

OUR VOICE IN TODAY'S WORLD

# EMERGE

Black America's Newsmagazine

December 1992

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Malcolm X**  
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Speaks

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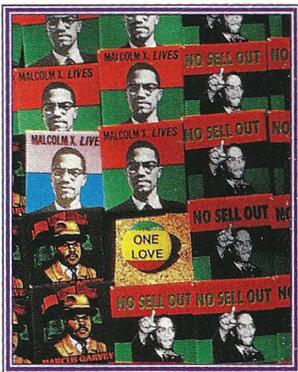
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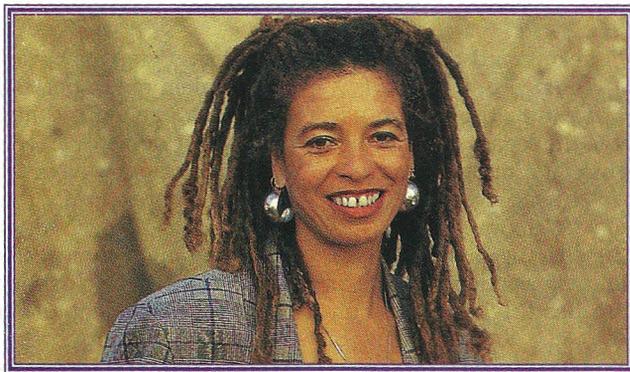
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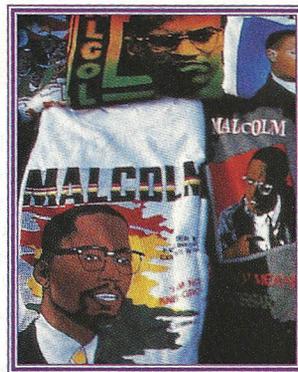
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JOHN VAN HASSELT/SYGMA



LINDA SUE SCOTT/ALFORD/TROTMAN



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ANGELA DAVIS ON

# MALCOLM X

HIS MARK IS WORN  
ON CAPS AND T SHIRTS,  
HIS IMAGE FLASHES  
IN MUSIC VIDEOS, HIS  
WORDS ARE EVOKED  
IN RAP. SUCH  
VISIBILITY MAY  
INDEED OBSCURE  
OUR VISION OF  
HIS HISTORIC  
LEGACY.

**I**N 1992 the legacy of Malcolm X is being contested in high profile within the realm of popular culture. A number of major battles are currently unfolding, whose aim is to capture this legacy and define it once and for all. There is, for example, the debate around Spike Lee's film on Malcolm, X, whose highly publicized release date was November 20.

Initially, Lee's argument for replacing the project's original director, Norman Jewison, with himself, was that a white director could never do justice to Malcolm's legacy. Once the film was in progress, Amiri Baraka entered the debate, claiming that Lee himself could not do justice to Malcolm's legacy (see EMERGE, November 1991, "Spike Lee: Bearing the Cross" by Playthell Benjamin). What is so striking about the debate is its anchoring point: the very conception of black nationalism—with its conservative, racializing limitations and strong mas-

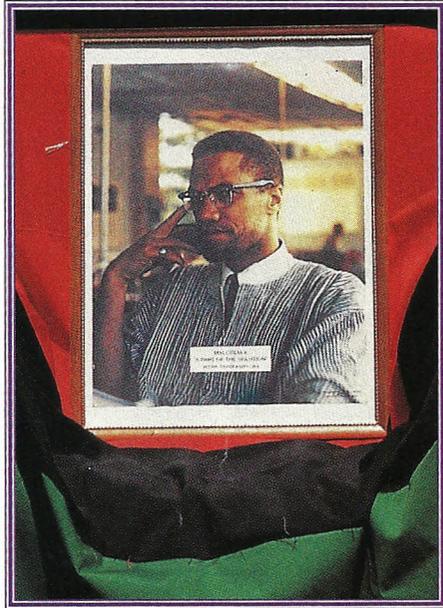
culinist implications—that Malcolm problematized at the end of his life.

Popular representations of Malcolm's legacy abound in contemporary youth culture. As Nick Charles has pointed out, "In death, the X has become ubiquitous, seen mainly on baseball and knitted caps. The face, handsome and goateed, peers sternly from T shirts, jackets and bags. His slogans 'No sellout' and 'By any means necessary' have taken on the dimensions of commandments." This is Malcolm's commodified legacy, as conjured up and evoked in wearable images, flashed in music videos, and sampled in rap songs. Who or what is this commodified Malcolm, the seller of T shirts and

EXCERPTED from a longer essay in the anthology *Malcolm X: In Our Image*, edited by Joe Wood and recently published by St. Martin's Press.

it? Everything? Nothing? How is the legacy of Malcolm perceived by those who locate him as a moving image, a voice wandering in and out of music videos and rap tunes, such as Public Enemy's "Welcome to the Terrordome" and Paris's "Break the Grip of Shame"? What does it mean to the youths who catch a video glimpse of Malcolm speaking and Malcolm dead, lying in his coffin? How is Malcolm's legacy constructed in Def Jef's "Black to the Future"? In Public Enemy's "Shut 'Em Down"?

JOHN VAN HASSELT/SYGMA



In assuming a critical attitude vis-à-vis this iconization and, because of its commodified character, this reification of

Brandeis to give expression to my own inarticulate rage and awaken me to possibilities of militant practice. I am therefore repelled by the strong resonances of unquestioned and dehistoricized notions of male dominance in this contemporary iconization of Malcolm X.

This is not to imply that Malcolm was not as much a perpetrator of masculinist ideas as were others of his era—men and women alike. What disturbs me today is the propensity to cloak Malcolm's politics with insinuations of intransigent and historical male supremacy that bolster the contemporary equation of nationalism and male dominance, touted as representative of progressive politics, with black popular culture.

Such slogans associated with Malcolm X as "The ballot or the bullet" are accorded a significance that overlooks the fact that the rhetorical brandishing of guns served a very specific purpose with respect to the 1960s mass movement for black liberation. Not one to resort to circumvention and euphemism, Malcolm certainly meant what he said. He did not oratorically invoke the bullet for the primary purpose of shaping a romantic, masculinist image of the black man. Rather, his purpose was to emphasize the black community's determined quest for political power. Likewise, "Revolution by any means necessary," another slogan through which Malcolm is often evoked, is used by some contemporary black youth to exalt abstract masculinist notions of political activism, with little or no reference to such indispensable

aspects of revolutionary politics as strategies and tactics of organizing. In this sense, the slogans become anchoring points for surrogate "revolutionism" that denies access to new ways of organizing contemporary political movements.

I am not suggesting that we leave historical figures, phrases and images in their original contextualization. What I am saying is that it becomes rather dangerous to project such one-dimensional appropriations on our past history and to establish them as standards for contemporary political consciousness. This kind of process flattens history to a video image that deflects rather than summons more complex efforts at comprehension.

Malcolm X's pervasive presence in the lives of young black people today has begun to be reduced to the letter he chose to replace Little, his last name. The X signified our African ancestors' refusal to accept names accorded to them by slave-owning families, who were by and large whites. Now, it seems, the X on caps, jackets and medallions is used to represent the essence of Malcolm, the quintessential X. It is no longer deemed necessary to include the "Malcolm" in Malcolm X, for the sign is the X and that X is invested with an abstract affirmation of black identity, black dignity, black resistance, black rage. I wonder whether young people feel that by wearing it, they are participating in something that cannot be defined and fixed once and for all: freedom—the freedom of African Americans, and thus, human freedom.

Does such passive acknowledgment of Malcolm—adorning one's body with his image and consuming video clips and voice samples of sometimes appar-

**It's tempting to speculate about what such a man, dead for**

**almost three decades, might have been today.**

**Pictured: Malcolm's grave in Ardsley, N.Y.**



Malcolm's legacy, I do not dismiss my own emotional response, my own enthusiasm about contemporary youth's sense of closeness to this African American historical figure. And I do not wish to belittle the sense of pride young people express in Malcolm as an ancestral champion of our rights as African Americans. Young people feel connected to Malcolm in a way I could not even have begun to envision experiencing in my own youth. For example, when I was a young girl, a historic figure like journalist and antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells could have held similar meaning and inspiration for me, but at that time I didn't even know she existed.

From this position of ambivalence, I express my anxiety in the face of the one-dimensional iconization of Malcolm X, and it is because the iconization tends to close out possibilities of exploring other implications of Malcolm's legacy that are not heroic, nationalistic, and masculinist. From the vantage point of an African American feminist with revolutionary aspirations toward socialism that refuse to go away, I acknowledge that I am also a product of that historical moment, informed in part by Malcolm's discourse, his oratory, and his organizing. Hearing him speak before an audience of almost entirely white students, when I was an undergraduate at Brandeis University, had a profound effect on my own political development. No one could have convinced me then that Malcolm had not come to

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ent (and perhaps no more than "apparent") hero-fixated male supremacy—challenge white supremacy? Does the contextualization of bits—infobytes—of Malcolm's body, voice, and political wit amid references to women as bitches, groupies and hoes invest our historical memory of Malcolm with the kind of vicious put-down of women that contradicts a possible turn toward feminism that some of us might associate with his legacy?

Instead of attempting to answer these questions directly, I turn to Malcolm the man—and more specifically, Malcolm the husband and father as represented by his widow, Betty Shabazz. In the February 1992 issue of *Essence*, Shabazz reflects on her love for Malcolm, and on some of the conflicts in their marriage arising out of the then prevailing patterns of male dominance in heterosexual partnerships.

"I shared Malcolm," she says, "but I don't know if he could have shared me to the same extent. He was possessive from the beginning to the end, though I think he learned to control it.... All my stress was over the fact that I wanted to work, and he wouldn't even entertain

the idea. He didn't want anybody to have any influence over me that would in any way compete with his. Each time I left him, that's why I left."

**SHABAZZ** says that she left Malcolm after each of their first three children was born. As she reflects upon her own personal transformation—and like all of us from that generation, she has been affected by the changing economic roles of women as well as by the rise and circulation of feminist ideas—she does not find it difficult to say: "I think Malcolm probably needed me more than I needed him—to support his life's mission. But I don't think that what I would look for in a man today would be what I looked for in a man then. I was very accepting. I just wanted love. I found a sharing and mature man—and I was lucky."

We might be able to liberate Malcolm's legacy from the rigid notions of male dominance that were a part of the ideological climate in which he grew to maturity. His willingness to reevaluate his political positions, for instance, suggests that he

might—given exposure to newer ideological circumstances—also have reconfigured his relationship with his family, and that if Shabazz were hypothetically to reencounter Malcolm during these contemporary times, she might find more of what she seeks today in the man than the historical Malcolm was capable of providing.

But here I am indulging in speculations about what a man dead for almost three decades might be like if alive today. My purpose is not to suggest that definitive statements may be made on what Malcolm X might or might not have been. I am really concerned with our historical memory of Malcolm as shaped by contemporary social and technological forces. Indeed, it is highly ironic that Malcolm's admonition regarding the "mental prison" in which black people were incarcerated can be evoked today with cogent relevance to the way his own legacy has been frozen. Instead of transforming the meaning of Malcolm's life backward and fixing it in this way, we might find a forward-looking way to draw from his memory, especially to find in it an impetus for creative political thinking and organizing. e

## PIKE LEE on youth's X-cesses

**My first exposure to Malcolm X was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which I read in junior high school. Count me in the league of the millions of other people who read that book, especially at the age I read it—it changed the way I thought, it changed my life. I think the autobiography should be required reading for every kid in America—white, black, whatever, because it is the story of America.**

**I think young people should start to think for themselves and stop succumbing to peer pressure, especially young black Americans. Our value system has gotten messed up: Young black kids who strive to get somewhere, to speak correct English, to go to school, to not do drugs, are considered white. But if they fail classes, act stupid, drink 40s all the time, and hang on the corner, then they're down, then they're black. That's crazy, where ignorance is being championed over intelligence. These young black kids just have to be strong and not bow to that ignorant peer pressure. We have to be about knowledge. Anybody who reads *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* will see that's the one thing that comes right out of the book. Malcolm always stressed education to build up everybody. Don't let anybody tell you that you're not black if you get an A, you're not black if you can read, you're not black if you speak correct English. I feel like shooting people who espouse that kind of ignorance.**

**I hope that people who see my film will be prompted to pick up not only the autobiography but Malcolm's speeches and the other books out there about him. Wearing an X hat or a T-shirt with a couple of logos, when it comes down to it, is very superficial knowledge of Malcolm X. You have to be able to say more than "The ballot or the bullet" or "By any means necessary." You've got to know more than that.**

—Interviewed by K. Maurice Jones

