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DOUBLE ISSUE

The Malcolmized Moment:

En-Gendering and Re-Politicizing the X Man

by John Woodford

“Malcolm X is probably the most visible (and vigorous) figure on the African-American political landscape today,” reads the publisher’s blurb for *Malcolm X In Our Own Image* (St. Martin’s Press, 1992, \$18.95 hardcover). It’s an ambiguous blurb. It could be a statement that the image of Malcolm X is currently the most displayed and politically potent icon in Afro-American affairs, or that a dead man is not only the most attended to but the most alive player on the stage of Black American politics. Either way you take the comment, it paints a pathetic picture of politics and of publishing.

Malcolmania is (or was, since marketing phenomena of this sort tend to be fleeting) so exploitable that all publishers and other entrepreneurs had to do was slap Malcolm X’s name, face or even his mere ‘X’ on a cap, a hat, a shirt, a movie, a book, and they’d reap big profits or at least respectable sales for a loss leader (via lost leader).

Nevertheless we can be grateful to *Village Voice* columnist Joe Wood for collecting these 14 essays on the meaning of Malcolm X. What’s good in the book is very, very good, though what’s not is horrid. Two pieces are must-reads on the subject — those by Hilton Als and Adolph Reed; five other contributions are worthy.

Unfortunately Wood himself, whose “Malcolm X and the New Blackness,” occupies the all-important lead-off position, is among the seven writers who fail at this particular time at bat. But no one bats a thousand, and Wood is at least in good company since no less than Angela Davis, John Edgar Wideman, Cornel West and Arnold Rampersad don’t measure up to their usual performances. And a joint

effort by Ron Simmons and Marlon Riggs (a “Black Gay Dialogue on Malcolm X”) reads like an unintended parody of Men on Film skit on of “In Living Color.” Wood mysteriously includes an undistinguished article by a college student “as told to” not one but two writers, Marpessa Dawn Outlaw and Matthew Countryman — and yet, as you will read later, he rejected an article by the historian Harold Cruse. Big mistake.

A psychologist or historian specializing in political rhetoric might be interested in the failed essays, however, because they do reveal the continuing mind-numbing absorption in talking about “Black identity” and “gender” that is afflicting oh so many intellectuals. I suppose it’s a sign of our late-20th century deconstructionist times that much of what passes as “analysis” of Malcolm X washes away most of his substance and leaves only his scowl and penis as preferred objects of contemplation and/or fantasy. Hey, brothers and sisters: Malcolm X wasn’t trying to be your shrink, your guru or your sex therapist. When you cast him in any of those roles, your talk about him becomes mighty boring.

To avoid being discouraged or put to sleep, I advise the reader to delve into one of the lesser pieces only after reading at least two of the solid works examined below (a few of which are gender-focused, but still deliver the intellectual goods).

The fun begins with the playwright and author Amiri Baraka (isn’t it about time we drop the aka parentheses?). Baraka blisters Spike Lee’s film version of Malcolm X, the Bruce Perry psychobiography (*Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*), the Socialist Workers Party for its litigious zeal to control

some of Malcolm X's writings, and "Negro bureaucrats" who were "conscientious objectors" to Malcolm X's struggles when he was alive, but who now "furiously, if stiffly, [rub] up against Malcolm like self-manipulated 'firesticks' trying to make a little smoke."

Having cited Lenin's observation that the petite-bourgeois nationalists of the world tend to be phony rebels who unite with the rich when the chips are down, Jones describes a Malcolm X celebration in Washington DC in which the "outspokenly capitalist" Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon "led a motley crew of small businessmen and half-hip promoters of 'Black,' the product," all of whom were "using Malcolm as if to sanctify and legitimize their own lives and paths, as somehow, any way, connected to Malcolm."

"It is," Baraka continued, "like the paradox of 'Blackness' as an ideology, in that it is the most superficial i.d. of the nation, classless and ultimately deceptive. Both Buthelezi and Mandela are 'Black.' Like Roy Innis and Malcolm X."

Baraka diagnoses Spike Lee's Detroit Red-oriented view of Malcolm X in the movie "X" as a symptom of the general "retrograde trend" in U.S. society and politics — a trend he sees as manifesting itself among Afro-Americans in the solidification of a reactionary Black comprador class whose "Black struggle is mainly *commercial*. . . . African Kings and Queens can be put to work for Budweiser. Martin Luther King for McDonald's and Malcolm X for Warner Brothers. ABC makes millions from our *Roots*."

Baraka assails Prof. Henry Louis Gates of Harvard and other "Negro deconstructionists [who] actually re-raise the reaction of the backward white Southern agrarian so-called 'New Critics' of the '40s and '50s. The attempted disconnection of literature from real life." Baraka places his targets within an historical scheme and lets loose at them with his deliciously invective style:

"So we begin to understand if we analyze this retrograde trend, these bought-and-paid-for Negro white supremacist 'intellectuals' and academics, these petty surrogate racist Negro politicians, as mayors, congress- or councilpersons, corporate figureheads, institutional jigaboos, these eurocentric 'happen-to-be-Negro' artists whose notoriety is that now their confessions of submission can be included in the curricula.

"After any social-political upsurge by the people, it is necessary for the rulers to, as quickly as possible, cover, obscure, distort, reverse, outlaw any trace of the entire epoch, its meaning, its victims, its ideas, its victories, its material human life."

Baraka reads Malcolm's life as an increasingly conscious expression of the struggle for democracy of the Afro-American ethnic group or nationality. The lesson of the Garveyite, Civil Rights, Black Muslim, Black nationalist and other groups/movements, he says, is that they express a common "call for Black unity against White supremacy and Black national oppression."

In Baraka's interpretation of Malcolm X's metamorphosis, the Malcolm who left the Nation of Islam and became Malik El-Shabazz reinterpreted the teachings of Elijah Muhammad that earlier inspired him as Malcolm Little/Detroit Red, the petty crook and convict. And, as El-Shabazz, Malcolm rightly saw all "Black nationalist" movements as a striving for political organization, as "a call for Self-Determination, as a function of unified Black political struggle, rather than the 'independence' Elijah Muhammad preached. . . . It was not a Bantustan Malcolm X called for but mobilization against national oppression."

Baraka argues that the Malcolm of Lee's film and other commercialized Malcolmite icons represent efforts to neutralize and obliterate the Black political, social and economic aspirations that he embodied. Baraka sees much of today's commercially approved and establishment-funded Black cultural activity as a trickbag, as "the rulers'" assault on Black Americans' ability to distinguish which modes of thought and action are in their interest and which are threats to it. That is why the establishment, snipe as it may at Spike Lee and his films, hails Lee's works as the standard for "real" Black films while it categorizes the Black films of the 1960s and '70s as "Blaxploitation" cinema.

Today, Baraka says, "Spike Lee and others lead a trend of *real* Black exploitation flicks, made by Black reactionaries, while any real analysis of those '60s films media 'goers' call 'Black Exploitation films' (e.g., *The Education of Sonny Carson*, *Superfly*, *The Mack*, *Buck and the Preacher*, *Across 110th Street*, even *Shaft*), will find them much more progressive, even much more pro-Black Self-Determination than the

She's Gotta Have It, 'In Living Color,' *House Party* syndrome of neo-Step 'n Fetchit derogations and caricatures of Black life, which completely eliminate even the slightest discussion of Black Self-Determination. (Except perhaps the twisted superficial backwardness of *Do the Right Thing* where Black struggle is perverted to mean photos in a pizza parlor.)"

Spike Lee smeared the Black liberation movement through his pandering-to-Establishment-stereotypes characterization of Elijah Muhammad and through his failure to give Malcolm X's life any political meaning. That political meaning, Lee says, is Malcolm's "very ideological movement, his groping and seeking, his stumbling and continuous rising from confusion to partial clarity and on." Malcolm X's purposeful and unrelenting struggle for personal and group advancement, Baraka concludes, is "something that should be taught and studied and widely understood by all of us who would make sweeping social transformation and revolution. *The very struggle for multicultural and Black studies courses in schools is part of that struggle for clarity, and against the masters of propaganda.*" [Emphasis added.]

Patricia Hill Collins, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, does what Angela Davis tries but fails to do in this collection, and that is to animate an analysis of the knotty and intertwined problems of race, sex and class.

Collins shows Malcolm to have been like most citizens of a society conceived and raised under a racist ideology: duped into believing that race is biologically constructed. One of the corollaries of the racist construct of race is that people fall into the categories of "pure" or "mixed"; this belief leads to other drivel such as the notion that people can have genetically contaminated "blood." The terms "biracial" and "colored" (as in the apartheid designation) are other examples of the social power of scientific falsehoods. Racism can infect Blacks as well as whites, but the symptoms may be different. Blacks who subscribe to racist pseudoscience are trapped within a paradox: those Blacks who are "tainted" with "white blood" are also cast (and caste), Collins says, as "more refined, intelligent and beautiful, at least by each other, while darker-skinned Blacks were portrayed as lesser."

Collins also examines Malcolm X's limitations as a political analyst. She sees him as an example of one tendency of the multiform and ongoing Black American liberation movement highlighted by Baraka:

"Missing from Malcolm X's analysis is a structural analysis of social class that addresses those features of capitalist political economies that profoundly shape both Black and white social class dynamics. The discriminatory investment policies of banks, the role of the real estate industry in controlling property in African-American neighborhoods, the culpability of existing approaches to school financing in fostering Black educational impoverishment, the employment and investment policies of major international corporations, all remain largely ignored and unanalyzed."

Not even in his final, *El Shabazz*, year did Malcolm take up such theoretical matters, Collins notes. The scarcity of analysis among Black conservative, centrist and nationalist political thinkers and organizers leaves them with a model of society in which "only Blacks appear to possess social class." Collins points out that "throughout his speeches and writings, Malcolm X alludes to the differences between working-class and middle-class Blacks. No such distinction is made for whites. . . . The absence of a comprehensive class analysis fosters the disquieting assumption that the true enemies of working-class Blacks are the 'white man' and his faithful sidekick — middle-class Blacks."

Like the entrepreneurs who have recently made high-yield investments in his story and image, Malcolm X chose to ignore the "longstanding Black progressive tradition concerning social class," Collins says, a tradition "largely silenced by the McCarthyism of the early 1950s," and formed by such thinker-activists as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida Wells Barnett, Oliver Cox, E. Franklin Frazier, Paul Robeson, Pauli Murray and Richard Wright.

Unlike most of today's X-marketeers, however, Malcolm was not ignorant of this tradition. Collins is apparently unaware that many of his speeches delivered both during and after his membership in the Nation of Islam are dotted with references to progressive, particularly anti-colonial, struggles. He consistently defended Cuban, Algerian, Vietnamese, South African and other freedom struggles led in the main by Communists. His articles in the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* show wide-ranging knowledge of international struggles

and his partisan responses to them. (It is pitiful that all contributors to this volume ignore his brief editorship of that paper and role in building it into the largest-circulation weekly newspaper in the country). He was no Red-baiter, nor could Red-baiters intimidate him.

A surprising source reveals one likely but ignored influence on Malcolm Little's political development, Redd Foxx's memoir from the '70s, *Redd Foxx, B.S.* The comedian met Malcolm, or "Detroit Red," shortly after Foxx had made a similar youthful exodus from the Midwest (St. Louis) to Harlem. Foxx got a job as dishwasher and waiter at the Chicken Shack in Harlem, where Little was also a waiter.

"Malcolm was about the same color as me," Foxx recalled. "You could hardly tell us apart; we both had these conks, and our hair was red with a high pompadour, and we wore the zoot pants." They often got high and chased women, and committed at least one b & e theft together.

One day, according to Foxx, he met Malcolm "walking down Saint Nicholas Ave. with this white chick." Malcolm introduced his companion as Linda. After some small talk, Linda tells Foxx that Malcolm told her that "you and Malcolm would like to join the Party."

"Oh, sure, I'm always ready for a good party," I said. 'Ain't that kind of party, Redd,' said Malcolm, shaking his head.

'It's a political-type party,' she said.

'Well, what type? Republican? Democrat?'

'Neither,' said Malcolm.

'It's the Communist Party,' said Linda, real proud.'

Foxx protests that Malcolm must be out of his mind, but Malcolm pulls him aside and says, "Redd, you asshole, there's food." They accompany Linda to the basement of an apartment building, where there are "broads, plenty of white broads . . . [and] tons of [food] all lined up real neat on a long table." Someone "shoved some papers at Malcolm and me for our signatures, which I guess meant we was joining up. Then they handed us stacks of their propaganda literature before they let us get too far past the door."

"You just couldn't avoid being part of things like that then," Foxx said, adding that he'd have "joined the KKK" for sandwiches in those days. Nevertheless, he and Malcolm be-

came regulars in that basement, where they'd "dance with the chicks, smell the perfume and eat the sandwiches. It saved my ass more than once."

Foxx's disavowal of interest in Red politics sounds like a successful showman's efforts to nip any neo-McCarthyite attack in the bud in case some accuser popped up with his signature on a Communist Party document. As for Malcolm, many observations in his writing and speeches suggest that he read from the "propaganda" and put a good deal of credibility in some of it.

But Malcolm Little had to suppress any awareness of the role of social class, Collins rightly says, as a price for his emotional rescue by Elijah Muhammad, for his rebirth as Malcolm X. He paid that cost by serving for 12 years as chief piper for the Black Muslims' chimerical tune of a separate Black capitalist state. In all fairness to Allah's Last Messenger, however, let's acknowledge that Elijah Muhammad used this Promised Land as a means to encourage academic and labor discipline among his followers, many of whom opened shops, learned trades, read widely, earned advanced degrees and so on, to prepare themselves as future nation builders. The Nation of Islam's rate of achievement in skills-building surely surpassed the public school system's, even if the Nation could never have served as all of Black America's substitute for that system.

Collins is also right to emphasize that the "checkered record of white progressives on matters of race may also have contributed to Malcolm X's basic mistrust of social class as a structural category of analysis essential to African-American social struggle."

But Malcolm X's championing of the Black Muslim's prescription for women — submissiveness to masculinity — cannot be explained away. Orthodox Islam, Christianity, Judaism and many other male-enforced, cleric-dominated religions and sects have constructed images of "Woman" as helpless-air-head/mother-of-the-race who is also a-creature-who-is-a-whore-if-uncontrolled. It is irresponsible, however, to sidestep Malcolm X's male supremacism with the excuse that "that's what everyone was doing back then."

Collins builds her case against Malcolm X's male supremacism by quoting his own

speeches and writings. Since his image of Black oppression was almost always expressed as one of castration of the Black man by the white man, she observes: "Equating Black oppression with the state of Black masculinity is in effect offering a masculinist analysis of Black oppression." Malcolm X's and others' masculinist ideology requires women to be kept in their inferior place by "strong" men — benevolent dictators with the authority to whip the stubborn "bitches" if that's what is required for domestic order. If male supremacists approve of such oppression in the home, Collins notes, "We might also question *what version of Black community control Malcolm X had in mind for the economic, political and social development of African-American communities.*" [Emphasis added.]

That is a question we must ask anyone who advocates or condones the use of force on members of his or her own movement. Anyone who accepts the brutalization of women can or will, if "the cause" demands it, also accept the brutalization of children, weaker males or others who do not possess the might to be right. Any self-styled nationalist who would limit a Black woman or man's right to read, marry, travel, attend school, live, eat or speak freely, can hardly be a sincere champion of the freedom of the race.

Collins finds much in Malcolm X to admire, however. He was a keen scholar and activist, and a bold personality resolute on the question of freedom, justice and equality for his people. Thus he offered a "type of leadership" that "may prove to be far more valuable to African-American communities than any specific idea he embraced or action he took. He was an individual who was able to think for himself and act upon the strength of his convictions."

No one should take that as faint praise.

Hilton Als, a staff writer for the *Village Voice*, presents the most emotionally and intellectually provocative essay, "Philosopher or Dog?", a meditation on the life of Louise Little, Malcolm X's mother.

Als begins by exposing the racist intellec-

tual dandyism underpinning two modish "very stupid words" of today's "critical" theorists — "otherness" and "difference" — the mole hills of big piles of academic discourse these days. These stupid words, Als says, are "the nonideas stupid people assume about 'otherness' and 'difference' — two words that define privilege in the epoch of some."

The ability to observe otherness and difference come to an infant early on, at his or her mother's knee, perhaps, says Als, which means such perceptions are hardly evidence of a high power of discernment. The infant, however, may not wish to break from the protective identity it shares with Mom, may fear Mom's becoming "other," may in fact hold subconsciously to the view that Mom's identity is inseparable from the child's own. So the child's experience, at least the experience of children with greedy personalities, becomes, as far as the child is concerned, the sum total of the mother's: The child dons the mother's mask to protect him/her self from Experience:

"We apply her mask to get us through a world we do not understand wherein we embrace the experience of people who cannot understand us. We accomplish this brand of retarded experience by nursing her words through the tit of her experience. Are we less lonely because of it? In X situation, Mother does exactly as I would have done. Mother says. And I am so much like her, et cetera."

The "X situation" that is Als's "ostensible subject" is the life of Louise Little, Malcolm X's mother. In the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X characterizes his mother as looking "like a white woman. . . . She had straight Black hair and her accent did not sound like a Negro's. . . . I looked like my mother." This formula for self-hatred, given Malcolm X's later ideology, intrigues Als, and he undertakes the "gargantuan task of remaking Mrs. Little."

Malcolm X left few ingredients for this re-making; he portrayed his mother, according to Als, as "an abhorrent phantom eventually driven mad by her ghostly, non-colored half." Her son omitted the story of her odyssey from Grenada to Canada to the United States, nor did he retell any of the normal family accounts of what had attracted her to Earl Little, the itinerant preacher and sometime Garveyite. In the son's story, she exists "to give birth to Malcolm, go mad and look nearly colorless."

Louise Little's father, however, a Scotsman she reportedly never saw, "hovers happily in the *Autobiography*," Als notes, and commands much more attention in the tale than Louise does — especially from readers "not of a color" — because the Scotsman represents power. "Earl and Malcolm speak of no one else with such passion" because the Grandfather stamped the mother and son (at birth, anyway) with "skin not of a color." And "Earl and Malcolm attached themselves to Louise's male, noncolored half, and compet[ed] with his ghost at every turn." Both men were avowed Black nationalists. Yet they found Louise particularly beautiful and seemed to have attributed her beauty in large part to her skin's relative absence of color.

"Malcolm holds Louise Little's father responsible for his mangled consciousness," Als says. Consider the myth of identity Malcolm X spun to explain his own character: "I was among the millions of Negroes who were insane enough to feel that it was some kind of status symbol to be light-complexioned. . . . [But] later, I learned to hate every drop of that white rapist's blood that is in me."

Als asks, "How do we know that Louise Little's mother — who is not mentioned in the *Autobiography* at all — did not love Louise's father?" Neither Malcolm X nor anyone else has presented any evidence that the Scotsman raped Louise Little's mother. But Malcolm X seems not to have been interested in his mother's past except to indulge in the "potential fantasy" of his Grandfather as rapist. In this fantasy the Grandfather is so hated by Louise Little that she "gave me more hell" than her other children, while his father, Earl, for the same reason of skin pallor, favored Malcolm for being lighter. If Malcolm knew more of his mother's West Indian culture, Als says, "he would know that in the West Indies a father is an immaterial thing — a scrap of man born as torment. Louise Little knew that."

Louise Little was smarter than her husband (did Malcolm X attribute this to her skin non-color? Als wonders), and was occasionally beaten for showing her brainpower. In the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X condoned his father's action: "An educated woman, I suppose, can't resist the temptation to correct an uneducated man. Every now and then, when she put those smooth words on him, he would grab her."

"Did Louise Little ask, by speaking, to be punished?" Als wonders. "Is that how she lost her mind, really?" Madness threatened her whether she expressed herself and received blows for her thoughts, or held her tongue and smothered her intelligence. But her fate seems not to have interested her son, Als says, except as it served his self-aggrandizement:

"The famous photograph of Malcolm standing at a window in his house with a gun looking out the window — I believe he is on the lookout for his mother. What did he see, looking out the window? Did he see his mother's quite appropriate anger? Based on the fact that in the Autobiography he refers to her as Louise and in Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America, Bruce Perry refers to her as Louisa? What was her name? Her date of birth? What parish was she born in in Grenada? . . . Mrs. Little did not write anything. I am writing her anger for her and therefore myself since I hate the nonwriting I have done about my own mother. The fact is, my nonwriting couldn't contain my mother's presence. . . . Since I am not capable of writing about my mother, how can I honor Mrs. Little? I did not know her. How did I not know my mother? What I know: Malcolm's interest in his mother is evident in his avoidance."

Als concludes that because she was an immigrant, and a West Indian at that, "American people of a color" are cheered by Louise Little's characterization and fate in the *Autobiography* because the plot "plays out the violence of their feelings toward the colored immigrant." But in their own homelands, "West Indians of a color are in the majority. They project the arrogance and despair that comes with this sense of being central but small onto everything and everyone else in the world." And "Americans of a color" define West Indians by this arrogance, but do not sense the despair and feeling of smallness that it masks. Als tells of his Barbadian grandmother, a Royalist who, like Louise Little, "was Yellow" and "attempted to ignore her children who were women, and their children who were dark."

Malcolm X sneaked in "bits about his hatred of Mom" as he developed his Black Muslim line, but these bits were only means for his "transferring his hatred of Mom's light skin onto a race of people he deemed mad because their skin was lighter than Mom's and, therefore, madder still."

And for this, Malcolm X was rewarded: "He was rewarded by very stupid people who

labeled his ideologically twisted tongue 'marvelous.' " The word "marvelous" was popular in the fashion and arts world, Als says, from the 1930s through early '70s. Diana Vreeland of *Vogue* magazine conferred "marvelous" status on Malcolm X because, ever mindful of the body and fashion industry as she was, she thought him marvelous "for telling people not of a color that their faces and bodies were ugly." The college campuses, TV shows and press also were drawn to Malcolm X and "supported his 'rage' because it reinforced their privilege" — the privilege of mytho-socio-economically constructed "difference."

And as Malcolm X grew in fame, "Mrs. Little was diminished by the loving glare of his publicity. . . . In the *Autobiography*, he describes this love [of publicity for him, and vice-versa] in great detail" — publicity that grew while his mother was spending 26 years in a state mental hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Readers of the *Autobiography* learn nothing of her "pitiful" (as Malcolm called it) life there, nothing of what her son said to her during his sporadic visits. At what point did she reach the condition in which "she didn't recognize me at all"? We're not told.

In sketching his reconstructive autobiography of Louise Little, Als overwhelms the reader with the force and logic of his imagination. Despite the *Autobiography's* continuing ability to inspire us, readers of "Philosopher or Dog" will forever hold in their mind Als's assessment, too:

"The *Autobiography* has everything very stupid people embrace — the mother driven mad by her husband's murder, the dust of patriarchy, religious conversion into the sublime — and yet it has nothing."

The book we need, Als insists, is an autobiography "rich in emotional fiber, with a love of God and children and Mrs. Little and so forth." Such a book would supersede the so-often-told tale of "a boy who speaks (badly) for women — the too-familiar story."

In "Can this Be the End for Cyclops and Professor X," *Village Voice* staff writer Greg Tate invents a short quasi-philosophical dialogue between two hip-hop young people nicknamed "Bullrose" and "Dravidiana," who

was Bullrose's girlfriend before she "turned that lesbonic corner."

Bullrose is a self-declared X-man — not as in Malcolm X but as in the squad of Marvel comic book heroes. In hip-hop Socratic fashion the two take up the question of how to account for Malcolm X's resurrected fame among today's Black youths.

"Why," asks Dravidiana, "are so many young brothers sweatin' Malcolm X's dick so hard these days? Is it 'cause of Spike Lee, Chuck D, BDP? Why you got the sleaze-ass likes of Big Daddy Kane saying he aspires to be a combination of Malcolm X and Marvin Gaye, a great Black leader and a sexy entertainer?"

Bullrose attributes Malcolm X's resurgence to his having been a "bona-fide superstar" with a "multiple-identity crisis going on. Count 'em off: preacher, poet, pimp, prostitute, player, political activist, warrior-king, husband, father, martyr."

But what do the young brothers really know about Malcolm, Dravidiana asks, beyond "what other niggas say about what a bad nigga he was. . . . What do they know about his politics, particularly his gender politics, which were like totally fucked up?"

"Brother man was videogenic and gave great soundbites," is Bullrose's analysis. "The hip-hop nation got to dig him because he could rap, he had street knowledge, mother wit and supreme verbal flow." Furthermore, Bullrose says, to be turned into a "revolutionary pop ikon" in America today, the figure needs to have "lived fast and died young" under "suspicious and mysterious circumstances." Malcolm fills the bill and is thus "the Elvis of Black pop politics."

He further cynically explains that Malcolm X's spirituality is "part of the package," a part that serves the young Black male well in his efforts to become proficient at "Black Male Posturing." BMP, Bullrose explains, is an attitudinal style that can "carry you farther than you will ever imagine in this world because the whole world gives it so much power. Except for the butch breed like yourself who on the whole are probably less impressed than anybody."

Bullrose pinpoints Malcolm X's way with words as an especially powerful and enduring skill: "Certain phrases will stick with me forever. 'I am the man you think you are.' 'I'd do

the same as you, only more of it.' 'You can't get a chicken from a duck egg.' That one where he talks about how if you were a citizen you wouldn't need no Civil Rights bill."

Even as a child of 7, Bullrose responded to the Manichean scheme behind Malcolm X's rhetoric: "Maybe because he was talking about right and wrong in such binary terms, like in fairy tales. You know he painted the world as Black equals good and white equals evil."

Bullrose argues that compared with Malcolm X's contemporaries, today's politicians, artists, writers and musicians are failing to "personify Blackness" in their works. Where, he wonders, are the Coltranes, Barakas, Lady Days, Fanny Lou Hamers, Shirley Chisholms, Jr. Walkers, Bob Marleys, Miles Davises, Iceberg Slims and Gloria Lynnes of the younger generation? These figures could "quantify" Blackness by doing things "white boys can't even contemplate."

"Race," Bullrose says, "doesn't prescribe experience or predict emotional depth, but there are historical experiences that only being Black in space, time and mind will make possible."

When Dravidiana counters that she sees little difference between Bullrose's aesthetic principle and "calling white folks grafted devils," as in the Black Muslim creation myth, Bullrose defends his view with an argument that rests on the wound-and-bow theory of artistic creation along with Harold Cruse's critique of the "crisis of the Negro intellectual":

"Look, there is a special kind of alienation you possess as a Black person in this society that is all mashed up with your feelings of love and loathing and loyalty to Black folks as a whole. [There are certain] sensitivities or neuroses [that make Blacks try] to square things that have no liners and hard edges. Like where Africa ends and Europe begins. How to develop yourself without alienating those who aren't interested in development on whose behalf you are developing yourself. You know if Malcolm hadn't had the Nation of Islam's save-a-sinner program behind him to smooth all that kinda shit out, he woulda been another alienated Black intellectual in deep crisis."

Editor Joe Wood invited Cruse, emeritus professor of history at the University of Michigan, to contribute to *Malcolm In Our Own Image*, and Cruse did so. Cruse argued that even if Malcolm X had not been killed he would have got nowhere with his Organization of Afro American Unity because he did

not know how to build a political organization and had no program that could unify grass roots Blacks or mainstream Black leaders. Furthermore, Cruse said, Malcolm X rang up no concrete accomplishments that could serve as a model for Black organizational progress today. Woods rejected Cruse's cantankerous essay, perhaps publishing the mawkish piece by the non-writing college student in its place.

But perhaps Cruse would take solace in Dravidiana's reply to Bullrose, which is a sugar-coated version of the same bitter pill Cruse administered:

"I was never raised to have heroes. I was raised to listen to what people said and look for how it contradicted what they did. I learned that the person who did a constructive thing for the community today could be tearing it down tomorrow. I was taught . . . that holding power over people makes [most human beings] even more fragile, vain and lonely and dangerous. Dangerous to others because their charisma makes folks want to let them do their thinking for them. Dangerous to themselves because they have to give up their humanity on the way to the hall of glory. . . . How can you respect the common humanity of people who hold your ideas, your utterances, as more valid than their own lives? That's why I got no use for heroes. I can respect heroic acts but I can't respect anybody who'd want idolatry for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

The dialogue ends with the protagonists ascending or descending into a mystical inquiry into the true path of enlightenment. Bullrose maintains that Malcolm's assassination shows that there are evil forces which instinctively attack anyone who is breaking down the "ism-schisms" that separate common humanity. But Dravidiana counters that human society is doomed until it is ruled by a cult of women, a cult that would by its nature bring a government organized around the eternal feminine principle embodied by the Earth Mother.

Patricia J. Williams, professor of law at Columbia University, keeps up the gendered emphasis of these meditations on Malcolm X. She sets herself the task of explaining why a Black neoconservative Supreme Court justice like Clarence Thomas could say that his hero "is, was or has been none other than Malcolm X."

Spurred by the comment of a friend that "Malcolm wasn't just a role model; he's become the ultimate pornographic object," Williams takes up the question of pornography — "the habit of thinking that [sex] is a

relation of dominance and submission. A habit of thinking that permits the imagination of the voyeur to indulge in autosensation that obliterates the subjectivity of the observed." This definition proves fruitful for Williams as she depicts Thomas as a man who claims to speak for all Black people "while speaking exclusively about himself" and a man who represents not the interests of Black people, but only their image.

Williams identifies Thomas as the Black correlative of the sort of woman who says that a "real woman" likes to please men by making available to them those body parts that define a "real woman." It is the whore, Williams says, who boasts that she would "never want to be a feminist because they don't believe in having fun and they emasculate men." Thus pornography is more than Thomas's hobby, it's his entire politics.

Williams then takes up the question of the iconography of Malcolm X. She points out that once he's been deformed or simplified into a symbol, "Malcolm X" is a pliable substance for the self-serving manipulations of Clarence Thomas, Spike Lee and other "pretenders to the Malcolm legacy." A political/mass media system as adept at instant myth-making as ours "can make Clarence Thomas look like Horatio Alger, Miss Jane Pittman and Colin Powell all wrapped into one." Such image-making feats are essentially pornographic because:

"If, as some assert, in sexual pornography men act and women appear, and if, in racial pornography white people act and Black people appear, a classic moment in the political pornography of the Malcolmized moment is exemplified by when President Bush invited the Black Caucus, who represent many millions of Black and white voters, on up to the White House to sit and chat about their concerns for a while."

As it turned out, the point of the invitation was the photo opportunity — pictures of Bush "looking as if he were listening" were distributed to the nation's media. Similarly, Williams adds, during the Thomas affair, both the media and Senate functioned in the same way; they disguised completely "the extent to which the witness who represented the NAACP also represented a membership of thousands upon thousands yet was made the

imagistic equivalent of the witness who represented the relatively miniscule membership of the Black bailiffs association of Southern California." That's America!

But Black people share responsibility for their vulnerability to such media ploys, Williams emphasizes. The enthusiastic gullibility with which many Blacks soak up and spew out conformist chatter about "role models" leaves Williams concerned that "all we are left with is 'players' in 'roles' rather than substantive, interactive beings." Williams probes the soft underbelly of 1990s group-think nationalism. Like Hilton Als and "Dravidiana," Williams argues that idolatry is the mother of surrender:

"I worry about this tendency to indulge in figureheading our ideals. I think that the habit of imbuing humans with ideal or essential traits is a formula for either dashed ideals or corruption of them. It is a formula as well for cynicism on the one hand or intolerance on the other. . . . If Malcolm had conformed himself to the politically pornographic imagination of his generation's fixed ideals — even just a little — he would no doubt be alive today, hosting a talk show, lunching with Clarence. But Malcolm never was one for mannered acquiescence."

Some nationalists who invest "Blackness" with innate progressive power felt obliged to argue that since Thomas was Black, he was likely to be "sympathetic to the advancement of particularly situated collective agendas." Only by ignoring his legal career could anyone entertain such false hope. His judicial philosophy has always been to reject "statistics and other social science data" and to dismiss entirely "a range of affirmative action remedies that have been central to Blacks' social and economic progress over the last 30 years or so."

It's not enough to condemn Thomas and his kind as conservative neo-Toms. We must define the characteristics and describe the deeds that make them so. There's nothing wrong with knocking the foibles of Black folks publicly. But doing so to gain a career, income and approval from an audience of anti-affirmative action whites makes you a neo-Tom. In Thomas's profession, Williams points out, the neo-Tom, like his white sponsors, "supplants a larger common history with individualized hypotheses about free choice, in which each self chooses her destiny even if it is destitution." Upon the altar of the self-

help bootstraps myth Thomas is willing to see the U.S. judicial system sacrifice as inadmissible all historical evidence that "gives at least as much weight to the possibility that certain minority groups have not had many chances to be in charge of things, as to the possibility that they just don't want to, or that they just can't."

Williams has a powerful epigrammatic style — the match of any of our Supreme Court justices ever — and Thomas gives her a chance to show it:

"While self-help and strong personal values are marvelous virtues, they are no stand-in for the zealous protection of civil and human rights. . . . Clarence Thomas has added a peculiarly stultifying, nullifying twist — that of simultaneously individualizing nationalism and nationalizing individualism."

That Malcolm X can be so easily stolen, pawned off and ripped off is a symptom of ills that grip the whole of U.S. society, Williams concludes. This "repeated emptying of all of our cultural coffers, of all of our sources of both self and unity, has left us much the poorer," she notes. By being so abused and abusable, Malcolm X serves as "a signifier of the female," not just of the strong-Black-male, because his history has become "a space for subjugation, a debased emptiness, a loss for which there is no voice."

We Americans dwell in a post-Orwellian Never-Never Land, Williams says, "in which if calling a Black person nigger is bad, then calling a white person racist must be Exactly the Same Thing Only Twice As Bad. . . . In which reality is just a high-price form of fantasy. In which marketing trends are the new-age demonstration of democracy-in-action. In which there is justice for sale and media moments for all."

The final two essays worth reading clash against one another, throwing off sparks that illuminate both our political landscape and our academic discourse about it. From this reviewer's perspective it might be more frank to say that Robin D.G. Kelley's "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II" is a handy

foil for Adolph Reed Jr.'s "The Allure of Malcolm X."

Kelley, a professor of history at the University of Michigan, provides a wonderfully documented look at the zoot-suit, conk-headed culture that Spike Lee uses so powerfully to whoosh viewers back to 1940s Harlem cool-cat life in the opening scenes of the movie "X."

But like Lee, Kelley strives to imbue the street hustling lumpen lads and lassies with inherent revolutionary potential. Ignoring Malcolm X's own interpretation of his transition from hustler to activist, those who idolize the gangster-rebel as People's Hero maintain that Malcolm X was no qualitative improvement on Detroit Red, and therefore to condemn the milieu of the petty crook, hustler and gang banger is to nip a hero in the bud.

As enjoyable and informative as it is to read Kelley's effort to make his case, I remain unconvinced. Granted, denizens of the street can be intriguing. Kelley cites no less a cultural observer to emphasize this fact than Ralph Ellison, who wrote: "Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical fantasy of the Lindy Hop conceals clues to great political power — if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle. . . ."

Attempting to fill Ellison's bill requires Kelley to indulge in some formidable prose sleights of hand. He has to de-emphasize, even slander, those young persons and common folks who displayed in the 1950s and '60s the discipline and daring needed to bring down the walls of segregation. To Kelley, "middle-class" must take on an intrinsically bad connotation so that zoot, hipster, hip-hop and other strata may be more easily glorified. Thus we read that the 1960 civil rights fighters were "sons and daughters of middle-class African-Americans, many of whom were themselves college students *taking a detour on the road to respectability to fight for integration and equality.*" [Emphasis added.]

Isn't it a put-down to characterize the freedom fighters as having been on a "detour," on a well-mapped route to "respectability"? And was the battle for Black freedom and equality ever really for "integration"? That term was foisted on a movement too busy to think about word-play. But the objective was always *desegregation*, the crushing of Jim Crow,

the smashing of the legal framework of U.S. apartheid, and not to foist ourselves into truly private white social settings or even to dismantle predominantly Black institutions.

I don't think Kelley in his heart is so contemptuous of the freedom fighters. But his objective in this essay imposes upon him a regrettable rhetorical strategy. Listen to what he says when the issue is whether Malcolm Little, rather than Black collegians, made a career detour: "... it is my contention that [Malcolm's] participation in the underground subculture of Black working-class youth during the war was *not a detour* on the road to political consciousness but rather an essential element of his radicalization." [Emphasis added.]

Kelley hopes to convince readers (including the college youths to whom he opens a path of apathy, frivolity or degeneracy rather than a "detour" into concerted political action), that the case he makes for Malcolm X applies as well to today's devotees of petty- (or worse) criminal subculture aka Authentic Black Hip Style. And so he says:

"For Malcolm, the zoot suit, the lindy hop and the distinctive lingo of the 'hep cat' simultaneously embodied these class, racial and cultural tensions. This unique subculture enabled him to negotiate an identity that resisted the hegemonic culture and its attendant racism and patriotism, the rural folkways (for many the 'parent culture') that still survived in most Black urban households, and the class-conscious, integrationist attitudes of middle-class Blacks."

We are to accept the proposition, therefore, that it was not the young punk Detroit Red — skillfully "negotiating his own identity" by living a prodigal life — who harbored "class pretensions." No. It was the earnest hard-working Black residents of Roxbury, Massachusetts! Thus, when Malcolm/Detroit Red dove into petty hoodlumism, he was, in Kelley's mind, discovering "the Black subculture" — not the criminal subculture but THE Black culture. Equating Black culture with criminality is something only bigots used to do.

The desire to "act out" through bizarre clothing, through avoiding honest labor, through reviling and exploiting women — these acts Kelley exalts as "subversive," as "resistance" and as a "rejection of both Black petit-bourgeois respectability and American

patriotism." This is the text he's forced to write. Because he can't take seriously Malcolm X's own later appraisal of the conk culture as an expression of feelings of inferiority and degradation as a vestige of servitude, Kelley must palm off Detroit Red's life as revolutionary stylizing and heroic resistance, that is, as Malcolm X's.

Does the rap culture Kelley glorifies solve Ellison's riddle? Does it offer clues as to how to gain political power for the Black community or other U.S. citizens poorly served by our democracy? Are hip-hop (or, for that matter, acid rock, heavy metal or grunge rock) modern-day incarnations of conk heroism or Robin Hoodism? Is singing nasty songs part of an unconsciously noble struggle to, as Kelley says of Detroit Red's shenanigans, "carve out more time for leisure and pleasure, free himself from alienating wage labor, survive and transcend the racial and economic boundaries he confronted in everyday life"? If so, where's the beef? Where in the USA or anywhere else have petty hustlers or riffraff — or rebel-entertainers who style themselves after lumpen elements — achieved any gains whatsoever for an oppressed people? Hasn't happened. Never will.

Reality is stubborn. Critics may insist from their offices in the halls of ivy that we stop using "decontextualized labels such as 'nihilism' or 'outlaw culture.'" Perhaps other terms may also offend them, like lumpen proletariat, declassé or, yes, even underclass. But the world inhabited by the majority of Black urbanites still exists, and its indices of quality of life are still dropping. And American apartheid will always defeat, as it did in Detroit Red's days, any assault armed ideologically with the pop-gun notion that there is revolutionary magic in syncopated song and dance, iconoclastic clothing, gang-banging, hanging-out or petty thievery.

Malcolm X knew that. That's how and why he became Malcolm X. With his considerable intellectual gifts and rigorous scholarly discipline, Kelley will undoubtedly come to the same conclusion soon, and he'll do so sooner if he takes to heart the last essay in this volume.

Skip the first five pages of "The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics" by Adolph Reed Jr., who in-

dulges himself with some weak and boring autobiography and other blather before he hits his stride. Start with the paragraph beginning, "Malcolm X is attractive to young people today in part because he was attractive to young people when he was alive."

What today's youth receive from their elders is, in part, "a Malcolm X fabricated within an abstracted discourse of Black 'greatness,'" Reed says. Malcolmania, however, is not just a marketing phenomenon but, far more than that, a sign of the desperation of those who believe "that Malcolm's apparent popularity either reflects or may crystallize a rising tide of activism."

Reed traces the development of today's severe socioeconomic problems from their emergence after the decline of the Black Power movement in the mid '70s. There was consumerism, militant posturing and mystification of Black identity back then, too. But at least the claims of any Black group or erstwhile leader "to serious commitment or sophisticated analysis [were] *judged in relation to an objective of changing social conditions affecting Black people.* [Emphasis added.] And that's what is missing now.

Radicalism has been marginalized, its space seized by the model of "Black officeholders and public managers" who have pushed the notion that racial empowerment can result from "incremental adjustment of the routine operations of institutions in their charge." These chiropractic adjustments have included "improving minority personnel ratios, opening access to public contracting, improving the social welfare system's methods of distributing what are called human services, and appointing and/or electing more Black officials." The political quackery narrows the horizon of political activity, substituting the maneuvering of "insiders" and agenda-setting elites for the mobilization of the Black citizenry.

The result is the rise of "venal and reactionary — but all militantly race-conscious Bantustan administrators as a stratum-for-itself." The civil rights organizations "found their way into public budgets and the inner circles of policy implementation and thereby legitimized accommodationist, insider politics as the proper legacy of protest activism."

Just as emperors can don new clothes, so too can the colonized. Simultaneous with the

rise of the kente-cloth nationalists came the new guise of the porkchoppers of old: today's hip-hop nationalists. Reed traces their ideological ancestry:

"Beginning in the 1980s also, the invention of a youth-centered hip-hop culture, whose iconic markers allegedly constitute an immanent form of social criticism, once again has blurred the lines between ideology and style, political action and consumer preference."

The whole cultural-politics discourse, Reed says, can be seen on one hand as a sign of the "relatively low level of political mobilization among Black Americans (and its corollary, absence of a dynamic political movement)"; and on the other hand as "an outgrowth of the structuralist and poststructuralist trends in radical social theorizing." The cultural-politics scholasticists define individuals' and groups' "identification with a 'taste community' as intrinsically political behavior, on an equal status with purposive contests over state action."

Pouring into the ever-expanding vacuum formed by political inactivity, Reed says, are such pseudo-political behaviors as Black History Month and compendiums of Great Black Historical Figures ("a hybrid Homeric narrative and Afrocentric version of "Jeopardy"); the Martin Luther King Jr. birthday rituals; and "nationalist psychobabble about the need to repair supposedly damaged self-respect by teaching Black people about 'themselves.'" (Or witness today's NAACP calling upon Blacks to pay their bills with \$2 notes called "Black-dollars" as if that's effective politics. Do they think big corporations, banks and stores are unaware of Black American purchasing power and spending habits?!)

No "parade of racial self-esteem experts" or purveyors of role-model panaceas will cut any political mustard, Reed says, because "linking examination of the past to a therapeutic project destroys a sense of history as process and reduces it to a field of static, decontextualized parables."

Reed identifies the kinds of pitiful measures that have created the big sucking sound associated with the Black political vacuum. He traces a pattern in all this, a pattern of retreat from and discouragement of community- and nation-based political organization and protest, and a pattern of "channeling Black political participation into support for the regime

— in part by defining any other course as illegitimate and in part by successfully representing the payoffs generated as both significant and optimal.”

Thus, instead of increasing Black voter registration and participation, Black elected officials and civil rights organizations have preferred to fortify their own seats of privilege, where they can serve as power brokers through a “strategy of insider advocacy” that is “incompatible with popular mobilization.” As Reed points out, there is more than a little bit of class prejudice in this commitment to “professionalistic ideology” and defense of privilege by a managerial elite.

Like the rest of America’s elite, the Black managerial elite indulges in “totemic nostalgia” for Civil Rights activism by concentrating on King birthday campaigns as a way of selling the idea that all that is lacking is a Great Black Leader. But the idolatry for King — like that for Malcolm X — arose only after the political figure was safely dead. The call for a leader inspired Jesse Jackson to present himself as “heir to King’s fictitious legacy” (the fiction, that is, that King led an organized national Black movement). And, like Booker T. Washington before him, Jackson has been occasionally denominated National Black Leader “by the dominant white political, economic and philanthropic interests precisely because he preached accommodation to their program of Black marginalization.”

Afro-Americans, Reed reminds us, have had “no referendum or other forum for legitimizing anyone’s claims to be a national leader.” The street riff-raff, the civil rights kingpins, the film makers, the curse-spewing/self-hating rappers and others hailed as conscious or unconscious subverters of the system of exploitation and oppression can point to nothing but personal achievements. And compared with the expectations he aroused, neither can Jackson. He can cite “few benefits besides his own aggrandizement — no shift in public policy, no institutionalized movement, not even a concrete agenda” around which to mobilize — unless you accept “Jesse for President” as such an agenda, and if you do, you must acknowledge that that is “the most radical narrowing of the focus of Afro-American political action to date.”

Jackson, Reed argues, has actually diminished Blacks’ power within the Democratic Party “by insisting that their preferences be channeled through him.” He demanded a “seat at the table,” and the elite of the party have been only too happy to accept his scarfing as comprising their program to meet the needs of all Black citizens. (Jackson has merely refined the tactics he learned during his phony boycotts of Chicago businesses in the late ’60s, boycotts that ended when his relatives or associates got jobs and “contributions.”)

The little increments derived from Black office-holders — “zoning variances, summer jobs in municipal agencies, waivers on code enforcement, breaks in the criminal justice system, special parks and recreational services” and a share in public contracts is obviously not proving sufficient to alleviate the problems of the day. Because “Black control of those agencies whose principal function is management of the dispossessed *does not alter their ultimately repressive function.*” [Emphasis added.]

Instead of rituals, Reed says, Blacks need strategy and tactics that flow from an awareness of present-day realities, of “the intricate logics of reorganization at work in domestic and global political economy since World War II.” What has happened is this:

“... the consolidation of a domestic political model — joining national and local levels — that cements interest group loyalties and legitimizes state power through participation in a regime of public stimulation of private economic growth; the subsidiary role for defense spending, transportation and urban redevelopment policy in recomposing regional and metropolitan demographic, economic and political organization.”

A radicalism that does not master the new reality “gives away some of the most important conceptual ground to defenders of the status quo” and, in their braying retreat, the pseudo-radicals make big noises that mystify the ignorant but do not frighten their enemies. These radicals tell us that to become politically effective we must model ourselves after some ancient Egyptian royal house, or understand the difference between “Fire People” and “Ice People,” or regale our children with fantastic (but easily refutable by a little honest book learning) tales of prehistoric African inventions of stainless steel. They urge us to praise the anti-democratic deeds of slave-holding Black kings and queens, or to

worship a beatific Black Female/Mother, or to "understand Malcolm."

Reed hits the nail on the head: "There is nothing that understanding the 'real' Malcolm X — an impossibility in any event — could do to clarify or to help formulate positions regarding any of those phenomena, neither the internal nor external forces shaping Black political life. Invoking his image in these circumstances amounts to wishing away the complexities that face us."

Appeals to special forms of knowledge are especially harmful when they come from Black scholars who should know better. False knowledge undercuts the ideological development of young men and women. Especially damaging is the "rhetoric of cultural politics" because it "exalts existing practices as intrinsically subversive and emancipatory":

... [I]t is a construction of radical opposition that naturalizes the demobilized state as outside the scope of intervention and limits itself to celebrating moments of resistance supposedly identifiable within fundamental acquiescence.

"Because it rejects distinctions between style and substance, form and content, this new rhetoric of evasiveness gives an intellectual justification for conflating political commitment and consumer market preference. . . . It consequently makes a fetish of youth as a social category (another failure to learn from mistakes of the 1960s) and idealizes trends in inner-city fashion as emancipatory expression."

When rappers project themselves as political sages, or politicians and scholars hail them as such, there is something rotten in the state. Malcolmism has arisen from this putrefaction. The demagogues who draw upon Malcolm tend to "reproduce his inaccurate, simplistic reading of Afro-American history and reinforce inadequate and wrongheaded tendencies in the present." Malcolm X's oft-repeated house-Negro/field-Negro metaphor is a prime symptom of an "historically wrong, obfuscatory and counterproductive" concept. The field Negro in Malcolm's mythology stands for the strong and militant Black, and the house Negro is the traitor and source of disunity. Never mind, Reed notes, that leaders of the major slave revolts (including Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser) were house slaves. The house/field dichotomy is a handy weapon for Black yahoos to pre-

serve the notion that there is a fundamental conflict between educated and under- or mis-educated Blacks.

As it happens, Blacks who exercise critical dissent are often abused as "house niggers" who are posing a deep threat to a united Black mass. Criticism delivered anywhere but "in the closet," in Malcolm's words, is dangerous or unwanted, thus he ridiculed Blacks who publicly rebutted his house/field nonsense. OK for Malcolm, however, was his own public attack — puritanical and naive though it was — on Elijah Muhammad for consorting with women out of wedlock. This is the kind of "criticism" that white supremacists and Spike Lee accept as serious and damaging, so fearful and eager are they to belittle and explain away Muhammad, a great figure in American history. (Look, for example, at the Black Panther Party's 10-point social program; it's closely adapted from the Black Muslim 10-point program printed on the back of every issue of *Muhammad Speaks*.) At least both groups understood the importance of having a program and communicating it to the Black public.

Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad and others have also advanced the notion that Blacks should condemn government programs that combat or seek to rectify the effects of racism. They call instead for self-help and self-reliance programs. "In current political debate self-reliance is a code for Booker T. Washington-style forfeiture of the right to make claims on public authority," Reed observes, a public authority resting on the wealth accumulated through centuries of super-exploitation of Black enslaved and free workers, among others, at home and abroad. "In this vein Black conservatives such as Clarence Thomas or Tony Brown are at least as likely to annex Malcolm's authority as are nationalists who prefer not to be thought of as conservative."

The truth of the matter, Reed says, is none of us knows what Malcolm would be doing if he were alive today, or what he would have done from 1965 to the present. And we will gain nothing by speculating about the matter. "Part of what was so exciting about Malcolm," Reed notes, "in retrospect anyway, was that he was moving so quickly, experimenting with

ideas, trying to get a handle on the history he was living."

Despite Malcolm X's appeals for Black unity — which included adapting the name of the Organization of African Unity for his own organization — he "made his reputation by attacking entrenched elites and challenging their attempts to constrain popular action and the vox populi: Now he is canonized as an icon, an instrument of an agenda that is just the opposite of popular mobilization."

Administering a welcome antidote to the over-dosing on anachronistic Black feudalistic fantasies, Reed concludes: "He was no prince; there are no princes, only people like ourselves who strive to influence their own history."

A part from the essays that are best ignored (and this book contains no greater portion of them than is usually the case with volumes of hastily collected "timely" writings), *Malcolm X In Our Own Image* is an important contribution to the too often malicious and mindless discussion of the roles of Black folk in American society.

We're witnessing a strong attempt by white establishment figures on both the left and right to eradicate the distinction between Black group-consciousness, or nationalism, and Black separatism. Television specials, Op Ed pages, cartoonists and college officials are gnashing their teeth and wringing their hands in denouncing "Black separatism" as the chief problem of race relations in the United States.

What they are denouncing, however, is in reality not Black separatism at all. Blacks are not seeking to bar whites or any other Americans from living, eating, attending school or working where they wish, or in receiving equality of opportunity and compensation. Not even those Blacks who claim to be separatists call for the denial of any Constitutional rights or other forms of social equity to whites or any other citizens.

So why the fuss? Why have we seen this recent effort of hypocrites styling themselves as foes of "Black separatism" making their appeals not to Blacks but to whites? The answer must be that they are seeking to appeal to the economic fears of working-class and

lower-echelon professional whites, to rally whites under the banner of defensive rather than aggressive racism. The budget crunch stops here.

The unspoken thrust of this new attack against Blacks is: *If the ungrateful Blacks persist in eating with each other, talking amongst themselves and preserving their presence in predominantly Black middle-class neighborhoods, well then, all bets are off. We've been kind and charitable towards them long enough. They don't deserve any programs designed to eradicate racism or its effects. Cut the funds. Kick 'em out. Don't let 'em in. They aren't your fellow citizens. They're un-American aliens who would turn our country into another Yugoslavia. Look at that Afrocentric kick they're on. They're all preparing to go back to Africa anyway.*

The writers I've focused on in this review show that group-conscious Black discourse is not only stimulating and diverse, but terribly necessary in the face of white neo-racism.

None of the writers in this book would accept the notion that non-Blacks can exclusively frame any purposeful debate concerning issues facing the Black community. But this is precisely what the habitually racist American establishment is seeking to do in its *seemingly mad* obsession with "Black self-segregation."

In their drive to control the American public's understanding of "what's going on in the Black community," however, the white establishment media offer virtually no exposure to Blacks who make the kind of probing and daring arguments that the reader can analyze and learn from in this book.

Lacking at this time a national organization or media that can assess the new ideological climate in private, and coordinate an effective program of ideological and political action, we must rely on freewheeling discussion in books and journals where our best scholar-activists can test various interpretations and suggestions in open debate.

It's not an ideal situation. It would be far better if the Black Congressional Caucus and other bodies did their fact-gathering and thinking in private rather than on C-SPAN, where headline-grabbers and gas-bags fill the air with predictable rhetoric devoid of any intellectual engagement over facts or strategy. But this is the situation we're in now, and we must make the most of it.

The Disappearance of Malcolm X: A Postscript

by Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Where did all the "X"s go? Only a few scant months ago Malcolm X was not only the talk of the town, but the craze of the nation. Madonna sang about him. Clarence Thomas and Dan Quayle said he influenced them. Clinton sported an "X" cap. Even Rush Limbaugh thought there was something positive about Malcolm's philosophy of black self-help.

The public and the press eagerly counted the days until the release of Spike Lee's film on Malcolm X. Movie critics proclaimed it a happening. It wasn't. The film quickly came and went and so did Malcolm. It's easy to see why.

In the years following his assassination in 1965, black militants continued to revere Malcolm X, but the general public forgot him. Bookstore shelves groaned with biographies on Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and many lesser known black figures. Cities named streets, parks and buildings after black politicians, personalities and historical figures. The media ran countless features on black issues. But apart from bootleg records of Malcolm's speeches and a collection of his speeches by a leftist publisher, the only full length testament to his life was his own autobiography.

Then something happened. The economic crisis of the 1990s began to slam young blacks hard; one out of four were in prison, on parole, or probation. Their unemployment chronically hovered near fifty percent. The high school drop out rate nearly tripled that of white youth. Lacking competitive technical skills, education, and professional training they were increasingly shunted to the outer fringe of society.

Young blacks, at best, perceived black leaders as incapable of providing them with credible role models, economic and social supports, or a sense of racial pride and awareness. At worst, they saw them as hostile to their plight. Feeling more and more like social untouchables, many turned to gangs, drugs, and crime to survive.

Facing a desolate future, they found Malcolm X. They listened to rap groups like Public Enemy weave his speeches into their lyrics. He sounded tough, defiant, and outlawish. And best of all, he talked back to the white man. That was enough.

Malcolm seemed to offer the solution to their frustration and discontent. He became their champion. Hollywood and Madison Avenue spotted a new fad in the making. Driven by the powerful scent of dollars, they quickly turned him into a very profitable myth.

But young blacks, most of whom weren't born when he was killed in 1965, didn't really try to understand Malcolm X. He was a terribly complex and contradictory individual. Malcolm was not just a fiery leader who cursed out the "white devil." He studied. He wrote. He debated. He was never afraid to test his ideas in the intellectual marketplace. When they came up short, he changed them.

He dropped the enemy-is-the-white man line and sought multi-racial alliances. He devised a sensible, practical program for economic self-help and political empowerment. This wasn't glamorous, sensational nor remembered.

There was a more painful truth about Malcolm. His revolt was against the rampant materialism of American society. If he had lived, he would have been repelled by the self-indulgent grab for expensive cars, clothes, and cash by the MTV generation. He would not think it "cool" for young black men to harangue black women with the "B" and "H" words, or each other with the "N" word." He would rail against Hollywood and the record industry's obsessive glorification of the "gangsta" lifestyle.

Despite Lee's good intentions, the film sealed Malcolm's doom. He could never hope to live up to the hype. The complaints about the film (and the filmmaker) began almost immediately. It was: too strong, too weak, too long, too distorted, or too boring.

Those that did enjoy it probably left theaters thinking they knew all they needed to know about Malcolm X. The flood of new books on Malcolm immediately began to gather dust on bookstore shelves, the clothing retailers changed lines, and black filmmakers suddenly discovered new projects. Black youth and Madison Avenue had rescued Malcolm from a forgotten netherworld, and now they quietly returned him there.

Perhaps it's just as well. Malcolm X was never designed to be a mass market commodity. He certainly wouldn't have wanted that. Malcolm looked into the scarred abyss of his life and American society and resolved to change both. This is what made Malcolm X the man that he was. This is not the stuff of myth, but of reality.