

# DID SPIKE LEE DO THE RIGHT THING?

## I THINK NOT, AND HERE'S WHY!

We are in the midst of a spectacle that reflects the great American dilemma of race and power, a public event that concentrates a discussion of the Black experience in the USA. The Spike Lee/Denzel Washington movie about Malcolm X raises hopes for a serious discussion of race, religion, and radicalism. Most media voices have been ecstatic, and most mainstream critics regard this film as a signal achievement. I think not.

Malcolm X (1925-1965) was a leader/teacher of immense significance because of his impact on the political ideology of the Black liberation movement. Furthermore, Malcolm X was the critical voice that linked militant Black radicalism to revolutionary forces in the USA and throughout the world. So, a movie about this man is not simply about the Black experience, but a radical Black message grounded in the "forbidden zones" of the "field Negroes" of the 1990s.

Fundamentally, this movie by Spike Lee is a reductionist exercise in mainstreaming Malcolm X. He might get an A- on marketing (though even Spike Lee seems to accept Madonna's leadership in this area), but on my grading scale he gets a D+ on political ideology, and a C on history. This film tells a story that revolves around the dual axes of race and religion, but in each instance there is deradicalization.

The social and economic conditions of the Black community are worse today than in the 1960s, so Malcolm X should be even more powerful today. The issues that require a voice like Malcolm X today include racism and police violence, homelessness, the deep and severe cut backs in welfare programs, permanent unemployment from deindustrialization, and the crisis of the U.S. being the world's greatest debtor nation. Malcolm X's time, the nightmare that he saw, is right now!

There are omissions in the film: e.g., Ella Collins, Malcolm's half sister, is written out but she was the reason Malcolm was in Boston. In fact, she was the woman Malcolm X confided in during the last year of his life. There are distortions in the film: e.g., the character Baines is actually a composite portrait of several people, and gives an incorrect version of how Malcolm X was recruited to Islam. Spike Lee belittles the role of Malcolm's family. But since art will have omissions and distortion, the overall main issue is interpretation.

The film's main focus is on a satan to saint

transformation, about half on "Detroit Red" (with flashbacks to Malcolm Little), and the remainder on Malcolm X in the Nation of Islam. The very end of his life is portrayed in religious terms, with the CIA as sort of keystone cops thrown in without explanation. In fact Malcolm X was developing an analysis based on class and power, increasingly talking about the negative aspects of capitalism and the "Western power structure" (i.e., imperialism). Malcolm X said to the movement "Put religion in the closet." Why did Spike Lee see fit to make this the main thing?

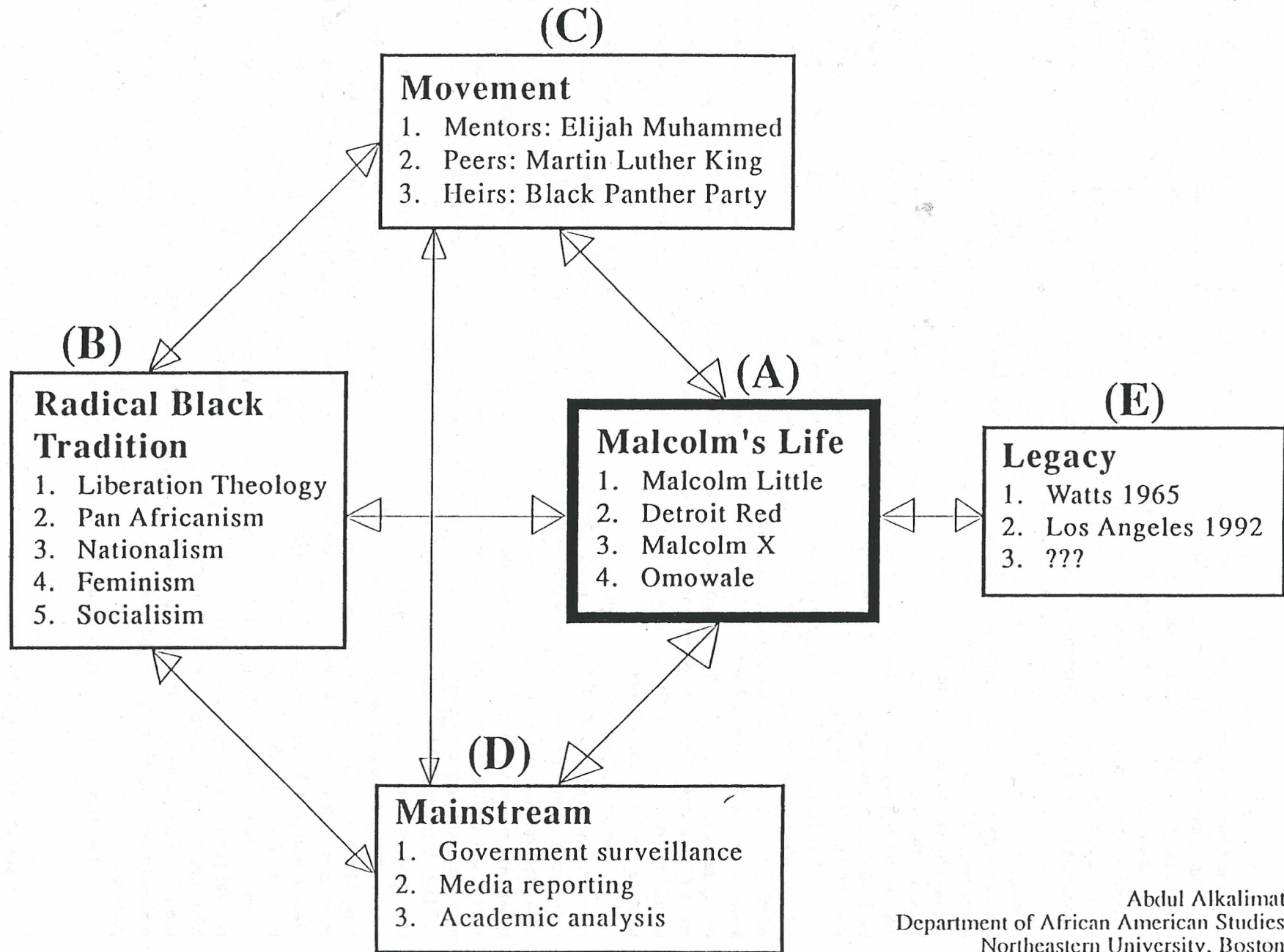
The essence of Malcolm X's last year was revolutionary politics, and it's on this issue that the film loses its chance for greatness. The link to South Africa was the impact Malcolm X had on Stephen Biko and the Black consciousness movement, and not Nelson Mandela, and the African National Congress. This point can be seen in the film when Mandela is reciting a quote by Malcolm X but was unwilling to finish the quote with the phrase "By any means necessary." The film ends with personality posters of the Black millionaires that helped fund the movie. The kind of politics they represent has little to do with Malcolm X, but one must guess they have everything to do with the meaning of this film.

I suspect that this film was carefully manicured to play well in mainstream suburbia, because it replaces radical politics with a moral universalism. Why should Malcolm X be less threatening to the U.S. status quo today, when the people he represented ("the bottom of the pile Negroes," "field Negroes") are now more threatened, and therefore are more threatening? Are we being conned by this film?

Well, maybe for most people this is an entertaining movie, and I guess there is some reason for the critics finally to support a film maker who serves as an ideologist for the new Black middle class, but there is another point of view to be heard. As a scholar and an activist in the Black community for the past 30 years, it is my responsibility to argue in support of a revolutionary reading of Malcolm X.

One has to wonder why Black activists who have studied Malcolm X were not consulted on the front end, and are so very critical on the back end of this project. Yes, Spike is right, only a Black person could make this film ... and get away with the con.

# A Framework for How To Read Malcolm X



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