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MALCOLM X

BY ANY REVIEWS NECESSARY

SYMPOSIUM

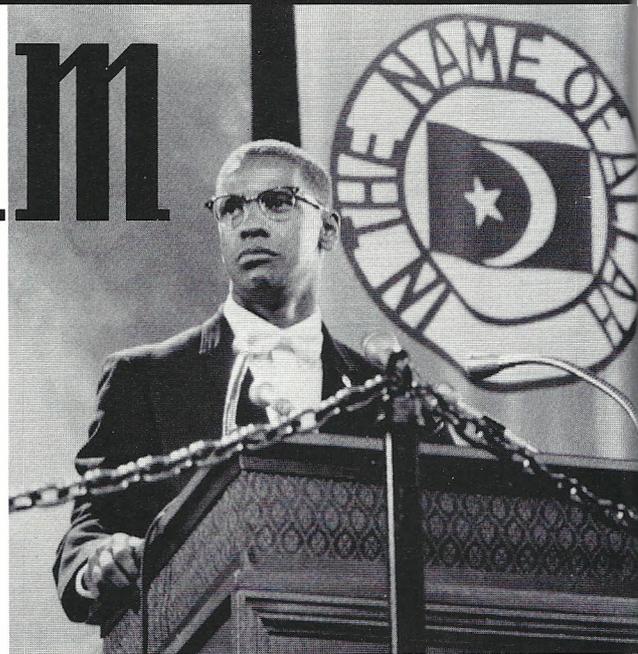
Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is the first film in which Hollywood has given epic treatment to an African-American leader. Not surprisingly, from its inception the film has generated controversy. Lee used racial considerations to win control of the material from projected white directors only to find himself immediately besieged by some African-Americans who felt he was inadequate to the task. As *Malcolm X* was in production it was surrounded by rumors that its content might provoke either white or black audiences (perhaps both) to violence. Further questions developed over its length and the conditions that forced Lee to go to prominent African-Americans for funds to complete the film on his own terms.

Given this buildup, when *Malcolm X* finally appeared on the nation's screens,

the general response was remarkably subdued. What had been expected to be at least as controversial as Oliver Stone's *JFK* turned out to be a relatively bland biopic. Lee had opted for making a kind of 'Malcolm for Beginners,' placing stress on themes of personal redemption in a cinematic style thought most appropriate for younger people and a crossover audience.

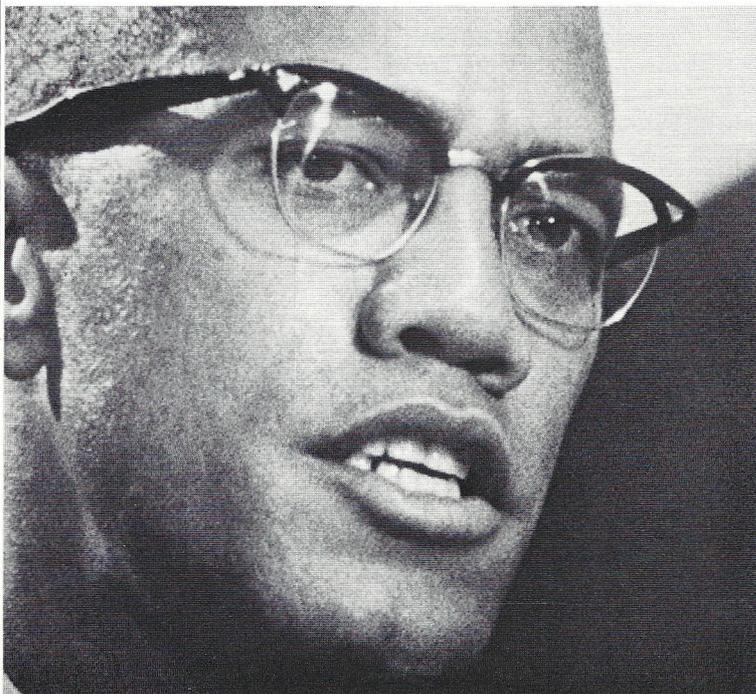
As is often the case with Lee's work, the subject he chose to address has proven more stimulating than his treatment of that subject. The commentators we have asked to evaluate *Malcolm X* have generally neither loved nor hated the film. Consequently, most of their essays drift away from the film per se to examine what has been omitted from Lee's portrait of Malcolm X and how the film reflects various cinematic and political problematics.

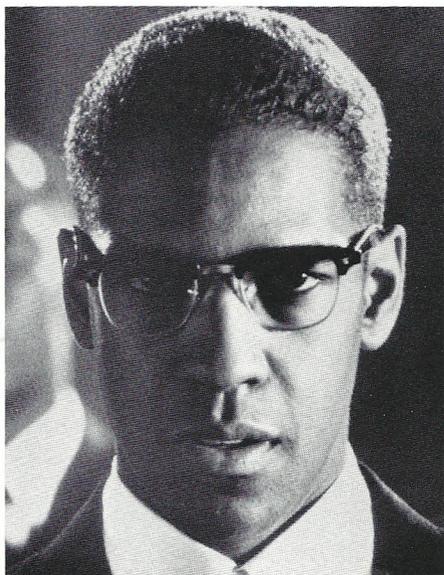
Despite this essentially negative or ambivalent response, our contributors show considerable respect for the fact that Lee was able to make such a film at all. *Malcolm X* is not the sort of person Hollywood bio-pics normally celebrate. Lee's renowned talent for publicity has definitely placed Malcolm X on the popular culture map. Yes, the 'X' on a



baseball cap does not mean very much in and of itself, but Spike Lee can rightfully claim major responsibility for the mushrooming of books about Malcolm X and the skyrocketing sales of Malcolm X's own writings. Pathfinder Press, the major publisher of Malcolm's speeches and interviews, for example, reports that its Malcolm titles which sold some ten thousand copies annually in the Seventies now sell more than a hundred thousand copies annually, a tenfold increase.

In some respects, Spike Lee is the victim of his own success. A few years ago to have Malcolm X presented on the screen as a positive role model would have been unthinkable, to have that film made with major studio financing a daydream. Hollywood's involvement, of course, always means a myriad of conditions and a phobia of offending one or another real or imagined publics. We can only speculate what restraints the studios will insist on when they inevitably turn their attentions to Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, or Arthur Ashe. That such films would even be contemplated, however, indicates how dramatically Spike Lee has expanded the cinematic horizons of Hollywood.





ADAPTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

The Transformation of Malcolm X

by John Locke

At the core of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, a story that draws from the breadth of twentieth century African-American experience. Like any narrative contemporaneous with a past era, the autobiography contains elements that most moviegoers today would find antiquated or irrelevant. From the outset, then, Lee's intent to tell history is at odds with the needs of a mass market, and the film's transformation of Malcolm X to meet contemporary expectations has significant consequences for historical accuracy and dramatic impact.

The story is fundamentally tripartite in structure: a man leads an aimless, self-destructive life; he experiences enlightenment; he is redeemed. Since enlightenment occurs nearer the middle of the story than the end, Malcolm's prison conversion to the Nation of Islam (NOI) becomes the fulcrum on which the story teeters. Before prison, he is Malcolm Little, humiliated beyond his comprehension by a racially prejudiced society; after prison, he becomes Malcolm X, with the prerogatives of indignation as the impetus to his claim on spiritual confession and political discourse.

For Malcolm's life to make sense in the film, his post-enlightenment anger must be evenly balanced—justified—by the cruelties of his earlier years. Indeed, his childhood is sufficiently traumatic—family harassed by the Ku Klux Klan, house

burned down by the racist Black Legion, father murdered, mother driven insane. The film covers these events in flashback, however, relegating them to memory. In the film's present, the adolescent Malcolm seems to be having a pretty good time, despite his involvement in various criminal activities, so the causality between past experience and present behavior, carefully explained in the autobiography, is unclear.

Putting it another way, the film distinguishes injuries inflicted by others and those which are self-imposed. One speaks to circumstance, the other to character. Lee depicts with clarity the horrors of racism that were beyond Malcolm's control, but he minimizes what Malcolm portrays in the autobiography as self-degradation, the acts of an animal. We know Malcolm 'conks' his hair 'to be white;' we see him acting comically hip in public. More serious issues of drug addiction and criminal behavior are glamorized. In the centerpiece drug scene, West Indian Archie introduces Malcolm to cocaine, but the feel is festive, not ominous. We never see Malcolm getting high in order to face his sordid occupations. Lee dampens the gravity of crime by playing the burglary racket for amusement, as when Malcolm perilously slides a ring from his sleeping victim's finger. When the gang members are sentenced for their crimes, Malcolm warms up the scene with chuckles and Shorty delivers the punchline when he mistakes concurrent for consecutive sentences. While entertaining, the light treatment of Malcolm's purported sins undermines his future role as a man returned from the brink.

In the autobiography, Malcolm's white girlfriend, Sophia, represents his repudiation of blackness through his desire for whiteness, a manifestation of self-hatred. That she was a status symbol proved the disease was endemic among his peers. In Malcolm's view, Sophia, too, acts from psychologically suspect motives, to the point of enduring his beatings. But excepting a brief exchange in which Malcolm expresses mistrust of her intentions, the film omits the complexities of their relationship, relieving Sophia of all but her color. Had the film been made in Malcolm's day, scenes of affection between an interracial couple would have shocked the audience. Today, with the taboo diminished, the mere depiction of the otherwise cordial relationship fails as a symbol of his debasement. The meaning of the scenes is cloudy.

Is the film demonstrating a problem that Malcolm will have to overcome; is it establishing his rebelliousness; or is it praising his natural egalitarianism in

order to subvert his salvation by the elitist NOI? (As a preacher, he disparages his past dating of white women, but whether that expresses some poignancy in addition to parroting NOI teachings is unclear.) As their relationship ends, Malcolm notes that the white judge inflated his burglary sentence to punish him for consorting with white women, completely shifting the import of the relationship from internal to external, from Malcolm's psyche to the injustice of the legal system.

The mystique of the gun weaves thematically through the film. The occasional punctuation of gunshots on the soundtrack—as when Malcolm and Shorty play cops and robbers—ring out Malcolm's destiny, elevating his death by gunshot from circumstance to inevitability. The theme counterpoints the tired association of Malcolm X with violence. We discover throughout the film that, despite Malcolm's reputation and defiant rhetoric, he was far more scholarly than violent. But while dispelling one myth, the film falls back on Hollywood stereotypes that cast the gun as a symbol of power and manhood. It begins with Malcolm's father who fires his pistol over the heads of the men who have torched his house, proclaiming, "I'm a man!" Malcolm receives his first gun in a solemn rite of passage from Archie. The gift of the weapon—Archie's first, as well—bestows the power accruing from Archie's trust and guidance. Later, Malcolm takes control of the burglary ring by bluffing his rival in Russian roulette. After the matter is resolved, and tension relieved, Sophia whispers to Malcolm, "I love you," further endowing the gun with the powers of masculinity. Rather than highlighting Malcolm's fall from civility, as the autobiography portrays this part of his life, these scenes serve the more conventional purpose of boosting the heroic stature of the role. It is not until the assassination itself that the veil of glamor falls from the gun and the prior ill-use of the theme becomes apparent. We see gunplay in all its ugliness as Malcolm is mutilated by the bullets tearing through his body.

The errant poetry of moonlit Klansmen on horseback and the other mythic images from Malcolm's childhood don't register his terror enough to establish a basis for the anger that will eventually burst forth, and what power they do contain is nullified by his guns-and-fun adolescence. For too long a period, he seems to have broken the continuum of adversity and put the past behind him. What remains is a kind of romantic victimization that protects Malcolm's image from the ravages of true degradation. We're told of his suffering but we don't have to

see it. Conked hair and a white girlfriend stand in as philosophical surrogates for true pain. Lee grants Malcolm 'star quality' when the drama requires he forgo his dignity, making him special when perhaps he should be pathetically ordinary.

Rather than challenging us to oppose suffering, the glamorization of Malcolm tempts us to covet his suffering as a means toward a fabled existence. To compensate for the dearth of provocations, the film later attempts to connect Malcolm's anger with his past by having him (and others) refer to the degradations caused by his drug abuse, his pimping (which we never see), or his thievery. At one point, Baines asks Malcolm to consider whether he has ever met any whites who weren't evil. Malcolm's apparently confirming thoughts are represented by quick flashbacks of white faces, some of whom, including Sophia, have been favorably portrayed. Such techniques retroactively make his youth seem more damaging than actually shown. Pain is reduced to a debating point.

In prison, with Malcolm's rebirth looming, the film attempts to make up for lost time by putting Malcolm through the hell of solitary confinement in a bare, unlit cell. His life instantly hits bottom where the perfunctory conversion to the NOI can raise him back up. At this point, Malcolm X replaces Malcolm Little and the NOI becomes his focus.

Despite its name, the Nation of Islam is an American original and borrows little from true Islam. Its beliefs encompass an invented history of the races and the goal of self-sufficiency for African-Americans including, most abstractly, a separate black nation. Malcolm's thorough embrace of the Muslim beliefs and prac-

tices constituted much of his preaching as a minister in the organization. As in the scenes prior to Malcolm's incarceration, Lee cautiously chooses what to associate with Malcolm. Most of the NOI's more curious concepts, which include the machinations of mad scientists in the shaping of history, and which Malcolm discusses freely in his autobiography, are omitted from Malcolm's dialog. Lee does acknowledge this aspect of the NOI, however, through the words of Baines and Elijah Muhammad, men who will later discredit themselves—and thus their views—by betraying Malcolm. For example, Baines explains to Malcolm that pork should not be eaten because the pig is "a filthy beast, part cat, part rat, and the rest is dog," even though it's Malcolm's observation in the autobiography. In general, the film burdens others with the peculiarities of the NOI and leaves Malcolm with the universal messages of pride and self-discipline, though in reality Malcolm covered the spectrum.

Those who know almost nothing about Malcolm X probably know that he described Caucasians as "white devils." The oft-used term was one of the most biting expressions in his oratory. More than invective, though, the idea that all whites are devils is fundamental to Muslim doctrine. It rationalizes the plight of African-Americans and justifies separatism. Since it became so strongly identified with Malcolm X, it's interesting to see how Lee employs the term. In fact, Malcolm says "white devils" only once in the film, in a narrated letter from prison that, in other ways, amusingly demonstrates Malcolm's naiveté as a fresh convert. Afterwards we hear the term only from other Muslims. Malcolm does refer to

"devils" a few times — "the devil's newspaper," "the devil's chickens" (coming home to roost)—but the closest he comes to using the term as a Muslim leader is in response to a reporter's question, "I've said white people are devils," the past tense leaving his current views ambiguous.

By separating the "white" from the "devil," Lee removes the racial philosophy

underpinning the NOI's concept of evil, further distancing Malcolm from the 'religion' of the NOI. It implies his weak conviction for the NOI's counter-prejudice, thus preparing him for the idealistic high ground in his later break with the organization. Taken with the downplay of Malcolm's (and the NOI's) disparagement of women and Jews by class, the overall softening of his rhetoric increases the chance that a contemporary film audience, drawn from diverse quarters, will find Malcolm appealing.

Malcolm X's departure from the NOI and its aftermath shaped the last year and a half of his life, a fittingly dramatic crisis and conclusion for the story. Superficially, Malcolm's confirmation of rumors about Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad's illegitimate children and Malcolm's tactless remarks about JFK's assassination caused the schism. But whether Malcolm 'quit' or was 'fired' is beside the point. The NOI had developed twin summits of power—Elijah Muhammad, the center of religious authority, and Malcolm X, the center of attention. Eventually one had to give way. The source of the fissure can be traced to Malcolm's mind, a division between his religious and political selves. He began as a preacher but his grass roots recruiting and lightning rod eloquence drew in many followers and the implied threat of a personal constituency. The division in his mind widened into a division in the organization. The threat might have remained benign had not his maturation as a leader within the NOI coincided with the most volatile years of the civil rights movement. While the NOI, and loyal Malcolm, eschewed political activity (calls for an unspecified black state notwithstanding), the eyes of black America increasingly looked to Washington for justice. Malcolm's affiliation with the NOI threatened to render him irrelevant as an African-American spokesman. The times pressured him to make the difficult choice between his religious and political inclinations. It was his personal dilemma; it becomes the film's critical issue. If *Malcolm X* is to claim contemporary relevance, it cannot relegate its hero to a historical sideshow.

Malcolm's second conversion, to true Islam, resulting from a pilgrimage to Mecca, pulls the issue in two directions at once. It affirms his identity as a religious figure; it also allows him to forge an identity apart from the NOI and seek a secular political role. From a religious perspective, a second conversion begs a peculiar question: If God reveals His truth a second time, was He lying the first? What 'was' the vision of Elijah Muhammad, animated and speaking, that brings Mal-



Delroy Lindo as West Indian Archie with Denzel Washington in *Malcolm X*



Al Freeman, Jr. as Elijah Muhammad counsels Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) in *Malcolm X*.

colm to his knees for the first time? No such supernaturalism lifts the *haji* above ritual. As shown, the principal change to Malcolm is a broadening of his outlook to recognize the fundamental equality of people. Now the seeds planted by the earlier presentation of Malcolm bear fruit. Though acknowledged as a full participant in the NOI, the film never fully dramatized his participation. Malcolm may have outgrown the absurdities of the NOI but the film never rooted him in them. He never preaches the NOI version of racial history, the theory of white devils, or any number of extreme views (although he does advocate separatism in one speech). Moreover, the film suppresses the wide differences between the NOI and true Islam. By softening the NOI and by further softening Malcolm's commitment to its philosophy, Lee 'politicizes' the second conversion by reducing it from a sweeping exchange of religions to a more palatable maturation of opinion, a maturation that moves him away from an exclusively religious perspective and towards the mainstream of the civil rights movement. The film allows Malcolm to be seen as having represented the good in the NOI, but an impractical good given the constraints; the separation from the NOI frees him to practice the good while absolving him of a bad he never seemed to believe in anyway.

When Malcolm left the NOI, he entered a political limbo between the organization he could not return to and the civil rights movement he could hardly step into after years of denouncing its proponents. His untimely death resolves his life ambiguously, leaving open forever the question of what he might ultimately have accomplished, and freeing the film to define his potential.

The assassination itself blunts the

drama of the conclusion. That Malcolm was murdered by black men is anticlimactic to his movement toward a higher political consciousness. He had been a soldier on the battle lines of race but in the end was killed by his own kind. His demise fails as an opportunity to validate his threat to entrenched white power, his longstanding pessimism toward racial relations, or his status as spokesman for the race. Lee seems to recognize this because he takes a number of steps to invite the possibility that (white) agents of the government sponsored the assassination. A pair of CIA agents trail him in Egypt; we see images of rolling tape recorders, a 'bug' in a lamp shade, FBI agents listening to his phone calls; Malcolm himself blames "larger forces" for the firebombing of his house, after first blaming the Muslims; he speaks of, but never specifies, a harassment beyond the NOI's capabilities. None of these facts prove the authorities had Malcolm killed but the implication further raises his viability as a civil rights leader—it sanctions him with the government's fear; it makes him look too dangerous to live.

The autobiography chronicles a series of transformations to the character of Malcolm X but, in true self-reflexive literary fashion, is itself another transformation, an attempt to redefine the past to justify a current posture. Bruce Perry's well-researched recent biography, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, assembles a more complete account of his life. It becomes clear from this version that the autobiography is part religious testament (to the virtues of the Muslim life) and part political tract (speaking out as an African-American Everyman), while its historical aspects have been transmuted for the purposes of the broader agenda.

Lee's *Malcolm X* does no better as history than the autobiography, but refines the book's agenda for a modern audience needing contemporary relevance and streamlined heroes. The Malcolm X of the film is less self-conscious, less square, more romantic, less dogmatic, and less divisive than the autobiographical Malcolm X. Near the end of the film, American and South African schoolchildren jump up from their desks to cry, "I am Malcolm X!" and we know they speak of the latter ecumenical man and not the Muslim separatist who came before. The film has forgiven and forgotten the hostile rhetoric of Malcolm's past as his America would not.

Then the film goes on to suggest a new transformation. As Malcolm's visit to the deteriorated, once proud Archie hinted at what an unrepentant Malcolm would have become, so does the appearance of Nelson Mandela, perhaps the world's most respected black leader, propose what Malcolm would have become had he lived to this day. Through the conceit of giving Mandela Malcolm's words rather than letting him speak his own, Mandela becomes the film's living embodiment of Malcolm X, a last-ditch effort to rescue Malcolm from history.

MALCOLM AS MESSIAH:

Cultural Myth vs. Historical Reality in *Malcolm X*

by Manning Marable

In a racist society, the most profound question which can be raised by the oppressed is the issue of identity. 'Who am I, and how can I act on behalf of myself?' It is this quest for critical self-consciousness which explains, in part, the continuing fascination by younger African-Americans with the charismatic and controversial figure of Malcolm X. According to a November 1992 *Newsweek* poll conducted by the Gallup Organization, fifty-seven percent of all African-Americans polled agreed with the statement that Malcolm X should be considered "a hero for black Americans today." Malcolm X's greatest popularity was found among African-Americans between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four, with eighty-four percent of those polled agreeing with the statement. When asked the reasons for Malcolm's popularity, blacks eschewed complex ideological explanations or theoretical excursions

into the history of black nationalism. Eighty-four percent replied that Malcolm X stood for "blacks helping one another;" eighty-two percent responded that the black leader symbolized a "strong black male," with another seventy-four percent indicating that he represented "black self-discipline." With the vast social destruction of our central cities today, with twenty-three percent of all African-American males between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine currently in prison, on probation, parole, or awaiting a trial, Malcolm X personifies the ability of an individual to overcome the worst circumstances to achieve personal integrity and leadership.

It is in this larger social context that Spike Lee's magnificent yet profoundly flawed film *Malcolm X* must be understood. The massive political and financial controversies in making the film have been well-documented. From the beginning, Lee planned a synthesis of recent black social history with the sweeping cinematic style of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. Warner Bros. had agreed to finance a two hour fifteen minute film at a price of \$20 million. Lee wanted an epic-sized, three hour plus film at a cost exceeding \$33 million. Going way over budget, the director appealed successfully to black celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Michael Jordan to finance his shortfall. Throughout the filming, black critics such as prominent playwright/poet Amiri Baraka charged that Lee was certainly the wrong person to be charged with the political responsibility for interpreting the life and times of a major black figure for a mass audience. Many black activists feared that Lee would focus too heavily on Malcolm X's pre-Nation of Islam career as 'Detroit Red,' street hustler and cocaine user, at the expense of a solid political analysis of Malcolm's ideological and personal evolution as a leader.

The final product of Lee's labors and shameless self-promotion, *Malcolm X*, is simultaneously a triumph of filmmaking, and a justification of Baraka's fears and frustrations. The film's major strengths begin with the truly outstanding performance of Denzel Washington as Malcolm X. Washington's detailed preparation for the role was quite remarkable—mimicking Malcolm's speaking style, even his tendency to place his right hand thoughtfully against his face, with two extended fingers. Malcolm's actual words are carefully woven into the dialog. Washington gives us a very emotional and powerful depiction of a street hustler who goes through a series of moral and spiritual conversion experiences.

Al Freeman, Jr. and Angela Bassett are also excellent in portraying Malcolm's mentor Elijah Muhammad, spiritual godfather of the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz, respectively. Freeman successfully portrays the actual autocratic style of the Black Muslim patriarch, illustrating his paternalistic compassion and his private hypocrisy. Bassett's role is decisive in providing the story with a central love interest which shows that a strong black woman was able to open

The filmmaker's goal was to create a cultural icon, but the black community does not need myths. It desperately requires practical solutions to its pressing problems.

Malcolm's innocent eyes to the truth which surrounded him. The film manages to show the enormous accomplishments of the black nationalist Nation of Islam—pulling thousands of drug dealers, prostitutes, and criminals off the streets, providing moral guidance and self-respect, and giving people denied opportunity a belief in themselves as capable and productive members of society. The core ideology of the Nation—the 'whites are devils' thesis—was always secondary to its constructive and positive contributions toward black working class and low income people.

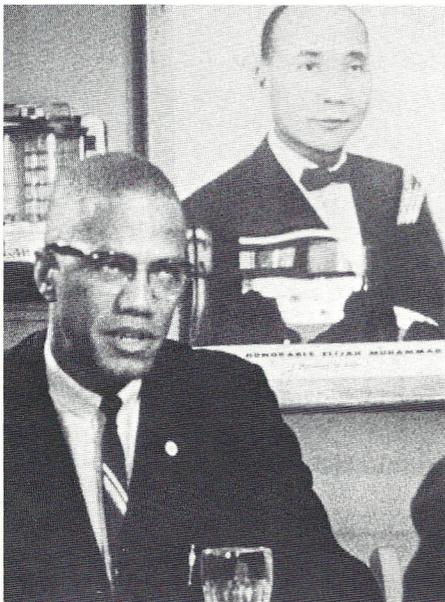
But the film also falls far short in many significant ways. Lee would have us believe that the Federal Bureau of Investigation began to monitor Malcolm's political activities sometime during his final, chaotic months of travel, reflection, and political struggle. Actually, the FBI began its systematic surveillance of Malcolm X more than ten years earlier, long before he had become a national figure. Malcolm's telephone was wiretapped illegally; his mail was monitored; his movements were carefully charted and followed. The New York City police placed double agents, including Malcolm's own bodyguard,

inside the Nation of Islam. The FBI also attempted to recruit Malcolm himself to betray Elijah Muhammad's organization by the late 1950s, years prior to the eventual split. Scholars have known for years about all of this police state style surveillance and illegal disruption by authorities. Why does Lee treat this as a minor episode, leaving viewers with the distinct impression that the FBI was at best peripheral to Malcolm's assassination? The wiretapping scenes in the film's final minutes should have begun before the movie was more than halfway finished. Most of the assaults aimed against Malcolm X could have been planned by the FBI or other governmental authorities, and loyalists to Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslims could have easily been manipulated to carry out the state's hatred and fear of the black nationalist leader.

Lee claims to have conducted extensive research in the construction of his screenplay; the film indicates otherwise. The storyline is essentially an adaptation of Alex Haley's classic text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The strengths of Haley's work are its powerful narrative, the moving descriptions of Malcolm's profound epiphanies, the faithful reconstruction of Malcolm's voice, his ambiguities, and intensely attractive human personality. Many of these elements are apparent in Lee's approach. But there are deep problems within *The Autobiography* which Lee failed to comprehend. The book is a narrative biography, related piecemeal fashion from Malcolm to Alex Haley over a period of several years. Most of the interviews were given to Haley in the early 1960s, well before Malcolm X had become disillusioned with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Throughout this time, Malcolm was a bitter critic of Martin Luther King, Jr., his political philosophy of nonviolence, and the civil rights establishment. Few interviews were incorporated into *The Autobiography* which reflected Malcolm's experiences after March 1964, when his entire political ideology had become radicalized.

The Autobiography and Lee's film, for example, suggest that it was Malcolm's 1964 *hajj* to Mecca which opened his eyes to the fundamental humanity of all people beyond the limitations of race, and that this final epiphany via the universalism of Islam was the basis of Malcolm's newfound tolerance and cooperative spirit. No one doubts that Malcolm's journey to Mecca and throughout the Middle East had a profound impact upon his worldview and political behavior. But I would suggest that the ideological limitations of both Haley and Lee keep their interpretations of Malcolm located on safe, religious

grounds rather than on the more dangerous terrain of race and class struggle. Haley was a longtime Republican, and a twenty year veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard. Lee is primarily a product of the post-civil rights era black middle class, who never directly participated in the massive black protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Both Lee and Haley ignore the long history of African-American nationalism in the U.S., preferring to see Malcolm as a 'reaction' to white



Malcolm X is interviewed before a portrait of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

racism and prejudice, rather than as the product of a long and rich protest tradition.

Lee also consulted Betty Shabazz and some of Malcolm's family members, friends, and former associates. But his approach to Malcolm was the construction of a mythic hero figure, not an actual political leader who made mistakes, assessed his errors, and went in new directions. The battle between Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm is shown as grounded in personalities, rather than in differences stemming from ideology and politics. Elijah Muhammad's sexual misadventures and Malcolm's 'silencing' for his "Chickens Coming Home to Roost" remarks following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy are the principal reasons given for the rupture within the Nation of Islam.

To be sure, Malcolm was personally disillusioned with the private greed and public hypocrisy of the core leaders within the black nationalist formation, but Malcolm had been moving away from the Nation's focus on spiritual issues for many years. Throughout 1960-63, Malcolm X frequently spoke at hundreds of

public forums on public issues, the civil rights movement and even foreign-policy—something completely alien to Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad's brand of black nationalism sought solutions to the black community's problems from within, focusing largely on questions of business development, personal hygiene, and socially conservative behavior. Malcolm's vision was always fixed on the larger world. It was not sufficient to save souls if one could not challenge social injustice.

Another serious weakness in Lee's film is the perspective which asserts that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were inherently at odds over philosophies, strategies, and tactics in achieving freedom for African-Americans. Viewers obtain the distinct impression that King was an accommodating leader, seeking to reconcile black demands within the framework of white power and privilege. Nothing could be further from the truth. Such an approach ignores the fact that King broke with the Johnson Administration over the Vietnam War, embraced a "Poor People's March" against poverty and hunger in Washington, D.C. in 1968, and advocated a radical restructuring of America's economic system. Simply because Martin failed to match Malcolm X's fiery language and style, or refused to depart from nonviolence as a means of public protest and civil disobedience, doesn't make him an 'Uncle Tom.' In *Martin & Malcolm & America*, noted African-American theologian James Cone observed that these two gifted, charismatic figures were complementary: "They were like two soldiers fighting their enemies from different angles of vision, each pointing out the others blind spots and correcting the other's errors. Each needed each other, for they represented—and continue to represent—the 'yin and yang' deep in the soul of black America."

Lee's *Malcolm X* is an excellent introduction to this magnificent and articulate black spokesperson for liberation, but it is also seriously limited in terms of critical interpretation. The filmmaker's goal was to create a cultural icon, but the black community does not need myths. It desperately requires practical solutions to its pressing problems. Malcolm's feet were always firmly planted on the ground, and he would be the first to reject any notions that his legacy should be praised in a series of baseball caps, T-shirts, and wall posters. The creation of charismatic, cultural messiahs may be attractive to a middle class artist like Lee, but it represents a political perspective grounded in conspiratorial theories, social isolation, and theoretical confusion. If African-Americans conclude that only the genius of a messiah

can elevate the masses of oppressed people to the level of activism, no social protest is possible. If the mantle of leadership is elevated at too great a distance from the people, few will have the courage to reach toward that goal. Cone reminds us: "Thus, it is important to emphasize that Martin and Malcolm, despite the excessive adoration their followers often bestow upon them, were not messiahs. They show us what ordinary people can accomplish through intelligence and sincere commitment to the cause of justice and freedom. There is no need to look for messiahs to save the poor. Human beings can and must do it themselves."

To really honor Malcolm X is to extend his political and ideological search into the struggles of inequality, racism, and economic oppression which define black liberation today. Black identity and personal dignity require something more than cultural manipulation of symbols without critical content.

SPIKE LEE PRESENTS MALCOLM X:

The New Black Nationalism

by Jacquie Jones

Many of Spike Lee's usual critics were quick to cast aspersions on him and even the notion (never mind the film) of him attempting to interpret the life and legacy of Malcolm X, the undisputed deity of black nationalism. What could Lee—a thirtysomething, middle class millionaire, third generation college graduate—know about the black struggle for justice in the America of the Sixties? What does Lee know about personal integrity and radical, fundamental change, societal or otherwise? Spike Lee didn't even know Malcolm, many charged. He was in grade school, for God's sake, when the shining black prince met his untimely, tragic, fratricidal end in the Audubon Ballroom in New York City in 1965.

Following the release of the film—Lee's epic, three hour and twenty-one minute *Malcolm X*—his critics remained steadfast. There was no social context, they held forth. Lee spent too much time with irrelevant choreography and his own character in the film and too little with the complexity of the man, the machinations of the moment. And, for many, the film was just not angry enough.

These critics, I think, are suffering from an elemental delusion with regards to Hollywood and its capabilities and some pretty off-base assumptions about contemporary African-American popular culture, in which the cinema is the most coveted vehicle. The charge of Hollywood has never been to produce functional political documents. And were the point of Lee's sixth feature film to capture faithfully the meaning and the resilient spirit of Malcolm in a manner that would satisfy the needs of every person of African descent in the United States, it would have remained as unmade as it has been for the past two decades.

Instead, *Malcolm X* culminates loyally the tide of new Black Nationalism that is as American as the Afrocentrism to which it lays claim. A few years ago, Nelson

sketchy and inconsequential.

The unfortunate fact of the matter is that popular culture, African-American or otherwise, tends to be shallow. I know this because otherwise Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* would have made more money than *Home Alone 2* and no one would care if Elvis were dead or not. Instead, it provides common identities and tangible links, primarily for young people, to universes beyond the family, the neighborhood, or the classroom. It is a system comprised of symbols, not knowledge.

Yet, the fact that X is the symbol of the day is not without critical meaning for African-Americans. Malcolm X has always signified something singular, though often unspoken, for black people, something that cannot be expressed by any other figure in our history: the confirma-

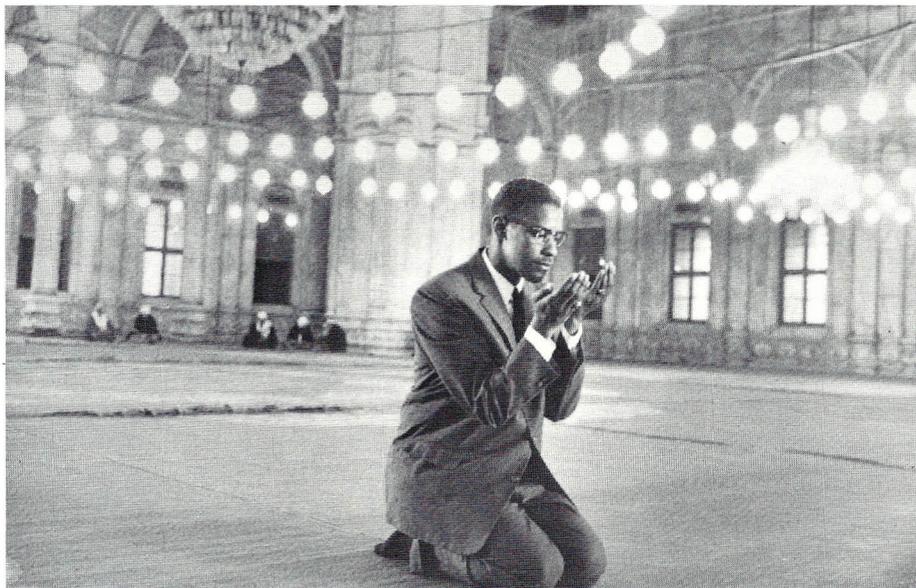
It also happens to be a rather well-known character study, surprisingly light on idolatry. And, most importantly, it does something that is rarely done well, and even then most often in fictions like Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: it details the tragic and profound effects of racism on the construction of the African-American self-image, and the equally unfortunate repercussions the resulting absence of self-esteem can have on society as a whole. Not in the abstract way that we understand that slavery has a correlation to black on black violence, but in the precise way the experience of every African-American has been shaped in some way by a school system, a social service network, a government, and a media that teaches black children self-hate.

The most nuanced and painful scenes in *Malcolm X* are those that recount Malcolm's conversion to Islam, his submission to the will of Allah, his liberation from ignorance and power. Though the years that followed, those years in which Malcolm X became the 'fiery' mouthpiece for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, are often characterized as angry and full of rage, the film paints a portrait of Malcolm at that time as a man at peace, his agitated rhetoric expressing nothing more than a clear vision of how black people have been duped by the American Dream.

A substantial portion of the film focuses on the early years in Malcolm's life (as did a substantial portion of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with Haley, on which the film is partly based), the famous outlaw, hair-frying, white woman-loving, drug-using, free-for-all days, from which Malcolm drew so heavily in his calls for black people to rehabilitate themselves, using himself as the definitive example. But, throughout the sometimes comical, carefully stylized scenes of Malcolm's loose-living days are the threads that make the conversion seem imminent.

An early scene stays with me: Malcolm reclines in bed while his white lover, Sophia, attempts to feed him breakfast. His eyes narrow and he berates her, accusing her of wanting to destroy him. It is as though he realizes that his desire for Sophia, for her whiteness, is destroying him, but, without any means of understanding why, he can only lash out.

It is in these moments that Denzel Washington brings the most to his phenomenal portrayal of Malcolm X, these moments of change and growth. As an actor, Washington is known for his immersion techniques, studying the character, 'becoming' the character he is called



Malcolm (Denzel Washington) prays to Allah during his *hajj* to Mecca in *Malcolm X*.

George, writing in *The Village Voice*, described the atmosphere from which hip-hop flows as "a post-civil rights, ultra-urban, unromantic, hyperrealistic, neona-tionalistic, antiassimilationist, aggressive Afro-centric impulse." It is, in fact, these forces that have resurrected and enshrined Malcolm X in his current incarnation, which is better characterized by stylized separatism than any sort of political depth.

The audience that Lee serves, the masses that have iconized Lee himself, are not, as his critics would argue, the white media but Lee's contemporaries who, feeling a bit beguiled by the civil rights hype, have rejected integration wholesale, if only in posture. Inasmuch, Africa is important primarily because it is not Europe, and Malcolm, because he is not Martin Luther King, Jr. From there, the details get

tion that we are a people—beautiful, tenacious, and proud though we may be—that has been dogged and victimized in the most insidious form of slavery known. We have been taught to hate ourselves. The shackles that we languish in today are prisons of the mind. And only by accepting this truth to be self-evident can we be empowered. All the desegregation in the world, as we have painfully seen, cannot save us. That this man is the subject of the first big budget Hollywood movie on the life of a black historical figure is, in and of itself, nothing short of a coup.

Still, it will be said, repeatedly no doubt, that *Malcolm X* is Spike Lee's most conventional film to date, that it strays very little, if at all, from the formulas of epic or Hollywood biography as we, the moviegoing audience, have come to understand those genres. And this is true.

upon to play. In no other film role has he been more successful.

For Lee, it is in his treatment of Malcolm's three romantic interests that he shows the most growth as a director. In particular, he resists the temptation to formulate a sweeping love story for Malcolm and his wife, Betty Shabazz. Instead he creates a resonant partnership marked by an extraordinary respect, warmth, and friendship.

Any review of this film would be remiss were it not to mention the remarkable performance turned in by veteran actor Al Freeman, Jr. (Chairman of the Drama Department at Howard University) as Elijah Muhammad. The Minister is beautifully sketched with the delicate complexity and pain one would have expected from an erstwhile apostle.

The problems with *Malcolm X* are obviously and sometimes excruciatingly vintage Spike. For all of the contrived meanings he would have for parading a pan-African chorus of schoolchildren in front of the camera only to announce, "I am Malcolm X," and a rather bizarre cameo by Nelson Mandela, the fact is that Lee still does not know how to end a picture. But gratefully, he has learned to draw a picture and tell a story. What Spike Lee has finally been able to do in *Malcolm X* is to interject into our cultural history a hypnotic character, flawed and gracious, who is capable of world-altering change.

MALCOLM AFTER MECCA:

Pan-Africanism and the OAAU

by Herb Boyd

In depicting the various incarnations of Malcolm X, from his beginning as Malcolm Little to El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, Spike Lee overlooked that brief but relevant phase of Malcolm's life when he was anointed "Omowale," a name given to him by the Nigerian Muslim Students' Society in 1964. It's a Yoruba term for "the son who has come home."

To a large degree Omowale epitomizes Malcolm's full identification with his African heritage and the cause of African independence. Lee had several opportunities to highlight this phase of Malcolm's development, particularly during the latter segments of the film when Malcolm is struggling to structure the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU).

While Lee went to considerable expense to recreate Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm is seen on African soil

only through the short snippets of footage from the point of view of presumably white CIA agents in Cairo. We are not provided even a still photo of Malcolm with Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser, or any of the other African leaders he met during two extensive trips across the continent. Missing are his contacts with such revolutionary leaders as President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, President Sekou Toure of

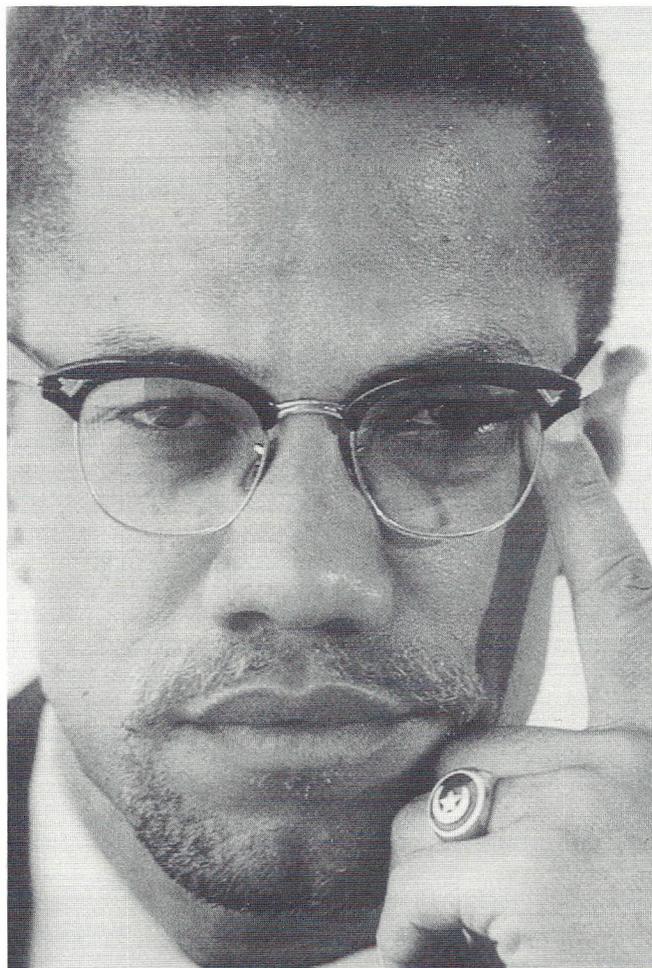
have been to capture his appearance at the Head of States Summit Meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Cairo in July 1964. Malcolm did not address the summit, as some books have mistakenly claimed, but he was a sort of roving ambassador and eventually had private sessions with all the significant representatives. Malcolm, in concert with several of his associates, including Dr. John Henrik Clarke, had already formulated ideas about structuring an organiza-

tion based along the guidelines of the OAU. In the memorandum presented to the OAU he expressed some of the pertinent points he had discussed earlier with Dr. Nkrumah, especially the necessity of merging the African liberation movements with the struggle for human rights by black Americans. Like the media of the day, however, Lee fails to observe this unique gathering in which the OAU in its final resolution promised to support the efforts of Malcolm's fledgling OAAU.

Toward the end of the film, just before he is to deliver his final speech, Malcolm appears extremely stressed and upset. In a rare lapse of composure he berates his aides for not having completed the "document." Most film viewers are unaware that Malcolm is referring to a revision of the OAAU's constitution

with special emendations on the role of women in the organization. Clearly, explication of this scene would have been doubly meaningful in providing a glimpse of the evolution of the organization and Malcolm's own changing attitudes about male chauvinism.

While Lee found time to show the assassins cleaning their guns and plotting their moves, he did not show one scene with Malcolm conferring with his associates about the form and content of the OAAU. Such a moment would have been pregnant with possibilities, allowing viewers to see how Malcolm functioned in meetings as well as some of the stated

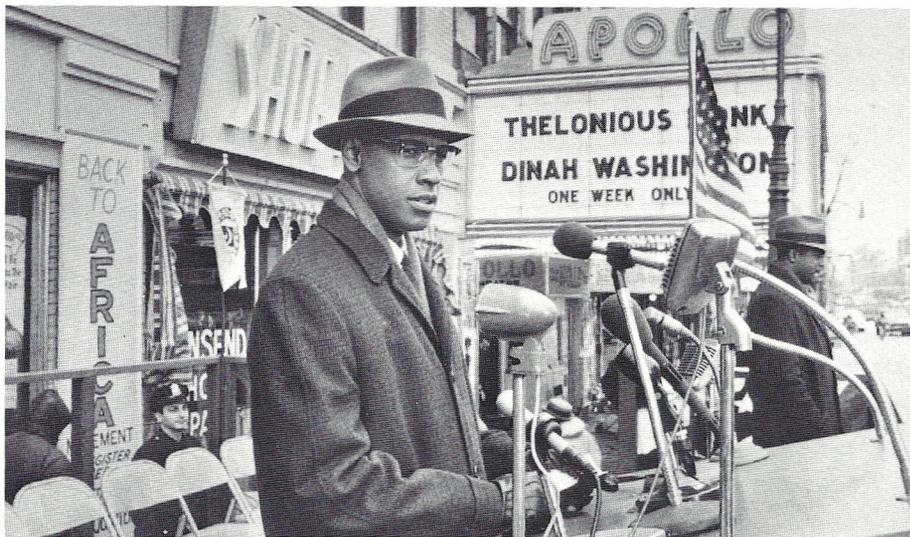


Malcolm X in a characteristic pose

Guinea, Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

In his autobiography Malcolm mentions all of these meetings and elaborates fondly on his session with Dr. Nkrumah. They discussed the unity of Africans and all peoples of African descent. A cameo of this meeting in the film would have been enormously rewarding. It would have dramatized the connection between Africa and Africans in the Diaspora, and Malcolm's increasing potential as a world leader.

An even better opportunity to showcase Malcolm's internationalism would



Malcolm (Denzel Washington) speaking in front of the Apollo Theater in Harlem on behalf of the Nation of Islam in *Malcolm X*.

objectives of the OAAU.

An example of such a meeting is described by Earl Grant, one of the trusted aides depicted in the film, in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (Africa World Press, 1990). He writes about a business meeting called for Saturday night, February 20th, 1965. A dozen people were present. Although Malcolm was very tired and restless, he said it was important that the meeting take place. He wanted a complete reorganization of the OAAU. He felt it had not been able to take advantage of the attention drawn to it by his activities and he wanted women to be given a more clearly defined organizational role.

In several ways the OAAU and its aims are Malcolm's last will and testament. A culmination of his ideas, it provides a blueprint of where he had been and where he was going. His cultural ideas are of particular interest. He wrote: "Our cultural revolution must be the means of bringing us closer to our African brothers and sisters. It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. Afro-Americans will be free to create only when they depend on the Afro-American community. Afro-American artists must realize that they depend on the Afro-American for inspiration. We must work toward the establishment of a cultural center in Harlem which will include people of all ages, and will conduct workshops in all of the arts, such as film, creative writing, painting, theater, music, Afro-American history, etc." One would think Lee would be anxious to present these views.

Less surprisingly, Lee has omitted any indications of Malcolm's ever evolving prosocialist tendencies, particularly his concern for geopolitical developments in the Caribbean and Latin America. Certainly there are several critics who Lee can

never satisfy, but for those of us who merely want the complete Malcolm, that which includes the African phase symbolized by Omowale, Lee's choices are disappointing. A filmmaker, particularly a maker of a biopic, must be judged on what facets of a life he or she deems important to emphasize or deemphasize.

Nowhere in the film is Malcolm's anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist position stressed. Had this political attitude been properly revealed, perhaps it would have discouraged some of the black neoconservatives—beginning with Justice Clarence Thomas—from tarring Malcolm with their reactionary brush. Malcolm was certainly a firm believer in self-help and he excoriated liberals, but his uncompromising stand against the American system of exploitation and oppression, his revolutionary black nationalism that insisted on confronting white supremacy and violence with a militant defense, distinguished him from today's black conservatives who are convinced that Malcolm would be in their camp.

Lee's *Malcolm X* is a powerful film. Had he chosen to round off the great man's life, however, making it resonate with the conviction and integrity of his international phase, the film would be even more remarkable, educational, and inspirational. Rarely are African-American artists given an opportunity to connect in such a massive way with our African sisters and brothers. This is what the last days of Malcolm's life were all about—you might say he had devolved back to the beginning, recognizing the importance of Africa, like his Garveyite father. Lee and his associates should have paid a little more attention to Malcolm's admonition: "You say you have left nothing in Africa, why, you left your mind in Africa."

POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT:

The Americanization and Death of Malcolm X

by Todd Boyd

Photographs of both martyred Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. have long adorned the walls of ghetto and working class African-American homes. Eventually, I came to regard this standard triptych as emblematic of both the strengths and weaknesses of Sixties liberalism. The image of Malcolm X was conspicuous by its absence; the marginal status of this increasingly influential leader remained a constant for many years.

The recent release of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* makes amends for the previous neglect of Malcolm's revolutionary message, although Lee's film, and the media circus which accompanied it, proved problematic. It might be said that Malcolm X was resurrected only to die a second death induced by cultural and media prostitution.

Lee's film attempts to pay Malcolm the same kind of respect that was once reserved for King and the Kennedys. In essence, *Malcolm X* endeavors to refurbish Malcolm's memory and legitimize him as a true American. As the film opens, we are shown an enlarged image of the American flag—a not so subtle allusion to *Patton*—and listen to Denzel Washington's uncanny impersonation of Malcolm's oratory. Eventually, the edges of this enormous flag begin to burn slowly, ultimately giving way to the by now familiar images of Rodney King's brutal beating. When the sequence ends, the flag has burned into the likeness of an 'X.'

This red, white, and blue 'X' foreshadows the film's ingenious narrative strategy: a protracted apologia for Malcolm's inclusion within the pantheon of American political heroes. This 'Americanization' of Malcolm X is achieved by depicting his political and spiritual growth in a manner that resembles a cinematic equivalent of the Stations of the Cross. In the film's early sequences, the character of Malcolm Little is presented with a certain amount of ironic sympathy. Although this pre-political Malcolm strays from the path of righteousness, he is shown as con-

tinually evolving. Malcolm's transformation from street hustler to respected political leader is conveyed through a series of visual and aural motifs. Lee's camera captures Malcolm's changing tastes in clothing, from the gaudy zoot suits favored by the 'country' Malcolm to the more dignified apparel he dons after meeting his West Indian friend, Archie. In the film's later sequences, another crucial epiphany is signaled by the appearance of Malcolm's newly grown beard: this seemingly inconsequential change heralds the protagonist's break with the Nation of Islam and the formation of a new stage in his political and religious evolution. Finally, Malcolm's journey from thief to martyr is evoked with the inclusion of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" on the soundtrack as the hero hurries to New York's Audubon Ballroom, the site of his tragic assassination.

It soon becomes apparent that Lee regards Malcolm's prison conversion crisis as the film's dramatic apogee, the central event in the life of a saint. Lee's effec-

define the film's collaboration with this process of commodification as anything other than truly 'American.'

The resurfacing of Malcolm X as an icon of political resistance can be traced to the growing importance of hip-hop and rap subcultures. When rappers became weary of repetitive 'dick grabbing,' they rediscovered Black Nationalist politics. Since rap's 'hard core' has always been an arena of male angst, Ossie Davis's eulogy extolling Malcolm's exemplary 'black manhood' satisfied rap's hunger for powerful role models.

Throughout rap's brief history, Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Ice Cube, among others, repeatedly invoked Malcolm and his image in order to reinforce their opposition to American racism. While the Reagan Administration put racial tensions on the back burner and elevated Clarence Thomas and Thomas Sowell to positions of power, Malcolm's rage found contemporary expressions in the impassioned rants of African-American rap artists. Ice Cube's third album, *The Predator*, offered an informed response to the rebellion of April 1992 that followed in the wake of the disastrous Rodney King verdict. Ice Cube's chant, "April 29th/More Power to the People/And we might just see a sequel," contains tangible echoes of Malcolm's famous "Message to the Grassroots" speech. In that speech, Malcolm proclaimed that "revolution was based on land," and concluded that bloodshed was the only means for realizing revolutionary goals. Although the 'revolution' of South Central Los Angeles did not reward the insurgents with any land, it did reflect Malcolm's insistence that America's violent racial past would continue to insure a present of violent retribution.

The current black cultural scene, with its ritual invocation of the image of Malcolm X, contrasts sharply with the black cultural agenda of the Sixties. At that time, 'cultural production' and political struggle were seen as indivisible. H. Rap Brown described the militant skirmishes of this period as a "dress rehearsal" for an imminent revolution and the cultural wing of the Black Power movement, whether embodied by the Marxist-inspired dramaturgy of Amiri Baraka or the musical commentary of Gil Scott-Heron, was seen as inextricable from the struggle against white supremacy. Unfortunately, in recent years, popular culture has remained the black community's only source of political empowerment.

Although Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* hopes to give Malcolm's legacy a prominent place within America's historical memory, the film suffers from a common tendency to recycle history into pure spectacle

empty of meaningful political or intellectual content. Lee refuses to address Malcolm's transformation from an archetypal 'race man' to an internationalist and pan-Africanist. The film merely honors Malcolm as a humanist, and this incomplete portrait of a complex man sets the stage for his enshrinement as a true 'American.' While the barrage of television advertisements for the film reminded viewers of Malcolm's aphorism—"We didn't land on Plymouth rock, Plymouth rock landed on us!"—it is now evident that Malcolm X has landed somewhere between Madison Avenue and Hollywood.

MALE HEROES AND FEMALE SEX OBJECTS:

Sexism in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

by Bell Hooks

In all Spike Lee's films, he is at his creative best in scenes highlighting black males. Portraying black masculinity through a spectrum of complex and diverse portraits, he does not allow audiences to hold a stereotypical image. For that reason alone, I imagined *Malcolm X* would be a major work, one of his best films. At last, I thought, Spike's finally going to just do it—make a film that will allow him to focus almost exclusively on black men, since women were always at the periphery of Malcolm's life. Thinking that the film would not focus centrally on females, I was relieved. Like many females in Lee's audience, I have found his representation of women in general, and black women in particular, to be consistently stereotypical and one-dimensional.

Ironically, Nola Darling in *She's Gotta Have It* remains one of Lee's most compelling representations of black womanhood. Though a failed portrait of a liberated woman, Darling is infinitely more complex than any of the women who follow her in Lee's work. *She's Gotta Have It* showed an awareness on Lee's part that there has indeed been a Women's Liberation movement that converged with the so-called 'sexual revolution.' Nola Darling was not obsessed with conventional heterosexual politics. Throughout much of the film she seemed to be trying to forge a sexual practice that would meet her needs. This film shows that Lee is capable of thinking critically about representations of black women, even though he ends the film by placing Nola Darling in a misogyny-

Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* suffers from a common tendency to recycle history into pure spectacle empty of meaningful political or intellectual content.

tive use of voice-over gives the audience access to Malcolm's thoughts and doubts, while the Honorable Elijah Muhammad emerges as his savior, the man with the ability to purge him of dope-fiend pain.

Despite the ostensibly militant trappings of Malcolm's newfound theology, the film clearly embraces some of the most potent myths of American culture. Malcolm's ability to 'pull himself up by his own bootstraps' fits neatly into the ideology of upward mobility, and, paradoxically, Malcolm emerges as more 'American' than the elite Kennedys or the middle class, well-educated Martin Luther King, Jr. Given the ubiquitous 'X' on film posters, baseball caps, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia, it would be difficult to

nist, sexist framework that ultimately punishes her for daring to oppose sexist norms of female sexual behavior. Rape is the punishment that puts her back in her place. And it is this scene in the film that ruptures what began as a transgressive narrative and makes it humdrum, commonplace.

Just as Lee abandons Nola Darling, undermining the one representation of black womanhood that breaks new cinematic ground, from that moment on he apparently abandoned all desire to give viewing audiences new and different representations of black females. Lee's desire to reach a larger, mainstream audience may account for the shift in perspective. Once he moved out of the world of independent filmmaking into mainstream cinema, he was seeking to acquire an audience not necessarily interested in challenging, unfamiliar representations. No matter how daring his films, how transgressive their subject matter, to have a predictable success he provided viewers with stock images. Uncompromising in his commitment to create images of black males that challenge shallow perceptions and bring the issue of racism to the screen, he conforms to the status quo when it comes to images of females. Sexism is the familiar construction that links his films to all the other Hollywood dramas folks see. Just when the viewer might possibly be alienated by the radical take on issues in a Spike Lee film, some basic sexist nonsense will appear on the screen to entertain, to provide comic relief, to comfort audiences by letting them know that the normal way of doing things is not being fully challenged.

Certainly the female role that most conformed to this pattern was the character of Tina played by Rosie Perez in *Do the Right Thing*. She is the nagging, bitchified, seductive female who is great to bone (not to be taken seriously, mind you). No matter how bitchified she is, in the final analysis her man, played by Spike, has her under control. This same misogynist message is played out all the more graphically in *School Daze* where the collective humiliation of black females enhances black male bonding. Yet it is *Mo' Better Blues* that sets paradigms for black gender relations. Black females are neatly divided into two categories—ho' or mammy/madonna. The ho' is out for what she can get, using her pussy to seduce, conquer, and exploit the male. The mammy/madonna nurtures, forgives, provides unconditional love. Black men, mired in sexism and misogyny, tolerate the strong, 'bitchified,' tell-it-like-it-is black woman but also seek to escape her. In *Mo' Better Blues* the black woman who



Malcolm (Denzel Washington), accompanied by his wife, Betty (Angela Bassett), and their children, gives an airport press conference on his return from Mecca in *Malcolm X*.

gets her man in the end does so by surrendering her will to challenge and confront. She simply understands and accepts. It's a bleak picture. In the final analysis, mo' better is mo' bitter.

Jungle Fever plays out the same tired patterns, only the principal black woman character, Drew (Lonette McKee), is a combination of bitch/ho' and mammy/madonna. The film begins with scenes of lovemaking, where she is busy pleasuring her man. We see her later in the film cooking and cleaning. Even her job is mainly about looking good. Her most bitchified, 'intense' read of Flipper (Wesley Snipes) occurs when he comes to her workplace. As with all of Spike Lee's representations of black heterosexuality, men and women never really communicate. Portrayals of white female characters are equally stereotypical. They are sex objects, spoils in the war between white males and black males over which group will dominate the planet.

In *Jungle Fever* white and black women never meet, they exist in a world apart. This media construction is a fiction which belies the reality that the vast majority of working black women encounter white women daily on the job, encounters that are charged with tension, power struggles fueled by racism and sexism. These aspects of white and black female interactions are only hinted at in *Jungle Fever* in the one improvised scene where black women gather to discuss Drew's situation and their collective obsession with getting and keeping a man.

Within the cultural marketplace, *Jungle Fever* courted viewers by claiming to address the taboo subject of interracial sex and desire, highlighting black male interactions with white females. Despite the

shallowness of the film, this focus drew crowds. Overall, however, the film had nothing new or revelatory to share about race, gender, or desire. No doubt the crowd-drawing appeal of such material accounts for the fact that Spike Lee's cinematic reconstruction of Malcolm X's life begins with a sorry remake of *Jungle Fever*. Anyone who has studied Malcolm X's life and work knows that no one has considered his involvement with white women as the high point of his career as small time pimp and hustler. Yet it is this involvement that most captures Spike's imagination, so much so that almost half of the film focuses on Malcolm's relationship with a white woman named Sophia.

The young Malcolm X was sexist and misogynist, and, in fact, made a point of treating women badly. Yet Lee ignores the sexism that shaped and determined Malcolm's attitude towards women and makes it appear that his lust for Sophia is solely a response to racism, that having the white man's woman is a way to rebel and assert power. Like the younger Malcolm, the real-life Sophia was a hustler, not the portrait of an innocent little girl trapped in a woman's body which Lee gives viewers. It was disturbing to see Lee's version of Malcolm's life begin with and focus centrally on his lust for white female bodies, but it was even more disturbing that this relationship was portrayed as yet another example of 'jungle fever.' Spike Lee refuses to allow for the possibility that there could be meaningful affectional ties between a black man and a white woman which transcend the sexual. The film does not show that Malcolm maintained contact with Sophia long after their sexual relationship ended. In Lee's version, relationships between black men

and white women never transcend the sexual. Indeed, in Lee's cinematic world, every relationship between a black man and a woman, whether white or black, is mediated by his constant sexualization of the female.

Fictively recreating the relationship between Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz provided an opportunity for Spike Lee to bring to Hollywood cinema a different representation of black womanhood and black heterosexuality. Lee did not rise to the challenge. All his films show darker skinned men choosing lighter skinned black female partners. Malcolm X should have been different. By his choice as a fair-skinned black male of a darker skinned partner, Malcolm was disrupting a black politics of desire which reflected internalized racism. Rather than honoring through his representations the significance of this choice, Lee reinscribes the same color caste conventions he exploits in all his films. Though a madonna figure in *Malcolm X*, Shabazz is portrayed as an advocate of 'women's rights' challenging Malcolm's sexism and misogyny. This portrait falsely constructs an image of black womanhood that would not have been acceptable for female initiates in the Nation of Islam, who were taught not to be manipulative or seductive, to be obedient to male authority. Lee's fictive Shabazz seduces and traps. She 'reads' her man in the bitchified manner that is Lee's trademark representation of heterosexual black coupling. Even though the real-life Shabazz shared with her that she did not argue with Malcolm, no doubt because she was conforming to the Nation of Islam codes of behavior which were informed by sexist notions of appropriate female behavior, Lee's film portrays them as fighting. Indeed, the most intense scene in the film is their near violent argument. As with all good nanny/madonna figures, the fictional Shabazz fights with her man because she has his best interests at heart. This image is consistent with the way Spike Lee's films depict black marriage; couples are either fucking or fighting. Like other female characters in *Malcolm X*, Shabazz must be molded and shaped by Lee so that her character mirrors prevailing stereotypes. Lee's film conforms to racist/sexist iconography that depicts white women as innocent and therefore desirable and black woman as controlling-dominating therefore undesirable. Had Lee chosen to represent Shabazz as submissive, his film would have challenged Hollywood's stereotypical portrayal of black women as always domineering—or as always sexual.

One of the most serious gaps in Lee's fictive portrayal of Malcolm's life is the

fictive erasure of Malcolm's half sister (whom he referred to as his sister), Ella Little. She is not present in the film and their relationship is never discussed by other characters. A major influence in Malcolm's life, Ella, along with their brother, Reginald, converted him to Islam, helped educate him for critical consciousness. By not portraying Ella or referring to her influence, Spike creates a fictive world of black heterosexuality in which all interaction between black women and men is overdetermined by sexuality, always negotiated by lust and desire. Conveniently, this allows the film to reinscribe and perpetually affirm male domination of females, making it appear natural.

By not portraying Ella, Lee is able to create a film that does not break with Hollywood conventions and stereotypes. In Hollywood films the super-masculine hero is most often portrayed as a loner, an outlaw, a cultural orphan estranged from family and society. To have shown the bonds between Ella and Malcolm which were sustained throughout his life, Lee would have needed both to break with Hollywood representations of the male hero as well as provide an image of black womanhood never before imagined on the Hollywood screen. The character of Ella would have been a powerful, politically conscious black woman who could not be portrayed as a sex object. Lee's portraits of black women in *Malcolm X* mirror the usual stereotypes found in films by white directors. Ella was radical in her thinking about blackness, more of a leader than a follower. To represent her fictively, Lee would have had to disrupt the fiction that politics is a male realm, that the fight to end racism is really a struggle between white and black men.

It reveals much about the nature of sexism and misogyny that the erased, symbolically murdered figure of Ella is replaced by a fictional, older black male character, Baines, who initiates Malcolm into the political realm. The invention of this make-believe character allows Lee to fictively create a hierarchical world of male power that conforms to popular, black nationalist, sexist insistence that males are best taught by males. Scenes of black male homosocial bonding in the prison context reaffirm the patriarchal assumption that it is only the actions of men that matter. This creates a version of black political struggle where the actions of dedicated, powerful, black female activists are systematically devalued and erased. By writing Ella out of Malcolm's history, Spike Lee continues Hollywood's devaluation of black womanhood.

WHO WILL SPEAK FOR EL-HAJJ MALIK EL-SHABAZZ?:

Hagiography and a Missing Identity in *Malcolm X*

by Dan Georgakas

The hallmark of the traditional Hollywood biopic has been a refusal to deal with the most controversial aspects of the subject's life. Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is no exception. His hagiography is in the mode of the classic Hollywood biopics of Benito Juarez, Madame Curie, and Louis Pasteur, while his avoidance of Malcolm X's ultimate political views is comparable to the denial of Cole Porter's homosexuality in *Night and Day*.

Lee's editorial timidity is first evident in the way in which Malcolm Little's criminal career is depicted. His drug addiction is made episodic rather than chronic, and his pimping activities are barely alluded to. The one major crime shown on screen is offered as light comedy. This sanitizing diminishes the tremendous effort required by Malcolm Little to become Malcolm X.

More troubling, however, is the nearly blank accounting of Malcolm's political evolution after his trip to Mecca, the period in which he took the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Two eventful trips to Africa are entirely omitted. Viewers unfamiliar with Malcolm's life have no way of knowing he met with more than a dozen Arab and black African heads of state, many of whom had come to power through revolutionary movements and most of whom were socialists. These leaders counseled him to relate the African-American liberation struggle to pan-Africanism and other movements for cultural and national self-determination.

Rather than being shown as having increasingly important international contacts, Lee's post-Mecca Malcolm X is rendered as an isolated figure. He seems as politically adrift as claimed by Mike Wallace and Dan Rather in a 1992 CBS special. This view ignores the fact that Malcolm was creating a dynamic in which his participation in a new civil rights movement would be calculated to make state and federal authorities more amenable to dealing with Martin Luther King, Jr., as a lesser evil. Malcolm was also a classic autodidact who never stopped reading.

His studies were now carrying him into new ideological ground. Associates have stated he was greatly impressed by his reading of C. L. R. James, the Afro-Caribbean Marxist, and by "The Colonial War at Home," a May-June 1964 editorial in the socialist *Monthly Review*.

A striking scene in Lee's film occurs when the pre-Mecca Malcolm curtly turns away a white woman who indicates her sympathy for his views. Just how far he had traveled from that orientation and

another occasion, the SWP provided a translator when Malcolm was visited by French-speaking Africans. The long-term significance of this development is that even though many of his associates were wary of the SWP contact, Malcolm was willing to work openly with principled white allies, however radical their ideology.

Malcolm's major organizational effort post-Mecca was the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), a group barely alluded to in the film and not composed only of those who had followed Malcolm out of the Nation of Islam. Among black radicals Malcolm was involving in his new organization were Max Sanford of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and Conrad Lynn, the attorney who was representing hundreds of African-American draft resisters. The RAM connection was important for RAM already had influence in the Atlanta office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had worked closely with the Philadelphia NAACP, and had members who would later help form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. RAM's honorary leader was Robert Williams, who had first come to prominence in the late 1950s as an exponent of armed self-defense. After being framed on a kidnapping charge, Williams had taken asylum in Cuba and then China.

Political outreaching of this kind makes it obvious that Malcolm was positioning himself to play a major

role in the dissident movements of the 1960s. At the time he formed the OAAU, the antiwar movement and the New Left were still in their early stages, while the massive civil rights movement was just beginning to deal with the problems posed by urban rebellions. The potential impact of Malcolm X's direct participation within this constellation is unknowable, but the prospect was as ominous to the Establishment as it was exhilarating to rebels. J. Edgar Hoover was already in a frenzy to prevent the appearance of what he called "the Black Messiah." As various attempts on Malcolm's life were made, he

stated the actions were too sophisticated to simply be the work of the Nation of Islam. In this context, Lee's evocation of unidentified government wiretappers and ludicrous CIA agents in Egypt is almost demeaning.

At the conclusion of *Malcolm X*, black children stand by their school desks to proclaim, "I am Malcolm X." The camera then shows us Nelson Mandela standing by a blackboard in a teaching capacity. This is as close as Lee ever comes to indicating where Malcolm was heading politically and what the reactions of African-Americans should be. But Mandela is evoked as a celebrity, a cultural icon not unlike a pop star. In reality, of course, Mandela is an African socialist who has led a mostly black nationalist movement with socialist and liberal allies. Among his strategies has been the use of the United Nations and world public opinion to advance his cause. Such a political perspective is never posed in *Malcolm X*. For those African-Americans who want to identify with Malcolm, there is only the story of how Malcolm Little became Malcolm X. Withheld is how Malcolm X was defining El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. That new identity does not fit neatly on a baseball cap, and it does not play well in Peoria.

BLACK SUPREMACY AND ANTI-SEMITISM:

Religion in *Malcolm X*

by Julius Lester

Malcolm X opens with the now famous video of the Los Angeles police beating Rodney King. Imposed over this is an American flag which starts to burn until a singed, red and white striped 'X' dominates the screen. In one of the many talk show interviews that Spike Lee did to promote the film, he said he chose to open the film with the Rodney King video to show that little had changed in America since Malcolm's time.

This is a limited truth. When inflated to represent the whole of a people's and a nation's story, it's irresponsible, a political distortion that turns history into propaganda. The Rodney King beating is only one face of black/white relations in America. Another equally important face is the fact that a number of whites were outraged by the beating and subsequent



Malcolm X at the Audubon Ballroom moments before he was struck down by assassins' bullets on February 21st, 1965.

why federal agencies were alarmed by his change can be seen in his developing relationship with the mostly white Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He spoke at its Militant Labor Forum twice in 1964, once at the SWP's invitation and once at his own request. He had been impressed that the SWP's weekly newspaper had been publishing his speeches verbatim, and at the time of his assassination, he was negotiating to have them printed as a book by the SWP's publishing arm. That project was completed by Betty Shabazz and the result, *Malcolm X Speaks*, long remained the only collection of his speeches. On

acquittal of the policemen involved. That white America could get outraged by the beating of a black man is a significant change from the indifference of the early Sixties. It's a change which the cynical take underlying the film's opening frames would want us to believe has either not occurred or is totally insignificant.

The title sequence gives us the image of the black man as victim of white America. The opening scene, however, unconsciously contradicts that sequence. In that scene Malcolm X has his hair straightened, presenting the audience with another order of victim, a man who is victimized by his own racial self-hatred. The depth of Malcolm's self-hatred is essential for an understanding of what would become his politics. The film undermines such understanding because Denzel Washington is darker than Malcolm X. In his autobiography, Malcolm states that he grew up proud because he looked more white than his siblings. And the Nation of Islam became the means by which he sought to exorcise his racial self-hatred. Despite the film's respect for this position, the adoption of black supremacist politics doesn't purge anything. It merely puts a veneer of racial militancy over the agony of one's sense of inferiority.

Lee's *Malcolm X* fails because it refuses to examine X's own politics of racial self-hatred, and has no other point of view except Malcolm's. Thus, it can mainly act only as a mouthpiece for black nationalism. This absence of another perspective leaves the uninformed viewer with the impression that Malcolm was a major figure during his lifetime. In fact, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. had a much broader following. While Malcolm received wide media coverage, on the black political spectrum he was on the fringe. In addition, the film refuses to consider information which doesn't derive from the autobiography. It presents as truth that the Klan set fire to the Little family home while Malcolm's mother was pregnant with him, and that his father was murdered by Klansmen. Both incidents make for very dramatic footage in the film. However, Bruce Perry's biography of Malcolm X, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, presents convincing evidence that it was Malcolm's father who set fire to the house, and that his father was killed while trying to climb aboard a moving streetcar as he was running from a girlfriend's husband. While it is understandable that Malcolm would create myths which granted him impeccable credentials as a victim of white racism right from the womb, it is irresponsible for a filmmaker to perpetuate those myths.

Spike Lee also maintains his anti-Semitic record in this film. In the prison scene where Malcolm confronts the chaplain, asking him: "You've been talking about the disciples. What color were they?" The chaplain demurs, but Malcolm presses on. "They were Hebrew, weren't they?" The chaplain concurs. "As Jesus was," continues Malcolm. "Jesus was also a Hebrew. What color were the original Hebrews?" The chaplain demurs again and Malcolm presses home his point, namely, the Hebrews were black, and therefore God is black.

This neat bit of sophistry implies that Judaism was originally a black religion that was later stolen by whites, a view promulgated by the Nation of Islam and assorted Afrocentrists. Such a view is an act of cultural imperialism reading back into the past a contemporary black supremacist perspective that recreates God in its own image. It is also anti-Semitic because it implies that the Jews stole Judaism from blacks. The second anti-Semitic scene comes in the following speech by Malcolm conveyed in a voice-over:

The white people who are guilty of white supremacy try and hide their own guilt by accusing the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of teaching black supremacy when he tries to uplift the mentality, the social, and the economic condition of black people in this country. And the Jews, who have been guilty of the black people economically, civilly, and otherwise, hide their guilt by accusing the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of being anti-Semitic simply because he teaches our people to go into business for ourselves and trying to take over the economic leadership in our own community. (By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X...Including the Screenplay by Spike Lee with Ralph Wiley, p. 271)

There is no denying that there were profound anti-Semitic strains in Malcolm's speeches. But Lee excluded other troubling aspects of Malcolm's public and private life from the film. The film never mentions that Betty Shabbaz left Malcolm on three separate occasions, or that Malcolm was unable to convince Muhammad Ali to leave the Nation of Islam with him. There is no organic reason that these words are in the film, and they serve no purpose except to further one of the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes.

The film concludes with a photograph of Malcolm X, and with his assertion that change must be brought about "by any means necessary." Slogans, however, don't make a politics. Means are at the

heart of political change, and the means are the hard, unglamorous, unromantic day to day work of organizing people and resources around a viable and coherent ideology. "By any means necessary" was a placebo when Malcolm proclaimed it in the Sixties. It is a narcotic now, designed to give one a 'black high' and nothing more. "By any means necessary" is not a point of view; it is a cry of despair, a mewl of impotence, a fitting coda to a politics based on empty posturing.

SPIKE LEE, MALCOLM X, AND THE MONEY GAME:

The Compromises of
Crossover Marketing

by Jesse Rhines

When Spike Lee demanded \$35 million from Warner Bros. to produce *Malcolm X*, he said it deserved the same budget the studio had provided for Oliver Stone's *JFK*. Warner Bros. thought otherwise on the basis that *JFK* as icon had a much larger potential audience than that for *Malcolm X* as icon. To paraphrase the famous Lloyd Bentsen quip, they were saying, "Spike, your *Malcolm* is no Kennedy."

That Lee thought his film could command as large an audience as *JFK* reveals how much Malcolm X's image has changed over the years, or at least the kind of image Lee was willing to fashion. Historically, *JFK* and *Malcolm* occupied entirely different political spheres. It's hard to imagine any circumstance in which Malcolm would have been invited to tea at Camelot. Nor can we visualize Kennedy, rather than Martin Luther King, Jr., smiling and shaking hands with Malcolm in that famous photograph *Do the Right Thing*'s Smiley lugged about. It's also doubtful that Malcolm would have issued a "chickens coming home to roost" statement had King rather than Kennedy been assassinated in 1963. Martin and Malcolm did not agree on strategies and goals, but they were not asymmetrical in the way Malcolm and *JFK* were. Malcolm and *JFK* had followings that were asymmetrical in their racial composition, their long range goals, and, most importantly, in their relative size. Something profound must have happened to the image of Malcolm and/or of *JFK* over the decades if, in the 1990s, they are considered capable of attracting equivalent, much less the same,

moviegoing audiences. Or perhaps it is the image of Malcolm as shaped by Lee that becomes compatible with the image of JFK as shaped by Stone.

The major consideration for Warner Bros. regarding *Malcolm X* was whether or not it could get a crossover audience. How else could a \$35 million, three hour plus epic bring in the \$90 million needed to make it a success? Malcolm had been despised by the vast majority of whites during his lifetime and disliked by a majority of black Americans as well. JFK, in contrast, had a reasonable chance for reelection, and his death transformed him into a national martyr on the scale of Lincoln. The conspiracy angle to *JFK* added additional dramatic dimensions that seemed lacking in the conventional version of Malcolm's assassination. Put more simply, if one assumes an average national admission price of \$4, and if fifty percent of all thirty million African-Americans bought a ticket to see *Malcolm X*, the box office return would be \$60 million. If fifty percent of white Americans bought tickets, the return would be \$400 million. This nearly sevenfold gap on return determined Warner Bros.'s consideration that a crossover audience, and not a black audience alone, was the primary market for *Malcolm X*.

To meet that need, Lee dampened every controversial aspect of Malcolm's life, not least the pan-Africanism and proto-socialism of his final year. Nor does he even hint at the controversies regarding the assassination. Most disturbing, however, is that he has in a sense 'decultured' Malcolm in the most fundamental way. This is most obvious in the scenes dealing with the period of his life when Malcolm was a hood. What happened to 'Detroit Red's' "Daddy O's," a term he surely must have used? Although zoot-suited and conked, he never extends his palm and asks Shorty to "Slap me some skin." He doesn't even slow-drag one foot behind him as he 'pimps' down the street. He does not notice, much less ogle, any woman's round behind. I found myself asking, "What's up wi' that?" I was looking at a Malcolm Little with "a hole in his soul."

This denuding of the early Malcolm of specifically black cultural qualities exemplifies the dilemma faced by any African-American filmmaker who wants to attract mass, or crossover, market dollars. When he or she views white filmmakers and their works as the primary models, the tolerance level and cultural biases of the white audience become critical. The natural consequence is the rather breezy and ill-fitting cultural representations of African-Americans found in *Malcolm X*.

The major positive aspect of this approach is that it has been able to stimulate broad popular interest in Malcolm as a historical figure. We can expect an increased enrollment in African-American Studies courses over the next few years, among both black and white students. We can even expect more black history to be entwined with national history. But only a much more vigorous look at the real Malcolm in all his transformations will counter the film's implicit JFK/X symmetry—a cultural and historical dupe—which only a master marketer like Spike Lee could have pulled off.

RECOMMENDED READINGS ON MALCOLM X

Compiled by Paul Lee, Historical Consultant on *Malcolm X*

Historical and Biographical:

Breitman, George,
The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary. NY: Pathfinder Press, 1967, 1989.

Cone, James,
Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare? Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.

Essien-Udom, E. U.,
Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1971.

Goldman, Peter,
The Death and Life of Malcolm X. 2nd edition. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

For Young Readers:

White, Florence M.,
Malcolm X: Black and Proud. Illus. by Victor Mays. Champaign, IL: Garrard, 1975.

By Malcolm X:

The Autobiography of Malcolm X. With the assistance of Alex Haley. NY: Ballantine, 1965, 1992.

By Any Means Necessary. Edited by George Breitman. NY: Pathfinder Press, 1970, 1992.

Malcolm X, February 1965: The Final Speeches. Edited by Steve Clark. NY: Pathfinder Press, 1992.

Malcolm X on Afro-American History. Revised edition. Edited by Steve Clark. NY: Pathfinder Press, 1990.

Malcolm X Speaks. Edited by George Breitman. NY: Pathfinder Press, 1965, 1989.

Malcolm X: The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches. Edited by Benjamin Goodman/Karim. NY: Merlin House, 1971, 1992.

Malcolm X: The Last Speeches. Edited by Bruce Perry (with Steve Clark). NY: Pathfinder Press, 1989.

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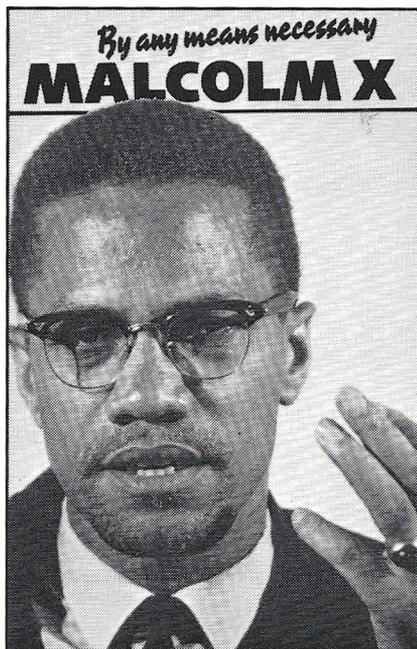
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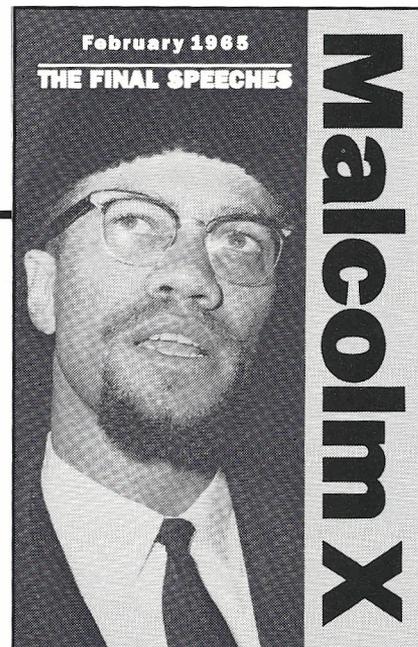
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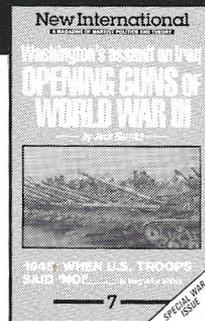
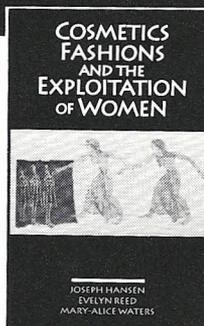
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Our Film Is Only a Starting Point

An Interview with Spike Lee

by Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas

In addition to our *Cineaste* Symposium on Malcolm X, *Cineaste* felt it was important to talk to Spike Lee and incorporate his comments in our overall perspective on the film. In the following interview, Lee explains his primary desire to introduce Malcolm X to young viewers and his awareness that the time limits of even a nearly three and a half hour movie prevented him from producing anything more than a "primer" on one of America's most charismatic black leaders. His additional comments about the difficulties of attempting to produce an epic political film within the budgetary constraints imposed by Warner Bros. and in light of the many other pragmatic and political considerations involved are important aspects in arriving at a fully informed appraisal of the artistic achievement and political significance of Malcolm X. Spike Lee spoke to *Cineaste* Editors Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas in mid-December 1992, just three weeks after the film's nationwide premiere.

Cineaste: What sort of research did you do for the film? And what was the role of your Historical Consultant, Paul Lee?

Spike Lee: I read everything that I could, including a new book by Zak Kondo about the assassination that was very important in helping us re-create the assassination in the film. Paul Lee was a great help because he's someone who's really devoted his life to Malcolm X. Paul, who lives in Detroit, was in the Nation, I think, when he was twelve years old. As far as scholars go, I don't think there's anyone who knows more about Malcolm X than Paul Lee.

I also talked to a lot of people, including Benjamin Karim, who's Benjamin 2X in the film, Malcolm's brothers—Wilfred, Omar Azziz, and Robert—his sister Yvonne, Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, and Malcolm Jarvis, who's Shorty in the film. I also went to Chicago and talked to Minister Farrakhan. That's where a lot of the good stuff came from, going around the country and talking to people who knew Malcolm. Not just his relatives, but people who were in the Nation with him, in the OAAU, and so on.

Cineaste: Have you had any dealings with the Socialist Workers Party? They got to Malcolm early, gave him podiums numerous times, and published a lot of his speeches.

Lee: Pathfinder Press? No, I just used their books, because they're fine documents.

Cineaste: Of the various screenplay adaptations of *The Autobiography* that had been written, why did you feel that the James Baldwin/Arnold Perl script was the best?

Lee: I read 'em all—the David Mamet script, Charles Fuller's two drafts, Calder Willingham's script, and David Bradley's script—but the Baldwin/Perl script was the best. James Baldwin was a great writer and he really captured Harlem and that whole period. He was a friend of Malcolm's.

Cineaste: What did your rewrite of the Baldwin/Perl script involve?

Lee: What was lacking, I felt, in the Baldwin/Perl script was the third act—what happens during the split between Malcolm and the Nation, between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad. A lot of

stuff about the assassination had not come out then. William Kunstler was a great help on that. He represented Talmadge Hayer and gave me a copy of Hayer's affidavit where he 'fessed up to the assassination. I mean, if you look at the credits of the movie, we name the five assassins, we name those guys—Ben Thomas, William X, Wilbur Kinley, Leon Davis, and Thomas Hayer.

I also wanted to tie the film into today. I did not want this film just to be a historical document. That's why we open the film with the Rodney King footage and the American flag burning, and end the film with the classrooms, from Harlem to Soweto.

The speeches in the Baldwin/Perl script were not really Malcolm's best speeches, they did not really show the growth politically of Malcolm's mind, so we threw them all out. With the help of Paul Lee, who gave us copies of every single speech that Malcolm gave, Denzel and I chose and inserted speeches. Baldwin had stuff out of order. He had Malcolm giving speeches at the beginning of the movie that didn't really come until 1963 or 1964, so we had to get rid of those.

Cineaste: So Denzel was involved somewhat in working on the script?

Lee: Yeah, Denzel was very involved. He has a good story sense. We both knew a lot was riding on this film. We did not want to live in another country the rest of our lives. We could not go anywhere without being reminded by black folks, "Don't fuck up Malcolm, don't mess this one up." We were under tremendous pressure on this film. We can laugh about it now, but it was no joke while we were doing the film.

Cineaste: Given the difficulty of portraying about forty years of a man's life in any film, even one nearly three and a half hours long, are there some aspects of Malcolm's life you felt you weren't able to do justice to?

Lee: No, this is it, this is the movie I wanted to make. Our first cut was about four hours and ten minutes, I forget exactly, and we had more speeches and stuff, but this is the best shape the film can be. Of course, people say, "Why did you leave this out and why did you leave that out?" but you cannot put a man's whole life in a film.

People have told us, "The most important year in Malcolm's life was his final year," and "Why didn't you show his whole pan-Africanism thing?" But it's limited. We've never said that anyone who sees this film doesn't need to know anything else about Malcolm X. I mean, the man had four or five different lives, so the film is really only a primer, a starting point.

Cineaste: But don't you think that showing him meeting heads of state in Africa would have added to his dimension at the end, especially for people who don't know?

Lee: But people don't know who Kwame Nkrumah is anyway. Besides, we didn't have the money. I mean, we just barely got to Egypt. We shot in the U.S. from September 16, 1991 up to the Christmas holiday and after the holidays we did what we had to do in Cairo and then we went to South Africa. But I don't think

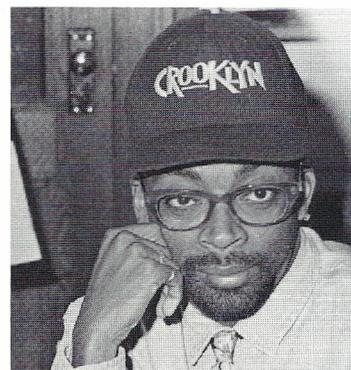


Photo by Jesse Rhines

we would have gained anything by showing him meeting with Nkrumah or others. Besides, at that point in the film, we're trying to build some momentum.

Cineaste: *Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali is sort of dropped from the film, too.*

Lee: What, and get someone to impersonate him? I think it was important to have Muhammad Ali in the movie, but we show him in a newsreel clip in the montage at the end.

Cineaste: *You don't think it dissipates some of the anti-Vietnam War feeling that was in the Nation?*

Lee: They weren't really anti-Vietnam. Malcolm was, but Elijah Muhammad never said anything about the Vietnam War. And by the time Malcolm spoke out against the Vietnam War, he had already been kicked out of the Nation.

Cineaste: *Do you feel a film of this financial scale has built-in 'crossover' requirements in terms of its audience?*

Lee: We felt so. We felt that everybody would want to see the film and we've received a large white audience to date. This is my first PG film—the previous five have all been rated R—because we wanted to get a young audience. We feel this is an important piece of American history and people, especially young kids, need to see this.

Cineaste: *Is that why the few sex scenes in the film are considerably milder than those in the published screenplay?*

Lee: Yes, because we made the decision for a PG-13 rating. We did not want to give teachers, schools, or parents an excuse why they could not take their children to see this film. I think when you weigh it, it's much more important for young kids to be exposed to Malcolm X than to see that other shit. We're preparing a classroom study guide on the film that'll be out in January.

It's amazing, I've seen this film with ten, eleven, and twelve-year-olds and they're just riveted in their seats. You know the attention span of young people at that age—they're usually throwing popcorn at the screen—but there's not a sound, they're riveted for three hours and twenty-one minutes. A whole generation of young people are being introduced to Malcolm X and people who've heard of him or had limited views of him are having their views expanded. Above all, we hope that black folks will come out of the theater inspired and moved to do something positive.

Cineaste: *What sort of message would you like white viewers to come away with from the film?*

Lee: I think that, as with any film I've done, people will take away their own message. For a large part of the white audience, however, I think we're helping to redefine Malcolm X because for the most part their view of Malcolm came from the white media which portrayed him as anti-white, anti-Semitic, and pro-violence. It's funny, when we had the national press junket for this film, many of the white journalists said they felt they'd been robbed, that they'd been cheated, because they'd never been taught about Malcolm X in school or they had only been told that he was anti-white and violent. A great miseducation has gone on about this man.

Cineaste: *In that regard, we heard that Warner Bros., presumably concerned about defusing any controversy about potential violence at screenings, held advance showings of the film for police departments around the country.*

Lee: That was Barry Reardon's decision. I did not agree with that. I thought it was inappropriate. I mean, if they do that to us, they should do it to *Terminator*. How many cops got killed in those films? Actually, it was the exhibitors. Before the film came out, exhibitors were calling Warner Bros., they were scared shitless, they were requesting extra police protection. One theater in Chicago even installed metal detectors!

Cineaste: *What was the response at the police screenings?*



Spike Lee as 'Shorty' and Denzel Washington as Malcolm in zoot-suited glory in *Malcolm X* (Photo by David Lee)

Lee: Oh, the cops loved it. In Los Angeles, they showed it to Willie Williams, the new Police Commissioner there. It was the exhibitors and also the press who were waiting for that violence so they could destroy the movie. *Do the Right Thing* was really hurt at the box office when the press—people like David Denby, Joe Klein, and Jack Mathews—predicted that the film was going to create riots. In Westwood, in Los Angeles, for example, nine police were at the theater on the opening weekend, some mounted on horseback.

What's interesting for me now in reading a lot of the reviews of *Malcolm X* is how so many critics had predetermined that the film was going to be inflammatory.

Cineaste: *To a great extent that's because of their unfamiliarity with Malcolm X other than what they've read in the mainstream press.*

Lee: And with me, with the combination of Malcolm X and Spike Lee. They were expecting a film that for three hours and twenty-one minutes would be saying, "C'mon, black folks, let's get some guns and kill every single white person in America," but in the end the critics were saying, "This film is mild."

Cineaste: *In the published screenplay, there are two sort of 'dramatic bookends' scenes. In the first scene, Malcolm brushes off the well-intentioned young white woman outside Harvard who asks how she might be of help in his struggle. The second scene, which occurs later at the Hilton Hotel in New York, involves the same type of encounter but this time Malcolm has a completely different response. The two scenes emphasize Malcolm's evolution on this question, but only the first scene appears in the film. Why?*

Lee: We shot that other scene, but the acting just didn't work. Anyone who's read the book knows that Malcolm's response to that young woman was one of his biggest regrets. I wanted to give Malcolm a chance to make up for it, so I wrote the scene where he could answer that same question again, but it just didn't work.

Cineaste: *Are you concerned with how the dramatic weight has now shifted to that first scene? At the two screenings we've attended, that scene always gets a big laugh.*

Lee: Who's laughing? Black viewers or white viewers?

Cineaste: *They've been mixed audiences.*

Lee: White people don't laugh at that because for the white audience that young white woman is *them*. We shot the second scene, but it just didn't work, so what were we supposed to do? In any case, I think we see Malcolm change when he comes back from Mecca.

Cineaste: *In terms of The Autobiography's portrayal of Malcolm's youthful criminal career and the extent of his drug abuse, Malcolm was much more critical of himself in the book than the film is. Do you think that aspect of the book is exaggerated?*

Lee: I've talked to Malcolm's brothers and they said that he was not that big of a criminal. He was a street hustler and not even a pimp, just a steerer. I think he was a wannabe, a wannabe big-time gangster, but he wasn't. The description in the book was not so much to build himself up but to lower the depths from which he rises. That's OK, but I don't buy this Bruce Perry bullshit that Malcolm was a homosexual, that he used to cross-dress, or that Malcolm's father burned down their house in Omaha or that Malcolm fire-bombed his own house in Queens. That's bullshit! He did a lot of research, and some of the interviews were good, but Bruce Perry's book reads like *The National Enquirer*.

Cineaste: *Many feminists are critical of the Nation of Islam's sexist attitudes towards women. In fact, one of their well-intentioned slogans refers to women as "property."*

Lee: We didn't make that up. That was an actual banner.

Cineaste: *No, we understand that was historically accurate, but since you've taken so much heat from feminists in the past...*

Lee: Hey, you know who should be taking more heat than me? Oliver Stone!

Cineaste: *Oh, he has taken a lot of heat.*

Lee: Not as much as me, though, about women.

Cineaste: *In a historical film like this, the dilemma seems to be whether one can—or should even attempt to—deal with such an issue by presenting an anachronistic, retroactive 'politically correct' perspective on the Nation's attitudes towards women.*

Lee: We just showed it the way it was.

Cineaste: *We thought you dealt with this issue well in at least one scene where you intercut Elijah Muhammad's various strictures against women with Malcolm's conversation with Betty where he parrots pretty much the same line.*

Lee: Yeah, he's a mouthpiece. [Lee at this point does a pretty good impersonation of Al Freeman as Elijah Muhammad] "She should be half the man's age plus seven. She must cook, sew, stay out of trouble." [Laughs] Sure, I've been at some screenings where women go, "Ugh!" but, look, those are not my views.

Cineaste: *You often have scenes where there's no obvious interpretation, you leave it up to the viewer.*

Lee: A lot of my work has been done that way. Some things I'll slant, but a lot of time I let people make up their own minds.

Cineaste: *We're thinking especially of the scene where Denzel is watching television, and you intercut newsreel footage of police repression of civil rights demonstrations with a slow zoom into his face.*

Lee: Yeah, and with John Coltrane's "Alabama" on the soundtrack.

Cineaste: *There are a couple of different levels of interpretation there. You can think that he's despising Martin Luther King, Jr. and his nonviolent approach, or you can think that he's regretting that he's not involved in action like that. In this regard, we also wondered about the little smile you see briefly on Malcolm's face just before he's shot.*

Lee: That was Denzel's idea.

Cineaste: *I guess that's also open to interpretation.*

Lee: Well, Denzel and I felt that he just got tired of being

hounded. In actuality, you know, there were several assassination attempts. The CIA tried to poison him in Cairo, and the Nation tried to kill him numerous times. There was a big assassination attempt in Los Angeles, another in Chicago, and one night he had to run into his house because guys with knives were chasing him. So he was hounded for a year, the last year of his life, and Denzel and I thought about it and just felt that, you know, he was happy to go. It was Denzel's idea to smile right before he gets the shotgun blast—like, "You finally got me," and it was over.

Malcolm knew that he was going to die—even in the book he says, "I'll be dead before this comes out"—and that idea is played through that montage where Malcolm, his aides, and the assassins are all driving in separate cars to the Audubon Ballroom—an idea we got from *The Godfather*, by the way ('props' to Francis)—accompanied by the Sam Cooke song, "A Change Is Gonna Come."

Cineaste: *In terms of FBI and CIA involvement in the assassination, do you think it was more a case of them letting it happen rather than actually doing it?*

Lee: In my opinion they definitely stirred things up between Malcolm and the Nation. The FBI's COINTELPRO operation had infiltrated the Nation and was writing letters back and forth. Then I think they just stood back and let it happen. I don't think the FBI or CIA needed to assassinate Malcolm because, if you read *Muhammad Speaks* at that time, the Nation was going to do it themselves.

Cineaste: *The FBI did the same thing on the West Coast, fomenting a rift between the Black Panthers and Ron Karenga.*

Lee: Oh yeah, they're great at that. A very important book in this regard is *Malcolm X: The FBI File*. Two new books coming out—*The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* by Karl Evanzz and *Conspiracys: Unravelling the Assassination of Malcolm X* by Zak Kondo—both say the Nation was responsible. Of course, Amiri Baraka's saying that I'm part of some great government conspiracy and that the reason the studio let me make the film is because I was going to pin the assassination on black people. That's bullshit!

The five assassins were from Temple No. 25 in Newark, New Jersey, and the orders came from Chicago. I don't know if they came from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, but it was from somewhere high up. That's the truth. I mean, Baraka should talk to Betty Shabazz, he should ask her who killed her husband. She told me the same thing. I'm not part of some conspiracy to turn black folks against the Nation of Islam. That's bullshit!

Cineaste: *Has the Nation had a response to the film yet?*

Lee: The Thursday before the movie opened we had a special screening in Chicago for Minister Farrakhan.

Cineaste: *How did that go?*

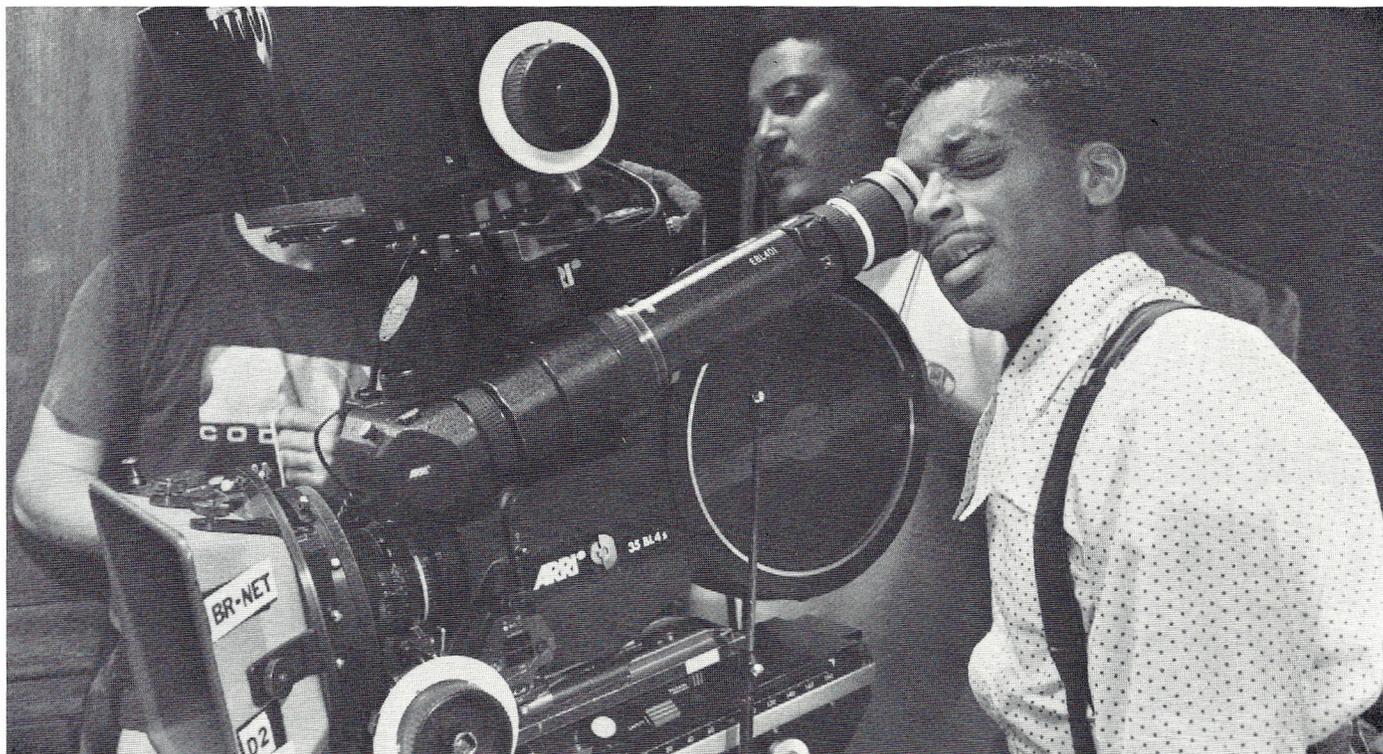
Lee: He was there, and I got a note from his secretary saying he was going to respond by letter, but we haven't heard from him since. But Minister Farrakhan has been supportive. While we were shooting the film, he said, "Look, Spike, I support your right as an artist." That's been it.

Cineaste: *Do you think they'll make an official pronouncement, one way or another?*

Lee: I think they'll just let it blow over.

Cineaste: *In making this film, did you arrive at a more sympathetic understanding or appreciation of Islam?*

Lee: Yeah, I mean you had to have respect. Denzel and I were reading the Koran before we began to shoot. We *had* to. If we didn't have a sympathetic attitude toward Islam, why would the Saudi government allow us to bring cameras into Mecca to shoot the holy rite of *hajj*? You have to be a Muslim to enter Mecca, so we had two second units, Islamic crews, who in May 1990 and June 1991 were permitted, for the first time ever in history, to film in Mecca.



Spike Lee checks a set-up through the viewfinder as Ernest Dickerson looks on during production of *Malcolm X* (Photo by David Lee)

I think the Saudi government realized this film could be good publicity for Islam. I mean, Islam and the Arabs in general have been taking a bashing in the West—what with Khomeini and the Gulf War and everything—and in Islam Malcolm is considered a martyr. That's why they let us bring cameras in.

Cineaste: Will the Islamic countries be an important overseas market for the film?

Lee: Yeah, we're going to try. We've got to be careful, though, because the same people who gave us the stamp of approval, the Islamic Court, are the same cats who sentenced Salman Rushdie to die, so we don't want to fuck around.

Cineaste: Some felt that the film's Mecca scenes were a little saccharine, somewhat like Christian movies of Jerusalem.

Lee: If the man says this was a deeply religious experience, you have to be true to that, no matter how you feel personally about religion. I mean, if up until that point the man felt that every single white person was a blue-eyed, grafted devil, and he no longer believed that after his visit to Mecca, something must have happened.

Cineaste: A very powerful scene in the film is when the young man, after seeing Malcolm and other members of the Nation confront the police, approaches Malcolm and says he wants to become a Muslim. It showed the power of the Nation to influence people and change their behavior.

Lee: People can talk about Elijah Muhammad all they want, but there's never been a better program in America for black folks to convert drug addicts, alcoholics, criminals, whatever. Elijah Muhammad straightened those guys out and, once they were clean, that was that.

Cineaste: A lot of people felt Malcolm would have left Islam, but we always thought he was as devout a Muslim as King was a Christian.

Lee: No, he would never have left Islam. He would have moved on to other stuff, but he would have remained a Muslim. He would not have made it a requirement to join his organization because he saw it was too regimented. He wanted to include as many people as possible. People wanted to follow him but they weren't willing to give up pork, or sex, or whatever.

Cineaste: There was always this tension between Malcolm and King which some people saw as a contradiction but which we saw as more of a dynamic tension.

Lee: I agree. At the end of *Do the Right Thing*, when I use the statements from Malcolm and King, I wasn't saying it's either one or the other. I think one can form a synthesis of both. When Malcolm was assassinated, I think they were trying to find a common ground, a plan they could both work on.

Some people felt I took a low blow at King in the film in the scene where John Sayles, as an FBI agent listening in on a phone tap on Malcolm, cracks, "Compared to King, this guy is a monk." I don't think that's a low blow. J. Edgar Hoover had made tapes of King with other women and he confronted King with them, saying, "If you don't commit suicide, I'm going to send these tapes to Coretta," and he did. Afterwards things weren't the same between Coretta and Dr. King, but I'm not taking a low blow at King. The low blow was the FBI doing this to Dr. King. But some black people told me, "Spike, you know, you shouldn't have done that."

Cineaste: They have a hard time dealing with King as a sexual being. Baldwin also thought that there was this dynamic, this dialectical tension, between Malcolm and King. Toward the end, Malcolm seemed to be saying, "You'd better deal with King, because, if you don't, you'll have to deal with me." It's *the Ballot or the Bullet*.

Lee: He said that all the time. He told King, "I'm good for you."

Cineaste: Some people would have liked for you to have included the scene where Malcolm went down to Selma and spoke to Coretta King. Did you think of putting that in?

Lee: [Covers his head in a defensive manner and laughs uproariously] We couldn't do everything! We knew going in that, at best, we'd just get the essence of the man, that's the most we'd be able to do. Besides, Henry Hampton of *Blackside*—you know, the guy who did *Eyes on the Prize*—he's preparing an eight hour series on Malcolm. They'll be able to do a lot more than we did, and I'm glad.

Cineaste: We've also heard that there are plans to re-release, at least on video, the 1972 feature documentary on Malcolm.

“ We feel this is an important piece of American history and people, especially young kids, need to see this film. A whole generation of young people are being introduced to Malcolm X. ”

Lee: Marvin Worth's film. It's good. I think if more people can learn about Malcolm X, that's cool.

Cineaste: *We thought you might have done more with Ossie Davis's eulogy.*

Lee: What, you mean see him delivering it? Then we'd have to restage the funeral and I didn't want to see Denzel in a casket. Besides, by that time we show footage of the real Malcolm X. I gotta give my props here to Oliver Stone. Barry Brown [*the editor who cut School Daze and Do the Right Thing*] and I saw Oliver Stone's *JFK* the first day it came out, and I said, "Barry, man, look what they're doing. C'mon!" That film gave us great inspiration.

You remember the opening newsreel montage in *JFK*? Well, we tried to do the same thing, or better it, with our montage at the end where Ossie Davis delivers the eulogy. We also had some of the black and white thing going, like newsreel footage.

Cineaste: *So you were directly influenced by JFK?*

Lee: Yes. There are other similarities between *Malcolm X* and *JFK* but what makes our film stand out is the performance of the lead actor. I think Kevin Costner is an OK actor, and I know that's probably the only way Oliver could have gotten the film made with the amount of money he wanted to, but I love that film *despite* Kevin Costner's performance. In *Malcolm X*, Denzel is the film, he's in every single scene. I hope he gets nominated for the Academy Award and I hope he wins.

Another thing we're really proud of with this film is the craft. Far too often with my films the craft is overlooked, but I think everything here—Barry Brown's editing, Ruth Carter's costume design, Terence Blanchard's score, plus the source music we used, and Ernest Dickerson's cinematography—is outstanding.

Cineaste: *The cameo appearances in your film are another similarity to JFK. In some ways they're amusing, and people love them, but, on the other hand, they seem to disrupt the dramatic intensity, because people are saying, "Hey, that's Al Sharpton," or "There's Bill Kunstler," or "Did you see Bobby Seale?"*

Lee: Not that many viewers know who these people are, and for me it just added weight to the stuff. I don't think I was making jokes or trying to make it campy or funny. I actually wanted Clint Eastwood to play the cop in the Peter Boyle scene, but he was shooting *Unforgiven*.

Cineaste: *Has Warner Bros. been supportive in terms of the advertising campaign and the national release?*

Lee: Yes, ever since they saw the rough cut. I mean, for a while there during production we went at it toe to toe, but since they've seen it they've been behind the film. We're on 1600 screens nationwide. I have no complaints.

Cineaste: *In terms of the highly publicized dispute during production between yourself, Warner Bros., and the Completion Bond Company, to what extent do you feel racism was involved?*

Lee: Racism is part of the fabric of American society, so why should the film industry be exempt? I think it's a racist assumption that white America will not go to see a black film that's not a comedy, or that doesn't have singing and dancing, or that doesn't star Eddie Murphy. I think there are racist tendencies that keep this glass ceiling on the amount of money that is spent on black films, to produce them or to market and promote them. I mean, how is it that Dan Aykroyd, a first-time director, can get \$45 million to do *Nothing But Trouble*? \$45 million! They're willing to give more money to these white boys right out of film school than they are to accomplished black directors.

In terms of the controversy, films go over budget all the time, so why I am on the front page? I wasn't calling up these newspapers and saying, "I'm over budget and the Completion Bond Company is taking the film over."

Cineaste: *Wasn't there some sort of misunderstanding about the delivery date of the film?*

Lee: No. Here's what happened. Any time a director and the lead actor are shooting, that is first unit, that is principal photography. The Completion Bond Company tried to say that what we did in Africa was second unit. But Denzel and I were shooting, so that's principal photography. We finished shooting in Soweto in late January 1992, and five weeks later they wanted a first rough cut!

The Bond Company was mad because they were getting stuck by Warner Bros. and were having to deal with a \$5,000,000 overage. Usually the studio will help out the bond company, but in this case Warner Bros. said, "Fuck you. We paid you a fee and this is your job." So the Bond Company said to us, "Look, until we work this agreement out with Warner Bros., we're not paying you anything." So they fired all our editors. We had no money coming in to complete the film, so that's when I made the phone calls to these prominent African-Americans—Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, and others.

Cineaste: *And their contributions were gifts.*

Lee: These were gifts—not loans, not investments. So for two months we continued to work and neither the Bond Company nor Warner Bros., knew where the money was coming from. That really fucked 'em up. I chose to announce what we had been able to do on May 19th, Malcolm's birthday, at a press conference at the Schomburg Center. *Miraculously*, two days later, the Bond Company and Warner Bros. worked it out. They say it was just a coincidence, that it would have happened anyway. I say bullshit.

But I hope this will be a precedent. Next time, maybe myself or some other filmmaker will bypass Hollywood altogether for financing and go directly to people like Oprah or Bill or Magic or Michael who'll finance the production, and then just go to Hollywood for distribution once the film is done. There are plenty of black people with money, plenty of black entrepreneurs. It can be done.

Cineaste: *Are there other major black historical figures that you'd like to do films on?*

Lee: Yeah, Walter Yetnikoff and I are working to acquire the rights to Miles Davis's life story. I heard that Robert Townsend may direct and star in a film on Duke Ellington. Right now, Touchstone is getting ready to do the Tina Turner story, with Angela Bassett, who plays Betty Shabazz in *Malcolm X*, as Tina and Larry Fishburne as Ike Turner. What we hope, what we're praying for, is that with the success of *Malcolm X*, you'll be able to eventually see films about Miles Davis, Paul Robeson, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth...you can go right on down the line. ■