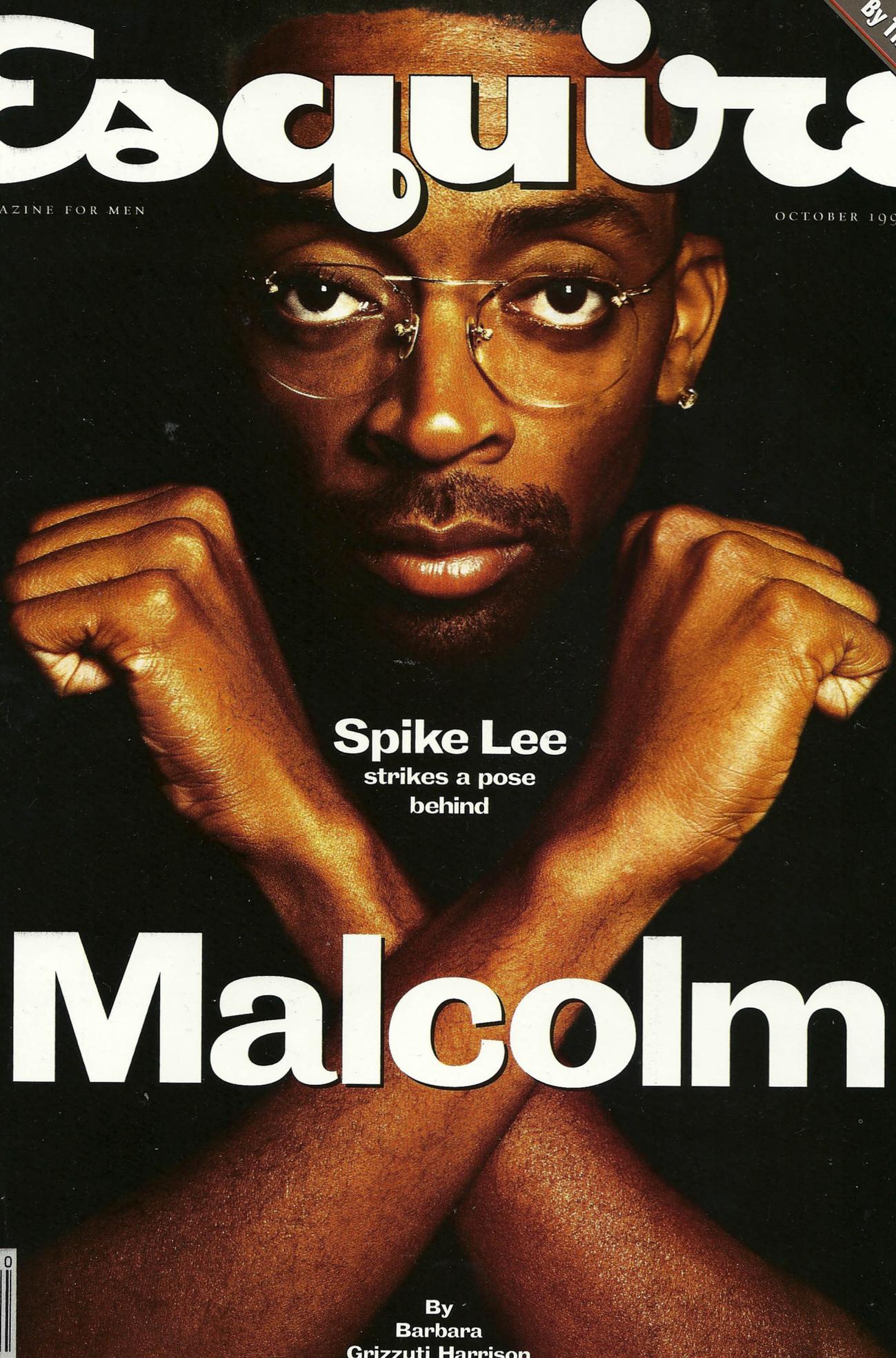


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Wild New Fiction
By Thomas McGuane



Spike Lee
strikes a pose
behind

Malcolm

By
Barbara
Grizzuti Harrison



Spike Hates Your Cracker Ass

If the battle to make Malcolm X has taught Spike Lee anything, it is to disdain those who just want to hold hands and sing "We Are the World"

LATE AFTERNOON in a midtown recording studio. Shadows converge. Controlled excitement. *Malcolm X* is in the final stages of production. Spike Lee is separated from his controversial creation by the glass wall that divides the controls from the screen on

which black-and-white images of Malcolm flicker. Actors and actresses, black and white, are looping—synchronizing voices to actions in crowd scenes: Black women gather at 110th Street in Harlem to be interviewed by prospective white employers; this

Esquire

Lee



By Barbara Grizzuti Harrison

Park Avenue “maids’ market” more closely resembles a chattel market, an auction for living souls. . . . Sidewalk preachers and activists on stepladders woo and harangue churchgoing crowds on Harlem Square. One of them is beautiful Denzel Washington, playing Malcolm X, who vies for the attention of churchgoers with a preacher played by the Reverend Al Sharpton. The demagogic activist white New Yorkers love to hate, Sharpton, in his cameo role, looks happily and hammily at home. Another stepladder orator is played by Bobby Seale, codefendant of the Chicago Seven. Radical attorney William Kunstler plays the judge who sent Malcolm X to prison. This casting of cameos is both mischievous and inspired.

I’m happy.

“We need them to say *stupid nigger, black bastard*, something like that,” Spike says. The blacks in one of his scenes are calling one another names. “How about *Alabama porch monkey*?” a technician asks; he is white. “Yeah, good,” Spike says; imagine. There is a scene in the chapel of the prison to which Malcolm was sent for six years in 1946 for burglary. The portrait of God before whom black prisoners are called upon to worship is white, insipid. The white technicians in the recording studio laugh appreciatively at the irony, the stupidity of a pretty Jesus, languorous in suffering, and a minister, white and scared and condescending, calling hardened black cons to submit to an alien and effete image. My elation, which began when I met and was pleasantly received by coffee-klatching black actresses, climbs another notch.

It has been a long time since I have been on easy terms with black women. We marched together once, and sang together once: “We Shall Overcome.” There were black women and white women on the sex-roles committee of the economically and racially integrated school my children went to in Spike Lee’s Brooklyn neighborhood. We argued—fought—about the relative importance of race and class and gender; we got angry at one another; we cried; we laughed; we slugged it out like gents and made up and worked together like sisters. . . . Like the sister Billie Holiday had been to me, when a black man in Minton’s jazz club on 118th Street accused me of being a white devil-woman: “She’s a nigger,” Billie Holiday said. “She can be raped. Anybody who can be raped is a nigger.” I loved her forever.

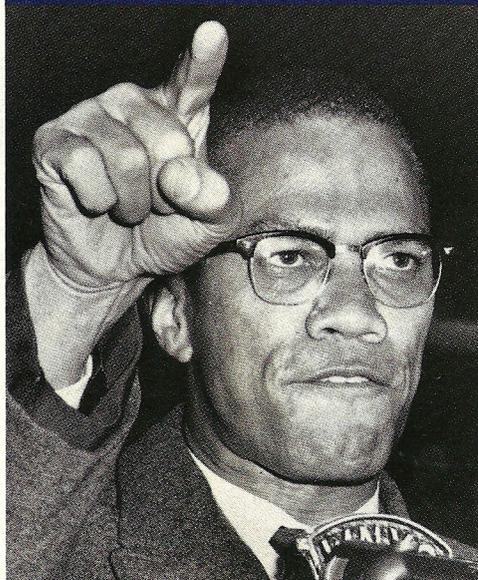
Where had it all gone, the good faith and the goodwill, the intention to trust, the ability to transcend differences and to take delight in them? Had it all been a mirage?

Now, in this room where Spike Lee is directing disembodied voices with quiet authority and intensity, there is no hostility (*Black and white together, we shall not be moved*), no ego, no edge.

I say something of the sort to Spike. He says: “Why shouldn’t they be nice? Those actors aren’t stars. They’re out of work. Remember, they saw you with *me*. They were getting paid to do that. What you want to do? Hold hands and sing ‘We

IT DOESN’T MATTER to you, but it makes a whole great difference to us,” says Spike.

“You don’t think it would have made a difference to whites if they’d been taught Jesus was black?”



Malcolm X addresses a Harlem rally in 1963

Are the World?” The diamond in his left ear glitters in the half-dark.

I feel foolish. My vanity, perhaps my arrogance, required so much more: curiosity and responsiveness and affinities. *Shit*. What if I told him that I knew James Baldwin? What if I told him about the time Jimmy and I got stoned together and he flirted first with me and then with my husband and then gave a twenty-minute speech about physical perspective, which he claimed just that second to have discovered, and we all, black and white together, fell on the floor in an orgy of happy laughter? All else aside, Spike Lee, after all, adapted his screenplay for *Malcolm X* from one by Baldwin and Arnold Perl. . . .

“You met him?” he says. He yawns.

Why should I have expected more than any other white interviewer has elicited from this thirty-five-year-old producer, writer, director, and world-class hustler who courts the media and simultaneously repels inquiry with set speeches, set postures, attitude? Why should I have entertained the hope that we could leap over the dividing wall of color?

It happened once, that meeting of minds I’d allowed myself to imagine. For five minutes or so I felt as if we were connecting. I felt a reciprocal absence of self-consciousness. We were like those characters in Forties and Fifties movies—prisoner on one side, visitor on the other, hands touching, palms and fingers meeting, establishing corresponding prints on either side of the glass divide.

We were talking about Frank Sinatra.

“It’s gonna be worse than Elvis when he dies,” Spike said. “It’s gonna be terrible. Great musician. *September of My Years*? Great album. Great. What the man sings about and what he does behind hotel doors is two different things.”

I remembered how, in the end of *Do the Right Thing*, when Sal’s Famous Pizzeria in black Bed-Stuy is set ablaze, one picture in his gallery of heroes—Sophia Loren, Vic Damone, Rocky Marciano, Joe DiMaggio—burns with a consuming fire. It is Sinatra’s, the last to fall.

“You met him?” Spike asks. He likes to know whom you’ve met. It places you, I guess. . . . “I sat on his lap once,” I say. “I met him outside Birdland. I was with my boyfriend. . . .” And I say the name of a jazz musician whom Spike Lee’s father—composer and bassist Bill Lee—knows quite well. But then Spike’s apathy overwhelms his tepid curiosity. He yawns, not troubling to cover his mouth. Though he isn’t actually saying it, I can hear him say: “So what we s’posed to do now? Hold hands and sing ‘We Shall Overcome?’”

I had thought: *Well, he can’t keep palming off the same old stuff on me*. How many times can he tell how many interviewers that he wants to get married and have “five rusty-butt boys, no girls; but I won’t throw a baby girl in the river if I have one”? How many times and to how many people can he say that integration has to mean “more than pissing in a urinal next to a white man”? It isn’t news. Studied ennui interrupted by howls of random manic laughter is an act that pales.

Now, in the gutter of his boredom, good faith and goodwill lie

buried, casualties of his contempt . . . and maybe (I hate this thought but am obliged to think it) of my conceit. Worse: of my racism. He made me feel like a racist. Am I a racist?

Birds in separate cages and we can't get out.

He is convinced that the word *nigger* plays its awful music in every white person's head.

"I'll tell you a story," he says: "In *Do the Right Thing*, in the final confrontation scene in the pizzeria between Mookie [played by Spike Lee] and Sal [played by Danny Aiello], we wanted Danny to say the word *nigger*, and he would not say it, and we all knew this guy had said the word many times. What finally got him to say it was when [the character named] Buggin' Out called him a fat guinea bastard. And something snapped in Danny, and he just vomited all this *black cocksucker nigger motherfucker*. He didn't want to be perceived as being racist or prejudiced, and that's why he had trouble saying the word. We all knew he had said those words many, many times. Once he was hit with *fat guinea bastard*, the floodgates started opening up. You all have said the word many times."

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SPIKE LEE'S LEGS are stretched out on the couch; it is 2:00 in the afternoon, and work for the day has ended. The room is dark and close. He's on the phone: "If you don't be cool, somebody else's bone is gonna be up your thing. . . ."

Do I want to hear Spike Lee talk dirty?

His eyes, lids at half-mast, glancingly acknowledge me from behind one pair of his astonishing wardrobe of eyeglasses.

"How long is this going to take?" Today's interview, he means.

"As long as it takes."

"How long?"

"It depends on how long you talk and how long I talk, I guess. . . ." It would be nice to talk somewhere other than dark studios. Besides, he has left no place for me to sit.

"Come on," he says.

"Where are we going?"

He doesn't answer. Outside a telephone cab draws up. In the time it takes us to walk from the entrance of the RCA Building to the cab, six young black men appear as if from nowhere and extend their hands and their love to Spike Lee. He is greeted in a manner that suggests he is not only a moviemaker but a prophet, a savior, a leader.

The driver of the car, a Latino, doesn't recognize him and makes a face when he hears his destination is Brooklyn. No cabbie wants to go to Brooklyn. (Everything outside Manhattan is Texas.) Spike takes this personally; he thinks he is being discriminated against. I could tell him the number of times I have had to climb out of cabs that wouldn't go to Brooklyn, my hometown. I don't.

In the cab on the way to DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn—where his home and his motion-picture company and his record company are—he commands me to put on my tape recorder. "Cleopatra was black," he tells me. *Hmmm*, I say. (Do I know?) "Black people still think that Cleopatra was white because they saw Elizabeth Taylor. White people went through the devious thing of trying to separate Egypt from Africa and all those great accomplishments, they didn't think blacks did it. I was on a talk show. . . . Julie London, somebody like that." (Joan Lunden, he means.) "'Spike, so you just came back from Egypt and Africa. . . .' I say, 'Wait a minute, Egypt is in Africa.' 'Oh, you know what I mean,' she says. It's not about what you mean, because in certain people's minds Egypt is not a part of Africa, and there's a reason for that, because Egypt is the cradle of civilization, and if Egypt is black and the cradle of civilization, they don't want to hear that. . . ."

I quote the Song of Songs: "My love is comely and she is black." "Do they still got those words in there?" he asks. He is angry

now. "So what about in the Bible where the guy says Jesus' hair was like wool and his feet were like ash?" he says. "That black Christ stuff, that's something totally new. Just recently blacks started thinkin' he mighta been black. . . ."

I don't care, I say, whether Jesus was black or white or whether God is a man or a woman.

"It doesn't matter to you but it makes a whole great difference to us. You don't think it would have made a difference to white culture if they'da been taught Jesus was black?"

He's right, of course.

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS, we lived, the Lee family and mine, about five blocks away from each other in Cobble Hill, a brownstone neighborhood that was on its way to being gentrified and renovated out of its working-class-Italian identity. My son played with the same interracial kids Spike Lee's brother and Spike himself hung with, Sam and Matthew Enriquez. A stay-at-home mother, I used to make brownies for all the kids after school. For all I know I made brownies for Spike Lee's brothers. My kids went to the Woodward School in Fort Greene, where Spike's mother later (in 1968) "had the foresight to see that it was time to buy a brownstone facing the park—165 Washington Park—while the getting was good: \$75,000." My daughter and Spike went to the same experimental high school in Coney Island.

Does Spike Lee care? No. Is there any reason he should care? Ordinarily when family histories touch, people *do* care, life being an endless process of returning to the source. But in this case, so far have we all fallen from the grace of harmony, I am painfully conscious of being liable to the charge of offering my credentials to prove I'm an "acceptable" white person. . . .

He yawns.

"I'm a very spiritual person," he says.

He spent the long hot summers with his maternal and paternal grandmothers: "Like most African-Americans who lived in the North, my parents shipped me South to get away from the city" (he stumbles over the words *African-American*). "We spent half the summer in Atlanta with my grandma Zimmie"—his mother's mother—"and the other half with my father's mother, Mother Lee, in Snow Hill, Alabama. That was the only time we went to church—when my grandparents dragged us . . . I can't define *spiritual*. I *am* spiritual."

His eighty-six-year-old grandma Zimmie—who put him through Morehouse College and NYU film school and gave him \$25,000 to make his first film—still lives in Atlanta. "It's a great feeling being in church with my grandmother, I mean, she's proud, she loves me to go to church so she can tell all her congregation, 'This is Spike Lee, this is my grandson.' She introduces me to every single member, it makes her feel good. She tells everyone I'm her grandson. . . ."

"Christianity was really used to dupe and trick black people into being pacifists . . . pie in the sky. . . . Also, religion gave us spirit to go on when we had to pick that cotton, face those whips. . . . Look at all the great people that come from the church—Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, Malcolm X. . . . In [Farrakhan's] Nation of Islam, you get what's yours now. Forget that pie in the sky. . . . Let me say there is a Greater Being. . . ."

"Jasmine Guy on *Different Strokes [A Different World]*, her father is reverend of my grandmother's church, Friendship Baptist Church. Zimmie Shelton. She doesn't tell anyone that I'm her grandson. She says, 'I don't want to get knocked over the head.' " My surprise at the contradictory reports about his grandmother's behavior makes him peevisish. "Why? Because of the subject matter of my films or because she doesn't wanna get kidnapped for ransom. She does not tell people I'm her grandson."

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THE NAME OF THE CENTRAL CHARACTER in *Mo' Better Blues* is a jazz musician whose name is Bleek. Spike Lee's father's nickname is Bleek. He still lives in that house in Fort Greene, around the corner from Spike. He lives there with his second wife, Susan, and their six-year-old child, Arnold.

At my first meeting with Spike Lee, he talked laconically, mechanically about his father, who was busted in October of 1991 for possession of about twenty dollars' worth of heroin. "He's on the straight and narrow, we're all happy about that." His bitterness and anger toward his father and his father's second wife seeped out slowly, over a period of time, oozing through the carapace of rhetoric.

"I hate the woman. She's not a nice person. She's a bad person. It's not because she's white and she's Jewish, I just hate her. The day she moved in the house was the last day our family was a family. She's good for my father, but unfortunately at the expense of the entire family. Everybody has to seek their own happiness. He's happy now. But the cohesion of the family was destroyed. Any stepmother must realize that when you come into a family, you're an outsider, a stranger. Come with some humility. She came like gangbusters. My mother wasn't even cold in her grave.

"Very systematically we all got thrown out of the house. She was behind it. She caught my father at a very vulnerable time in his life. His wife of twenty-seven years had just died of cancer. So today whatever she says, he's gonna do. He does whatever she says forever. None of us sees him anymore."

Bill Lee scored four of his eldest son's movies; he wrote two songs for *Jungle Fever*. Now: nothing. They "can't work together anymore," Spike says. Neither father nor son will talk about what precipitated the final breakup, which predated Bill Lee's drug bust.

Bill Lee has a group called Noah's Ark of which his wife and son are part. He calls his wife Bones. He met Bones at a club called Boondocks. She is Lithuanian and the descendant of rabbis, but considers herself "spiritually black." (She wears dreadlocks.) He was introduced to her by "Baroness Nica," who was a special friend of Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. Bill Lee says he's "going ahead with the work my grandfather left me to do in the world, the work he got from Booker T. Washington. . . . My work is not about what Spike is doing. . . . If my children are not interested in the work, I'll pass it on to Arnold."

Spike Lee calls his father paranoid and says Arnold "doesn't feel like my blood brother because my father's never allowed that relationship." Bill Lee says Spike is nuts and that he doesn't have anything more to say about his eldest son.

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ONE WAY OR ANOTHER Spike Lee has had a lot of love in his life and a lot of the craziness of pain. Is it possible that his anger is theoretical? His rage seems so sleepy, so bloodless, so much more a defense against intrusion than a howl. Is it possible that he has replaced the anguish of family trauma with agitprop rhetoric?

The rhetoric: "Racism has been our biggest cancer, and until we deal with and acknowledge it, we're never going to be able to move forward and upward. They think, 'We've done enough for the niggers. They got Michael Jackson, they got Cosby, they got Arsenio Hall'; and their perception is that because a couple of people were able to slip through the cracks, it's like that for thirty-five million Americans, but the truth is that the African underclass now is larger than it's ever been. Quayle and Bush and the government were totally caught by surprise in South-Central Los Angeles, they did not know what was happening. They don't care. . . . as long as it doesn't come to Bel Air and Beverly Hills. . . . The riots were not

contained to South-Central. They didn't want you to know that. . . .

"We've been robbed of our names and robbed of our culture. When you're told every single day for four hundred years that you're subhuman, when you rob people of their self-worth, knowledge, history, there's nothing worse you can do. We got told that if we could ride in a bus next to a white person, take a leak next to a white man, everything would be fine. Well, we got those things. What people have forgotten is that under segregation, black businesses thrived, we had to rely on ourselves. And the minute that we could run downtown and spend money with white folks we forgot all about our businesses, black restaurants, and black hotels. We did better when the dollar was turned over in black communities. . . .

"Black South Africans are gonna have to kill people. Why should this be different than the history of the world? Tell me a case where people just handed power over to somebody else. Never before in the history of the world has a government just handed power over to another. That Gandhian shit don't work. They gotta start picking up guns. Righteousness is gonna win out. From the barrel of a gun. You don't think we shoulda taken arms against fascism and Hitler? Apartheid is even a greater evil. You gonna pray and hope that motherfucker DeKlerk is gonna hand over power? I went to South Africa, I saw those little kids chanting 'One bullet, one settler.' It's gonna come to that. I'll be rejoicing. Who knows? We might see the same tactic here some day. . . ."

He delights in taunting. Whatever happened to "synthesis"?

"If George Bush told Colin Powell right now to go to Washington Heights and shoot every Dominican in the head, he would, because the only way you get that kind of position is to take orders. They're tryin' to appease us. . . . Yeah, they put some colored folks on television on the Fourth of July: 'Let's get some respectful Negroes out there to speak to their people and tell them to chill out.' They have no credibility. Kids in South-Central Los Angeles don't give a fuck what Shelby Stone [Shelby Steele] has to say. . . ."

His glib wrath propels him to tell stories without foundation: "Last week," he tells me, "Oprah Winfrey had Liz Claiborne on the show. I guess she wears Liz Claiborne's clothes all the time. Claiborne got on and said she didn't make clothes for black people. Oprah stopped the show and told her to get her ass off the set. How you gonna get on Oprah's show and say you don't make clothes for black women? It definitely happened. Get the tape. Every black woman in America needs to go to her closet, throw that shit out, and never buy another stitch of clothes from Liz Claiborne."

According to Oprah Winfrey's staff, it did not happen. Claiborne was never on the show. The last time Liz Claiborne was on television was in 1983—on the *Donahue* show. This rumor has been around for a long time. There is no truth in it, I tell him.

He yawns. In my face.

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HIS CRITICS SAY his movies hate women.

Spike says, "I make plenty types of films not all womenists hate."

The lead female character in *She's Gotta Have It* is brutally raped—"Whose . . . pussy . . . is . . . this?" her rapist/lover chants as he pounds at her from behind. "Some people think I was empowering her sexuality," Spike says. "That is the way, when I went to school, men in fraternities viewed women. As pieces of meat. Bitches and hos and freaks. You fuck them, and then you give them to one of your friends."

So, is Lee reflecting reality, is he criticizing it, or is he, by reflecting reality solely from a male point of view, endorsing it? He says he's both a reflector and a shaper, "because through reflecting what I see, I can influence, I can shape, mold, bend—that's the power of

film—by my perceptions.” And (covering all bases) he quotes Zora Neale Hurston: “Women are the mules of the world.”

In the Seventies, feminists used to ask: Can a feminist love the Rolling Stones? Can a woman love Spike Lee’s work?

I had no trouble identifying with Annabella Sciorra’s character in *Jungle Fever*, the Bensonhurst temp secretary who falls in love with Flipper Purify. I thought Spike Lee got it all right. The interracial thing. The emotive Bensonhurst thing.

I’ve been crazy about one black man in my life. I was not, I feel called upon to say, a groupie; I wasn’t in love with the genre.

“Yeah,” he says, “white women when they want to be with black men, they just know all they have to do is go to some club.” Not the kindest thing he could have said under the circumstances. “Okay, maybe you didn’t,” he says, his eyelids drooping with cynicism. He is making a sawing motion with his right arm, his fist clenched, back and forth, back and forth. He howls with laughter. “I give interracial couples a look. Daggers. They get uncomfortable when they see me on the street. Hand in hand and arm in arm. I just hope they’re not in it for the sex mythology.”

White women who go out with black men are “mugly.” He quotes one of his characters: “‘Most black men don’t be having no *Penthouse* pets, they be having outhouse pets.’” Not the kindest thing he could have said under the circumstances. “And they have nothin’ going for them, nothin’. Doesn’t matter what she’s doing, what she’s about, she’s just there, and you have a prize—a white woman on your arm. A trophy. Sick.”

Not very different from the old white businessman who has to have a decorative girl on his arm, I say. “Why you keep bringin’ up white men and women?” he says. “I can’t worry about that. I can only worry about issues that are relevant to me.” Okay. And what do white women get out of this, I ask; what’s their part in sexual mythologizing? He makes that sawing-in-and-out motion again; there’s no mistaking what it means. “Simple as that.”

Sleepily he says: “Interracial relationships are possible if there is genuine love.” Covering all bases.

Lee has dated actress/model Veronica Webb, who has an eat-shit-and-die, I’m-so-bored runway persona, according to fellow models. After Mike Tyson’s conviction on rape charges, Webb, who writes a column for a downtown magazine called *Paper*, hailed the fighter as “our wounded warrior,” a point of view Spike Lee shares. He is going, the week I interview him for the last time, to see Tyson, his friend. “Any girl that goes up to Tyson’s room at 4:00 A.M. doesn’t think she’s going sight-seeing in Indianapolis. Ain’t nothin’ to see in Indianapolis after you seen that Hoosier Dome they got. . . .” On the other hand, he buys the discredited Tawana Brawley story: “Black people know that our people have gotten raped for many years. What girl would smear herself with feces and throw herself in a ditch” for a made-up story, “ever think of that? That’s Klan country up there, anyway. I don’t know what happened, but something happened. Anytime a black man or a black woman steps out and talks, you gonna get shot down.” Never mind that the young woman Tyson was convicted of having raped was black.

In *Do the Right Thing*, “Tawana told the truth” is scribbled in chalk on the buildings of Bed-Stuy.

As for Magic Johnson, who—let’s face it—for all his courage and winning ways is a man who may have infected a large number of

BLACK SOUTH Africans are gonna have to kill people. When I went there, I saw little kids chanting ‘One bullet, one settler.’ It’s gonna come to that. I’ll be rejoicing.”

female partners with AIDS, Spike reserves his contempt for the women who slept with him: “They knew what they were doing. And he was good, too.” His laughter bounces off the acoustic tiles.

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SPIKE REPLACES THE BATTERIES of my tape recorder. A short time later we hear a loud bang. The acid has leaked out. I try not to be paranoid.

“I think I got the kind of charm you gotta warm to,” he says.

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MOST INTERVIEWERS, he says, are interested not in his work but in what he feels. “. . . I’ve never tried to position myself as a spokesman, that’s something the media has tried to put upon me,” he says. But to talk

about the work is to talk, inevitably, about race.

“I never understood how a neighborhood could change if one black family moves in,” he says. “That’s insane. Because a black person is next to you something’s gonna happen?” My grandparents, who came to this country during the Great Immigration, were so poor they had literally lived in caves in Italy. “Yeah, and the minute they stepped onshore, they thought they were superior to us,” he says. “Like we’re subhuman. Darker. Africa. Animal. In order to believe in white superiority, they have to chop down everyone else.” A point toward which, in fact, I was reaching—I am fascinated by the anatomy of fear and the progression of white fear to white rage, fueled by white ignorance—but his anger wouldn’t allow me to make it, he made it for me.

He rebuffs me at every turn. And my anger leads me directly into stupidity . . . into racism, he would say . . . he did say. How dare he accuse me of assuming superiority? His great-grandfather went to Tuskegee; I don’t know my great-grandfather’s name; my maternal grandfather, a shepherd, was an indentured servant. Until my children’s generation, nobody in my family went to college. . . . I may agree with him that race, in our society, is more determinative than class . . . but do I have to be lumped in with the Klan?

The question I have scribbled to ask him next is about affinities: Are they based on commonality of work, on class, on race, on chemistry? That’s not what I ask him, though. My God. Isn’t there *anything* we can talk about without drawing blood? What I ask him is: Do you have any intimate white friends?

“No white person in the world gets asked that,” he says. “What are you asking that for? Did Woody Allen ever get asked, Did you ever have any intimate black friends? Name me one white person that got asked. What is behind a question like that, asking Spike Lee, Is it possible to have a best friend who’s white? By me saying yes means I’m not a racist? I’m supposed to be vindicating myself?”

In fact, he does not ask me if I have any black friends. “It’s not like a badge of anything,” he says. “Whites always say that when they feel you got them in a corner: ‘Some of my best friends are black.’ Doesn’t mean anything. Your black friends—just because they’re black, that’s not telling me what kind of person you are.”

There is nothing about which we can talk. My mind stutters in his presence. . . . He has a recording company and has castigated disc jockeys for the limitations of their playlist. I can’t talk about rap music without incurring his wrath: “2 Live Crew? Why you want to talk about him? That guy ain’t gonna sell anymore records. Didn’t have no talent anyway. How many records you gonna sell about

dick...? There's a lot more sexism in heavy metal. Why you want to talk about Sir Mix-a-Lot and that stuff about buns?" I don't know. Maybe because I saw Sir Mix-a-Lot on MTV that morning, perhaps because hip-hop is described as political and offered as prescriptive. . . .

It occurs to me to wonder if all the good-looking black men I see in the recording studio would frighten me if I were to see them in a different context: walking toward me on a dark street.

How racist am I?

This is getting me down.

I sometimes wonder if the anger Spike directs in his movies toward Italians, his enemies/his intimates, his brothers/his opposites, is not displaced anger—anger that he feels toward Jews, whom he once knew largely as abstractions . . . until his stepmother entered the picture. Conversely, I wonder if the anger he expressed in *Mo' Better Blues* toward Jews is a function of his ambivalence toward Italians, his sense of ultimate betrayal at their hands. Mookie likes Sal too much in *Do the Right Thing*, he says; hence the denouement, the burning desert of despair.

"It's not about complexion," he says. It is.

"Blacks and whites holding hands singing isn't gonna do it anymore," he says. "It's '92. Gotta get with the program. . . . Who said anything about guns?"

"Why do you think whites hate and fear blacks?" I ask. It seems to me possible that the hated understand the hatred better than the haters—brutalized by blind rage—do.

"Why don't you ask some white people that?" he answers. "I'll tell you a story. I went to Chicago for game seven of the playoffs between the Knicks and the Bulls. The National Anthem is on. Two big fat white guys yell: 'Hey, Spike, take your hat off.' Everybody in the stadium is wearing a hat and they tell me to take off my hat. I go over to this guy, I say, 'Look, man, why don't you go over to Rodney King and tell him to take his hat off also.' They say, 'What does Rodney King have to do with this? You're way out of line. Come on, Spike, you're making good money, if you don't like it go back.'"

He yawns. "I'm not angry all the time," he says. "They think I'm a racist and I hate white people. They say I blame everything on race. They get it from the press. . . ."

"Angry. Yeah, I'm angry. Always amazes me when white people get so crispy when they see angry black people. Makes me mad when people say, 'What does Spike Lee got to be mad about, he came from the upper-middle class?' That's not true. The perception is that Spike Lee was a golden middle-class baby born with a gold spoon in his mouth."

One doesn't ask a black person not to be angry because he wasn't brought up on welfare and food stamps. . . . One does ask an artist, though, to understand that authentic anger comes from many and from mingled sources—from defeated love for family and community and race and tribe as well as from injustice.

He's built a country house—"call it a getaway"—in gingerbreadly Oaks Bluff, an upper-middle-class black community on Martha's Vineyard. He teaches a course on black film at Harvard. A real estate investor and an entrepreneur, he plowed \$2 million of his \$3 million salary back into *Malcolm X*. "I employ a lot of people, mostly black, young, intelligent, hungry, striving African-Americans. The money gives me ammunition to deal with the world of sharks we swim in."

As De De Allen, the highly regarded film editor who is now a

SPIKE "went to the highest Islamic court, the people that issued the death sentence to Rushdie. No way I want to be killed—Malcolm is a martyr. I'm in it to win."

creative consultant to Spike's *bête noire*, Warner Brothers, says, "His pushiness helped to open the doors to the establishment. He's tough. And every white person I know who succeeds in this business has to be, too. He knows that money is power and to get it you have to be tough. I understand perfectly where he's coming from. This is a business that inspires paranoia."

He made sure that his quarrels with Warner about money "were played out in the world arena. I don't like this back-room shit. I wanted the whole world to see what was happening." He wanted the world to see "the trials and tribulations of making *Malcolm X* with ten million motherfuckers fucking you." He's had interference or strong opposition from the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, the spokesman for which is Amiri Baraka, the

black nationalist poet who dismisses Spike's films as the trivial work of a buppie; the Teamsters Union; and the studio. The film, which finally came in at \$33 million, "was \$5 million over budget, and the bond company that insured it—a black company—did not want to absorb the \$5 million hit. And Warner Brothers wouldn't budge either. And I did not want to shut down. I just picked up the phone and I called Cosby, Oprah, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Tracy Chapman, Janet Jackson, Prince, and I asked for money—not for a loan, for a gift. And they sent their checks. They know how important this film is to black people. . . . What I want young people to get out of it is how much emphasis Malcolm put on education. I want their value system to be righted. 'Cause right now, if you speak proper English and get A's in school, you're considered a white boy. It ain't down, it ain't cool, and it ain't black. . . . On the other hand, for four hundred years black folks have been taught to hate themselves."

Spike Lee went to see Farrakhan before they began to shoot, "to get the blessings of the Nation, because I didn't want any complications." Farrakhan was "not really concerned about how we portrayed Malcolm; he was more concerned with the portrayal of Elijah Muhammad." He got his blessings and his protection.

He went to see Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, too; he "needed her name on the dotted line. Betty doesn't like Farrakhan; she thinks he was in league with the faction from Elijah Muhammad's Newark temple—and maybe the CIA and the FBI—who killed her husband." She signed on. She is acting as consultant.

He sent a second crew—converted to Islam for the purpose—to Saudi Arabia to shoot footage for Malcolm's hajj. He went to "the highest Islamic court, the same people that issued the death sentence to Rushdie. They gave us the seal of approval. . . . I'm just glad they let us shoot. Rushdie can take care of his own business. I knew what I was going into. No way I wanted to be killed—Malcolm is a martyr in the world of Islam. I'm in it to win." He is the first to say that *Malcolm X* "has to be the best thing I've done. I had no choice. I can't afford for it not to be great.

"It is great. Three hours and thirty minutes of greatness. My audience is the world."

I wouldn't be surprised if he were right. It is a mystery, the relationship of the worker to the work; I like his work so much more than he allowed me to like him.

Whose failure has this been? Whose arrogance, whose vanity, whose wounds and sores and nostalgia and betrayals and intransigence doomed us? He's right, he's wrong; I'm right, I'm wrong. Birds in a cage and we can't get out. ■