“**You and me, same!”: Political Envy in *Do The Right Thing***

Logan Canada-Johnson and Sara Protasi[[1]](#footnote-1)

A group of men sitting under an umbrella

Description automatically generated

*Abstract.* In this paper, we argue that political envy is central to unraveling the racial dynamics in Spike Lee's*Do The Right Thing*. Building upon Sara Protasi’s taxonomy of envy and in particular from her analysis of some DTRT scenes, we conduct a more thorough interrogation of how political emotions, most notably envy, shape race relations in the film. We start by summarizing Protasi’s account of envy and then review two alternative accounts of political emotions. After elucidating what envy is and how it becomes politically valenced, we analyze a few key scenes in the movie that are the most emblematic of political envy.

1. **Introduction**

To begin with an end, the climax of *Do The Right Thing* (1989) finds a desperate Korean shopkeeper, Sonny, pleading with the indignant mob of Bed-Stuy’s Black and Puerto Rican residents. He has just witnessed the mob raid Sal’s Pizzeria, where local resident Radio Raheem was murdered on the sidewalk minutes before. In order to avoid that his store be subject to the same treatment, Sonny protests that he is not White, that he and ML, who is leading the charge to ransack his store, are both Black. “You, me, same! We same,” Sonny screams. ML is enraged by the Korean’s incredulous suggestion until his friend Coconut Sid, who like Sonny is also an immigrant, leans over and says “Leave the Korean alone, man! He’s alright.” ML cools off and shakes Sonny’s hand. In this scene, a dynamic of interracial rivalry seems to evolve into interracial solidarity, albeit a precarious one.

In this paper, we will argue that political envy is central to unraveling the dynamic between racial groups not just in this scene, but in the whole of *Do the Right Thing* (henceforth *DTRT*), Building upon Sara Protasi’s account of political envy in *The Philosophy of Envy* (2021) and in particular from her analysis of some DTRT scenes, in this paper we conduct a more thorough interrogation of how political emotions, most notably envy, shape race relations in the film. We start by summarizing Protasi’s account of envy and then review two alternative accounts of political emotions. After elucidating what envy is and how it becomes politically valanced, we analyze a few key scenes in *Do the Right Thing* that are the most emblematic of political envy.

1. **What is Envy and How Can It Be Political?**

We define *envy*, following Protasi (2021), as an aversive response to a perceived disadvantage or inferiority vis-à-vis a similar other with regard to a domain of self-importance, which motivates to either push oneself to the level of the envied (or even above) or pull them down to ours (or perhaps even farther below). For instance, if I envy my sibling who received an expensive gift from our parents, such as a Rolex watch, while I received a less expensive one, that suggests I am pained by seeing myself as disadvantaged compared to someone with whom I share many similar traits (e.g. being part of the same family, likely being of similar age, and perhaps of the same gender), with regard to something that matters to me (this could be material wealth, but it’s probable that the monetary cost is only a proxy for something far more valuable: parental love).

Envy is standardly distinguished in both social psychology and philosophy from *jealousy*, which is an emotional aversive response to a different kind of perceived disadvantage, where the jealous person regards a rival as attempting to take what they perceive as rightfully theirs (for a review of the literature, see Protasi 2021, ch. 1). Jealousy, therefore, is about loss, while envy is about lack. If I begin to make remarks to my sibling such as, “It would be a shame if that watch ended up on my arm…” or “You don’t deserve that watch, I do!”, then my sibling might become jealous towards me about their shiny new Rolex. In a slogan, jealousy *guards* what envy *covets*. Protasi provides more contours to this account of envy by delineating the emotion into four kinds: *emulative envy*, where the envious cares about the lacked good for its own sake and believes they can level up to the envied; *inert envy*, where the envious cares about the good for its own sake but does not believe they can successfully emulate the envied; *aggressive envy*, where the envious is more focused on bringing down the envied and believes they can steal the envied good; and *spiteful envy*, where the envious is equally focused on bringing down the envied but doesn’t believe stealing the good is obtainable and is thus motivated to at least spoil the envied good (Protasi 2021, 44-65). In all cases, envy engenders pain, but in some cases this pain is ultimately motivating, and in one case (emulative envy) it motivates agents to actions that are neither immoral nor counterproductive.

In order to see how envy operates at a political level, we need to look into the debate on political emotions. In philosophy, as in the social sciences (including political theory, sociology and psychology), an “affective turn” has promulgated a flourishing investigation of political affect. In philosophy, there are two alternative approaches to thinking about political emotions.

One account has been recently defended by Thomas Szanto and Jan Slaby (2020). The authors propose a *multidimensional account*, according to which there are four categories of political emotions. First are *weakly shared* political emotions, whose “sharedness” is based on social appraisal or socio-communicative sharing of information, as when a person’s xenophobic fear is reinforced by polarized peer-discussions. One’s emotion is thus influenced and modulated by relevant others’ appraisal. Second are *group-based* political emotions, which “are based on individuals’ self-categorization as members of a political community and their concomitant group-identification” (485). Here the emotion helps the agent to re-evaluate their relation to the group (which can be putative) and to amplify the emotion. An example of this is “White guilt”: a feeling of guilt as a White person for the wrongdoings perpetrated by White supremacists.

The third and most important category is that of political emotions in the *proper* or *robust* sense, which are “based on a *shared* and *jointly felt evaluation* of the target in light of the community’s concerns” (emphases in the original, 485). An example of this would be the rage felt by activists in the Me Too or Black Lives Matter movements, or anti-abortion activists.[[2]](#footnote-2) (The fourth category is explained below.)

A much more *minimalistic account* is defended by John Protevi (2014), who proposes that political emotions are “collective emotion[s] within a political context, such that a political event or issue is the target, but not necessarily the focus, of the emotion” (Protevi 2014, 327). The *target* of an emotion is the object eliciting the emotion, while its *focus* is the object of import, that is, what makes the emotional evaluation of the target intelligible. To borrow an example from Szanto and Slaby (2020), the target of my anger might be the governmental decision to lower corporate taxes, while the focus might be the declining state of the tax-dependent medical care system. For Protevi, it’s enough that an emotion has political import to count as political. So, one could be angry at the lowering of corporate taxes because one feels like they are individually paying proportionally more taxes, and this anger would likely affect their voting behavior, but they might lack any sort of class solidarity accompanying their indignation and might not even share their emotion with people who are similarly affected by the same measure. Thus, their indignation has political import, but it lacks the many other features that Szanto and Slaby deem necessary for an emotion to count as political in a stronger sense. They explicitly differentiate their position from Protevi’s and call these emotions “politically focused” (and this is the fourth kind in their taxonomy). In this paper, we do not take a stand in the debate of how to best define and taxonomize political emotions but through our analysis of envy in DTRT we suggest that even what Szanto, Slaby and others (such as Lucy Osler; see Osler and Szanto 2021) call “politically focused” emotions play a pivotal role in group interactions.

1. **Political Envy and The Corner Men in *Do The Right Thing***

*Do The Right Thing* chronicles the hottest day of the year in the Bedford-Stuyvesant (commonly known as Bed-Stuy) neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. The film interlaces episodes between Bed-Stuy’s residents, which, in almost every case, advance the film’s rhetorical discourse of race by pitting racialized groups against each other. The Latin American residents have a street beef with the Black residents; the Korean shopkeepers argue with the Black corner men; even the film’s most complex characters (arguably the main characters as well), Mookie and Pino, have a relationship that teeters between friendly teasing and racist hostility.

Rivalry pervades the movie's atmosphere from the start. Sal, proprietor of the popular Sal’s Pizzeria and a central character in the film, slides the genial neighborhood drunk Da Mayor a dollar to sweep the sidewalk outside the restaurant. This incenses Sal’s son, Pino, a character who we will revisit often. With Reaganite indignation, Pino whines, “You running welfare here or something?... Every day you give this *azupep* a dollar for sweeping our sidewalk. What do you pay Mookie for? He don’t even work. I work harder than him, and I’m your own son.” Mookie (who is played by Spike Lee himself), Sal’s pizza runner and the other main character of the film, stands uncomfortably at Pino’s side and shakes his head in disapprobation. Pino’s complaint invokes two emotions for us to disentangle. The first is resentment. Though it often masquerades as envy, resentment is distinct because it involves the central moral claim that wrongdoing has been committed against us (Strawson 1962). By contrast, envy gives primacy to the envied’s superior status, which may or may not be deserved or achieved unjustly. Thus, when Pino here likens his father’s generosity towards Da Mayor to a “welfare” state and complains that Mookie “don’t even work,” the implication is that Pino resents Da Mayor and Mookie – both Black men – for undeservedly stealing his compensation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jealousy intuitively follows from Pino’s resentment. Assuming that Mookie and Da Mayor will continue to pocket Pino’s ‘rightful’ compensation, Pino will have the justification in his own mind to fear the loss of something that he values greatly: money. However, money alone cannot account for the negative emotions that Pino harbors. The final clause of his sentence, “and I’m your own son!”, when taken together with a subsequent scene wherein Pino chastises his brother, Vito, for trusting Black people such as Mookie, evokes race-traitor rhetoric. This noxious combination of jealousy and White supremacy festers, as we will soon see, and becomes more affectively apparent.

However, racial prejudice does not only pair up with resentment or jealousy in *DTRT*. Twenty minutes after Pino’s invective, we find three secondary characters, ML, Coconut Sid, and Sweet Dick Willie, posted up in foldable chairs on the sidewalk and lampooning the lives of passersby like a Greek chorus. Shot from a low angle and against a backdrop of freshly painted red brick, viewers can immediately register the heat of the day and the unease in Bed-Stuy.[[4]](#footnote-4) (For the full transcript of the scene, please see the appendix.) One of these three Black men, ML, remarks acerbically on how a Korean family has transformed a condemned building into a prosperous corner store only a year after they had gotten “off the boat[.]” He avers that either Korean people are “genius” or that Black people are “just plain dumb.” Coconut Sid quickly interjects that “it’s got to be because we are Black”[[5]](#footnote-5) but Sweet Dick Willie rebuffs that “old excuse.” Though ML imagines a future equally prosperous for Black people, it is a future where he envisions himself only as the first customer and not the store owner. For his modest aspirations, Sweet Dick Willie mocks him, predicting that Coconut will not do “one damn thing” because he never has before. And, as he rises from his chair to fetch a beer from the Korean store, he admonishes Coconut that he too was once fresh “off the boat.”

Here, Spike Lee embeds in the dialogue multiple kinds of envy amongst the trio. As Protasi (2021) notes in her analysis of this scene the Korean shopkeepers’ success is not apparently regarded by the group as undeserved (146); envy is a befitting term then.[[6]](#footnote-6) But what type of envy their words indicate is less clear. ML’s dream of a Black-owned bodega strikes us as emulative, insofar as he would like to imitate this success. Yet, the group’s collective unwillingness to be the ones to foster such a change renders their envy inert: they do not see themselves as capable of such an achievement and so they limit themselves to gossiping and bickering. How to taxonomize this envy in light of extant accounts of political emotions is not clear, partially because there is a shared experience — feeling a painful response to a perceived disadvantage vis-a-vis a similar other (namely another racial minority) — but this experience is also fragmented in three individual variations. ML starts the conversation about Black people’s inability to open up a business and thus raises the initial concern: his envy, as we highlighted before, falls short of being emulative, and rapidly turns into inert. Coconut Sid perhaps feels most similar to the Korean show owner, given that he, too, is an immigrant to the US. He may feel emulative envy, if only he found support in his community, which he evidently does not. He is also the only one who displays an explicitly political outlook: the obstacle is not intelligence, but anti-Black discrimination.[[7]](#footnote-7) Finally, Sweet Dick Willie not only rejects racism as an “old excuse,” but also vituperates the Korean store owner as “Kung Fu” in an ensuing altercation. Thus, his inert envy rapidly devolves into an aggressive envy that is, in turn, tainted by anti-Asian racism.

By the lights of a demanding account of political emotions such as Szanto and Slaby’s, none of these expressions of envy qualify as robustly political, but only as politically-focused. While the street corner trio’s individual emotions may only count as a “politically focused,” we should not discount their impact. To wit, we contend these emotions are powerful catalysts to the dramatic events that take place later in the film. The same can also be said of the type of envy on display in later scenes, to which we turn in the next section.

1. **The Many Envious Men in *Do The Right Thing***[[8]](#footnote-8)

Having been repeatedly subjected to Pino’s racial epithets, Mookie pulls Pino aside to level with him. As the characters reposition themselves and the camera dollies in, they each occupy roughly one-third of the frame. Between them sits a cigarette vendor dividing the frame symmetrically and imposing a physical barrier between the two men that they each lean on. Thus, despite the physical (and metaphorically emotional) barrier between the men, Mookie and Pino’s standing is literally equal; an allusion to the characters attempting to see “eye-to-eye.” In their exchange, Mookie coaxes Pino into admitting that his favorite basketball player is Magic Johnson, his favorite actor is Eddie Murphy, and his favorite rockstar is Prince. Pino, in other words, admires many Black people.

Anticipating his own hypocrisy, Pino tries to differentiate between the celebrities he mentions, who are “more than Black,” and other Black people, who Pino unabashedly calls the N-word.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mookie patiently waits for Pino to exhaust himself before cooly piercing the veil of Pino’s racist attitude: “Pino, deep down inside, I think you wish you were Black.” Behind Pino’s racial animus, Mookie seems to detect a desire in Pino to be like the people that he’s grown to hate. Though we don’t have access to Pino’s phenomenology, we might read his affect here as confusion about whether to accept his own admiration of Black people and permit himself to emulate them or continue channeling his inert envy into aggression. Mookie appears to sense Pino’s confusion, inviting Pino to reconsider the source of his bigotry with the almost fraternal disposition he displays. But Pino instinctively laughs off the insight with a dismissive “Get the fuck outta here!”

Mookie and Pino’s exchange resolves on this inert note, leaving viewers little more than a rough sketch of Pino’s character. Pino’s dialogue in this scene and others evince an incoherent political ideology grounded seemingly in just his affective state. Specifically, Pino exhibits an emotional complex of jealousy, envy, and anger in tandem with racial prejudice against Black people. The admixture of emotions such as these, when combined with racism, may lead Pino to radicalize his positions and motivate hateful behavior. We might imagine, for example, in the film world of *DTRT*,that once Sal retires, Pino bars the Black neighbors of Bed-Stuy from Sal’s Pizzeria; worse yet, Pino might join a White supremacist organization like the Ku Klux Klan. Conjecturing about Pino’s future matters less to our analysis of the present film. What matters for an analysis of political emotions in *DTRT* is Lee’s decision to *refrain* from radicalizing Pino in such ways. For all the circumstances which might promote Pino’s radicalization (one of which we will discuss in the next section), Lee never seizes on this opportunity. We do not regard this a misstep, rather a keen insight: political emotions often, but need not, lead to radicalization.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Mookie and Pino’s heart-to-heart precedes the “racial slur montage,” a famous scene in which a member of a different racial and ethnic group in the neighborhood directs racial castigations at the viewer. Drawing again from Protasi (2021, 133), we conceive of the racial slur montage as the collective version of Mookie and Pino’s exchange. The first scene is a dialogue between two people who are certainly not friends but have a high degree of familiarity. They are the same age and gender, and work together for Sal, who later claims that Mookie is like a son to him, much to Pino’s chagrin.[[11]](#footnote-11) Despite Mookie and Pino’s different appearances and group affiliations, they resemble each other in some important respects. Envy therefore has the ideal conditions for enculturation here. Pino’s socioeconomic status affords him some privilege: he will inherit his father’s joint, after all, and he lives in a different, potentially wealthier neighborhood; he is also White, and that imports a number of political and social privileges (that he likely does not care, or is capable, to acknowledge). Nevertheless, Pino lacks Mookie’s emotional security and resents that he must serve a population that he sees as beneath him.[[12]](#footnote-12) The second scene, the racial slur montage, augments the rhetorical power of the first, insofar as it shows the negative collective emotions that are felt by the racialized groups that live in the same Brooklyn neighborhood. Put another way, the racial slur montage distills prejudice down into its harshest form and then demonstrates how this distillation permeates all racialized groups.

From these two scenes, a dialectic of similarity and difference most clearly emerges. Most of Bed-Stuy’s residents are working-class people of color (though, ironically, we see only a few people at work in DTRT); even the Italian American cohort at Sal’s would not have been considered White in the century prior.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, relatively minor differences give way to major conflict. Indeed, the fragile harmony borne amidst this dialectic is easily disrupted by negative political emotions, including most notably envy.

1. **The Stakes of Political Emotions in *Do the Right Thing***

DTRT’s straight-talking, frequently foul-mouthed characters color their affective relations in ambiguous ways. We as viewers – especially those outside of the Eastern US cultural context – may struggle to read certain interactions between characters as merely teasing banter or genuine hostility. But the cloud of ambiguity dissolves once Sal smashes in the boombox of the neighborhood’s revolutionary figure, Radio Raheem, and calls him the N-word. Dan Flory (2006), who argues Sal is member to the tradition of the ‘sympathetic racist,’ observes

after Sal has smashed Raheem’s boom box, he looks its erstwhile owner in the eye and unapologetically declares, ‘I just killed your fucking radio.’ By explicitly stating that he has destroyed the source of the ‘jungle music,’ the origin of the unwanted ‘African’ melodic presence, as well as Raheem’s pride, joy, and sense of identity, Sal underlines his own violently imposed and racially inflected dominance. (73)

Sal’s racist smear reveals that his benevolence towards Black people hinges on their submission to him. Those who accept Sal’s authority, like Mookie and his sister Jade, enjoy his paternalistic embrace; those who challenge Sal’s authority or subtle racism, like Buggin’ Out and Radio Raheem, receive his wrath. So, once the cops arrive and extinguish Raheem’s life in the all-too-familiar chokehold position, Sal can only muster a half-hearted, “You gotta do what you gotta do.” Mookie, the same man Sal had told just hours earlier was “like a son” to him, now casts the first the stone of the riot by throwing a trash can through Sal’s window.

The Bed-Stuy riot Mookie catalyzes shows us how political emotions can radicalize and engender political action. Until this turning point in the film, we could not properly label the residents of Bed-Stuy’s emotions as ‘political.’ At most, these emotions are politically focused, as we argued in our analysis of the corner trio’s scene. What shifts in the riot, then, is that the neighbors’ emotions become *shared* and, as such, aimed at a single political target: injustice. We witness this collectivization in an extended shot wherein characters declare their indignation. The shot, moving left to right, oscillates focus as it moves between each subject:

**Punchy**: Mookie, they killed him! They killed Radio Raheem!

**Stevie**: It’s murder. They did it again, just like Michael Stewart.

**Ahmad**: Murder! Eleanor Bumpurs, murder!

**Cee**: “Damn man, it ain’t even safe in our own fucking neighborhood!”

**Coconut Sid**: “It never was, it never will be.”

**Sweet Dick Willie**: We ain’t gonna stand for this shit no more, Sal, you hear me? We ain’t gonna stand for them police punks.

**ML**: This is plain as day. They didn’t have to kill the boy.

Shooting this exchange as a long take imbues the moment with an air of camaraderie, augmented by each character picking up on the theme of the previous character’s declaration (ex. Stevie exclaims “It’s murder” and Ahmad begins his line with the same word). We then cut to a close-up, low angle shot of Mookie, stunned to silence. Cutting, as opposed to extending the long take by twisting the camera to face Mookie, suggests to us Mookie’s separation from this group. However, once Mookie sees the division between Sal and the neighborhood he abandons “the ‘pizza plantation’” (Guerrero 2020, 80). Lee’s formal choices it seems to us emblematic of the shift from personal, politically focused emotions to political emotions *proper*. The neighborhood makes common cause in the injustice of police brutality and further enacts their political emotions through the radical action of rioting. (We come back to the arguable claim that rioting is a political action below.)

Once we arrive at the juncture that began this discussion, we might now view the “You, me, same!” scene with such insights in mind. “You, me same!” represents the aforementioned dialectic of similarity and difference in *DTRT* reaching its climactic tension but also its anticlimactic (dis)resolution. The differences between the Korean shopkeeper, an immigrant with a successful business, and the three Black men who envy his success are *nearly* big enough to bring them to blows and the probable destruction of the Korean shop, on which Sonny and his family's immigrant dreams depend upon (it is noteworthy that in this scene the wife is holding in her arms their small child). In full display we see here the paradigmatic devolution of envy from almost emulative (ML starting the conversation), to inert (in the exchange among the three corner men), to aggressive (Sweet Dick Willie yelling “Kung Fu” and trying to steal a beer), to spiteful (destroying the store). At the same time, we also see an emotion that starts as a personal feeling, invokes a politically charged explanation which requires group-level thinking and potential action, and then becomes shared and robustly political: we see “a shared and jointly felt evaluation of the target in light of community’s concerns” to use Szanto and Slaby’s definition, albeit a detrimental combination of interracial resentment, rage, and spiteful envy.

We believe what averts a destructive outcome is a recognition of similarity and thus the evolution of group spiteful envy into group appeasement (and a prelude to interethnic solidarity). When Sonny makes his declaration of sameness, ML, who’s in the grip of spiteful envy and rage,[[14]](#footnote-14) is not immediately moved by it and actually finds it ludicrous. What seems to precipitate a change is that, whereas ML jealously defends his status, Coconut recognizes a common cause in their subjugation under White supremacy. Moreover, “You, me, same!” may intimate a kind of emulative envy on Sonny’s behalf and suggests Sonny’s desire to have his non-White status recognized by the Bed-Stuy community and to thus be included in the struggle for equity — a wish that may or may not be fulfilled after the film ends. Historically, both outcomes have taken place: more than 2000 Asian-owned stores were destroyed by Black protesters during the LA riots following Rodney King’s beating, but at the same time there have been several occasions in US history where Asian American and African American activists have joined forces. Spike Lee’s movie magisterially shows the interpersonal roots of the dynamic interplay between affinity and division that characterizes the relation between these two political groups.

Someone skeptical of our argument might object to our claim that the neighborhood’s political emotions motivate political action. On this view, political emotions could not motivate the neighborhood’s actions in *DTRT* because riots are not political actions; rather, riots are violence *tout court*. At the outset, we ought to note political philosophers and theorists have generally ignored the conceptual question of what a political action is *per se*, since an answer to this must also answer the hotly contested issue, ‘what is the political.’[[15]](#footnote-15) But we can answer the skeptic without articulating or endorsing a larger conceptual view. Normative theorizing about riots commonly defends the view riots are morally impermissible because 1) crowds lack expertise or cannot bring about sustained political change, 2) riots violate the state’s monopoly on violence, 3) riots break the state’s law, and/or 4) it violates the parliamentary procedures of the state (Havercroft 2021). We do not wish to make a claim about the moral permissibility of riots. We only wish to highlight the progression of Bed-Stuy residents from individuals at odds

(think again of racial slur montage) with politically-focused envy to a collective sharing spiteful envy, in addition to anger and resentment. Their feelings of hopelessness and helplessness about remedying their disadvantage and political inferiority makes this destructive outcome almost inevitable. Yet, the glimpses of interracial solidarity and alliances between Asian Americans and African Americans shows a different future, and a different, emulative kind of envy, is possible.

1. **Conclusion**

In this article, we have aimed to re-read *Do the Right Thing* by attending specifically to how political emotions, in particular envy, underwrite the interactions between some characters in the film. We began by outlining Protasi’s taxonomy of envy, which distinguishes envy as four kinds: spiteful, aggressive, inert, and emulative. We also elucidate two competing affective theories of political emotions by Szanto and Slaby and Protevi, respectively, but remain agnostic on which to prefer. Political emotions, especially envy, bear on how we interpret scenes with Pino and Mookie, the Corner Trio, and the climactic riot. In our analysis, envy underpins the interpersonal dynamics between Mookie and Pino and the Corner Trio, borne out in the content of their conversations. However, the kind of envy displayed in these two scenes is not properly political on either affective theory of political emotions. Moving to the Bed-Stuy riot, political emotions help us explain the neighborhood’s rapid radicalization and their decision not to raze Sunny’s store. In this scene we witness the transformation of the neighborhood’s residents *qua* individual agents into a neighborhood with robustly political emotions. These emotions not only include anger, sadness, and (likely) betrayal, but also political envy.

Our analysis intends to complement previous analyses of DTRT and to offer a promising avenue to *reapproach* a vital social problem film where envy has perhaps eluded scholars previously. We also want to remind those who are worried about envy’s destructive powers that envy does have a luminous side: it arises towards similar Others and it thus can also constitute a transitional step towards political alliance and solidarity even in very grim circumstances, as the end of the DTRT shows.

**Appendix**

Script for the Corner Men scene, with additional lines present in the filmed version; emphases are our own. The scene can be easily retrieved online.

**COCONUT SID**: As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted by New York City’s finest.

**ML**: What was you saying?

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: Motherfucker wasn't saying shit.

**ML**: Look at that.

**COCONUT SID**: Look at what?

*ML points across the street to the Korean fruit and vegetable stand*.

**ML**: It's a goddamn shame.

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: What’s a goddamn shame?

**ML**: Sweet Dick Willie.

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: That’s my name.

**ML**: Damn, man. Do I have to spell it out?

**COCONUT SID**: C’mon man, make it plain.

**ML**: Okay, but listen up. I’m gonna break it down.

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: Let it be broke, motherfucker.

**ML**: Can you dig it?

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: It’s dug.

**ML**: Look at those Korean motherfuckers across the street. [Coconut Sid and Sweet Dick Willie look at each other with a knowing glance, shaking heads*.*] I betcha they haven’t been a year off da boat before they opened up their own place.

**COCONUT SID**: That’s right, man, it’s been about a year.

**ML**: A motherfucking year off the motherfucking boat and they already got a business in our neighborhood, *a good business!*, occupying a building that had been boarded up for longer than I care to remember and I've been here a *long* time.

**SWEET DICK WILLIE** [looking towards Coconut Sid]: Yeah, he has been here a *long* time...

*Sweet Dick Willie and Coconut Sid chuckle*

**COCONUT SID**: How long?

**ML**: Too long. Too long. Now for the life of me, y’know, I can’t figure this out. Either them Koreans motherfuckers are geniuses or you Black asses are just plain dumb.

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: Fuck you.

[*from the original script:* “This is truly a stupefying question and all three are silent. What is the answer?” *In the final cut, there is only a brief pause.*]

**COCONUT SID**: It's gotta be because we are Black. Ain’t no other explanation, nobody don't want the Black man to be about shit.

[This line is interrupted by ML trying to talk back angrily. ML interrupts both, physically shoving them apart.]

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: Motherfuckers, hold this shit down. I’m tired of hearing that old excuse. Tired of hearing that shit.

**ML**: I swear, man. I'll be one happy fool [when] we open our own business right here in our neighborhood. I swear to God. I *will* be the first in line to spend what little money I got.

**COCONUT SID**: Right there with you, buddy.

*Sweet Dick Willie gets up from his folding chair.*

**SWEET DICK WILLIE**: Y’know, you motherfuckers always talking that Keith Sweat shit. ‘I’m going... I’m gonna do this. I’m gonna do that.’ You’re not gonna do a *goddamn* *thing* but sit your monkey asses on this corner. [Towards ML] Hey ML, when you gonna get your business, huh? Yeah, just like I thought. You ain’t gonna do a goddamn thing! But I tell you what *I’m* gonna do: I’m gonna go over there and give dem Koreans some more of my money. Fuck outta way. Goddammit, it's Miller Time, motherfuckers. Ol’ moosehead fuckers tellin’ me what to do. And Coconut, you got a lot of damn nerve, you got off the boat too. Damn, leave me alone.

[Sweet Dick Willie walks away and shouts at Sonny:] Hey Kung Fu! Give me one of them damn beers, damn it.

[Sonny: “What? No more free beer!” A brief not overtly hostile, but not amicable exchange ensues.]

**ML**: It’s a motherfucking shame.

**COCONUT SID**: Man, ain’t that a bitch.

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2. Osler and Szanto (2021) propose a slightly revised version of the multilayered account offered by Szanto and Slaby. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We take Pino’s comment at face valuehere but viewers with foreknowledge of the film’s event will know that Pino’s resentments run far deeper than one simple matter of fair compensation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These formal techniques appear in nearly every shot of *Do The Right Thing*. Cinematographer Ernest Dickerson states in the 20th anniversary documentary that they employed color psychology to imbue the film with a feeling of heat, specifically staying “away from blues and greens” as well as shooting in canted angles. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lee (2010) writes that Coconut Sid “rehashes a fallacious rumor that non-African American immigrants have easy access to institutional and financial resources unavailable to African Americans” (744). Lee’s analysis is very useful in reviewing the historical background of the tensions between Korean and African Americans, and also Spike Lee’s own perspective on these tensions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lee (2010) cites Spike Lee as stating that the dialogue in the Corner Men scene “was not intended to blame Korean American grocers” (744), thus confirming the interpretation that there is no resentment or implication of injustice in the scene as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Unsurprisingly, Coconut Sid is the one who pleads in Sonny’s favor at the end and who could spur others to form a political alliance, perhaps when the ashes are cold and the spirits are calmer. But perhaps even then he would not find the right conditions… [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While we do not explore the gendered aspects of DTRT in this article, it seems apparent how masculine-coded the film is. Lubiano (1991) comes to the same conclusion, arguing specifically that “*Do the Right Thing* makes manhood synonymous with having a job (and being able to take care of one's monetary responsibilities)” (271). This complements Lubiano’s broader claim that “[t]he politics of race, gender, class, and sexuality in *Do the Right Thing* and *School Daze* are inadequate to the weight that these films and Lee carry within the discourse of political cultural work” (259). Regrettably prescient, Lubiano’s point is affirmed by a 2000 interview with Rosie Perez, who recounts the experience of shooting her sex scene in the film as “horrible”: “I had a big problem with it, mainly because I was afraid of what my family would think -- that's what was really bothering me. It wasn't really about taking off my clothes. But I also didn't feel good about it because the atmosphere wasn't correct. And when Spike Lee puts ice cubes on my nipples, the reason you don't see my head is because I'm crying. I was like, I don't want to do this… So that was my first experience, and it was horrible.” For all of Lee’s competencies in *Do The Right Thing*, we find his treatment of class, gender, and homosexuality negligent. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By coincidence (or perhaps not), Chris Rock makes the same distinction in his comedy special *Bring the Pain* (1996) with an infamous segment called “Black People vs. Niggaz”. Both invoke a post-racialist attitude that some Black people, such as O.J. Simpson or Barack Obama, are ‘above’ racialization. There is also an assumption of class privilege at work as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Moncrieff and Lienard (2024) argue that envy’s functional structure share operative properties, though other emotions may ground radicalization. For example, Cottee (2021) focuses on ‘defensive’ emotions like resentment, shame, and revenge in radicalization. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Another relationship worthy of attention is Sal's relationship with Mookie’s sister, Jade. Sal is clearly attracted to her, which elicits Pino’s negative reactions; it’s unclear whether he is feeling some sort of racist disgust or resentment, filial or sexual jealousy, envy, or *ressentiment* (see next footnote), or an inchoate mix of some or all of these. This is one of those situations where cinema perfectly captures the messy reality of emotions, which at times defies categorization. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Arguably, in addition to envy for Mookie, Pino also feels also *ressentiment* towards Black people. There is too large a literature on *ressentiment* to possibly review it here, but the classical reference is Scheler (1912) (after Nietzsche, 1887). For a recent analysis of *ressentiment* as a central political emotion in US politics, see Capelos et al. (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a rigorous socio-historical account of how Italian Americans and Irish Americans came to be seen as White, see Roediger (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. While here we focus on envy, there are many other political emotions driving any type of large-scale political events such as racially motivated unrest. Anger, in particular, has long received philosophical attention in this regard, starting with Audre Lorde’s famous essay on how Black women can use anger to respond to racism (1981). For contemporary analyses, see Srinivasan (2018) and Cherry (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Nichanian and Ploof (2020) for a review. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)