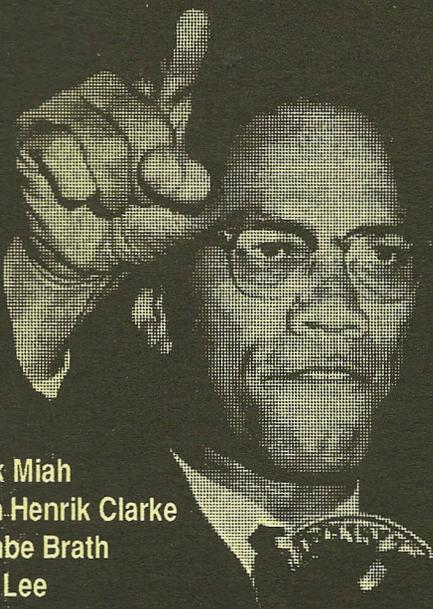


In Defense of Marxism

\$3.00

The African American Struggle Today



Malik Miah
John Henrik Clarke
Elombe Brath
Paul Lee
and Others

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Introduction to Talks on Malcolm X

A militant nationalist trend in the African American community today is highly critical of Spike Lee's movie *Malcolm X*. The main criticism is that the movie distorts and waters down Malcolm's message and takes advantage of the growing interest in him in recent years just to make money, not to help build the movement to carry on his work and bring about the type of revolutionary transformation he foresaw in his last year when he said: "I believe there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation."

Such criticisms were voiced at a forum held in Harlem on November 13, 1992, a few days before the public release of the Spike Lee movie. The title of the forum was "The Continuous X-ploitation of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz: The Man, the Message and the Movement vs. the Movie." (The forum was also described as a rally to stop the pimping and selective sampling of the legacy of Malcolm X.)

The forum was sponsored by the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, which sponsors a regular series, the African International Forum, at the Harriet Tubman School in New York City's Harlem. The first speaker was Elombe Brath, leading spokesperson for the Coali-

tion, who also acted as moderator. The keynote speaker was Dr. John Henrik Clarke, African Historian Emeritus, retired from Hunter College in New York, editor of the anthology *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, and an associate of Malcolm's in the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). The last speaker was historian and expert on Malcolm X, Paul Lee.

Other speakers included: Dhoruba bin Wahad, former Black Panther and political prisoner, whose case is continuing in the New York City courts; Amiri Baraka, the prominent African American poet and revolutionary activist; Sonny Carson, of the Committee to Honor Black Heroes, through whose efforts streets and schools have been renamed after Malcolm X; Viola Plummer, also a former political prisoner, now active with the Harriet Tubman-Fannie Lee Hamer Collective; Olive Armstrong, of the Save the Audubon [Ballroom] Coalition.

To continue the discussion we began with Vera Wigglesworth's article on the Spike Lee movie in the January 1993 *BIDOM*, we are printing in this issue excerpts from the talks by Elombe Brath, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, and Paul Lee.

Readers interested in the entire forum can obtain videotapes or audiotapes by contacting the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, 1845 Seventh Ave., Apt. 6C, New York, NY 10026.

A Criticism of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

by Elombe Brath

The following are excerpts from Elombe Brath's remarks at the November 13 forum. He focused first on Time Warner, the giant conglomerate that produced the movie.

We're talking about one of the world's largest entertainment and media companies, worth anywhere from \$12 billion up. In 1990, its chief executive, Steve Ross, made \$78.2 million. The kind of publicity they have been able to manifest in the last eighteen months is not just by accident. What has happened is that the movement that for the last 27 years since Malcolm's assassination has kept his name alive through efforts of its own, combating the civil rights argument, and the argument of "turn the other cheek," finally won out at least six years ago. We know that. And because of the impression young people have gained by listening to the voice of Malcolm X, reading his autobiography and his speeches, hearing people talk about him at various lectures at their universities and schools, and as the contradictions have sharpened in U.S. society, particularly as far as racism is concerned, and as the class contradictions have sharpened, they have started to know more and more the reasons why they should listen to his voice. And for that reason there's been a campaign to seize on Malcolm and give a distorted view.

Many of you might have come here on August 7, when we had a program with basically the same individuals who had knowl-

edge of Malcolm personally and had a difference on how they thought he should be portrayed. [...] But we've been fighting on this issue since about 1990 when we tried to build a campaign to save the Audubon Ballroom [where Malcolm during his last year addressed mass meetings of his new organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and where he was assassinated]. That campaign was initiated by a march and demonstration on February 21, 1990, when hundreds of young people came marching up from Harlem to Washington Heights to the Audubon Ballroom with huge signs with a large X on them, and words saying "Malcolm Never Died" and "Nothing But a Man," with Malcolm's face on the back. This was the first time the X was actually used in that manner. It was done by a brother in the December 12 Movement, Omowale Clay. And it was done way before Spike Lee or anybody thought of using the X to symbolize the movie. It was used to symbolize the struggle.

Of course the X goes back even further, to the formation of the Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America. And of course the X symbolizes the unknown, our original names being unknown [the memory of them having been destroyed by the slavemasters].

The X was used to indicate what should have been there but was not known.

The point is that this has been exploited. About September last year [1991] *USA Today* put out an article stating that Spike Lee had designed this for his film and that everybody else was using it as a knockoff, an unauthorized copy. That's not true at all.

The movement is the one that's responsible for promoting Malcolm X, his name, his ideas, his message. The movement continues to do this against all odds. The movement came up with the idea of using the X. And all this now is being ripped off because Time Warner had an eighteen-month plan to capitalize on this the way they did with Madonna, who they also control, Ice-T, and all these others that you hear about.

As a matter of fact, a couple of months ago someone asked Spike Lee how his film was coming along, how was it going to be. He said, "Great. It's gonna be better than Batman or the Simpsons." Now when something as important as what we're talking about can be compared in any kind of way with Batman or the Simpsons, you know there's something wrong.

What happened before was that a group of activists declared they were very concerned

about the issue of a film coming out about Malcolm that was being promoted by Spike Lee. Because he had used a kind of deceptive tactic to get the film away from Norman Jewison [the white director originally assigned by Warner Bros. to do the film]. We do agree that a Black director should do the film. But by the same token if he can use that

as a reason for him to determine that this person did not have the ability to do it, by the same token we who have been out here struggling over this issue can make an assessment too, about whether he is really the one to do this film. I know for myself I felt that Gordon Parks would have been a good person. [He]

is a dramatic presenter of information, and he was not given that chance.

Be that as it may, the fact is we gave Spike our arguments and said, "We want to talk to you. We want to discuss this thing about the film." He then did a flipflop and came out with another campaign to try to make believe for the press that this was a personal polemic

LA Times on Warner's Promotion Efforts (Excerpts from "When X Equals Dollars")

From the Los Angeles Times, November 3, 1992

The film *Malcolm X* wouldn't seem to have much in common with *Batman*, but image experts say the X that symbolizes the *Malcolm X* movie may already be among the most recognized film logos of all time, rivaling even the eerie black bat that was used to market [the] caped crusader.

Now the Warner Brothers marketing executives who turned *Batman* into a \$250 million box office hit are trying to make the omnipresent X also represent the almighty dollar symbol. The carefully planned marketing and public relations campaign by Warner, the film distributor, is unlike that for any previous movie from a Black film maker, industry executives say.

...Hollywood's depiction of the life of the slain Black Muslim leader, is expected to be of wide interest to various races, ages, and income levels. In fact, because the film, which opens on November 18, cost so much to make (\$34 million) [although *Batman* cost \$50 million — E.B.] it basically must be marketed to everyone, and painstakingly so.

Until now Warner executives have refused to discuss the marketing of the film, a campaign whose price tag is expected to reach nearly \$10 million by opening day. But in interviews with the [LA] Times two top marketing executives of Warner revealed how carefully over the last eighteen months each phase of the marketing strategy was planned.

In a highly unusual multipronged campaign Warner Brothers is relying heavily upon trailers that portray *Malcolm X* as a relatively moderate man in order to attract older people and whites to see the film. "If people think that the film *Malcolm X* stands for anger and fists in the air, it will be harder to market," said Joel Wayne, executive vice-president of advertising at Warner.

Warner has also taken pains to separate *Malcolm X* from its previous effort at marketing a black movie, *New Jack City*, a film about the violent rise and fall of a Harlem

drug lord, which opened in 1991 to violent incidents in a handful of cities nationwide, including Los Angeles' Westwood area.

"The material in *Malcolm X* is much different from that," said Robert G. Friedman, president of worldwide advertising at Warner. "It is epic in its look and dramatic in its feel. I don't think there's anything inflammatory in the movie."

While trying to make whites comfortable seeing the film, Warner Brothers acknowledges that the success of the film depends greatly on its appeal to Blacks. It has also undertaken an extensive public relations campaign to draw Black audiences, especially young Blacks, to the box office.

"We have set out to position it as a movie for anyone," Friedman said. "We assume the film will first appeal to adults over 25 who have more of a knowledge of who *Malcolm* was. But we also have to find ways to make the film's appeal younger."

"Perhaps the best way to appeal to cross-over audiences of whites and Blacks is to first target teenage Black culture," said John Singleton, director of the film *Boyz n the Hood*. "Young Black culture has had such a profound effect on America at large. It permeates the media. But you have to do your homework. You have to be careful not to insult the core group," he said.

"*Malcolm X* is one of the first Black films with a multigenerational appeal," said Ken Smikel, president of Target Market News, a newsletter about Black consumers. "But film distributors have minimum experience in that area. Perhaps the best way you can get an edge on the learning curve is to draw on the experience of African Americans."

That may be why one of the nation's largest Black advertising firms, Uni-World, was brought in a year ago by Warner Brothers to help it figure out how to reach Black consumers. The agency chose Black-oriented magazines, newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations for the film's ads,

and it also pieced together a carefully orchestrated public relations campaign that began nudging the opinion leaders of the Black community months ago.

"We know that we need a groundswell of positive word-of-mouth opinion about this film," said Byron E. Lewis, chairman of Uni-World, "so we're trying to touch all the bases in the Black community."

Over the last year the agency has brought director Spike Lee and cast members for the film to a series of gatherings of influential, professional Blacks. They showed them at this summer's annual gathering of the National Association of Black Journalists in Detroit, where Lee suggested that African Americans take the film's opening day off to see the film. He also met with members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Premier-week screenings for Black communities are scheduled in half a dozen major cities.

At the same time Warner Brothers developed a study guide for the film that it will send to urban high school history teachers in the nation's top 100 markets. It will also send *Malcolm X* book covers to schools. And even two separate sound tracks for the film. One features period music from the film aimed at adults. The other contains contemporary popular lyrics from the movie aimed at teenagers.

Certainly Lee, who declined to be interviewed, but who has had a hands-on role in each step of the film's marketing, has taken that approach. For more than a year he has been wearing the X-cap just about everywhere. And his high-profile friends, including Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, have also donned the caps.

"The X has become an instant icon," said Elroy H. Vick, chief executive for the San Francisco corporate-identity firm Randolph Associates. "It doesn't just stand for a movie, or the passionate, deeply rooted issue of Black pride. It also stands for lots of free publicity, the best marketing that money can't buy."

between himself and Amiri Baraka. Amiri Baraka was one of the pioneers in exploring Black culture in the '60s, you know, the Black arts movement. It never was personal and it was never about getting any money.

A lot of people have been involved in this film and have gotten money for what they were trying to do, and many people are criticizing what has been done. We want you to know that in principle we've never been interested in trying to be official consultants to the film, or to try to get any money from it or from Spike Lee. All we were interested in was how Malcolm X was going to be portrayed, and how the movement was going to be portrayed, because there was more than just Malcolm during that period.

I just wanted to read an excerpt from something to give you an idea that this is not just some hyperbole, nor is it just something we're making up. We feel concerned about Malcolm X. We're not talking any kind of sour grapes or jealousy.

The idea that Time Warner has been very much involved in distorting Malcolm's image comes from some of our brothers, particularly in the Patrice Lumumba Coalition out there in Los Angeles, who sent us this clipping from the Los Angeles Times of November 3, 1992, from the business section. The article is by Bruce Horovitz, "When X Equals Dollars: Spike Lee Movie to Create Instant Icon." [See box on p. 11 for excerpts from Los Angeles Times article.]

The point is not that we were dissatisfied that Black promoters would actually get an opportunity to make money off a Black project. But this gave us the incentive, the determination, to go on line before the film even opens. From what we hear from people who have seen it, and we ourselves have seen parts of it, every criticism we have made has been justified by the product that's about to come forth next week.

And one of the reasons why we came to this conclusion is this. We had the script, and we [compared it to] the original book, the Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley. We were familiar with that. We were familiar with the James Baldwin script [in circulation since 1972], because you can buy it in paperback. It's called *One Day When I Was Lost*. You can buy it in almost any bookstore.

And then we saw the script where Spike Lee had made his own indications of how he was going to treat the whole story. But more than that was what we deduced when we saw the script. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to be able to use deductive reasoning. It was clear that Spike Lee was going to play the character of Shorty Anderson, who was the sidekick to Malcolm when he was in the Detroit Red stage. [...] Now, you'll find that Spike Lee has a proclivity to be in his own films but not to do cameo roles. In other words [...] if Spike Lee is going to be in the film playing Shorty Anderson, it tells you that

a sizable amount of the film is going to be based on the time when Malcolm was a hustler, doing the things that he was later going to turn away from — which is when we become interested in him.

So therefore we know the film was going to be tilted, with too much gone into Malcolm's past. Not only that, it's to the omission of half the time when he was in a particular stage that nobody even thinks about. We know about Malcolm Little, when he was a child, from his birth up to what happened with his family. We know about Detroit Red, his hustler days. We know about his prison days as Satan. We know about him as Malcolm X, as a convert. We know about him even as El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, when he went to Mecca.

But the most important part, that we don't know about, that you don't often hear, is the stage of Omowale ["the son who has come home," a Yoruba name given to Malcolm in Nigeria]. When Malcolm went to West Africa, where he was able to pick up and deal with Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Touré of Guinea, and all these other African leaders, and he came into contact with the Organization of African Unity, which had just formed in 1963. When he got the idea for the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Where he could meet with Dr. [John Henrik] Clarke in Ghana, with Maya Angelou, Julian Mayfield, and others, all people from our community who were based in Ghana trying to build up a relationship between Africans here in the United States and those in Africa. If that's omitted, if that's sacrificed for promotion of a hustler, then the picture has already been distorted.

No matter how glamorous it looks, no matter how slick and sophisticated the photography is, no matter if it makes you laugh at certain times and even feel passionate about dealing with his assassination, if that isn't there, if that's the kind of omission they make, the whole impression is wrong.

Now for Time Warner to be sending out these history packets as the real story, that's a travesty. If you want to know about the real Malcolm X, if you want videos, the best thing to do is get in contact with Gil Noble, with the archives he's putting together now, because Gil Noble was the one that really started pushing [...] these documentaries, like Malcolm speaking at Oxford. Gil went into his own pocket, bought the film, put this whole file together, and helped to keep the real Malcolm out here.

So I'm saying that what we're talking about is opposition to trying to institutionalize a film as being the final determinant of how you ought to view Malcolm X. [Instead you should listen to] those of us who knew Malcolm, those of us who were associated with him, even those of us who were in rival organizations, like I was, with a man who most people overlook. But if Malcolm was alive today he would tell you that the late

honorable Carlos Cooks was responsible for lots of things that people just normally think that other people have done. For instance, the promotion of the red, black, and green [Black nationalist flag], the continuation of Garvey's ideas and his organization, the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, founded in 1941, the convention in 1959 to get rid of the word "Negro" and replace it with African and Black, the idea of natural hair being a way to indicate our pride, the concept of Buy Black as an economic vehicle for us to make sure that the economy of our community is controlled by the majority of its residents. The idea of Black uniforms. (Later on the Republic of New Africa picked up on that.) The paramilitary force. All those things came from a brother from the Dominican Republic who happened to be an African named Carlos Cooks.

If you read the Autobiography of Malcolm X, he tells you that when he got here he was influenced by the Buy Black people. And if you read the book *Black Nationalism* by Professor Essien-Udom from the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, it will tell you that.



So what we're saying is that we're here trying to establish the true image of what Malcolm stood for. The rest of the idea is trying to save the Audubon Ballroom. Because we feel it should be preserved the same way the Ford Theatre was, where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, or the motel where Dr. King was assassinated. The Audubon should be saved.

It's interesting that they never make the connection with the people who were struggling around Malcolm, who shared the objectives he stood for. The same thing with those who went to the United Nations in Geneva in the last four or five years trying to bring up the question of human rights violations against Africans and other people of color in this country. That is what is important. That is what Malcolm needs to be identified with. □