially when I was a young person, I tried to assimilate. For a while I remember thinking, “boy, if my name didn't have a vowel at the end, I would feel more American, if my name was Brown or Smith or whatever.” Actually when I got married I thought my name could be different and I did get married to a man whose name is Guay [Richard Guay, producer]. I used the name for a year while in college, and then I said, “I am really sorry, I can't use your name, I have to go back to my name, I don't know who I am anymore.”

Your “white” look must have helped you.

Exactly. If you see the way I look, I often was told I can *pass* in this country. As a kid I grew up in a neighborhood that was mostly Puerto Rican and African American, and I was the lightest skinned person in the group. I was constantly told by teachers and by the other kids, “you can pass for a white.” It is true nobody understands where I grew up, where I come from. And they are surprised when they hear my ethnic, loud working class background. But I can't obliterate any of it.

Having said that those kids who were “white” feel they have nothing to say, would you stretch this notion and say that only in our roots do we find spiritual depth and the rest is superficiality? It seems one of the leitmotifs of your movies.

Oh, yes, I could say that. I could stretch this out into so many directions and include the high school shooting of Columbine or the movie *Fight Club*, a very important movie. I think that movie shows the place where young “white” men are today. We've sucked them out of every identifying

thing they can have and the only thing that's left is male violence, male aggression. This violence is such a negative thing because we cannot deal with socially accepted ways of aggression. To me it all comes back to the lack of identifying people. It's interesting because ultimately, the goal that everyone has in world peace or spirituality is that we are all one, but you know? You have to be all one with all your differences and that's the trick. It sounds like a contradiction, but you have to be all one *and* still separated like the little pieces of sand in the desert. You have to recognize the things that make you separate and *then* you can be all one. But right now, you know what, you're all one, we're going to make you mush. To me, this shakes your soul and there can be a violent reaction to it. Even if consciously you buy into it and say, "yes, I'll leave my family and my identity behind," unconsciously your soul is screaming at you, and you better get a gun and want to shoot people, and start fighting, because that's your inside saying "no, no, no." I've seen so much anger in young white people, people who don't know who they are. I am worried about it. We have to look at this problem and I think it is all about stripping away identity.

**Does the poetry in your work come from this mixing of cultures?
Mixing reality and the world of inner dreams?**

I am very attracted to things that are literal, real, realism, documentaries. But I am really afraid that if they just stay in that realm, I haven't done everything I could do to explore them, to see them, and so I then step away from what we call reality to go a step further. I receive criticism on the fable aspect of my stories, but, oh my God, my people *are* like that, my family *is* like that. They all seem bigger than life, overly dramatic, poetic. If I would have taken down how people really speak in my family that would be really too much, they are too much. And people would say it is exaggerated, but it is not.

So you work with the incredibility of the real? You don't really look for it?

Only documenting what I see. And then I am curious to know if other viewers see what I see. I put it up on the screen and I am curious to see what people think of it, how they react.

Then art for you is a proposition to the audience.

Absolutely, it is never a statement. If I make a movie it is because I have a lot of questions, never because I have something to say. Even with *Dirt*, which can make a political statement about immigration today. Yes, it does but only because I don't understand what is happening. I see what is happening but I am trying to understand the bigger picture of what this means, how it affects me and how it affects you. Because I don't understand it, because I'm trying to make a film; not because I'm trying to tell you something. If anything, I want you to look at it with me and tell me what you think.

Do you ever reach an answer, after having asked a question with your films, after having told a story?

No, usually I have more confusion! But that's ok. That's why many movies that I make don't have a solution; don't have an ending or an answer. People ask me for an answer: "how can you make a movie if you don't have the answer?" I am not trying to be slick. I don't have an answer. I want to ask questions to get more questions. This is how you get closer to things. It is never here is a question, here the answer and I am not going to think about it for the rest of my life. No, that question will always be there.

Is it a common limitation of our society, wanting statements, answers, and not asking enough questions?

Oh my gosh, I have more of these reactions when I travel with my movies in the United States than if I travel abroad. People protest more here. And it is interesting to me because people who are attracted to come to see a film and ask questions to me afterwards are a specific type of people. Not everybody wants to do that, most want to forget and go home. So it's wonderful that even though they know they are not going to be getting more answers, they still want to stay and talk about it. Yes, in this country we are very efficient, very literal, very "let's get to work about it." But art is not about black and white. It is about the gray, the uncertain, the uncomfortable. And that's ok.

Did you ever try to make a definitive statement in a film?

No, I am curious to see people I know on the screen. It's about human behavior and characters. And if there is a political or social topic, most of all it is about human behavior, individual characters for each story, a specific situation... In *If These Walls Could Talk* it is primarily a story about a woman and her pain and her choices, and then it is about abortion. But you have to engage the audience at a human level. Some people enjoy movies that are overtly political, but my approach is different: get them at a human level, invite your audience to experience something with another human being, and then let them walk out and figure out the politics.

What do you think of the way Italian Americans are depicted in the mass media in America?

American media have gone between the two extremes, portraying Italian Americans on one hand as Mafia thugs, gangsters, stupid, and ignorant, and on the other hand as incredibly romantic, perfect lovers, the moonstruck. And they can eat... and they can love... and they can dance... and the *famiglia*... they sit around the table... and they have the perfect family. And you see that and say, "that's not true either." So people that are insulted by the Mafia should also look at the other extremes that to me are equally insulting.

None of your movies even touches the Mafia.

But that doesn't mean that one day they won't, because it is certainly an interesting subject. I don't refuse that subject on a moral ground, because in fact I was very close to people in the Mafia, and knew people in the Mafia in my neighborhood, definitely. In my two Italian American movies there was no chance to speak about it, but I am not rejecting it on a moral ground. It's fascinating and there are still themes that have not been developed, such as the role of women in the Mafia. I'm still looking around for that. Or the workings of the Mafia within a community as coercion, but also protection and help. Or the political hierarchy in the Mafia between the low level people who do the job and high people who never get their hands dirty.

How is it working against the advice of people who defined your movies as "too regional," "too local"? How do you have the necessary courage and hardheadedness to make independent movies?

It's funny because I don't think I had a choice. My reason for making movies wasn't to have a career and consciously choose the steps that would bring me somewhere. People would tell me, "Make your big movie, and then make your little movie," or "leave Italians out now and later come back to them." But at least for the last fifteen years I had very strong reasons to make each movie. I made the movies I really wanted to make. There has always been a burning desire to tell a story or see some people up there that I was trying to understand, that's the reason why I made movies. In my mind I don't differentiate between independent and Hollywood movies. To me it's all about the story.

Are independent movies still places to say something different or are they being sucked in by the system?

They are supposed to be saying something different. It doesn't necessarily always happen. What angers me now is that the name of independent film has been co-opted and used for movies which do not have original takes on things, but are only cheap. "Oh, it cost a thousand dollars, that's an independent film." Even if it treats a subject matter worse than any other Hollywood movie.

Do you think cinema needs a particular voice coming from a woman?

I think we need a particular voice from different people. I am tired of always hearing the same persons talking, and it is usually a man, and a man who comes from the same place, the dominant culture, the dominant class. To me those movies become tiring after a while, repetitive. So, absolutely, we need more films by women but also by people coming from different places that enrich us as an audience. To me the greatest thing a movie can do, or a book, is to tell you a story that takes place in Iran about an Afghani immigrant on a construction site, and then make you realize, "oh, my gosh, but I know who that is." Even if it is an Afghani in Iran, "I know who that is." That's art, isn't it?

So you believe in the power of recognition, of identification.

Absolutely, it's the most amazing communion between an audience and an artwork. It is when you have that moment of "oh yes, I recognize that, I know what that is," even if it is "I know that confusion."

Critics always debate a feminine style of making art, saying things, writing, filming. Do you think a feminine way to tell a story really exists?

That's because we don't have enough women's voices. If I think of the few women directors that I know, if I think of their style, I can't think of a particular feminine style. I'm not a film critic or a film historian, but if I think of Catherine Bigelow, Penny Marshall, Julie Dash, Nora Ephron, Allison Anders or myself... what does that feminine style look like? I don't know. And you can take that further and say it for any artist. We have to work on the political inequality of women in the system, and that's a fact. But on the other hand once you get in the aesthetics and the art, you have to look at individuals. To me the best artists, whether male or female, are those who can explore in themselves the male and the female, who can find in themselves the feminine and masculine side of things and show it in their art.

How is it being a woman in the film industry?

There was a time in my career when I did hear comments such as "you are woman; you can't do it." Never to my face, but behind my back. Especially that I wasn't able to do it because I would get pregnant. I was pregnant twice during the filming of my first three movies. I always kept working. I edited *Household Saints* until the day I had contractions, I had the baby, stayed at home for a week, brought the baby in the editing room and finished editing the film. I thought: "it never stopped my grandmother from doing what she had to do..." Women have always been working and all of a sudden this generation gets punished.

About your last movie, *Dirt*, where did you find the first hint of the story?

My family has many people that work in service jobs: my brother-in-law is an elevator operator in a luxury building, my nephew is a doorman, my dad was a cook. Throughout my childhood I listened when they would often talk about the rich people, about human behavior. On the other side, when I make a movie and present it, I'm put up in a five-star hotel, I get a limousine, I go to parties and I start to hang out with those people my family works for. So I see both sides, and because I can pass, I can move around with my invisible background. That is how my fascination with

the different classes developed. Then, in my suburb of New York I see all these immigrants coming in, not speaking any English. I was helping in a program for immigrants and, knowing Spanish, all these women would come and tell me their stories. I couldn't stop listening; they were terrible stories. And plus my parents are immigrants and I would relate to their stories with my own past, I would give them advice such as "do not lose your culture and your language." I am grateful that my parents did not assimilate, they suffered for it, but I benefit from their non-assimilation.

How do you mix reality and comedy in your movies? Even in *Dirt*, you tell of such a hard life with some smiling moments.

I have to, because it's so sad it's funny. It's so painful it's funny. And I think that comes from my culture, my personal experience: people would tell stories about their difficulties, about not having enough money, about nostalgia. There was great pain but for some reason you cry and then you start laughing. The more painful, the harder you'd laugh. The best comedians come from a place of pain. Comedy comes from pain.

Hope has the last word in your movies. In *Dirt*, Dolores touches the bottom and then she rises again.

You have to be hopeful, because otherwise what do you do? I couldn't leave that story in sadness. It was hard to find the right tone for that ending. There was a growth that I had to show, because once you hit rock bottom, where are you gonna go? And so you come back up, and guess what? That "up" becomes the new bottom for another level of growth.

CREATING DIFFERENCE: LANGUAGE USE IN INTERRACIAL COP MOVIES

ARYN BARTLEY

Despite the seeming centrality of black cops in interracial “buddy” films, these depictions of the hyper-masculine world of the crime fighter suggest the black man’s radical marginality. This study explores how the use of African American Language (AAL) and Standard English (SE) constructs the main African American cops as “other” in four male-male interracial cop films — In the Heat of the Night (1967), Lethal Weapon (1987), Rush Hour (1999), and Training Day (2002) — and briefly examines the role of “Blaxploitation” films like Shaft (1971) in countering this process. Regardless of the language variant used by the African American cops in the four “buddy” films, the reception or production of these languages within each filmic world produces whiteness as an invisible “center” or norm, and blackness as “other.”

“You talk crazy. You gin drunk?” — *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)

Interracial cop movies, with their focus on the hyper-masculine world of the crime fighter, offer a productive site in which to examine how white mainstream cinema in the U.S. constructs the black man as a social category. As Ed Guerrero notes, “biracial buddy films in many instances are a metaphor or allegory for racial relations in America” (*Black American Cinema* 242). The use of African American Language (AAL), or Ebonics, and Standard American English (SAE)¹ in four male-male interracial “buddy” films — *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Rush Hour* (1999), and *Training Day* (2002) — marginalizes the main African American cops. Despite the ostensible focus on cross-racial harmony in interracial “buddy” films, the language types used by the African American cops in these films — whether AAL or SAE — construct whiteness as an invisible “center” or norm, and blackness as “other.”²

Phillipa Gates’ articles “Being a Buddy: The Black Detective on the Big Screen” and “Always a Partner in Crime: Black Masculinity in the Hollywood Detective Film” trace the progression of African American males’ appearances in law enforcement roles in Hollywood movies since the 1960s. The black detective, she argues, evolves from the 60s integrationist

hero of *In the Heat of the Night* and *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!* to the 70s separatist hero of *Sweet Sweetback's BaadAsssss Song* and *Shaft*. In the 80s enter white/black buddy movies like *48 Hrs* and *Lethal Weapon*, followed by 1990s serial killers/white female sidekick movies like *Kiss the Girls* and *The Bone Collector*, and the “No Buddy” movie of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. I would add that in the 1990s and early 2000s, the 80s phenomenon of the “buddy” movie expands to include two variations on a familiar theme — namely, the Asian/Black partnership of *Rush Hour* and the “false buddy” of *Training Day*. The focus of all the interracial “buddy” cop films Gates mentions, despite their variations, remains ostensibly on constructions of cross-racial understanding and friendship. Language use in buddy films, however, counters these goals.

***In the Heat of the Night* (1967)**

In the Heat of the Night was one of the first detective films to partner a black protagonist with a white one. In the film, Virgil Tibbs, a black homicide expert from the North, while waiting for his train in a small Southern town, is picked up by the police and charged with murder. After establishing his innocence, he helps solve the case in which he was earlier incriminated. The characters in the film employ white Southern speech, AAL, and Standard American English. As Stam and Spence write in “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation,” “the absence of the language of the colonised is also symptomatic of colonialist attitudes . . . major ‘native’ characters are consistently obliged to meet the coloniser on the coloniser’s linguistic turn” (240). In mainstream U.S. cinema, the “coloniser’s language” is Standard American English. Interestingly, Tibbs, the African American protagonist, is the only main character to use SAE.

From his first words, Tibbs’ language use is instantly commented on by the white “buddy” figure of Ray:

R: Whadju hit’m with?

T: Hit whom?

R: Whom? Whom? Well, you a Naw-th’n boy, what’s a Naw-th’n boy like you doin’ all the way down heah?

T: I was waiting for the train.

R: Now, there ain’t no train this time a morn.

T Tuesdays only, 4:05 to Memphis.

R: You say. (hears train whistle.) Well, you say right.

Ray instantly notes that Tibbs uses the grammatical rules of “proper” SAE (“Hit whom?”) and brings attention to Tibbs’ grammar to examine what the black detective is doing “all the way down heah.” Ray implies

that Tibbs does not fit in not only because of his race, but because of the characteristics of his language, which tie him to a particular geographical location.

In this instance, and throughout the film, Tibbs' clipped and proper SAE accompanies his characterization as competent, thorough, and intelligent (in opposition to many of the racist, quick-to-act Southern characters). Not only does he follow the grammatical rules of SAE, he knows the train schedule better than those who live in the town. This precision is also reflected in his ability and drive to follow clues to their logical, rule-based conclusions. Whereas Ray jails people on the basis of hearsay or vague evidence, Tibbs' logic leads to the arrest of the true murderer. Tibbs' use of SAE also reinforces his economic status. His competence, rationality, and wealth all establish Tibbs' superiority to the whites in the film. The white policemen begrudgingly respect him, but camouflage their admiration through open ridicule. When Tibbs reports, in precise, rational SAE, "When I examined the deceased it was obvious that the fatal blow was struck from an angle of 17 degrees from the right which makes it almost certain that the person who did it is right-handed," the white policemen standing to the side whistle under their breaths and smile patronizingly at him. Tibbs' language use marks him as an "other" from the white police society, not only racially, but geographically and economically as well.

Isolated by race and geography from the white community, Tibbs distances himself from the black community as well. Theoretically, he challenges racism; he is prepared to arrest the wrong man for murder because he thinks he is a racist. Here, his seeming racial identification overrides his rational qualities. When Tibbs tells Ray he is going "where whitey ain't allowed," Tibbs further establishes his connection to the black community. Nevertheless, it is unclear if Tibbs wishes to arrest the racist suspect because he is racist or because the man has personally insulted him. Additionally, his isolated use of AAL ("where whitey ain't allowed") is sarcastic, displaying even more clearly how removed he is from the rest of the black community. Tibbs' linguistic disavowal of other African Americans complicates his seeming alliance to equality. When he talks to Mama Caliba, an African American woman, he chooses to employ SAE:

T: Mrs. Bellamy?

MC: People roun' heah call me Mama Caliba.

T: Mama, I am not from around here. But you can put me on my train.

MC: You talk crazy. You gin drunk?

T : Just homesick.

MC: Lawd, lawd.

Mama Caliba can only explain Tibbs' language use choice by assuming he is drunk. She does not understand or approve of Tibbs working for "Mister Charley." "Why you wanna help the police like that?" she asks, adding "they stealin' your soul. Chew you up and spit you out." Mama Caliba, firmly rooted in AAL and the African American community, sees Tibbs' use of SAE as representative of his betrayal of his race in choosing to work with the police. She suggests that just as his language is "absent," so is his soul.

AAL is thus portrayed in a contradictory and ambiguous way; it can be seen to symbolize, positively, ties to the black community and a "soul," but conversely, in its absence from Tibbs' mouth, as the mark of ignorance, inefficiency and poverty. A self-imposed outsider from the black community, Tibbs himself furthers this social distance by avoiding AAL.

Tibbs' race and class conspire with his language use to make him an "other." He and Ray share an intimate conversation in which both reveal that they are unmarried. Ray is also portrayed as a lonely man, a newcomer in a community that does not yet respect him. It is only through the two men's isolation that they can form a tentative friendship. The conditions for this are portrayed as exceedingly particular: Tibbs is a black man who does not fit into the black community; Ray is a white man who does not fit into the white community. Virgil Tibbs must be an "other," non-representative of blacks, for this relationship to develop. Their social and linguistic isolation are portrayed as necessary preconditions for their friendship. Thus, their friendship is constructed as out of the ordinary and improbable.

In the Heat of the Night positions SAE use as intricately linked to social and economic benefits like education, intelligence, rationality and wealth. The Southern blacks of the community, present only in the margins of this film, have no access to these qualities; in the film's ideology, their language use prevents them from accessing its benefits. They are the real "others" here. Mr. Tibbs, the only user of SAE in the film, is portrayed as an anomaly, an outsider. SAE use may be open to the African American detective, but his utilization of this language isolates him from both whites and blacks; he is punished and alienated for transgressing his social and racial position.

Blaxploitation (1970s)

“Blaxploitation” films of the 1970s challenged the idea that *any* black man would choose to work for “Mister Charley.” In fact, in *Sweet Sweetback’s BaadAsssss Song*, Sweetback assaults two white police officers who are brutally beating an innocent black man, thus placing him outside of a corrupt power structure that values whites over blacks. Cross-racial friendship was in no way a focus of the black filmmakers of the seventies; cop films featured solo black detectives, not interracial partners. These movies embraced African American Language, using it not to construct blacks as “others” in a white power structure, but instead to establish the black community as socially central.

In 1971, *Shaft* was marketed as a separatist action film for the black viewer. The title character, like Virgil Tibbs, straddles two worlds: the white police establishment, and the world of the streets, which in itself covered middle-class blacks, black gangsters, underground black power movement, and the white mafia. He too is grudgingly respected by the white police chief and accused of being a “tom” by his “Black Power” school-days friend. Nevertheless, *Shaft* is not a “buddy” film: Shaft has his own office, and solves the crime alone, leaving his white counterpart clueless.

While *Shaft* has been rightfully criticized for replacing certain filmic stereotypes with others (especially “the pimp” or “the superspade”), separatist movies like *Shaft* were clearly threatening to the dominant power structure. Ed Guerrero argues that white/white buddy movies were “a reaction to the rising power and influence of the women’s movement” (*Framing Blackness* 127). Similarly, the biracial buddy films of the 80s may be a reactionary response to the Black separatist films of the 70s. The buddy film reemerged with the Reagan years, starting in 1982 with *48 Hours*, a film about an African American criminal partnering with a white detective. Seemingly focused on racial harmony across difference, as Guerrero writes, “[i]t seems that with the biracial buddy formula Hollywood put the black filmic presence in the protective custody, so to speak, of a white lead or co-star and therefore in conformity with white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks, essentially, should be” (*Framing Blackness* 128). A slew of “buddy” cop movies followed; one of the most successful was *Lethal Weapon*. In *Lethal Weapon*, AAL is not only erased, but ridiculed.

Lethal Weapon (1987)

Like *In the Heat of the Night*, *Lethal Weapon* uses language to construct a wide cross-section of the black community as “other.” In both instances, the black cop complies with this linguistic segregation. Whereas Tibbs at least theoretically identifies with “blackness,” however, Murtaugh disavows blackness completely. He and his middle-class family not only erase their blackness through speaking only Standard American English, they actively ridicule rap, a specifically African American linguistic form. *Lethal Weapon* seeks to efface racial difference by erasing both AAL and the social and historical background leading to the development of the language (slavery, discrimination, etc.) When Murtaugh meets Riggs, his white “buddy,” they bond over their masculine similarity, completely ignoring their different racial backgrounds. Throughout the movie, the two proceed to compare their guns, their Vietnam war experience, and their hatred of Murtaugh’s wife’s cooking: in essence, the markers of their de-racialized “manhood.”

This bonding can only occur because Murtaugh erases the symbolic markers of blackness in favor of his masculinity. In one scene when the two men investigate an explosion, a crowd of African American children gathers around Murtaugh and Riggs. As Murtaugh tries to interview one of the children, the others cry, “Don’t tell him your name! Don’t tell him your name or he’s gonna put you in jail! And you won’t see your mom!” The child says, “Momma says policemen shoot black people! Is that true?” The others chime in. Murtaugh looks around helplessly, at a loss. The dichotomy is established: policemen, black person. You can be one, or you can be the other, but never both. Another black policeman says, “Uhhh... maybe we should get the kids some ice cream.” In order to be a cop, in order to fit in, to not be “other,” Murtaugh must erase any ties he might have to “blackness.”

Murtaugh’s family erases their blackness as well, not only through using SAE, but through actively ridiculing black popular culture. When Murtaugh brings Riggs home for dinner, his light-skinned daughter Rianne exaggeratedly moons over Riggs. The younger son and daughter start a “rap” about this crush that sounds something like: “My name is Carrie/ I’m no fairy/ My sister’s Sherry/ She’s in love with this guy named Martin.” Everyone at the table laughs. “Come on, it was really good,” states the youngest daughter. “Yeah, Dad,” says the son, “Why don’t you try it?” Murtaugh follows with a similarly fumbling “rap.” The absolute cuteness of the giggling kids shields the underlying ideology of the scene. Blatant

homophobia aside, these raps are portrayed as ludicrous and worthy of ridicule. In their tongue-in-cheek performance of “bad rap,” the Murtaughs imply that they are only black in skin color. By joining with a white man in laughing at what is a specifically African American form of artistic and often political expression, the Murtaughs signify their difference from the black community, not only culturally, but linguistically. Thus, the Murtaughs affirm that they are not “others.” They are “normal,” part of the invisible center of whiteness; the rest of the black community becomes the “other” in their stead.

Just as in *In the Heat of the Night*, the white cop in this film is also a social “other.” Unmarried, living in a trailer, and suicidal, Riggs symbolizes the white outsider, the “crazy man.” This time, however, Murtaugh is more socially central than his “buddy.” He is staunchly middle class, the “family man.” This centering is based on the film’s reactionary erasure of blackness and ridicule of AAL. *Lethal Weapon* implies that black-white friendships can be formed and that African Americans can only be central, when African Americans deny and ridicule blackness. The film places the responsibility for “othering” on African Americans, as a necessary sacrifice in order to gain the center.

***Rush Hour* (1999)**

In *Lethal Weapon*, humor veils the problematic erasure and devaluing of blackness. *Rush Hour* uses humor to naturalize othering; this time, however, both main characters are targeted as racialized others, first from each other, and then from the spectators. *Rush Hour* does not erase African American Language, but rather treats it as cultural capital to be shared with another stereotypical “other” — the Asian martial arts expert.

At the core of the comedy is the juxtaposition of the cops’ stereotypical “cultures,” both alienated from white mainstream America. At the beginning, Carter and Lee are established as two specific types of “others”: the flamboyant black cop, and the Asian martial arts expert. Language use emphasizes their difference and the marginality of each when the two men misunderstand the other’s language. Carter begins the partnership by assuming that Lee doesn’t speak English. He is, of course, mistaken. Here, through Carter’s performance of the self-centered and ignorant American, the film critiques the blind and ridiculous American nationalism that is so well-known it has become an international cliché, and positions Lee as a well-educated foreigner. Yet Carter’s position as the representative of “America,” no matter how ignorant, is short-lived. Indeed, the attempted

substitution of AAL for SAE highlights Carter's position as a racially marked outsider to the American white mainstream. Later in the film, Lee attempts to employ AAL in a copycat attempt to establish a common identity between the two men, with devastating effects. Carter tells Lee to "follow my lead," and enters an African American bar, greeting people with the term "Whassup, mah nigga?" Due to Lee's misuse of the same phrase, Lee gets into a fistfight with the bar's patrons:

L: Whassup, mah nigger?

Bartender: What did you just say?

L: Whas-sup mah — nigger?

Man: C'mere, watch your mouth! What'd you say, boy?

L: I don't want trouble. Please, I don't want trouble.

Here, Lee attempts to adopt a new language without an awareness of how racial identification affects the use of that language. In this instance, the power of the word "nigga" to symbolize inclusion in the black community, and its difference from the word "nigger," as a derogatory marker of racism, becomes comic fodder. By taking a cultural rule of language and exaggerating the effects of its transgression, *Rush Hour* establishes the characters' ignorance of each other's cultural and linguistic rules. It concomitantly assumes an understanding of AAL's social rules and a distance necessary to make fun of the language.

Throughout the film, the two men slowly chip away at their cultural alienation. To symbolize bonding across difference, the two men exchange food, dance, martial arts tricks, and language like a "cultural currency" of friendship. First, Lee offers Carter eel from a Chinese restaurant which, after initial revulsion, Carter acknowledges is delicious. Carter then initiates Lee into "American" (read: stereotypical African American) culture by teaching him how to pronounce "y'all," and how to dance:

L: (singing along to *War*) Good God. You all.

C: It ain't you all, it's y'all.

L: Yaw?

C: Y'all.

L: Yao?

C: You sound like a karate movie, y'all!

L: Yao.

C: Say it right here with some soul. (pats gut.) Y'all.

L: Yao.

C: Y'all.

L: Yao.

C: Let me show your groovy ass how to do this.
(dances, sings along to song.)

(Lee dances a little then does complicated-looking “martial arts move.”)

C: Do that again. Do it again. Like this? (mimics.)

The scene works as humorous because it plays to and exaggerates stereotypical expectations (ie., that black men only like “soul food,” and that Asian men can’t dance). The attempts of the two men to physically overcome these stereotypes, then, become effective slapstick. Along the way, the sense of the men as two distinct categories of “others” is erased. In the beginning of the scene, the two men are cut to by successive shot-reverse shots, establishing their difference. At the end, the camera unites them in one long shot, dancing away down the street. They have become a unit: both as friends, and, more problematically, as a combined “other.”

In *Rush Hour*, language represents comic difference. AAL is firmly placed within a stereotypical divide that pits the two main characters against each other as opposites. When Carter and Lee exchange their language and food like a form of currency, the two men effectively state that no matter their differences, they are exactly equal. Their cultural tokens lack specific meaning, and may be traded with ease. This trading in effect erases their differences. The two men *become* part of each other; forming one unified “other.” The exact quality of their “otherness” does not matter, only the fact that they *are* “others.” It is only within this unified state that they can defeat their common enemy, a white British colonialist. This exchange places the two protagonists firmly outside the realm of “mainstream” white U.S. culture, skewing and constructing culturally unique qualities as inherently comic material. Whereas in white-black films, the male-male bonding is portrayed as tentative, dependent on either erasure of blackness or constant highlighting of “difference,” the two men are portrayed as inherently *similar*, due to a common definition of “otherness.”

***Training Day* (2002)**

Language use also creates bonds in *Training Day*; these bonds, however, are ultimately proven to be temporary and dangerous. *Training Day* establishes a dichotomy between AAL and SAE that must not be bridged. Harris, the African American cop, is portrayed as a law-breaker and his linguistic choices parallel this law-breaking. His white trainee, Hoyt, is allowed to cross linguistic lines unscathed.

The film begins in the comfortable suburban home of Jake Hoyt, a young white rookie, as he enjoys a leisurely breakfast with his breastfeeding wife. This idyllic patriarchal locale is interrupted by the first brusque