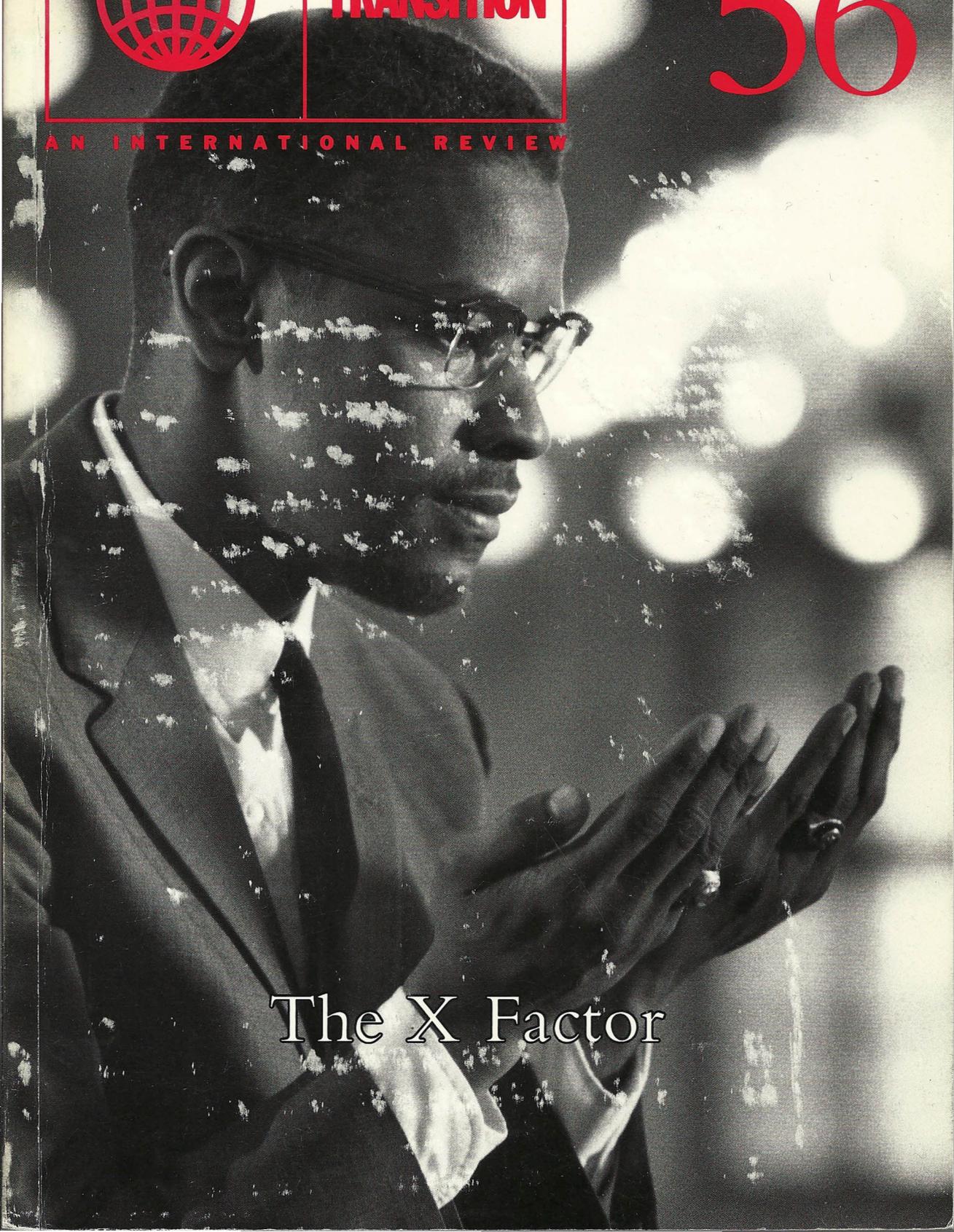




TRANSITION

56

AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



The X Factor



MALCOLM'S MYTHMAKING

David Bradley

*John Brown's body lies a-mouldering
in the grave,
His soul goes marching on.*

—Thomas Brigham Bishop
John Brown's Body

One balmy night in September 1991, I was in Newark, New Jersey, dining at the home of Amiri Baraka. It was not primarily a social occasion—he, Toni Cade Bambara, Thulani Davis, and I were scripting a documentary film about W. E. B. DuBois: this was a working meal—but it was convivial as could be, due to the rich supply of food, wine, and culturally concerned folk. And it was almost inevitable that eventually conversation would turn to the Malcolm X movie, which the redoubtable Spike Lee was supposed to start shooting the next week.

Baraka, of course, had already started shooting. In early August he had held a rally in Harlem and charged that Lee was trashing the story of Malcolm's life "to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier." The charges were hard to verify, as they were based on a "leaked" script; Lee had, supposedly, classified the thing Top

Secret. Reliable sources said that the camera operators had only seen the shooting script a day or so before, and Baraka wasn't showing his copy around, but reliable sources said the script emphasized Malcolm's youthful days as "Detroit Red"—which is to say, it was full of big band music, drinking, doping, and hustling, and that may have been what Baraka had been alluding to in Harlem. Now he just shook his head and said, "The script is terrible." I'd heard that before. I'd been hearing it since another balmy September night, back in '84, when I agreed to write the script.

Not *this* script. Actually, not *the* script. *Another* script. I was not the first writer on the job. Nor was I the last; two drafts and a set of changes later the producer, Marvin Worth, and the studio, Warner Brothers, "brought in another writer"—Hollywoodese for, I got fired. I don't know when this happened—nobody called up and fired me, that's not how it works—but I heard about it in early 1988, at a cocktail party in Philadelphia, from another writer who said he had been offered the job.

He took it. And got fired from it. And

Discussed in this essay

Malcolm: The Life of a
Man Who Changed
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thereby no doubt hangs a tale or two, just as a tale or two depends from my own hiring and firing, and no doubt from those of the writers who came before. Lately a lot of journalists have been trying to find out what those tales are—the *Malcolm X* movie has by now generated more publicity without getting made than most films that do get made. They've gotten frustrated and a mite discouraged—"Perhaps we'll never know what went down with the script," lamented Playthell Benjamin, in *Emerge Magazine*.

Probably not if you don't know any more about Hollywood than Benjamin apparently does.

Few do. The General Public has an idealized notion of how the Motion Picture Industry operates—a notion derived mostly from movies and MPI publicity. As a result, the GP consistently misapprehends MPI events. For example, emotional outbursts on the set. A nuclear exchange that has rocked all Tinseltown? Hardly. Usually it's just a firecracker in a tin can. Or maybe a smokescreen over contract negotiations. For another

**Malcolm X at
Kennedy Airport
upon return from
abroad, November
24, 1964.**

Photo: Robert Parent/
Courtesy of Pathfinder
Press

example, firings. When I tell people I was fired off the Malcolm X movie they often get a half-compassionate, half-embarrassed, "Gee, what can I say?" look on their faces. One reporter marveled that I wasn't "bitter" about getting fired.

It's hard to be bitter when you're living in—not on—your severance pay.

People think getting fired in Hollywood is like getting *fired*. It's more akin to ending an *affaire du cœur*. At worst it's like breaking up with someone you love. Usually it's like breaking up with someone you hate. At best it's like getting divorced from somebody you married for money anyway—you always get alimony, and sometimes you get joint custody and child support; if the writer they bring in uses a lot of your material and the Screen Writers Guild decides you ought to get credit, your name ends up on the silver screen, and you get paid even more. People also think that if they see three names in a writing credit, the writers worked together. More likely they never *saw* each other, except at cocktail parties. And when they hear that a writer got fired, people think it's because there was something wrong with the script.

From the point of view of the producer and/or the studio something *is* wrong—only they can't say what. Legally, they have to tell the writer what it is—there's boilerplate in the contract about notes. I know writers who claim to have seen notes—numbered, neatly typed on studio letterhead—but I never have. I once got two handwritten (back-slanted, purple ink, little circles over the "i's") pages (yellow lined paper, letter-, not legal-size), but that was on another project, and besides the wench is now an "independent producer" and working

out of her house in suburban Oxnard, which is to say, dead. Most producers won't put *anything* on paper, and get nervous if the writer takes notes (or, God forbid, brings a tape recorder to a meeting) because they're afraid somebody will find out the stupid ideas were theirs.

They probably weren't; producers' ideas are rarely coherent enough to be translated directly into dialogue and action. In fact, producers don't have ideas; they have instincts and gut-feelings. They're right a lot of the time—you don't have to make sense to make movies—but it's not like they can *explain*. . . . That's why they solve "script problems" by bringing in another writer, who, they hope, will understand what's wanted without being told in words. But that doesn't mean the old writer didn't do the old script right; it just means the producer and/or the studio (not the same thing, usually not the same people) didn't like it.

You don't have to be a Hollywood insider to "know what went down with the script" on the Malcolm X movie. All you have to do is know a little bit about the business and apply a little logic—which Playthell Benjamin doesn't have and surely didn't do when he listed the candidates for writer credits thusly: "Worth commissioned the distinguished Afro-American novelist James Baldwin to write the script . . . after a year of 'livin' large in Tinseltown at studio expense, he failed to come up with a usable and finished script. Two other novelists tried their hand at it and failed: David Bradley, a black college professor and author of the celebrated novel *The Chaneyville Incident*, and Calder Willingham, author of the novel *Eternal Fire*. Two Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatists

also bit the dust trying to produce a viable script: Charles Fuller and David Mamet. . . . A brilliant playwright who has taken us on marvelous excursions into the soul of African American culture [Fuller] seemed destined for the project. But alas, zilch."

First of all, no writer produces "zilch," because if he does he doesn't get paid, and maybe gets sued. So whatever happened, every writer produced something that looked like a script. And all the scripts told pretty much the same story. Now any writer can produce something that is—in the words of Mr. Benjamin, "unusable and unfinished" or not "viable"—but *all* the writers couldn't have screwed up the same story so badly—remember, we're talking not only drafts but producer- and studio-influenced redrafts—for so long—we're talking a quarter of a century here—that a talented director—both Sidney Lumet and Norman Jewison were involved at some point—couldn't have come up with a shooting script.

Especially not these writers.

Leave me and Willingham out of it—everybody knows novelists can't write scripts. But Mamet and Fuller surely can—Pulitzer Prize-winning plays and scripts for films that get mentioned at Oscar time. You really think *neither* one of those guys could come up with a "viable" script? As for James Baldwin, he was a novelist, sure, but he was also a playwright and, while the man admittedly wasn't afraid to spend his expense allowance (which is written into the contract; it's not like the studio got taken by either Baldwin or surprise) if he "failed to come up with a usable and finished script" how come Worth brought in another writer, the late Arnold Perl, to fin-

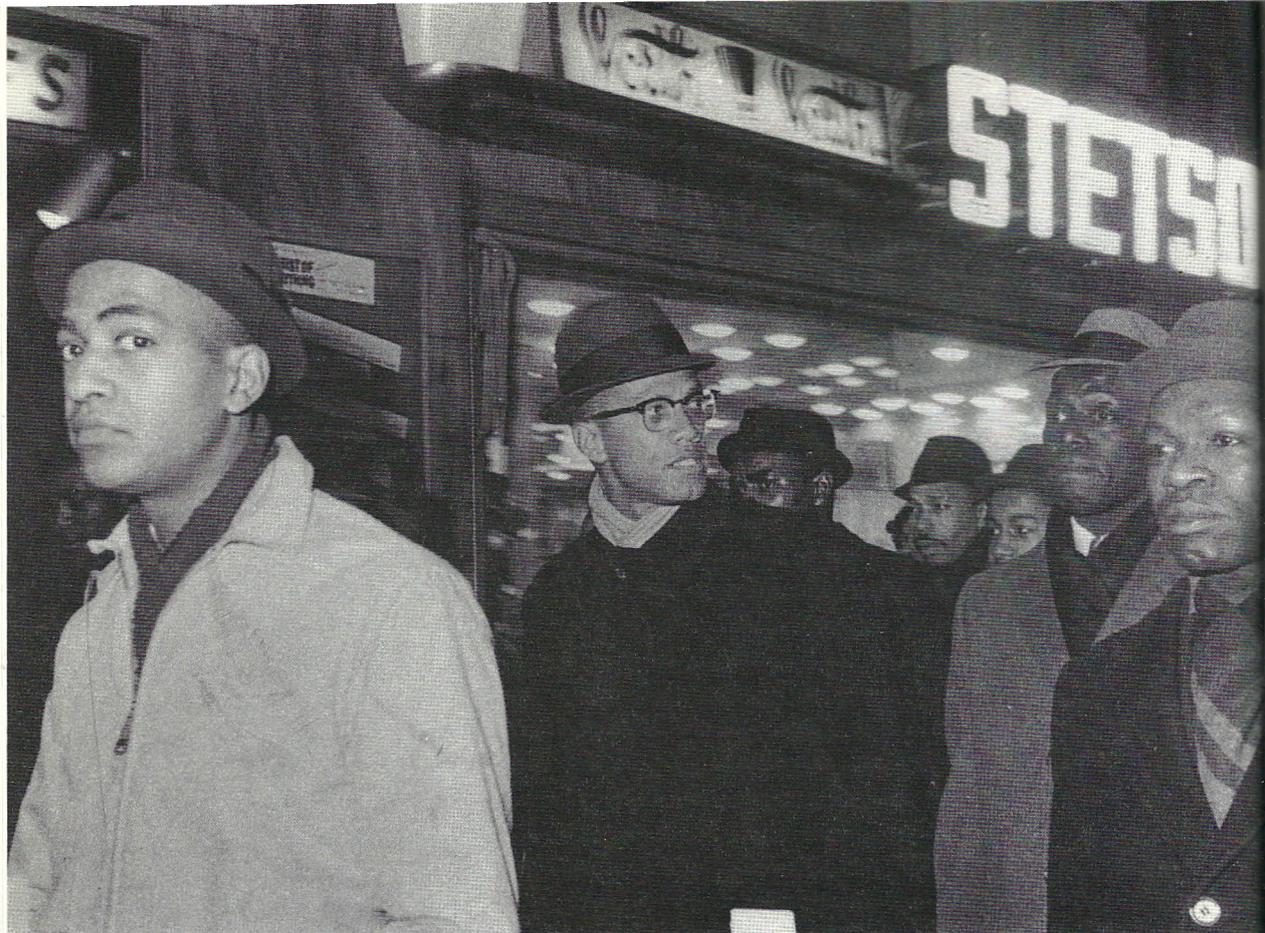
ish the unusable? And how come Spike Lee—as he told Benjamin—"thought it was a great script except for the last third" and is using the "unusable" script to make the movie? I mean, nobody would be so cynical as to suggest that the unusable script became usable once both the writers were dead. . . .

It's not so terrible that the General Public doesn't do the logic, or that Playthell Benjamin didn't. What was terrible is that *I* didn't, back in 1984 when I flew into LAX (first class; it's in the Guild's Minimum Basic Agreement) to take my first meeting on the Malcolm X Project. I was both naive and egotistical—perfect qualifications for a young scriptwriter—so when the producer told me (as he apparently told Benjamin) that the only reason the film hadn't been shot was because all the writers before me screwed up, I believed it.

I kept on believing it until the spring of 1986 (It doesn't usually take that long to do a script, but there was a Guild strike in there) when I was taking another meeting on the project and one of the studio executives expressed a certain discomfort about the content of one of the speeches I had the Malcolm character making. I explained that those particular lines came directly from one of Malcolm's actual speeches. The executive said she understood that, but still wanted me to tone it down, because it made Malcolm sound too anti-Semitic. I can't swear that quote's exact, but it's close. And as I sat there not-screaming I had a flash of Socratic lucidity: Why do these people want to make a movie about Malcolm X?

The old Malcolm X, I mean.

Not Malcolm as he now appears—neutralized by death, sanitized by time,



**Malcolm X leading
Nation of Islam
pickets February
13, 1963, in Times
Square protesting
police harassment
of Muhammed
Speaks salespeople.**

Photo: Robert Parent/
Courtesy of Pathfinder
Press

and legitimized by the failure of the social programs he denigrated. Nor Malcolm as he appeared in 1968, when his advocacy of self-defense was vindicated by the assassination of Martin Luther King. (Might as well get violent, homey, 'cause they blew Mr. Nonviolence's ass away.) And not Malcolm as he appeared in 1967, when even Roger Wilkins, Mr. Blue Chip Nigger himself, admits he "thought of Malcolm X and understood him better than I ever had before." Nor even Malcolm as he was at the end of his life—exiled from the Nation of Islam, broke, homeless, hunted like an animal.

I mean Malcolm in 1959. When Mike Wallace's documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced* gave white America its first look at a black leader who wasn't marchin' and singin' and keepin' a-hum-

ble and talkin' 'bout Jesus, but who was standing up and shouting and preaching pride and a warrior religion that had been killing Christians (and vice versa) for thirteen hundred years. I mean the Malcolm whose political credo was a lot more American than the *agape* love songs of Martin Luther King (the American Revolution was *not* a nonviolent demonstration) and whose potential appeal was therefore greater—you didn't have to convert anybody to self-defense, it's the hallmark of every American founding document. I mean the Malcolm who was as handsome and young and vigorous as Jack Kennedy, Mr. Youth and Vigor himself—and more charismatic by some folks' measure. I mean the Malcolm whose personal morality, unlike Marcus Garvey's, or Adam Clayton Powell's (or

King's or Kennedy's), was above reproach. I mean the Malcolm who was liberal America's second worst nightmare—a powerful black orator who preached hate and made sense—and who became liberal America's worst nightmare, because when he stopped preaching hate he didn't start preaching love,

They didn't keep firing writers because the scripts were wrong. They kept firing writers because the story was wrong

he just started making more sense, to more people. That Malcolm frightened the feces out of damn near everybody. Why would these people want to make a movie about him?

Answer: No reason.

Conclusion: They didn't keep firing writers because the scripts were wrong. They kept firing writers because the *story* was wrong.

And not just because Hollywood numbers among its denizens a number of folk with ethnically identifiable surnames who might have legitimate concerns about portraying as a hero someone who during most of his life mouthed sentiments that Adolph Hitler would have found extreme. *Everybody* in Hollywood does not have an ethnically identifiable surname, even if they haven't changed it. And the Malcolm X story is more wrong than that.

It did not conform to a three-act structure—a real life almost never does. But if a writer doesn't conform to it, producers and studios have a fit. (No, they never heard of Shakespeare.) It was too

long, because if you start when Malcolm is young (to get in the bits about the white supremacists burning down his childhood home and putting his father on the trolley tracks so the streetcar can crush his skull), you've got to deal with thirty-five years—and some of the most powerful events of the century: the Selma March; not one Harlem riot but two; the assassination of John Kennedy; the March on Washington . . . the list goes on. Only the writer can't—in script form you've got one hundred and twenty pages, most of it white space.

But that's just formal stuff. The content of the story was also wrong. All wrong. Malcolm was a victim of racism—but in Michigan and Massachusetts, not Mississippi. Even *publishers* know *that* won't play; that's why Richard Wright's editor said Wright's autobiography “would break much more logically with the departure from the South.” Malcolm attended integrated schools—and came out a semi-illiterate because some of his teachers were racist bastards who humiliated him in class. Can't have that, when the legal basis of the modern civil rights movement rested on the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and that said, “Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children . . . for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive

in a racially integrated school system” Malcolm was a stone-crazy, brutal, drug-addicted, no-good nigger on the express train to hell via the violent death route, but during his predictable layover in maximum security he sho’ nuff rehabilitated his ass—taught himself to read, learned to argue like Socrates and Cicero, all those Greek and Roman cats—because he got religion. But it was the wrong religion—wrong scripture, wrong God, wrong devil, wrong imagery. *The Cross and the Switchblade*, now that’s right; *The Scimitar and the Switchblade*, now that’s . . . not. And if any director or producer or star—such folks have more clout than writers—pitched that concept over lunch at the Tribeca Grill, the studio exec would have made him pay the check.

Because we’re not just talking prejudice or politics. We’re talking losing money. Consider: Malcolm got off drugs. Not just the illegal ones—all the drugs: tobacco, alcohol, white women. So, if the movie doesn’t make money in the theaters, what are you going to do? You can’t sell it to TV, because who’d sponsor it? RJR Nabisco? The Miller Brewing Company? Maybe Maxwell House—Malcolm did drink a lot of coffee. But not Ford, or GM or Chrysler. Because Malcolm kicked the habit of thinking white women were beautiful just because they were white—he kicked the *image*. Which meant he rejected the fundamental icon of American advertising—the Caucasian T & A used to sell the tobacco and the alcohol and the new car (how old *was* Malcolm’s Oldsmobile?) and almost everything else. Malcolm did not become a Communist, but he ceased to be an uncritical consumer.

Malcolm even kicked Hollywood. Once he sat for hours watching gangster movies. Then he turned into a bookworm.

Want to hold that up as a model for the “Underclass”?

Well, yes. *I* did. Because back in ’68, when I first read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, I had been right on the verge: smoking a pack a day, drinking bad Scotch but wanting better, conforming to the primary stereotype of the black male—the one Clarence Thomas *didn’t* mention—and thinking that it was morally superior to work through the system, and that liberation lay in the goodwill of my fellow man. Malcolm, through *The Autobiography*, made me wonder why. Did I want the cigarette or did I just want the woman? Did I like the taste of Scotch or did I just think it would help me get the woman? Did I want the woman—or just her skin under my hand? And did it make sense for you to work through the system when the system wasn’t working for you? And did I really want my liberation to depend on liberal goodwill and/or guilt?

And back in ’84 I agreed to write the script because it seemed that The Black Community (I love that term) was all caught up in symbolic agitations about Martin Luther King (Should the city name a freeway or a street or a convention center after him, and should his birthday be a national holiday?) while fewer and fewer young black people were being made aware of Malcolm—and his rational and philosophically legitimate alternative to nonviolence. There was a joke floating around about a kid who asked, “Who is this Malcolm the Tenth, anyway?” I didn’t think it was funny.

None of the people at that meeting thought it was funny when we'd first talked about the script. Then, in '84, they'd shaken their heads as I had, and said that that was terrible. And now, in '86, whatever else they said, they were talking about the Malcolm X story as if they *liked* it. But they didn't like it. They hated it. And they hated Malcolm, just as most of America had hated him. Statistically speaking, when he died almost no one—white folks, black folks, folks with ethnically identifiable surnames, folks who had changed their ethnically identifiable surnames to something more generic (like Smith or Jones), and folks who would one day change their generic surnames to something ethnically identifiable—wanted him alive.

I'm not saying they wanted him dead—although somebody surely did. They just wished someone would rid them of this troublesome priest. And were relieved when it happened and happy about how it happened—King intoned that those who live by the sword shall die by it; Malcolm's death legitimized nonviolence—temporarily. A lot of tears were shed for Malcolm in the Inner City, but people in the geographical and political and philosophical suburbs—Hollywood is one big suburb—heaved a sigh of relief when Malcolm breathed his last.

But a movie would breathe life back into his corpse. Because that's what movies *do*: bring things to life. And Hollywood has always done it better than anybody in the world. Forget European cinema—maybe it's artistic but you think any French *auteur* could do the Bible like Cecil B. De Mille? Forget Japanese cinema. Even their *monsters* can't

act—that's why they have to buy Hollywood—and their greatest production, Pearl Harbor (Mitsubishi-Sansui-Sony, 1941), didn't have the punch of John Ford's remake. And today Hollywood can do it better than ever. So you take even a semigood actor and give him strong lines (you don't *need* a writer, just crib from "The Ballot or the Bullet") and put him on that big screen with the sixteen-speaker SurroundSound. Let some people sit there in the dark and the Dolby, and you CLOSE UP: MALCOLM'S FACE and CONTINUE VOICEOVER as you DISSOLVE TO: MONTAGE—full-color and sound of the boys in the 'hood gettin' strip-searched at bayonet-point by the National Guard and what you've got is . . . well. Malcolm said he didn't know that he could start a riot, but Hollywood can, and has. I don't mean some silliness like breaking shop windows in Westwood or on Chestnut Street—I mean what happened after *Birth of a Nation*.

I don't know what else was said in that meeting. I stopped listening. I never reviewed the tape. Because by then I'd figured out I was going to get fired.

Right then I *deserved* to be fired. The script was a mess. It fell apart after act one. The first act was a natural—the producer loved it—because there were plenty of opportunities for music and dancing and sex. But in act two, while Malcolm hadn't yet become the man the studio hated, he also had not yet become the man I loved. In act two he was a guy who hadn't escaped drugs, only gotten on a Methadone program of hate, half-baked religion, and addictive loyalty to a murderous little mulatto who looked like he escaped from the organ

grinder. And he was *boring*—you want to watch forty minutes of somebody *not* drinking, *not* dancing, *not* fornicating, and making crazy speeches about a Judgment Day on which a big flying saucer loaded with hundreds of fighter planes would descend and destroy the white folks? This was maybe what the producer and the studio were trying to say.

But even if I got fancy with the flashbacks and got some music into act two and some hint of the man Malcolm would become into act one, I was still going to get fired. Because the studio wasn't going to like act three and because the producer wasn't going to like anything but what went on in act one. The only thing I could do was make sure I got fired for purely Hollywood reasons.

So—to make the story conform to the three-act structure—I went home and got my head screwed on straight and stopped thinking that Jimmy Baldwin and David Mamet had screwed up and

Hollywood finds novelists annoying. They're tolerated because they add an air of class and they work cheap

did what they did—captured what I could of Malcolm's life in script form. And I sent it in, billed for the work, spent the money happily on a house in Southern California—but a hundred miles from Hollywood. FREEZE FRAME. ROLL CREDITS.

The trouble with the three-act structure, though, is that it makes you leave things out. Like how I felt when I sent the script in: scared. Because once I'd figured out they didn't really want to make a

movie about *my* Malcolm, I had to wonder why they wanted me.

Well, let's see. I was an award-winning novelist. And I'd written an article about Malcolm for *Esquire*. And I had academic credentials—grad school, college professor. And I had one (unproduced) screenplay to my credit. . . .

Let's get serious.

Hollywood finds novelists annoying. They're tolerated because they add an air of class and because they work cheap, but eventually the Industry chews them up and spits them out—or turns them into scriptwriters. Hollywood finds academics amusing. Screen *Bringing Up Baby* or *Teacher's Pet*, or one of those Flubber movies starring the late Fred MacMurray. And *everybody* in Hollywood has an unproduced screenplay—including the guys parking the Benzes at Trumps.

So maybe they brought me in to fire me. I mean, let's say a studio that owns a property that a lot of popular actors—who are complaining loudly that the industry makes very few movies with major parts for them—think would be a good vehicle, so you want to look like you're trying, but don't want to succeed. Maybe you scrape somebody off the bottom of the scriptwriter barrel, turn him loose, and stand back and say, "See, we're trying."

Or maybe they brought me in to take the blame. Because one thing was certain; if a movie got made, there were going to be compromises—some for reasons that were technical or dramatic, and perfectly honorable, and some for reasons that were not—and a lot of people who revered the memory of Malcolm were going to be displeased, and likely to make accusations of racist exploitation.

They'd have at least a *prima facie* argument, because none of the Hollywood people was a black person. Marvin Worth was not a black person. (Still isn't, so far as I know, although Hollywood makeup men are notoriously brilliant.) Sidney Lumet—the only director who had then been mentioned—was not a black person. (He'd been married to Lena Horne's daughter, though.) None of the Warner Brothers executives were black persons. (There were two black guys at Warner who read the script, young comers, two doors up from the mail room, but one young comer opposed the project and the other young comer went.) Ah, but if there were a black writer involved, the producer and the studio (and a white director, too) could shrug and point and say, hey, hang him. (You think Hollywood doesn't think that way? Why do you think Steven Spielberg wanted Alice Walker on the set of *The Color Purple*, even though he rejected her script?)

Not that whatever happens in a movie is the writer's fault. A script is just the basis for a lot of other artistic decisions, over which writers have no control at all. It's right there in the contract boilerplate: "Writer will defer to Producer in all matters of taste and judgment." And that's just on the script. Writers don't agree to defer on choice of director, or casting, or cinematography, or music—or any of the things that give film its awesome power—because writers rarely have anything to say about any of those things to begin with. Being a scriptwriter—unless you're a writer-producer, or a writer-director—is like being the navigator on the *Titanic*: you lay out the course, but somebody else says full speed ahead

and damn the icebergs. But the GP doesn't know that. The GP will lynch a writer for the studio's decisions. The GP will lynch a black writer for a white studio's decisions. You don't believe me? Go ask Alice.

As I worked through the process of script changes—mostly cutting a hundred and forty-six pages down to a hundred and twenty-five—I was really scared. Because by that time I'd gotten around to reading *Cultural Literacy*, the book that made E. D. Hirsch a bugbear of liberal intellectuals back in 1987. After I brought my brain back on line—cutting fifteen percent of a script is best done without cerebation—I looked into the controversy.

Unlike many of my colleagues, I didn't think Hirsch was all that bad; he pointed out some things that were at worst obvious and often subtle and profound. One chapter I found intriguing described nation-making; in Hirsch's terms a conscious and artificial process. Hirsch's argument linked the establishment of what is an obviously artificial entity, the geographic border, to the less obviously—but equally—artificial entity, a standard language. Then he argued: "Every national culture is similarly contrived. . . . For nation builders, fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling, and pronunciation."

Hirsch went on to give an example of creating part of a national culture:

One American culture maker who was driven by the aim of doing well by doing good was Mason Weems, the author of numerous popular works, including an edition of Franklin's Autobiography expanded by anecdotes.

... His ... main contribution to the American tradition was his biography of George Washington, wherein could be found the original legend of the cherry tree. . . . If this legend had been left to languish in Weems's book, it might have been forgotten. For the sober later biographers of Washington, anxious to discriminate between fact and what Weems openly called romance, were successful in discrediting Weems's book, the popularity of which waned greatly in the later nineteenth century. But with a sure instinct, the compilers of textbooks took up the Weems stories. McGuffey included a sterner version of the cherry-tree episode in his Second Eclectic Reader and thus assured it a place in many other readers, and in our permanent lore. Abraham Lincoln relates in his Autobiography how he educated himself by carefully reading and rereading a few books . . . Weems's Life of Washington, the Bible . . . the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (possibly the expanded version by Weems). . . . This typical frontier education itself became part of American national mythology after Lincoln's assassination. . . . In the early stages of a nation's life, its traditions are in flux. But with the passage of time, traditions that have been recorded in a nation's printed books and transmitted in its educational system become fixed in the national memory. They become known by so many people over so long a time that they enter the oral and written tradition, where they tend to remain through generations.

The first thing that struck me about this description was that truth seemed to be an option. While the aim of culture-making was the inculcation of morality and values, it didn't seem to matter whether the cultural icons had actually exemplified those values—only that

eventually everybody thought they had. Maybe it worked in the short term, but I wondered if a culture based not only on myths, but on lies—the Big Lie, maybe—could be viable in the long term. The question seemed not to have occurred to Hirsch. It occurred to me, because the second thing that struck me was that description of Mason Weems as “driven by the aim of doing well by doing good.” That pretty much described my motivations for taking on the Malcolm X project. Weems introduced the biography thusly:

Give us his private virtues! In these every youth is interested, because in these every youth may become a Washington—a Washington in piety and patriotism—in industry and honour—and consequently a Washington in what alone deserves the name, SELF ESTEEM and UNIVERSAL RESPECT.

With only minor caveats—like a clarification of the word “patriotism”—that could have been my declaration of intent. The trouble was, I knew I didn't like what had resulted from Weems's efforts. I wondered if, in the end, I could like what would result from mine.

Because, even absent any politics—and what is?—the Malcolm X story is a risky one to tell in a medium that imposes some genuine limitations with regard to length and structure. (Playthell Benjamin quotes two “film pundits,” one of whom “confided ‘If Spike makes this film anything less than four hours long he's doomed.’” and the other of whom “assured me . . . ‘The only way you can tell Malcolm's story effectively is with two movies of about three hours and ten minutes each.’” Both may be

right, but neither one knows Sunset Boulevard from the Sunset Marquis when it comes to the economics of commercial filmmaking. A ticket to a four-hour movie would have to sell for maybe twice as much as normal; how would you end a three-hour movie to get folks to come back for a three-hour sequel—the next day? The simple fact is that the Malcolm X story is not a natural. It has colorful parts and dramatic parts and parts that are historically significant, but they aren't the *same* parts, and they don't always come at the "right" time, and Malcolm was often at the "wrong" place.

For example, the Harlem riot of July 1964. It started as a nonviolent protest orchestrated by CORE, but it turned violent and spread to Bedford-Stuyvesant and it went on for six days, and in the middle of the looting and burning young blacks started shouting: "We want Malcolm." So you've got this great sequence: cops beating journalists, looters running down 125th Street with TV sets, traditional civil rights leaders in suits riding around in limos with bullhorns trying to quell the riot and getting pelted with bricks and doggie doo, and Malcolm standing at the window of his headquarters at the Hotel Teresa, smoke from the fires swirling around him, listening to the gunshots, sirens, rioters chanting his name, and he's tortured by the sudden realization of his rhetoric. . . .

Too bad he was in Europe at the time.

Or take the confrontation in Selma, Alabama. There had already been some minor violence, so the SCLC had a fit when Malcolm arrived, because the young folks in SNCC wanted him to speak but Martin Luther King was in jail so he couldn't counterbalance Malcolm

with that big soothing Baptist baritone. So Andy Young tries to get him to keep it cool, but Malcolm told him (politely) to go to hell and stands up and says that white people better make sure Martin Luther King gets what he's after, because there are "other forces waiting to take over if he fails." Great stuff. So then you CUT TO: THE PETTIS BRIDGE, five hundred nonviolent marchers come over the rise and two hundred cops go at them with tear gas and billy clubs and whips, and Malcolm . . .

Was dead by then. And Martin Luther King had long since bailed out of jail and gone off to Norway and come back with the Nobel Prize. It's a beautiful ironic finish—for a movie about King.

But you can deal with those little historical problems. You don't have to lie, just adjust the timing a little—so Malcolm rides through the riot-torn streets on the way to the airport, maybe. And you cut straight from the scene at Malcolm's funeral to the Pettis Bridge—so what it was two weeks later? Film is a discontinuous medium.

Now, I don't think anybody in Hollywood is crazy enough to turn Malcolm X into a Martin Luther King clone (although I did once hear a producer seriously suggest that the role of Otis Redding be played by Neil Diamond. Well, he did blackface in *The Jazz Singer*, didn't he?) but somebody might suggest that Malcolm ought to privately say something positive about nonviolence just before he goes out on stage the last time, just to give the blow-off an ironic twist. You throw in enough ironic twists and you've got just about any story you want. Or rather, any story the studio wants. (What, you won't do that? Bring

in another writer.) But the thing is, maybe you did do it, because, hey, the Malcolm X story promotes a sense of self-esteem. And you did it because you wanted to do well while doing good.

So when I heard my fellow Philadelphia writer had taken the job, I sighed with relief, because my fellow Philadelphia writer was a fellow black person (so at worst I'd end up with shared credit—which is to say, shared blame) and also because my fellow Philadelphia writer had intelligence and integrity. When I heard he'd gotten fired—actually, I heard he'd walked off the project, but who knows—I was neither surprised nor disappointed. But then somebody said they'd spotted Marvin Worth in Manhattan, doing lunch with Spike Lee, even though Norman Jewison supposedly had the directing job, and then there was Lee saying the life of Malcolm could only be treated properly by an African-American director, and Jewison voluntarily (maybe) resigning, and then I got a call from a reporter at *Mother Jones* who wanted to talk about Spike Lee's "cultural" controversy (which is merely a racial controversy—last I looked, Spike Lee wasn't a Muslim).

But by that time I wasn't worried at all. Because it was January of '91, and America, the most powerful Judeo-Christian nation on earth, was studying war with the most powerful Islamic nation on earth. Saddam Hussein said he was going to kill 'em all and the forensics guys in Dover were going to have to sort 'em out because nobody knew if God was Jehovah or Allah. Winter trees were blooming with yellow ribbons, the media was downplaying any hint of antiwar dissent, and this lady thought Hollywood—those wonderful people who

gave us *Hellcats of the Navy*—were going to make a movie about a black guy who finds salvation in being a better *Muslim*?

More likely a remake of De Mille's *The Crusades*.

I still suspect that, had hostile fire been as effective as friendly fire at taking out Allied armored personnel carriers, the Malcolm X project would have suffered the fate of that Baghdad bomb shelter. But Desert Storm made Americans look like heroes and Muslims look . . . non-threatening. So I was only mildly surprised when another reporter—*Newsday*? *Washington Post*? I can't recall—tracked me down in California to talk about Baraka and his class controversy, which I hadn't heard about, but which I figured was really just a way to make headlines for somebody, although I couldn't say for whom. Some say Baraka, who admittedly has never shunned a spotlight. But there ain't no such thing as bad publicity, and having your project in the public eye might keep an antsy studio from killing a project on the eve of principal photography, which has been known to happen—ever wonder what happened to the movie version of Shelley Williams's *Dessa Rose*? I'm not saying Spike Lee is in cahoots with Amiri Baraka—although you have to wonder who "leaked" the script, and why they "leaked" it to Baraka, especially since Baraka's daughter was Lee's longtime collaborator. I'm just saying that if you were making book on the Malcolm X project's ever hitting the theaters, you'd have shortened the odds the day Baraka held his Harlem rally.

And as we sat in Baraka's dining room that September, the odds looked good that they'd actually get the thing shot. I found myself with conflicting

feelings about that. For I surely understood that Baraka's concerns were essentially valid—although the excesses of Barakan rhetoric tend to obscure the validity of Barakan concern. But I also understood that the nature of the processes, creative and commercial, made his focus on Lee wrong. Lee asked for it, by making himself sound like a bigger shot than he is—he told Playthell Benjamin he would have final cut, but that's nonsense. The studio always has final cut—in more ways than one. The studio can cut the budget. The studio can fire Spike Lee. (Oh, yes, directors get fired, too.) The studio can screw up post-production—not allow enough time or money for editing, reshoots, or dubbing. The studio can insist on a shorter running time because the theaters can't get in enough showings per day to make a profit. The studio can gerrymander distribution (ever wonder how come some films *never* seem to be showing at a theater near you?). The studio just keeps the thing in the can. Maybe they'll lose money, but maybe not; sometimes not distributing a film is the only way to make a project pay off . . . for the studio.

I was also reminded of another night in Newark. Not a night that I personally remember, because I wasn't there. But Arnold Perl was.

He was working on some aspect of the Malcolm X project—completing Baldwin's script, or writing the script for the documentary version (a powerful, funny film that may be the only one we need about Malcolm X). In any case Perl had gotten into the ill-advised business (for a scriptwriter) of running around trying to find people who (a) knew Malcolm and (b) would talk to a guy named Perl about Malcolm. When he found

them, sometimes he'd tape an interview, but a lot of people had problems with that, so sometimes he'd take notes, but some people had problems with that too, so sometimes he'd wait until he got back to his apartment and sit up late scrawling down notes—which I ran across while going through Marvin Worth's files looking for material for my version of the script—and trying to remember what he'd been told and trying to figure out if he was being lied to, and if so why, and how to find the truth, and how to be sure he'd found it, and how to tell the truth if he had found it. It was obviously a tricky and frustrating business, and his notes kept trailing off in some fairly maudlin musings.

But then he finds somebody—I can't recall the name—who had been in the Newark Temple, and who had known not only Malcolm but Talmadge Hayer, the only man who (almost) everybody is (almost) sure was a member of the team that assassinated Malcolm. Perl is a little shaky about coming face-to-face with this guy, especially since the meet is set for midnight at what Perl thinks is a bucket of blood in Newark. But it turns out to be a clean, well-lighted diner, and the informant is a typical, conservatively dressed polite Muslim; he apologizes for the lateness of the hour, but he works three-to-eleven, and he wasn't sure he could make it before midnight, and he didn't want to keep Perl waiting around.

So he talks and Perl listens, and they drink coffee and eat donuts, and then the guy gives Perl a ride back across the Hudson. And Perl is totally confused. Because the guy was forthcoming, and he *seemed* to know a lot of things, but in fact, he didn't know anything about Malcolm—he just knew what he'd been

told about Malcolm, either by Malcolm himself or by somebody else who got it from Malcolm. So Perl starts going back through his notes and realizes that almost all the interviews are that way, and he starts wondering if maybe a lot of people who won't talk to him because they say they don't know anything really *don't* know anything—except hearsay, mostly from Malcolm.

So Perl sits there in the dark of night in an apartment on the Upper West Side of New York, and I'm sitting there in a file room on Sunset Boulevard in LA, a continent apart, a decade apart, and we have the same horrible thought. And we both ignored it. Because if we didn't ignore it we'd have had to quit. But we didn't forget it; and one of us wrote it down. I don't know which one—Arnold Perl and I will have to share credit—but even now I can see the image in my memory of words scrawled in black ink on yellowed or maybe just yellow paper.

All we know of Malcolm is what he wanted us to know—and not one damn thing more. So . . . what if he lied?

The form I used to see

Was but the raiment he used to wear

—John Pierpoint
“My Child”

One chilly morning in October 1991, the mailman brought a book. I knew it was coming. The author, a guy named Bruce Perry, had sent me a note of thanks because apparently I'd encouraged him about writing it a long time back, and he'd needed the encouragement; he'd devoted more than a decade to research—the interviewing of more than four hundred people, the perusing of hundreds of

documents, the careful comparing of transcripts to tapes—and nearly as long to finding a publisher. The book was subtitled: *The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*. It was titled: *Malcolm*.

When first I'd heard it would be published, I was happy. A biography would in a sense legitimize what I had done, what was, presumably, at that very moment happening in Harlem with the lights, camera, and action. The theory was that somebody would see the movie and want to know more of Malcolm, and it was good that there would be some factual reference, something with . . . an index, which *The Autobiography* doesn't have. But now the book was here before me, and I hated it on sight.

Unfortunately, in a moment of insanity, I'd agreed to review the thing. “When I was a young college student in the early seventies, the book I read which revolutionized my thinking about race and politics was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*,” wrote Bell Hooks in “Sitting at the Feet of the Messenger: Remembering Malcolm X.” She is not alone. Ask any middle-aged socially conscious intellectual to list the books that influenced his or her youthful thinking, and he or she will most likely mention *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Some will do more than mention it. Some will say that, back in the sixties (by which they really mean the late sixties and early seventies), when they were young and earnest but callow, and oh, so confused, they picked it up—by accident, or maybe by assignment, or because a friend pressed it on them—and that they approached the reading of it without great expectations, but somehow that book . . . took hold of them. Got *inside* them.

Altered their vision, their outlook, their insight. Changed their lives.

In that there is some irony. For while Malcolm had in the early sixties achieved national prominence as the national representative of the Nation of Islam—what some called the Black Muslims—by the end of 1964 he had been expelled from that post with extreme prejudice, had left the Nation “voluntarily,” and was the official leader of nothing but the Organization of Afro-American Unity, an insignificant, insolvent, and hyperbolically appellated handful of blacks, mostly refugees from the Nation. By most measures he was politically impotent and in all probability he would have gone gentle into the good night of the seventies, for despite talents that should have destined him for leadership—tough-minded managerial skills, an incredible intelligence, an encyclopedic knowledge of history, a brilliant flair for rhetoric, an incredible combination of integrity, dignity, and discipline—Malcolm’s political positions ethically and practically cut him off from the sources of money and influence that might have led to some legitimate power. His one (dim) hope seemed to be for the congressional seat held by Adam Clayton Powell who, in 1964, seemed to be on the verge of retirement. Powell did not retire.

But in February of 1965 Malcolm became the victim of the sixties’ second (and most brutal) domestic assassination. Some would say that martyrdom rescued Malcolm from obscurity. Bruce Perry does not, but he is aware that in death Malcolm became that most attractive of things, a dead hero. Worse, from a biographer’s perspective, the myth was mostly self-made, as Malcolm told his

story again and again, in public speeches, magazine interviews, and finally *The Autobiography*, over which he exercised great control despite the fact it was written with the assistance of Alex Haley and published posthumously. Worst, in this case the myth is a highly constructive one; *The Autobiography* tells a tale of personal development that is in many senses a desirable model for the black urban masses—the modern equivalent of *Up From Slavery*. Which means that a lot of folks who prefer their idealism untainted by realism are going to be a wee bit upset by a factual—which is to say, non-mythic—treatment, which could be seen as, at best, a willingness to sacrifice a positive force for the sake of a little picky accuracy, and, at worst, as a blatant attempt to sully an African-American hero, when the demand for such is great and the supply of same short.

Perry well knows this: “The story of Malcolm’s life,” he writes in his Introduction, “will comfort neither his detractors nor his idolaters. Nor will it please those who allow heroic myths about him to obscure his real heroism.” Real heroism, for Perry, is less visionary leadership than “transforming youthful weakness into political strength,” a definition that leads him to write “far more about the subject’s childhood than one does in most biographies. . . . One cannot thoroughly understand the adult, political Malcolm without thoroughly understanding the youthful Malcolm.”

This is not basically an onerous notion; Malcolm himself subscribed to it. But Perry goes beyond basics to suggest that Malcolm’s entire career was less the result of a growing political, intellectual, religious, or moral concern conscious-

ness than a set of compensations. "This biography," Perry writes, "is a narrative about one man's struggle to liberate himself inwardly by liberating his people politically."

Supporting such a thesis requires Perry to emphasize childhood conflicts, and some of the emphasis is questionable. It probably is significant that Malcolm's father beat his wife and children, but to note that when he was a child "darkness terrified Malcolm . . ." is to imply significance by merely noting the norm; to ascribe childhood avoidance of fistfights to a "fear of combat" is a bit grandiose. To assert that "his unhappiness and his youthful delinquency . . . originated largely in his loveless, conflict-ridden home" is to deemphasize the dysfunctions of the welfare system of which Malcolm became both ward and victim. And to say that Malcolm "was a man in conflict—a living microcosm of the racial discord that corrodes American life" in that he was torn by an "inner struggle to decide what color he wanted to 'be'" is to ignore the possibility of change. There is no question that the youthful Malcolm fell prey to a physical aesthetic that glorified the European, and that he was hardly alone in this—in *The Autobiography* he offers himself as an example of what is wrong with the black masses in this regard. But there is little evidence that, as Perry insists, the adult Malcolm continued to have such ambivalence, that in public utterances he altered facts of his mixed ancestry because his "black self-image was so fragile" or that he called moderate leaders Uncle Toms "in an effort to purge himself of his ambivalence about skin color." This ignores explanations that are less patholog-

ical and more political and rhetorical. (Also more accurate; Uncle Tom, one must note, was "a large, broad-chested, powerfully made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense.")

Perry's emphasis seems all the more distorting because his psychology is Freudian. He therefore tries to demonstrate this fragility of Malcolm's black self-image by citing a series of "slips"—so labeled by psychologist Kenneth Clark—and takes obsessive interest in the functions Freudians love best. While in prison Malcolm suffered from headaches that "frequently responded to placebo treatment" and "had recurrent bouts with hemorrhoids . . . and suffered from constipation" which Perry speculates resulted from "harsh toilet training . . . his mother had responded to her children's lapses of sphincter control with beatings." Similarly, the causes of symptoms Malcolm experienced later in life—splitting headaches, stomach cramps—Perry labels "not physiological" or "psychosomatic." In the latter instances, stress-related would be a more accurate diagnosis; at the time Malcolm had a pregnant wife and three children and was being evicted—and the Nation of Islam was trying to blow him up with car bombs.

Even if one lacks the concept of stress-related illness, one would hardly suggest that a man whose life had been threatened publicly and privately was overly concerned with his personal security. Perry does, though—the index lists entries under "Malcolm X, paranoia of." One passage so indexed relates how Malcolm "secured the hood of his Oldsmo-

bile with a lock and chain," even though Perry elsewhere describes, and independently documents—that "Langston X, a NOI [Nation of Islam] member who had done demolition work" was asked "to wire Malcolm's automobile ignition with a bomb. Langston warned Malcolm of the plot." The other passage indexed as paranoia says that "as time passed Malcolm appeared to put increasing stock in the thesis that he was the target of an international conspiracy." The suspicion was hardly unjustified, since Malcolm had recently been denied entry to France. Nor was it even false; Perry's own research documents that "State Department functionaries" including William Atwood, the American ambassador to Kenya, "received instructions to keep tabs on Malcolm"; that one of Secretary of State "Dean Rusk's assistants, Benjamin Read, asked the Central Intelligence Agency to help," and the CIA, which, Perry notes, "later tried to cover its tracks," did attempt "to ascertain what funds Malcolm was receiving from abroad."

While a concerned and conscientious biographer—and Perry is surely that—has a right to develop a paradigmatic interpretation, Perry's psychological emphasis unfortunately supports a reductive, mechanistic, and ultimately behavioristic interpretation of Malcolm's career, an interpretation that cannot be divorced from the same liberal-racist attitudes that caused Dorothy Canfield Fisher to describe Richard Wright's *Native Son* as a "report in fiction . . . from those whose behavior-patterns give evidence of the same bewildered senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions studied in animals by psychologists in labo-

ratory experiments," and which, a century earlier, caused Harriet Beecher Stowe to aver that only "the desperate horror" of being sold South "nerves the African, naturally patient, timid and unenterprising, with heroic courage" necessary to running away.

Although Perry cannot be accused of such extremes, the connection is problematical, because his pushing of the paradigm affects what is usually clean and readable prose, and pollutes otherwise insightful statements with irrelevant neo-Freudian nudges. Malcolm's "oratorical prowess . . . soon surpassed his father's," for example. Similarly: "The black preachers he castigated for failing to practice the Christianity they preached—and for sponging off their gullible followers—bore a striking resemblance to his own father." And: "Malcolm was no more able to halt [corporal punishment] which was practiced throughout the Nation of Islam than he had been able to put a stop to the beatings his parents had administered in his boyhood home."

This emphasis is unfortunate because in general Perry scrupulously restrains himself to opinions that are firmly based on fact and evidence. Indeed, it is possible that his psychological emphasis might have seemed more justified had he been able to quote fully from unpublished materials—specifically Malcolm's letters—which current law prevented. (Perry notes that "in one letter, Malcolm declared that his imprisonment had enabled him to recapture the contentment he said he had known as a child" and rather cryptically laments that legal concerns dictated that he "delete substantial amounts of material from certain

chapters." And psychology in a generic sense does explain the undeniable and admitted pain of Malcolm's childhood and some of the contradictions of his complicated adulthood. When Perry's most extreme interpretations are discounted, Malcolm emerges as a subtly altered figure—more intriguing, more intelligent, certainly more human.

Alas, subtlety may be the first casualty when the cold waters of fact encounter the molten lava of myth. There's likely to be a steam explosion when the "idolaters" read that during his first sojourn in New York in his incarnation as Detroit Red, Malcolm "arranged a 'party' in the six-by-nine foot YMCA cubicle of a man who called himself 'Reverend Witherspoon' . . ." involving friends whom he encouraged by saying, "It's not so bad, they suck dick," or that later, in Boston, Malcolm "actively participated" in sessions involving a white "bachelor," talcum powder, and full-body massage. In fact, these and other sensational details merely augment *The Autobiography* and other of Malcolm's statements which alluded clearly, albeit in less detail, to the degradations of the hustling life. But on other, more significant points, Perry challenges *The Autobiography* directly.

One is the 1929 fire that destroyed the Lansing, Michigan house which Malcolm's parents had purchased in good faith but from which they were about to be evicted under a covenant forbidding sale to blacks. *The Autobiography* claimed the fire was arson and the work of whites, but "one interviewee suggested [Perry] examine the records of the 1929 fire." He did so, and concluded the fire

was indeed arson, but done by Malcolm's father, Earl Little. Perry also examined the records of the 1965 fire-bombing that destroyed the house from which the adult Malcolm's family was about to be evicted. *The Autobiography* implied this was the work of the Nation of Islam; Perry concludes the arsonist was Malcolm himself.

Many other points have to do with the image of Earl Little, who is presented in *The Autobiography* as a brave and independent thinker, and a staunch Garveyite, who was driven out of Omaha, Nebraska by the Klan and murdered in Lansing, Michigan by a Klan-clone called the Black Legion. But Perry's informants describe Earl as a "natural whoremonger" and two-bit hustler who "worked hard when he worked." The Nebraska Klan incident was denied by Malcolm's mother, Louise, who, in *The Autobiography*, confronted the Klan with a shotgun. Perry says the Black Legion was never active in the Lansing area; indeed, it may not even have existed at the time of Earl's death. And Earl's skull was not crushed; he was conscious when help reached him, able to tell a police officer how the accident had occurred, and the coroner's report made no mention of head injuries.

Perry reveals that Malcolm was not as much of a career criminal as *The Autobiography* implied. The supposedly highly professional Boston burglaries "were amateurish and unplanned. . . . There was no reconnoitering . . . none of the specialized burglary tools . . . no glass cutter or lock pick . . . Malcolm did not even know how to pick a lock." In one of its most dramatic scenes, *The*

Autobiography had a supposedly wild and dangerous Malcolm caged in court; but Perry implies this was routine; the "cage was reserved for prisoners who were unable to make bail." *The Autobiography* portrayed Malcolm as "a tough convict who had refused to respond when his prison number was called, dropped his dishes in the dining hall, cursed his guards, and spent considerable time in solitary confinement. But prisoners were addressed by name, not by number. There was no dining hall . . . each prisoner ate locked in his cell . . . no evidence that he cursed any guards or spent more than his first day of prison in solitary confinement."

Perry typically makes too much of the possible psychopathological explanations for these discrepancies, but some kind of psychological process does seem to have been at work in Malcolm's hear-no-evil relationship with the Nation of Islam in general and with Elijah Muhammad in particular. Perry demonstrates quite convincingly that Malcolm "learned about Elijah's philandering in 1957, after two of the Messenger's secretaries became pregnant and gave birth." Indeed, the whole business of Elijah's sexual escapades and Malcolm's reactions to them takes on a different twist, for Perry reveals that two of the women who eventually filed paternity suits against Elijah—one of whom claims her liaison with the Messenger began as rape—had been romantically interested in Malcolm, a fact which *The Autobiography* entirely omits. Perry even suggests that Malcolm in essence pimped for the Messenger by "sending additional secretaries . . . to Chicago in the hope they

would induce 'stronger' men to join the Nation."

But the challenge that those who revere *The Autobiography* will probably find most disturbing is Perry's assertion about Malcolm's change of heart regarding whites. Most readers would say that the moral and spiritual climax of *The Autobiography* comes when Malcolm, ousted from the Nation of Islam, makes his pilgrimage to Mecca and discovers, even as he becomes a true Muslim through the rituals of the *hajj*, that true Islam is a brotherhood that transcends race. According to Perry, the pivotal experiences were nonmystical and took place during an earlier trip to the Middle East; that "*The Autobiography* devotes forty-three detail-studded pages to his April 1964 trip to the Middle East and only one short, unrevealing paragraph to his 1959 trip there" was part of a determined and remarkably successful deception. "Louis Lomax," Perry asserts, "was not fooled. . . . Nor were Philbert or Wallace Muhammad fooled. Nearly everyone else accepted Malcolm's assertion that the scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes that morning in Jeddah. Even his wife was apparently fooled, for it would have been political suicide for him to admit that, despite his pronouncements about white devils, he had known for years that white-skinned people are no worse than anyone else." Perry suggests that Malcolm may never have believed it ("Privately," he writes, "Malcolm admitted that he did not believe everything he said publicly."), but during those five or more years of deception, Malcolm concealed his new attitude from the faithful by using a careful lo-

cution: " "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that God taught him that the white race is a race of devils," " a sort of verbal Simon Sez that he increasingly used to conceal other serious doctrinal disagreements between himself and Elijah.

Political disagreements followed. "Mr. Muhammad," Perry writes, "was reluctant to allow his ministers to engage in political activity. . . . Muhammad's position on political involvement was so rigid that the members of the Nation of Islam . . . were even forbidden to vote. . . . Yet Malcolm, who reportedly found it embarrassing to have to sit on the sidelines while others risked their lives, had been trying to nudge the Nation of Islam in the direction of political involvement for some time. There is evidence that suggests he unsuccessfully tried to secure Elijah Muhammad's permission to boycott Harlem stores that refused to hire or promote black employees." On at least two occasions this disagreement was publicly apparent. Once "the Messenger made Malcolm apologize publicly for organizing a protest demonstration in nearby Newark." And in May of 1963, two days after the nonviolent protest in Birmingham, Alabama turned violent in response to the peace-keeping tactics (K-9 dogs and high-pressure hoses) of Police Chief Bull Connor and cross-burning and bombings by the Klan, the head of the Birmingham temple announced that Malcolm "would soon arrive in Birmingham to hold a series of public rallies." This was reported in the *New York Herald Tribune*, but the next day, Malcolm denied he had plans to go to Birmingham. Perry concludes that the idea was instigated by Malcolm, who su-

pervised the Birmingham temple, but was vetoed by Elijah. "Malcolm," Perry writes, "kept pressing Mr. Muhammad for permission to engage in demonstrations. The Messenger instructed him not to raise the subject again. Malcolm obeyed." But Malcolm's obedience, as Perry describes it, was more a matter of letter than spirit, and the net result of the conflict suggests that Malcolm's silencing by Elijah, the event that supposedly produced a major crisis in his life, could hardly have been as great a surprise as *The Autobiography* implies.

Those whose experience with *The Autobiography* was intensely personal and emotional, perhaps even spiritual, will want to reject Perry's challenges and his book angrily, perhaps violently. I speak here from personal experience—a wall of my study has a small hole in it, and the spine of my copy of Perry's book shows traces of matching paint. As I picked the thing up (a few hours and several curses later) I found myself feeling sorry for Bell Hooks, whose excellent essay is organized around precisely those critical turning points in the story—as Malcolm told it—that Perry insists occurred at other times or in less dramatic fashion and assumes that, like herself, "most readers of *The Autobiography* are moved by his quest for self-realization, by the frank and direct way he communicates his rage, and profound commitment to black liberation struggle." I've never met Bell Hooks, but I can't imagine that she could read Perry's book without . . . well, let's just say I can't imagine that she could read it without feelings of extreme displeasure.

But all the legions of the displeased—and anyone who recalls *The Autobiogra-*

phy with fondness and some accuracy is likely to be a little displeased—would do well to begin reading *Malcolm* on page 382, the first of more than one hundred twenty-five pages of citations, references, and notes. They should begin there not only because Perry has there included “material that . . . could not be fitted into the narrative without transforming it into a tedious debate with other published works” and not only because the extent and detail speaks eloquently of Perry’s concern for details and accuracy (Malcolm’s eye color, mentioned *en passant* on page 4, has two full paragraphs of citation, and the additional notation: “see additional note on eye color, *supra*.”) but mostly because, when one is not grappling with dramatic debunkings (and Perry’s psychology) one realizes that Perry’s research overwhelmingly confirms *The Autobiography*; in general and, in specific, it corroborates some of the most bizarre and poignant particulars.

Details of Malcolm’s humiliation in public school, for example, were confirmed by three classmates. Malcolm’s acting crazy for draft board psychiatrists was something he did not once, but twice. His prison sentence was unusually long. Malcolm was under constant surveillance—by the FBI, the State Department, the CIA, the New York Police. The biography confirms that, as Malcolm charged, Elijah Muhammad tried to enlist the aid of the Ku Klux Klan in obtaining land for a black homeland. Perry adds that the meeting, at which Malcolm represented the Nation, took place in Atlanta, probably on January 28, 1961, and was reported by an informant to the FBI. Ultimately, Perry confirms

what most readers of *The Autobiography* have known in their bones—that it is a fundamentally true document.

But Perry’s research also supports the conclusion that *The Autobiography* is not truly a document at all. For Perry establishes that Malcolm did alter the facts. If Perry’s treatment has a fundamental flaw, it is that he ascribes the alterations to psychological compensations but gives only passing consideration to other possibilities. For example, on entering prison, Malcolm was not as thoroughly illiterate as *The Autobiography* reported. “The reasons Malcolm later exaggerated his reading difficulties are not altogether clear. . . . Perhaps it was also due to his desire to inspire his ghetto followers to educate themselves as he had educated himself.”

Fact is, a comparison between Perry’s facts and Malcolm’s tale reveals that Malcolm changed those facts in a remarkably precise and consistent way. And the striking thing about the alterations is that they are not particularly self-serving, at least not in conventional terms. Perry insists, generally, that Malcolm was uncertain of his manhood, yet *The Autobiography* makes no reference to women in his life between the time he entered prison and the time he married, and states explicitly that during that time he was celibate. Perry shows that there were women interested in Malcolm, and for whom he had strong romantic feelings. The omission of these women from *The Autobiography* certainly did not create a macho image, but rather the reverse—and that impressed many readers. Bell Hooks, for example, wrote that “undoubtedly there are many individuals who would question that a public male

figure as charismatic and dynamic as Malcolm X could have remained celibate for so many years. But unlike other significant black political figures, no one has uncovered a past that would cast doubt on the truth of this assertion. Those twelve years exemplify the depth of Malcolm's emotional and spiritual engagement with Elijah Muhammad." Perry

Malcolm turned a two-bit wife-beater of a father into a political and religious visionary

does not suggest that Malcolm was anything other than celibate, but in identifying women who were interested in Malcolm and pointing out that "the tall, lean, muscular celibate was the movement's most eligible bachelor" he could be said to have uncovered a past that would cast doubt. That only suggests that Malcolm had his reasons for not mentioning it.

Perry shows that Malcolm lived a life. But he also shows that, in public utterances and expressions, Malcolm consistently transformed his life. He turned a two-bit wife-beater of a father into a political and religious visionary who was killed because of his beliefs and defiance; he transformed his youthful self into a dangerous and hard-nosed criminal; he made the process of conversion seem sudden and powerful and inescapable. He made the bottom deeper so the top could be higher. He did just what a novelist or a scriptwriter would have done; tightened up the action, combined characters, gave the thing a better act structure and more dramatic impact—more punch.

Anyone who feels cheated by that might well reflect that at the time he was writing *The Autobiography*, although at the zenith of his rhetorical power, he was at the nadir of his political power. Full in the knowledge that he was in real danger, he consciously crafted a myth of struggle and uplift. On the eve of his death he read and approved it. Perry, in documenting the reality, allows us to see *The Autobiography* not as a social document but as a literary expression, and provides a standard by which the mythmaking of *The Autobiography* can be judged.

And the judgment has to be that Malcolm was a writer as great as any who has turned his or her hand to a quintessentially American form that includes the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and, as prototype, the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin. Some may find this Malcolm, less the political animal, more a literary lion, unsatisfying.

Not I.

• • •

*We the living have a complaint:
ignorance*

—David Rosenberg
"Lamentations"
A Poet's Bible

On a cloudy afternoon in November 1991, I got off a train at Pennsylvania Station in New York City. My errand in the Apple was slightly unusual. Some months earlier a fellow writer named David Rosenberg had completed *A Poet's Bible*, a new translation of fifteen of the most moving and poetical biblical books not only into contemporary language,

but into modernistic poetical form and imagery. As the book neared publication, someone had decided it would be a good idea to invite a number of writers to appear publicly, read from the translation, and speak briefly about their personal connections with a particular book. The aim was, I suspected, to secure a subtle and sorely needed referendum on Rosenberg's work which, while brilliant, was sure to offend some readers and outrage many nonreaders who would reject the very thought of tampering with the Scripture—and Rosenberg's concurrent notion that some of the Hebrew poets who wrote these books had been women.

I'd agreed to appear for a number of reasons, but the oddest of them grew out of thoughts and feelings that had been occasioned by the hoopla over Spike Lee's movie, the synchronicous appearance of Bruce Perry's biography, and early reaction to some writing I myself had been doing. Basically, I felt concern and a kinship for any writer who could be called a revisionist—especially one who revised what could be called the Holy Writ.

I arrived at five in the afternoon. The reading was not till eight, so I strolled through the drizzle to my hotel, getting myself in the mood for my offering, which was from the Book of Lamentations, and thinking about what personal reflections I would offer. I'd assumed that I would talk about my father, a minister of the Christian Gospel, who, toward the end of his life, when he was afflicted with diabetes, partial blindness, and several other ills, had often preached from what I'd always called the Downer Books—Lamentations and Job. But as I

approached the Hilton Hotel on Sixth Avenue and 54th Street I thought of someone and something else: Malcolm X and my artistic failure in writing the script for a film version of his life.

On the night before his murder—February 20, 1965—Malcolm checked into the New York Hilton, probably in an attempt to draw his pursuers away from his family. He ate supper in the hotel dining room and later met with several of his aides. At ten o'clock Talmadge Hayer and two unidentified black companions entered the Hilton lobby and questioned bellmen about the location of Malcolm's room. They were given no information, but the attempt to ascertain Malcolm's room number was repeated by an unidentified black man at seven the next morning.

At eight o'clock that morning—February 21, 1965—Malcolm answered the phone in his room and heard an unknown voice saying, "Wake up, Brother." A few minutes later he telephoned his sister, Ella, and told her of the call. At nine he called his wife, Betty, told her of the call, and asked her to attend the rally at the Audubon Ballroom that afternoon—something he had forbidden her to do the previous day. He dressed in long johns, a white shirt, a dark brown three-piece suit. At one in the afternoon he checked out of the Hilton, got his car out of the hotel garage, and drove uptown. He parked at 146th Street, possibly to avoid arriving at the Audubon Ballroom in his trademark Oldsmobile. He was spotted at a bus stop by one of his followers, who gave him a ride to 166th and Broadway. At approximately two p.m. he arrived at the Audubon. The rest, as they say, is history.

In the summer of 1986 I pieced together most of that timetable to help me organize the ending of the first draft of my version of the script. I saw immediately what any experienced writer would see: that the hours between Malcolm's meeting with aides and that cryptic, threatening phone call offered a natural dramatic opportunity—the doomed tragic hero, a man of contemplation and faith, aware of his impending fate, cut off from friends and family, alone in the still watches of the night. Moreover, I realized it was a way to sell the story to a culturally Christian audience.

Because the facts of Malcolm X's last night fit almost perfectly into the Christian paradigm, the last night of Jesus Christ. I mean, you've got that dinner at the hotel—all you have to do is shift it from the public dining room to a private room. Make it Malcolm's room, to cut down on the number of sets, and combine it with the meeting with the aides and you've got . . . the Last Supper. And then, dramatically speaking, it gets better than the Gospel, because you have the martyr alone—you don't have to fool around with Peter and James and John being close to him and falling asleep, and you don't have to deal with Judas. . . .

But you do have to deal with what he did all night. And that was the problem.

It was a problem the Gospel writers couldn't solve. Luke offers the most detailed version of the hours of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (only he doesn't say anything about Gethsemane, or a garden, it's just the Mount of Olives) and gives Jesus those great lines about "removing this cup" and "not my will but thine," but he takes up only four or

five verses. Matthew and Mark do set the scene at Gethsemane and they give it twice as much space, but most of what's described is process—Jesus going off and coming back and finding the three disciples who were supposed to be keeping watch asleep. Their dialogue isn't any better than Luke's (in fact, it's a lot flabbier) and both of them leave out the nifty part about the angel appearing and giving Jesus strength (which is a bad move, because all you're left with visually is a guy on his knees). Even so, they did a better job on the scene than John, the only one of the Gospel writers who was also among the Favored Three who went further into the garden with Jesus. Only he doesn't say that. He has everybody going to a garden across the brook Cedron, but doesn't mention disciples sleeping, or Jesus praying, at all, much less angels.

So, as I'm looking over the garden scene in the Gospels to get some idea of what to have Malcolm X doing in the scene at the Hilton, it occurred to me that the Gospel writers who did the best job on the scene (Luke was first hired, but the studio thought the angels were a bit much, so they brought in Matthew and Mark) were the ones who were farthest from it; their material was based mostly on hearsay—indeed, hearsay from guys who were nodding off. And not hearsay from John, who wasn't talking.

So I tried the Qu'oran. It wasn't much help. Mohammed wasn't really into agonized contemplation; he was more a vision man. Neither was the Muslim caliph Omar, whom some likened to Malcolm, and to whom some said Malcolm likened himself; according to legend, Omar,

sensing he was about to be assassinated, climbed on a horse and tried to get out of Dodge. (He didn't make it.)

In the end, I talked myself out of writing the whole Hilton Hotel sequence. I told myself there'd have to be too many one-use sets—hotel room, garage, lobby

Maybe young people do need role models, but I am not a young person anymore

—and minor characters—Hayer and his associates, at least one bellman, a desk clerk—and all the phone calls and intrigue were going to make the movie look like a thriller. But if I left it out I was going to have nothing but a guy praying, and there were already two strong prayer and contemplation scenes, one in the jail cell when Malcolm—"Satan" at that point—has to fight to bend his knees, and one in Jeddah, where he gives up on the "white devil" theory. . . . Nah. It was too complicated. You could do it in a novel, but there wasn't enough action for a movie. So I set the phone calls at the Teresa Hotel headquarters, and CUT TO: THE AUDUBON.

Which is to say, I copped out, artistically. Not that the producer ever noticed. And in the end it didn't matter anyway, except that from time to time I would think about it, about what would have happened in that room, in Malcolm's mind. About how a man faced death, what he thought, what he did—and why I had been able to come up with so many excellent reasons (rationalizations) for not writing (avoiding) the scene.

Most recently, I had thought about it as I read Rosenberg's translation of the third chapter of Lamentations. Because in Rosenberg's version the writer—female—is suffering an almost clinical depression because she feels Jehovah has deserted her and her people. The poet begins by lamenting the abandonment in symbolic terms, but then the lament evolves into a midnight recollection of the suffering that resulted from having been forsaken:

*Memory the weight on my back
and deep in my breast every crushing
detail*

*I cannot close my eyes before it
I cannot rise from my bed.*

The tone changes;

*and yet I do each day
and I rouse my heart*

and the poet goes on to say:

*The Lord's mercy brings a new morning
each day awakens the thought of him*

*though I'm buried in nights of doubt
day returns faithfully—he's always there.*

As I read that I thought: this was what those last hours were for Malcolm. A final rejection of Elijah Mohammad and a final acceptance of the One True God. Not something you could put in a script, but a hell of a passage in a novel. A beautiful passage anywhere.

And that was what I was thinking as I walked up Sixth Avenue toward the

Hilton. It came to me that this was the tale I would tell that evening, at the Ethical Society.

But then I remembered Bruce Perry. And I started wondering if all this dramatic agonizing stuff wasn't really a problem. Maybe Malcolm was tired and fell immediately into satisfying and dreamless sleep. Or maybe he turned on the Late Show and spent his last night watching one of those old gangster movies that he'd once so loved. And maybe, if that was the story, it wasn't dramatic, and maybe it wouldn't play, but in my heart of hearts, I kind of liked it better. I kind of liked *Malcolm* better. And maybe young people do need role models, but I am not a young person, any more. I am older than Malcolm ever got to be.

Now, if I were writing a movie—or a myth—I'd tell you that that resolution came to me after I'd checked into the Hilton, and while I was sitting in a lonely room preparing for the reading and agonizing over . . . well, whatever. It didn't. I didn't. I checked into the Dor-

set, half a block away. And I met a friend for drinks in the bar, and then we strolled on uptown to the Ethical Society. And while I did tell the audience a short version of the Malcolm story, I cut right to the text.

But as I read I did think of Malcolm. And of Bell Hooks. And Bruce Perry. Of Charlie Fuller, and Jimmy Baldwin, and me. Of all the folks who, for whatever reason, love what they know of Malcolm. And I prayed that all of us would find it in our hearts and minds to keep on loving him, no matter what we learned. The Hebrew poet (after the rewrite by David Rosenberg) exhorted:

*open your heart on the rough path of knowing
open your mind on the hard road of understanding*

*the solid ground supports
firm trust.*

Selah.
Insh'allah
Amen.

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MARTIN AND MALCOLM

Michael Eric Dyson

Opposite: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

AP/Wide World Photos

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X are the towering icons of contemporary African-American culture. Of course, King has transcended the boundaries of race. His iridescent image has been seized upon to illumine an astonishing array of social projects—and commercial products—whose humanitarian pedigree is thought to be vouchsafed by symbolic solidarity with an American hero. But the international fame and nearly universal respect he now commands have not diminished his appeal among common black people who will never know either. Millions of black homes continue to display portraits of King, his graceful humility radiating a perennial blessing to their domestic space. For many blacks, King's progressive civil protest, in which American ideals of justice engendered civil disobedience and social compromise, has become the definitive model for social transformation.

But for a generation of black youth reared on sound bytes of history that mimic the rap culture that has shaped them, the voice of Malcolm X supplies the authentic timbre of social rebellion.

And his serene but ominous countenance peering from countless posters forms the perfect portrait of black anger at American pride and prejudice. Unlike King, however, the hues of Malcolm's charisma have for the most part remained dark and radical. His reputation is shaped by the specific appeal to racial identity and cultural pride, heroic gestures in an era of political surrender and resurgent racism.

• • •

Rap artists, black youth culture's self-styled postmodern urban griots, dispense social criticism and history lessons with Malcolm's hot breath sampled between their fiery lyrics. Radical and black nationalist intelligentsia employ Malcolm's words as the touchstone of an independent and critical black cultural consciousness. And even black people for whom King's example provides an ideological north star draw solace from Malcolm at moments of uncertainty about the sanity of American culture or the sincerity of American democracy.

Discussed in this essay

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



That Martin and Malcolm, therefore, represent two distinct traditions of response to home-grown American racism is undeniable. Captured in the useful but imprecise shorthand developed to distinguish the ways black people have resisted racism for more than two centuries, King's position represented an integra-

**King's and Malcolm's
strategies seem the
fragmented components of
a narrative whole of
racial redemption**

tionist approach to the American dilemma, advocating equal inclusion of blacks in the drama of national privilege. And for most of his life Malcolm X advocated a separatist and nationalist strategy for black survival, seeking a space free from white racial violence. But what is even more intriguing, though more subtle and complex, is the way in which King's and Malcolm X's strategies, ideologies, and principles of racial combat seemed at *crucial points* to be of a piece, the fragmented components of a narrative whole of racial redemption.

This is a complicated point to make without homogenizing King and Malcolm X into a mythic unity, without creating consonance where there is none, and without imposing a grid on racial experience. The challenge to anyone who would interpret King and Malcolm X is to appreciate both overlap and opposition, but only after tracing the contours of their ideologies; exploring the nuances of their respective visions of racial transformation; and investigating the varied

intellectual and social resources they brought to bear on the traditions in which they took part.

To this task James H. Cone seems particularly well suited. Born and reared in the Deep South, Cone has spent most of his career as a teacher and scholar in northern institutions. Educated as an undergraduate at a historically black college, Cone gained his doctorate at a white university, where he was trained in the thought of neo-orthodox German theologian Karl Barth. Soon thereafter, Cone came to reject many of the premises of white Western theology. In its place, he articulated a theology that reflected black religious experience and reshaped theological language in light of the guiding principle of black liberation and resistance to oppression. Indeed, Cone is widely regarded as the father of black theology.

In his incipient expression of intellectual dissent from traditional theology, the groundbreaking *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), Cone proved to be the angry young man of the religious academy. He took traditional theology to task for its vicious complicity in the oppression of blacks by supplying theological comfort and philosophical justification to white racism. Though he failed to take seriously the important exceptions to his theological diatribe (a failure duly noted by equally blind white theologians), Cone's often shrill tone struck a highly responsive chord in important sectors of the theological academy.

But more importantly, Cone made theology suddenly attractive, and in some cases irresistible, for a whole

generation of black religious intellectuals and church persons who questioned the power of their discipline and faith to facilitate social transformation after King's death. Cone integrated elements of traditional black church life (discourse about justice, God, and judgment) with radical social ideas (black power, a black

**Here was a black man
trained like Martin who
spoke like Malcolm, an X
in King's clothing**

God, and trenchant criticism of white racism). Here was a black man trained like Martin who spoke like Malcolm, an X in King's clothing.

In more than twenty years and several books since then, Cone has refined his vision of the scope and tasks of the black theological enterprise. He has introduced a vibrant idiom in theological language from his academic base as Charles Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at New York's Union Theological Seminary. Cone has lectured across the hemisphere, his books have been translated into several languages, and his ideas have spawned dissertations, conferences, and books in many parts of the world.

Like King and Malcolm X, Cone is a revolutionary figure, and like them, he has endured the pain and risk of growth. He has integrated new strands into his arguments over the years to address his former weaknesses, particularly on issues of gender and social theory. Each new book has reflected his continuing dialogue with an expanded group of in-

terlocutors. Cone's latest book, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, takes us forward by looking backward. He examines two figures who have influenced black Americans, and more specifically, the shape and character of his own thought. In a sense, his book is a public reckoning with his own intellectual and personal heritage. It is, in many ways, an impressive achievement and perhaps his best book.

Cone's book is organized in a methodical fashion with his characteristic clarity of expression on generous display. While obfuscatory and insular jargon hold sway in so many academic disciplines, Cone never lets the language he is using get in the way of the story he is telling. Other fine studies have compared King and Malcolm X, along with other black religious and intellectual figures, such as Peter Paris's *Black Leaders In Conflict* and Robert Franklin's *Liberating Visions*. With the exception of Louis Lomax's *To Kill a Black Man*, Cone's is the only book-length study devoted exclusively to comparing the two figures.

Though the trajectory of their social acceptance has been wildly different, King and Malcolm X scaled the heights of cultural popularity only after their apocalyptic martyrdoms. Though he is now shrouded in myth and legend, King's popularity plummeted in the years prior to his death because of his opposition to the Vietnam War, the rise of black power, and his turn toward matters of class inequality. And when he was assassinated, Malcolm was diligently redefining his ideological identity, and winning increasing popularity among an audience previously denied him because

of his role in the Nation of Islam. But it has taken nearly a quarter century for his appeal to fully emerge, and for his image, voice, and message to find a new place in the black cultural imagination. As Cone observes,

Twenty-five years after his assassination, there is a resurgence of interest in him, especially among the young who were not born when he died. Malcolm's name, words, and face appear on buttons, T-shirts, and the covers of rap records. His life has become the basis of films, plays, and even operas. He is now being quoted by mainstream black leaders, who once despised him. Conferences, seminars, and parades are being held in his honor, and streets, schools, and organizations are being named after him. People are making annual pilgrimages to his birthplace and grave site.

Though research on King is voluminous and growing daily, the literary attention paid to Malcolm is only now swelling to match his renewed popularity. Bruce Perry's recent biography of Malcolm X and Spike Lee's upcoming film about him will most certainly stimulate more interest in the man's legacy, as will Cone's fine comparative study.

Cone's text also deftly explores the differences between King and Malcolm X, which upon cursory glance appear conspicuous. After all, their differences from birth might be considered a study in suggestive polarities: South/North; middle-class/poor; dark-skinned/light-skinned; short/tall; educated/auto-didact; and slow southern cadence/rapid-fire oratory. And Cone goes to great lengths to show how substantial their differences were. He shows us how the

social, political, and economic forces that produced them, as well as the geographic regions that were the scene of their major contributions, reveal a great deal about the character and limitations of their respective contributions. King was reared in a comfortable, middle-class home in Atlanta that nurtured his sense of self-worth in the bosom of a vibrant black religious faith. Malcolm X's first memory in 1929, ironically the year of King's birth, was a nightmare, a terrifying remembrance of the burning of his family home in Lansing, Michigan, by white vigilantes.

Cone's introductory chapter shows how King and Malcolm X participated in venerable traditions of integrationist and nationalist social thought and practice, and hence were neither completely nor finally the inventions of mass media or white society. Each was fundamentally a creative and singularly gifted political and social actor within a rich and particular ideological heritage. Though Cone delineates the specific marks of each tradition on King and Malcolm X, he also concedes that the rhetoric of nationalism and integrationism was used to express complex beliefs that were sometimes combined by black leaders and intellectuals in their struggles against slavery and oppression.

Of course, no black thinker has been a pure integrationist or a pure nationalist, but rather all black intellectuals have represented aspects of each, with emphasis moving in one direction or the other, usually at different periods of their lives. . . . When blacks have been optimistic about America—believing that they could achieve full equality through moral suasion and legal argument—they have been

integrationist and have minimized their nationalist tendencies. On the other hand despair about America—believing that genuine equality is impossible because whites have no moral conscience or any intention to apply the laws fairly—has always been the seedbed of nationalism.

Cone's abbreviated genealogy of conflicting and sometimes converging black ideological traditions provides a helpful schema for comprehending continuities between past advocates of resistance to racist oppression and his twin subjects. It may also result in closer attention to the significant and suggestive dissimilarities between King and Jesse Jackson, Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan—dissimilarities that are often overlooked in the avid search for successor messiahs in our era of racial desperation.

Cone skillfully contrasts the impact of their early lives on the development of their thought in sketching a kind of existential ecology of the origins of King's dream and Malcolm X's nightmare. King's embrace of crucial elements of a Booker T. Washington version of accommodationism and a Frederick Douglass version of integrationism, supported by his father's and grandfather's philosophies, found expression in his early leadership style. And his absorption of the ideals of Christian brotherhood and universal love preached in the black church shaped his understanding of acceptable forms of protest and resistance to racism.

Cone's point here, set against the stream of one school of King interpretation, is that the black church was the primary influence on King's life and thought, and that only later did white

Protestant liberal theology, Gandhi, Niebuhr, and strands of the social gospel play a role. In intellectual biographies of King such as Kenneth Smith and Ira G. Zepp's *Search for the Beloved Community* and John J. Ansbro's *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind*, the latter influences have been accorded primacy. Other recent studies of King have acknowledged the decisive role of black church faith and culture in shaping King's thought, such as Lewis Baldwin's *There Is a Balm in Gilead* and Fred Downing's *To See The Promised Land*. And in a few scattered essays, Cone has argued for the preeminence of black Christian values and practice in understanding the moral vision and social protest of King, an argument he elaborates in the course of this book:

The faith of the black experience began to shape King's idea of God during childhood, and it remained central to his perspective throughout his life. This point needs emphasis because many interpreters have failed to acknowledge the decisive role of the black religious tradition upon King's thinking. Without denying other important influences—liberal Protestantism, Gandhi, Niebuhr, among others—we still must emphasize that no tradition or thinker influenced King's perspective as much as the faith which blacks created in their fight for dignity and justice.

Moreover, King's virtually unlimited optimism about the possibilities of interracial coalitions defeating racism developed only after he conquered his "anti-white feeling" in college, where he encountered whites in interracial organizations. As Cone points out, King's desire to explore the merits of integration-

ism almost blinded him to the necessity for addressing racism in his graduate work.

It is important to note that he did not even mention racism in most of his graduate papers that dealt with justice, love, sin, and evil. In six years of graduate study at Crozer and Boston, King never identified racism as a theological or philosophical problem or mentioned whether he recognized it in the student body and faculty. . . . Like most integrationists of his time, and in contrast to Malcolm and the nationalists, Martin appeared to be glad merely to have the opportunity to prove that Negroes could make it in the white man's world.

Here, and throughout his book, Cone gives the sharpest criticism of King's psychological disposition toward white society articulated since John A. Williams's *The King God Didn't Save* and David Lewis's *King: A Biography*. While avoiding the more exaggerated effects of Williams's self-conscious debunking of the King myth, and supplying a more nuanced reading of the black religious roots of King's thought than found in Lewis's treatment, Cone vigorously challenges and critiques King's weaknesses.

He is just as balanced toward Malcolm X. Cone discusses Malcolm X's origins in Omaha, tracing the influence of his parents' nationalist activity on his worldview. Like King, Malcolm X's father was a Baptist preacher, though on a much more modest scale, preaching as an itinerant or "jackleg" minister. Malcolm X's father was president of the Omaha branch of Garvey's UNIA, while his mother was the group's reporter. During

his childhood, Malcolm X was subject not only to white violence but also to a vicious cycle of domestic violence as his father beat his mother, and they both abused their children. Malcolm lost his father early, and it is not clear whether his death was accidental or murder. What is clear, though, is that Earl Little's death had a traumatic effect on Malcolm X's family, leaving mother Louise Little to rear eight children during the Depression. She eventually suffered a mental breakdown, and the children were placed in several foster homes.

After experiencing the ravages of integrated schooling, Malcolm dropped out of high school to live with his half-sister in Boston. Malcolm had already begun to steal in Nebraska because of extreme hunger, and he expanded his hustling repertoire in Boston. He used cocaine and established a burglary ring to support his expensive habit. After he was caught and sent to prison, Malcolm X displayed a resentful attitude until his conversion to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam.

As Cone explains, Malcolm X was drawn to the Nation because of its definition of the white man as the devil, and its strong emphasis on pride in black culture and history. Malcolm's many difficulties with whites in adolescence, and his experiences in Boston's ghetto, prepared him to reject nonviolence and integration, and to accept a strong separatist philosophy as the basis for black survival in racist America.

Malcolm's experience in the ghetto taught him that the black masses could be neither integrationist nor nonviolent. Integration and

nonviolence assumed some measure of political order, a moral conscience in the society, and a religious and human sensitivity regarding the dignity and value of all persons. But since the masses in the ghettos saw no evidence of a political order that recognized their humanity or a moral conscience among white people, an appeal to integration and nonviolence sounded like a trick to delude and disarm poor blacks, so whites would not have to worry about a revengeful response to their brutality.

In the first section of his book, Cone gives us a good sense of how King and Malcolm X were formed, and what differences their respective social origins made on the way they thought about race and American society.

Cone devotes two chapters to exploring King's and Malcolm X's understanding of America through the metaphors of dream and nightmare, metaphors that would define their different approaches to racial justice. Cone probes the social sources of King's American dream, linking King's vision to the white public, "because he believed they had the material resources and moral capacity to create a world based on the principles that they claimed to live by." Cone also explains that King urged black people to enact their redemptive roles in American society by pursuing self-respect, high moral standards, wholehearted work, leadership, and nonviolence. Despite severe challenges to King's faith in the plausibility of American democracy, especially after the bombing of a church in Birmingham that killed four innocent black girls, he continued to believe that the American dream would soon be fulfilled.

From the very beginning, however, Malcolm X understood that the conditions of black Americans were a nightmare of racial injustice, urban poverty, and drug addiction, all presided over by the negligence and hypocrisy of white liberals and unprincipled racists. Here and throughout, Cone makes clear that Malcolm X's unbridled anger toward white racism provided a strong counterpoint to King's integrationist philosophy, making King's views, once deemed radical, seem acceptably moderate by comparison. Once Malcolm X left the Nation, however, he discovered that many integrationists were more radical and militant than he had formerly believed. Still, Malcolm continued to enliven the role of the angry black in order to provide a sharp enough contrast to King that white people would gladly listen to King's demands.

For most of Malcolm's life, King avoided him. Of course, Malcolm had developed a side career of verbally assaulting "so-called Negro" leaders, taking special delight in tagging King with a jumble of colorful but caustic monikers, including "religious Uncle Tom,

King believed that violence as a tactic of survival was suicidal

traitor, chump and the Reverend Dr. Chickenwing." For his part, King believed that Malcolm X's promulgation of black anger, and his statements about the "reciprocal bleeding" of whites and blacks, were irresponsible and morally wrong. King also believed that violence as a tactic of survival was suicidal in light

of the fact that blacks were only ten percent of the population, and therefore grossly overmatched and underarmed.

Cone probes Malcolm's conception of divine justice, predicated upon a philosophy of an-eye-for-an-eye, and explores his advocacy of self-knowledge, self-love, self-defense, racial separatism, and most of all, racial unity, "the dominant theme of his ministry." After he examines the impact of King's and Malcolm X's faith and theology on their versions of the American dream and nightmare, Cone details the unraveling of King's faith in American justice and Malcolm X's reexamination of a strong version of separatist black nationalism after his break with Muhammad.

King's confrontation with persistent racism caused him to reject his former optimism about the capacity or willingness of whites to practice social justice. Though Cone details King's growing pessimism about the structural racism and economic inequality of American society, he doesn't tell us that this prompted King to advocate "nonviolent sabotage," which included blocking the normal functioning of the government as a sign of deep social frustration and moral outrage. Cone reveals that King also began to ponder the virtues of "temporary segregation" as a means of reconstituting the economic health of black communities, since American society had not shown serious interest in reordering social priorities and redistributing wealth.

In his mature stride, King also increased his emphasis on black pride, appealing to a theme that had been implicit in much of his work but now, because of the challenges to nonviolence posed by

black power, required an explicit articulation. Such moves caused David Halberstam to call King a "nonviolent Malcolm X," a characterization King rejected. Nonetheless, his later thinking is detailed by Cone in a way that leaves no doubt that King's shift to progressive and radical social thought was a permanent feature of his mature civil protest.

But, as Cone shows, Malcolm X too was changing. His break with Muhammad had freed Malcolm to become publicly political, an opportunity that Malcolm X used to attempt to join forces with King and progressive elements of the traditional civil rights community. But Malcolm's reputation of advocating violent self-defense had been so deeply entrenched that even his move away from Muhammad didn't prevent the white media from viewing Malcolm as a rabid racist and destructive demagogue. As Cone notes, this troubled Malcolm X, who had a genuine desire to forsake his recent past and articulate his racial demands to a wider audience. Rebuffed and scorned, Malcolm entered into a phase of

**Shared suffering due to
racism is no guarantee
of unanimity on the means
to racial justice**

radical rabble-rousing, still specifying the absurdity of white racism, while displaying a newfound openness to limited white support of black freedom. Even after his journey to Mecca, however, Malcolm never surrendered his advocacy of black unity as a precondition to black freedom, a unity that could never result if even well-intentioned whites participated in black organizations.

Malcolm X's stress on unity is a theme that resonates with Cone's own thinking, and shapes his understanding of King and Malcolm X throughout his book. It also limits his understanding of the two figures. In a discussion of the impact of the faith of the black experience on King's idea of God, Cone says:

As different as Martin's and Malcolm's religious communities were, Martin's faith, nonetheless, was much closer to Malcolm's than it was to that of white Christians, and Malcolm's faith was much closer to Martin's than it was to that of Muslims in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia; that was true because both of their faith commitments were derived from the same experience of suffering and struggle in the United States. Their theologies, therefore, should be interpreted as different religious and intellectual responses of African-Americans to their environment as they searched for meaning in a nation that they did not make.

But is this accurate? Is it true that the experience of black suffering and struggle is the primary basis of unity, even when the differences between black people are strong and persistent? While Cone may be right to suggest that King and Malcolm X were closer to one another than they were to white Christianity and orthodox Islamic belief, this must be proved by citing historical evidence. As Cone has so convincingly shown us, King and Malcolm X were deeply divided not only about their tactics of social protest, but about their anthropological, social, and psychological understanding of human beings.

It is, therefore, conceivable that a white person who embraced King's un-

derstanding of human community, love, interracial coalition, and the limitations and injustice of white racial practices might indeed have more in common with King than a black person who held highly divergent views about such issues, despite a shared experience of racial suffering. The case of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and other black conservatives proves that there is no necessary or automatic similarity in the interpretation of the "black experience," and that shared suffering due to racism is no guarantee of unanimity on the means to achieve racial justice. Thus, King would have had (and I believe he did have) more in common with, say, Michael Harrington than he would have had with George Schuyler when it came to issues of racial and economic justice.

Cone himself provides ample support for the belief that King and Malcolm X, as a result of their concrete set of historical experiences, were indeed converging on a similar, though by no means identical, view of racial justice and economic health for black people. But as Cone also makes clear, they had enormous and longstanding barriers to overcome to achieve even limited ideological parity. For instance, Malcolm's earlier views of violence, as Cone points out, "were hardly different from [those] of the whites he criticized." And in criticizing King and Malcolm X for their abominable views on women, Cone points out how they had more in common with white men than with black women.

While Martin and Malcolm challenged white values regarding race, their acceptance of black male privilege prevented them from seeing the connection between racism and sexism.

While both differed sharply with most white men when it came to matters involving race, they shared much of the typical American male's view of women. Martin's and Malcolm's views regarding women's place were not significantly different from those of men of other races.

The call for racial unity is usually premised on the assumption that the experience of black suffering will itself guarantee similarity of perspective. But the complexity and diversity of racial experiences cautions against advocating racial unity based on the presumption of homogeneity. Neither does it bode well for trying to explain the genuine and irresolvable differences between King and Malcolm X, no matter how much we appeal to their same experience of suffering and struggle. Besides, other dimensions of struggle to which King and Malcolm X became more sensitive, such as class inequality, mean that the experience of suffering, though crucial and certainly central, is not the exclusive or exhaustive basis of racial unity.

Because Cone believes that both King and Malcolm X promoted self-knowledge and respect for one's history and culture as the basis for unity—without which there could be no freedom—the view of unity based on sameness of experience fails to capture other enabling forms of racial solidarity. Furthermore, it imposes a narrow view of their uses of history and culture, especially in King's case. Such a view leads Cone to stress the necessary and crucial ingredients of self-esteem in combating black disunity and the corrosive racism that destroys black culture, without supplying a trenchant criticism of the social forces that help

construct and define self-regard. Regarding the latter, Cone concludes:

It is not easy to survive in a society that says that you do not count. Many do not survive. With the absence of black pride, that "I am somebody" feeling, many young African-Americans have no respect for themselves or for anybody else . . . Malcolm X is the best medicine against genocide. He showed us by example and prophetic preaching that . . . we can take that long walk toward freedom. Freedom is first and foremost an inner recognition of self-respect, a knowledge that one was not put on this earth to be a nobody. African-Americans can do the same today. We can fight for our dignity and self-respect.

While Cone's claims are undeniable, what is needed at this point is a complex and detailed cultural criticism in light of the social vision and religious values that King and Malcolm X promoted, values that Cone has expressed in his own work. It seems odd that Cone prescribes self-respect and self-esteem without giving a sharp or substantial analysis of the social resources for such qualities, and the political and economic reasons that prevent their flourishing in many urban black communities across the country. It is precisely here that we want the full analytical power of black theology, and the best available insights of progressive social theory brought to bear upon the various crises that confront black Americans in tracking a path for those who take the mature King and Malcolm X seriously. Here Cone's treatment falls noticeably short.

Nevertheless, Cone's study of King and Malcolm X is admirable. Cone gives a life-sized portrait of two figures who

have grown larger than life. And with the phenomenal resurgence of interest in Malcolm, Cone has not been afraid to criticize him for his often lethal sexism, his advocacy of impractical strategies of violence, and his almost exclusive focus on race, which was only decentered after his break from the Nation of Islam.

The imaginative virtue of Cone's book is that he has shown that Martin and Malcolm needed each other, that their ideas and social strategies brought

them to a strange but effective symbiosis. His title, employing his subjects' first names, is a symbol of the first-name familiarity we feel with these great men, and a striking emblem of their genuine humility. As we struggle to take measure of their extraordinary accomplishments, Cone's book will be indispensable in charting how two supremely human and heroic figures occupied and defined their times with empowering vision and sacrificial action.

GENERATION X

A conversation with Spike Lee and Henry Louis Gates.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: The Malcolm X project has been in turnaround, in development hell, for two decades. Not for lack of talent, either. James Baldwin and Arnold Perl, David Bradley, Calder Willingham, Charles Fuller and David Mamet were attached to the project as writers at various points. What's the real reason this movie was never made—until now?

Spike Lee: I just think the studios were scared of the film. And the rising popularity of Malcolm, coupled with the box office appeal of Denzel Washington and myself, is what made it economically feasible for them to invest in the project.

HLG: So the reports that there were script problems aren't really the point.

SL: That had something to do with it, but I just felt that they were too scared. You have to remember that for many of those years, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was still alive, so that was another deterrent. And the bad blood between the Nation of Islam and Mal-

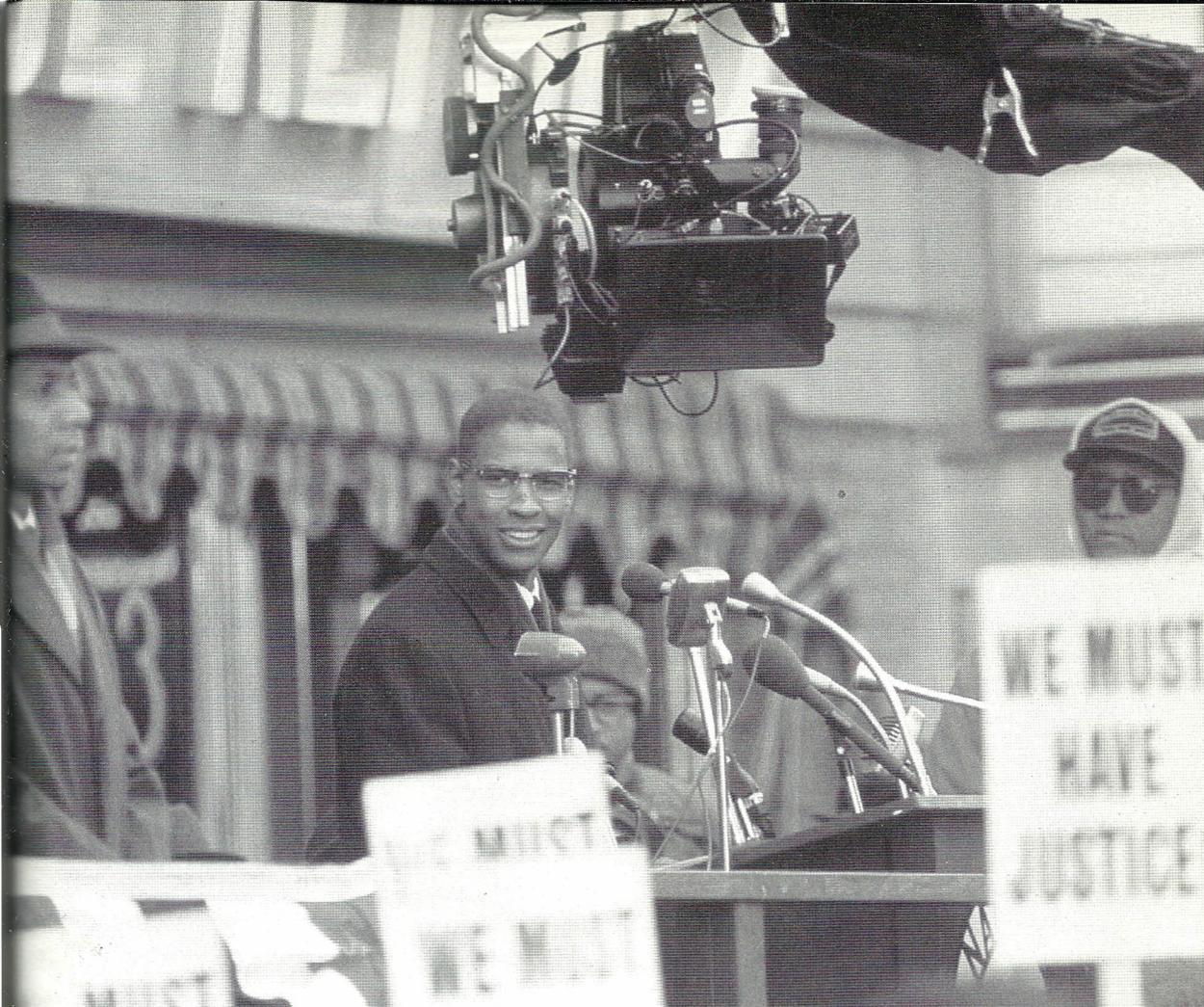
colm's camp has subsided over the years. I don't think it's an accident—the film's being made now by Denzel and myself. I think we were the people all along who were meant to do it.

HLG: David Bradley says they didn't keep firing the writers because the scripts were wrong; they fired them because the *story* was wrong.

SL: I would agree with that. Malcolm X was basically disputing the American dream. And if there's one thing Hollywood is about, it is selling the American dream. So Malcolm X is at odds with the images that Hollywood has always been about.

HLG: On the other hand, he *is* the American dream: rags to riches, figuratively speaking. The self-made man. Very much like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography or Booker T. Washington's—

SL: Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, self-education.



HLG: Right.

SL: Yes, but there are many different stories like this, with many different ethnic backgrounds. The story they choose to tell is always John Doe, Horatio Alger. It's never been about people of color.

HLG: How do you think about the relation between the film and the facts? For example, Bruce Perry's 1991 biography disputes some of the standard, canonical episodes of Malcolm's story. Like the 1929 fire that destroyed the Lansing, Michigan, house: Perry claims it was probably started by the father, Earl Little.

SL: Why's he going to burn down his house with his family in it?

HLG: And he's skeptical about the 1965 firebombing of Malcolm's house: Was it the Nation of Islam, or was it Malcolm, which is what Perry suggests?

SL: I know guys in the Nation who *told* me the Nation did it. They own up to that.

HLG: And he doubts the activity of the Klan in Nebraska and Michigan. He even disputes the way Malcolm's father died. Say Perry's right on some points, wrong on others. In a subtler way, any form of narrative history involves falsification or

Denzel Washington during the filming of "Malcolm X"

©Steve Sands/Outline

distortion of some kind; you're always shaping the facts to fit a narrative framework. But in the case of Malcolm X, there's an especially heavy political freight to carry. You got a taste of this kind of thing in the controversy over the historical veracity of Oliver Stone's *JFK*. The point is that while the *Autobiography* stands as a generally truthful work, individual episodes, some pretty basic, are disputed or controversial. And my question to you, as a filmmaker, is, does that matter?

SL: It does matter; I think that's something every filmmaker or writer has to deal with when you're dealing with someone who has lived. I think Oliver Stone's *JFK* is a great movie. What he did in *JFK* is what he did in *Born on the Fourth of July*. And I think the most important question you have to ask is, what is the *intent*? Our intention is not to tear down Malcolm; for us this is an act of love. And in those cases where we had to change names, change events, or make three or four characters into one, well, I don't think that's distorting the Malcolm X story. You have to realize we're not making a documentary, we're making a drama. Ella Collins is not in this film; Farrakhan is not in this film; you don't have Reginald introducing him to Islam in this film. So you've got the same problem as a filmmaker adapting a vast novel to the screen. You can't include everything; some things you switch or turn around. But you always have to ask artists what their intent is, and this film, as I said before, is an act of love. I know there are people who will say: this film is false because Malcolm didn't do such-and-such . . . and Denzel is too light-

complected, and even though he dyed his hair red, that's not the color that Malcolm X's hair was. I mean, those little things do not detract from the overall work. Let's look at the body of the film, the overall sense of it.

HLG: Is this a "Malcolm" for our time?

SL: Individual viewers will have to make up their own minds. One of the reasons we've gotten static is that Malcolm was so many people. Everybody has their own Malcolm who is dear to them, and their Malcolm fits their own personal and political agenda. So everybody claims him in whatever period of life he was in at that particular time. All I can say is: I was the director, I rewrote the script by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl, and I will take full responsibility. I will say that this is the Malcolm I see.

HLG: Spike's Malcolm. But is Spike's Malcolm the Malcolm before Mecca or after?

SL: We show them all. That's why this film is an epic, that's why it's three hours: we want to show the total evolution of what made him, we want to show the three or four different people he was along the line. People tend to have one view of Malcolm, but he had many different views over his life, he turned completely around several times in this life. We leave it up to the audience to pick and choose which one they agree with, but we want to show all the Malcolms.

HLG: Do you have a favorite?

SL: I like them all—even when he was a

hustler. I can see what steered him that way: having seen the state commit your mother, the family broken up, your father killed. All these things led him to the course he took. I try to keep him together as one person, and all these things, you might say, are spokes in the wheel that made him. I know for sure Warner Brothers is trying to stress the Malcolm *after* Mecca, when he stopped calling white folk blue-eyed grafted devils.

HLG: That's the split everyone sees in him. But does this post-Mecca Malcolm, this more embracing figure, appeal to you, given your own sensibilities?

SL: Yes. I think that Malcolm came to a point where he saw that we're all brothers. And what he had done, through the Nation of Islam, was something he felt very bad about. I think that Malcolm felt personally responsible for every person who joined the Nation because of him. And you'd get arguments with people like Farrakhan, but Malcolm was the one that broke with the Nation of Islam. That doesn't negate the power and greatness of Elijah, but it was Malcolm who gained the Nation the attention of the world through the media. He was the fiery orator, and Elijah Muhammad simply did not have the speaking skills. You know, I had a meeting with Farrakhan. And it's funny, they don't even *care* what we do with Malcolm. All they cared about was how Elijah Muhammad would be portrayed in the film.

HLG: How is he portrayed?

SL: We show him as a very brilliant man—a man who taught Malcolm, and

then put Malcolm out there and gave him a chance to become the person he was. But I don't think he was a divine man; he was a human being, and we bring up the whole thing about his secretaries. He had a weakness for young women, and my view is, that's fine—except that he never owned up to it, and anytime these women would get pregnant, they were

Malcolm post-Mecca is the one where he evolved the most

banished from the Nation. Nobody knew who the fathers were; they were kicked out.

HLG: You mentioned that Warner prefers a certain Malcolm. How did that manifest itself, and how did you deal with it?

SL: They just make suggestions; I have final cut. I know what they're trying to get at. At the same time, they have a point. Because I think that Malcolm post-Mecca is the one where he evolved the most. That is not to negate what Malcolm did when he was in the Nation, aside from those theories that white people were grafted by the evil scientist Yakub and that there's this wheel spinning above us that's going to destroy the world. Even in those days, he was speaking important truths about oppression and resistance, and at a time when no one else had the courage to say the things that Malcolm was saying. These were things we all knew were true, but none of us in the past had the spine to stand up and say.

HLG: You talk about having final cut,

but one way people attack you is to say that in the final analysis, he doesn't *really* have final cut.

SL: Those ignorant motherfuckers haven't read my contract. I have final cut on all my films: that means I decide what goes in, what stays out of the movie. That's it.

HLG: Should we think of this as, in some sense, the film adaptation of Malcolm's autobiography, rather than an independent historical chronicle?

SL: The Baldwin-Perl script was adapted from the autobiography by Alex Haley. But the problems with it were in the last third of the script, where the split with the Nation occurs. They were really, I felt, walking on eggshells, tiptoeing over a lot of stuff—again, at the time Elijah Muhammad was still alive, there was a lot of bad blood still between Malcolm's camp and the Nation—and they really didn't deal with the split, and how Malcolm was killed. Since then a lot more information has come and we've really been able to develop the last third.

HLG: What sort of additional research did you do in order to capture a bygone era?

SL: That's where you have to use your production staff—Wayne Thomas, production designer; Ruth Carter, who did costumes; Ernest Dickerson who shot the movie; various other art directors; and a whole art department. Tons of research was done. I myself did a lot of reading and talked to people who knew

Malcolm. I went to Detroit and talked to Malcolm's brother and Omar and his sister Yvonne; I talked with people at the Organization of Afro-American Unity like Peter Bailey, Earl Grant, Benjamin 2X, Kathleen Misslessharp, who was a captain at Malcolm's Temple Number Seven. I talked with William Kunstler, Betty Shabazz. Charles Kenyatta, Percy Sutton, Rob Cooper, Alex Haley, Dr. Omar Ozan, who wrote the letter that opened up the door for Malcolm when he went to Mecca, because people in the Nation were not considered true Muslims. I tried to use all these people who were there with Malcolm, who knew him.

HLG: What's your relation to the Nation of Islam? During one of the many controversies connected to this film, you were quoted saying that a nonblack director like Norman Jewison wouldn't be able to do justice to the subject. By that logic, what about a non-Muslim director?

SL: I think it's got to do more with race than religion. There was so much research that had to be done, and the people you had to speak to for the most part were black: I don't think they would have opened up to anybody white. Now, in all my films since *Do the Right Thing*, we've used the Nation of Islam for security on the set, and we used them again on *Malcolm X*. But there was one point where they had gotten the word from Chicago to pull out. And they stuck with us. They flew out to Chicago and we had to sit down with Minister Farrakhan and it was smoothed over. But Chicago still



The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, at the February 24, 1965 press conference where he denied any involvement in the assassination of Malcolm X several days earlier. In 1964, Malcolm had publicly denounced his former mentor as an adulterer, charging that he had children by six of his secretaries.

Archive Photos/AFP

put the word out that they're going to keep their distance, they're going to wait till the movie comes out.

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HLG: There's a sense in which people already talk about a "Spike Lee movie" as a genre: there's a peculiar mixture of humor, politics, sensuality, drama, elements that constitute a distinctive sensibility in your own work. And, after all, these are films that you conceive, write, direct, and produce yourself, on your own, in a sense. *Do the Right Thing* wasn't based on a Pat Conroy novel; *School Daze* didn't originate on Broadway. In that generic sense, then, is this biopic *Malcolm X* really a "Spike Lee" film?

SL: I think it is. It's a challenge, because it's the first film that I didn't originate. I had to respectfully deal with Malcolm X but still see if I could put my personal stamp on it. But I think we've been able to do that.

HLG: How?

SL: I had to walk a tightrope, but you can still tell that I directed this film. I still feel it's a personal film like my other films. It was paramount to us that Malcolm would be a human being—we didn't want him to be a Jesus Christ figure, you might say. We wanted him to be complex, wanted him to have shades of gray, not be all black or white. Of course, you can write material like that, but in the end it comes down to the

actor, and Denzel gives a tremendous performance as Malcolm.

HLG: Why would you risk so much on a film so fraught with controversy from the git-go? Why roll the dice on this, instead of going the way you were going?

SL: I had to take the opportunity. People ask me all the time: do you think about the pressure, about what's at stake with this thing? And I realized you can't think about it, because if you do, you'll be paralyzed. Denzel and I have a running joke that both of us are going to have to leave the country when this film comes out.

HLG: Why is the life of Malcolm, Spike Lee's Malcolm, needed right now?

SL: It's needed for the same reason that Malcolm was needed when he was alive, and even more so today. One of the things that Malcolm stressed was education. Well, we're just not doing it. It's such a sad situation now, where male black kids will fail so they can be "down" with everyone else, and if you get A's and speak correct English, you're regarded as being "white." Peer pressure has turned around our whole value system.

HLG: Since the late sixties, "authentic" black culture had been equated with street culture, or urban vernacular culture. It wasn't always this way.

SL: Wynton Marsalis talks about this all the time. It's really crazy. Matty Rich, who made *Straight Outta Brooklyn*, was attacking me by saying: "Spike comes from the middle class, Spike is the third

generation college educated—I didn't go to college, I didn't go to film school, I'm from the streets . . ."

HLG: I'm pure, I'm authentic.

SL: "I'm pure, I'm ignorant." I mean, that's nothing to brag about! This is exactly what I'm saying, where intelligence or education is being looked down upon. And that's stupid. Ignorant.

HLG: If you were a Martian, landed here, and wanted to know about black culture, and went to see the movies made over the last year, with that as the source of your knowledge of who black people are, what do you think you'd conclude? How is black culture represented?

SL: If a Martian landed here and had to imagine what black culture is, based upon recent black cinema, it would conclude that all black people lived in ghettos, did crack, and chanted rap. There was all this talk about the nineteen black movies that came out last year. If you look at them, their subject matter is basically limited to two genres: they're either comedies, or inner-city homeboy revues. Well, this year, there's only nine black films coming out. Do the arithmetic. It's not a good sign. And there's a whole lot more to black culture that just isn't reaching the screen.

HLG: I saw the results of a survey they conducted in various black schools in Washington, D.C., where they asked students to list things they consider "acting white." And one of the things on the list was going to the Smithsonian Institution. I couldn't believe it—when I was

a kid, going to the Smithsonian Institution was like going to Disneyland, or better. You could listen to your heartbeat, see space capsules. Then you realize that a certain amount of romantic black neonationalism is tied into this attitude we've been discussing, which is a real problem for me. Is your movie going to counteract that?

SL: You see Malcolm educate himself; you see him going through the dictionary, copying every word and definition, A to Z. You see him striving to better himself, to educate himself, to talk correctly, to stop swearing and stop other people from swearing . . .

HLG: There's a kind of buppy nationalism that does seem to be waxing strong these days. I recently remarked, in a college seminar, that there are limits to identity—that you don't usually wake up in the morning and say to yourself, thank God I survived the night as a strong black man. And one of my students raised his hand and said, "I do." So I said, "Tell me about yourself; where'd you go to school?" He said, "Exeter, sir." I said, "The State rests." But what you find, often, is that there's a generation for whom Malcolm is purely a symbol, rather than somebody with substance, and that's so whether on the streets outside this building, or in Harvard Square.

SL: That's something we hope to address in this film. You have to realize there's a lot of reeducation that has to go on. I guess the first step is their wearing a cap or T-shirt with a slogan. But hopefully that's only a first step. Then you hope that it starts to be more, and deeper,

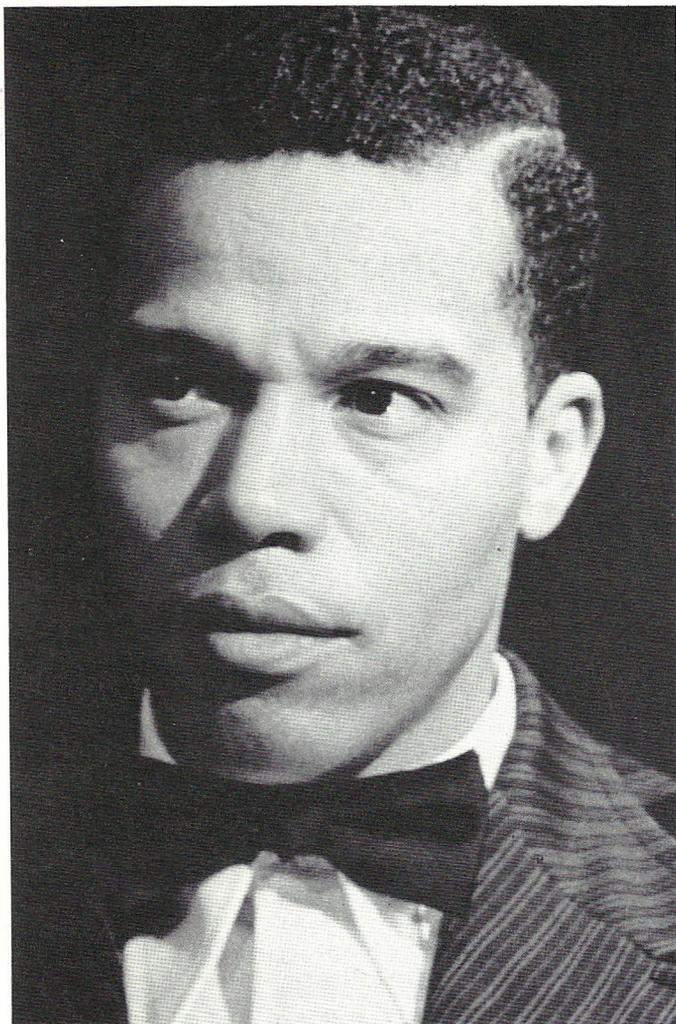
than this cosmetic bullshit. For a lot of people, that's where they're at: they wear an X hat, they've got the Malcolm X T-shirt—and maybe it's better than wearing Batman or Bart Simpson, but it's going to take more than that. The hat or the T-shirt isn't going to get you far. You know, people like shortcuts, so if you want to show you're "down," it's like, you don't have to question anything, because you have this T-shirt or this hat.

HLG: Why do you think there's been such a resurgence of interest in Malcolm X, especially among black youth? You see this "Malcolmania" in rap music, posters, baseball caps, a flood of new books, and, of course, your movie as well.

SL: I think Chuck D., with Public Enemy, and KRS-One, with Boogie Down

The whole turn-the-other-cheek business isn't getting anywhere in black America. That's why people aren't walking around with a K on their hat

Productions, have to be credited with really giving black youth Malcolm through their lyrics. It began there and it just started to build from here. Even more than that, though, the issues he talked about haven't gone away. If they had, there wouldn't be a need to listen to what he had to say anymore. Conditions have even gotten worse. That's why he's more popular now than he's ever been.



Louis Farrakhan, as a national spokesman for The Honorable Elijah Muhammad. In 1964, Farrakhan wrote in *Muhammad Speaks* that “the die is set and Malcolm shall not escape. . . . Such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death.”

Archive Photos

HLG: What about the need for heroes? I think one of the reasons Malcolm’s so visible on the streets is the lack of heroes. Does your Malcolm emerge as a hero?

SL: Very heroic. I think Ossie put it best in his eulogy: he said Malcolm is our shining black prince.

HLG: Why are we seeing “Malcolmania” and not a “Martin-mania”? Why isn’t Martin sexy?

SL: Well, Martin was more mainstream. Black youth today are not going to sit

down and turn the other cheek. The other day, there was a bias case where some white teenagers set on a black kid and painted him white. The next day, some black guys retaliated—fucked with some white kids and painted them black. So the whole nonviolent, turn-the-other-cheek business just isn’t getting anywhere in black America. That is one of the reasons why people aren’t walking around with a *K* on their hat.

HLG: James Baldwin said, and James Cone says this, too, that around the times of their deaths, Martin and Malcolm were, religion aside, virtually identical with respect to their viewpoints on the racial situation. Think that’s true?

SL: Yes, they definitely had made overtures to each other, to find common ground where they could work together. I think they always had the same goals, just took different routes, and by both taking different routes, there were some words between them—each would speak on the other’s tactics. But I think at the end they really saw that they had more in common than not.

HLG: What audience is this film primarily directed toward: are you trying to educate black America or white America? Given the complexity of the subject, can one film do both?

SL: Yes, I think all my films have done both. I’ve always found it interesting to view my films as having two different audiences, one black and one white. We have enough stuff in there that everybody gets something out of it.

HLG: That's a hard balancing act to pull off.

SL: It can be done. Everybody can get an education out of this film. This film's about America, and all Americans can learn from it. Like Malcolm, we're taking a global view of this film: it's not just about the United States, we're thinking about the world. And there will be people who'll want to see this around the world.

HLG: But, to go back to the running joke between you and Denzel, you run the risk of alienating people once you go beyond the manipulation of symbols. Certainly it happens when you start to separate truth from falsehood, wheat from chaff, saying: no brother, the Jews did not invent slavery, the degree of melanin in your skin doesn't correspond to the degree of humanitarianism in your heart, and the Egyptians did not levitate the Pyramids and fly around in airplanes, whatever the Portland Baseline Essays claim. Now, you've sometimes been called a griot. One of the things that most Afro-Americans don't know is that the griot was always estranged from his community, always a marginal figure, exiled at his death, even buried separately from the rest of his community, because he was the person who was supposed to call a spade a spade. He was the person who was supposed to say, these are the veils you have before your eyes.

SL: This is something that's difficult to deal with, because we all want to be united as a people, and we've really been divided on purpose from the beginning,

back when they made sure nobody spoke the same tongue on the slave ships. So there's always this decision to be made: should I speak out because what's going on is false, or should I keep my mouth shut? It's like the whole Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill thing. Or the whole thing between me and Baraka. I know there have to be differences, case by case; sometimes maybe differences should be talked out behind closed doors, other times, maybe it has to be done publicly. So there's this fine line, between going for the truth, while, at the same time, you don't want to make it seem that black folks are fighting black folks.

HLG: The trouble is, we're 35 million people—and that's just the ones that the Census Bureau counts . . .

SL: I know there's not one unified black thought. So there's always that issue of who determines who's black and what's black, and what's black enough. Who appointed Amiri Baraka the grand poohbah of black culture?

HLG: He did.

SL: Himself. There was no general election, though. On the other hand, I see people getting mad at you for saying Leonard Jeffries is full of shit. And they can say, you're just as bad as the white press that's attacking him. What people have to understand is that your questioning of his stuff doesn't come from hate or animosity. It has to do with truth. Whereas the guys at the *New York Post* and people like that are just pure racists. So there has to be a distinction made, and even

though we're black, we still have to be allowed to disagree. Now, sometimes, the question comes where the disagreement's going to come. Are we going to go out in public, where we just have two black people fighting all the time?

HLG: A battle royale.

SL: A battle royale in full view of white people . . . or are we going to take these disagreements behind closed doors and see if these disagreements can be worked out.

HLG: Sometimes I've found, though, that black people don't take each other seriously until it hits the public.

SL: That's true.

HLG: And then you're stuck. But just as the charge is leveled at various black writers and intellectuals, people will charge that the white establishment created you. The line is that you're a product of *them*, that black people didn't elect you spokesman, so where do you get off talking like one?

SL: That's true. I've not been elected by black people as a spokesman, I've never positioned myself as a spokesperson for black people. The white media always designates who they feel should speak for black folk. This year we decide this is the person: when something happens that concerns black people, we're going to call this person for their reaction. I've never set myself up to be a spokesperson. At the same time, some things need to be spoken about, and I do have access to the media, and I'd be a fool not to exercise

that on occasion.

HLG: It's also one of the ways a persona is created. It seems every marketable filmmaker concocts a legend about himself. Van Peebles became both the Left Bank pavement *artiste* and the outlaw with a tattoo on his neck, daring one to cut on the dotted line if you can. . . . What's Spike's legend? Surely the last thing you want to be known as is a New York urban bourgeois who not only, God forbid, went to Morehouse, but graduated from Morehouse, too.

SL: What I've been able to do is make a persona that people can believe in to sell the films. I started in the position where I'd done some low-budget films, and you know that the studios were not going to put a lot of promotional money behind that. I had to be the one to stand up on a soapbox and say: come and see this film, come and see this film, come and see this film. And so that's really how it started. And that ties in with the commercials with Mars Blackmon, for Nike and Levi's.

HLG: You don't see a tension between these two things, the artistic and the commercial.

SL: Nowadays you got to sell your product out there or nobody's going to come. And if nobody sees your movies, you won't be able to make another one.

HLG: This is your first film with Warner . . .

SL: And last.

HLG: Why's that?

SL: I've done three films before with Universal Pictures, and I just have better relations with the people there—Tom Pollack, Katie Silvers, Sandy King, Skip Jacks. I've not had that relationship at Warner Brothers. At Universal they left me alone: they understood what I was trying to do, they gave me money, and I went ahead and made my film. That really hasn't been the case at Warner Brothers. The reason I made it at Warner is that they owned the property. Universal would have loved to make this film, but they didn't have the property.

HLG: How was the financing with Warner?

SL: It's a \$32–33 million movie, but Warner Brothers only put 18 into this film. And Largo bought the foreign rights for 8; so it's 6, 7 million over budget. But that \$32–33 million figure was what our original budget was from the beginning. If we had held out and said, we're not making this film unless you give us \$32–33 million dollars, the film would not have been made. So we went in, knowing that somewhere down the line, we'd have to find some extra money. But we had to get the film made then: it's been two decades, and we had to seize the opportunity.

HLG: With a budget this size, you've got a bigger crew, more locations, historical details: how was the adjustment?

SL: It was a big adjustment, because none of us—Ernest Dickerson, myself, Ruth Carter, Wayne Thomas—none of

us had done anything on this scale. This film is vast, a three-hour epic. It involves a lot more people, a lot more sets, a lot more locations, a lot more decisions to be made . . . more money at stake, a longer shoot. A longer shoot means more fatigue.

HLG: Will you stick in this budget range, or go back?

SL: I'll go back. The budget depends on the story. This was a \$33-million story.

HLG: You've said before that the amount of control the studios exert is in direct relation to the amount of money they put up. Were there more suits on the set this time, more of a sense of studio control this time?

SL: No, they rarely came to the set. Their attitude was this: we're putting \$18 million into this and not a penny more; anything that's over budget, the producers are going to have to cover, and we don't care. So they didn't hang around.

HLG: Another aspect of the production that's gotten press in the trades is the well-publicized argument you had with the local Teamsters Union, which you described as "lily-white." You said you didn't want to hire from their pool. How was that finally resolved?

SL: It worked out. We got a black teamster captain for the first time in the history of their union, and we made them hire a lot more black teamsters. Of course, it's just a drop in the bucket. What's funny is that once we started to shoot, about halfway through, Eddie

Murphy started to film; and instead of hiring more black people, the union wanted to take half of our blacks and distribute them to Eddie Murphy. Well, we said, hell no. If Eddie wants more blacks, then you've got to hire more blacks for Eddie, let more blacks into the union.

HLG: Did they do it?

SL: Not right away. But this is something that Eddie has to deal with.

HLG: On another point of contention: some people have described the flap that Amiri Baraka manufactured as the railing of a failed populist against a successful one. That is, here's someone who would also like to engage the popular consciousness the way that you've succeeded already in doing. What's your own take on the Baraka thing?

SL: I think Amiri does love Malcolm. At the same time, I think there's some jealousy in this. I think he looks around today and he's seeing young black people doing stuff, enjoying access to the media, access to the people. I mean, how many

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people can you reach as a poet or playwright? How many people ever saw *Dutchman*? Ten thousand at the most? How many people saw the movie? I think that gets to him, the fact that we have access to so many people, and we're making money at it. And it just came at the wrong time. What's really sad is that

you'd think the people before you should be glad that somebody comes up who's successful, and who's only building on what they did. It's like the old, bitter black ball players who looked down upon Jackie Robinson, because Jackie was the one that got the shot and it just so happened that they were born ten years too early. Well, don't knock Jackie because he was the first to get picked. That's how I saw a lot of that, with Baraka.

HLG: Do you feel an obligation to reach out to the older generation?

SL: I reach out to the people who want to reach out to me. Why should I reach out to Baraka? People say, you should sit down with him, you should meet with him. I mean, fuck him. If he has such a wealth of knowledge about Malcolm, why has he never written a book about Malcolm X? Why has he never written a play about Malcolm X? Why has he never written a screenplay about Malcolm X? Now, once I start doing something, he starts talking about it. What did he do before? Nothing. I said in *Newsweek*, all these people, all you great students of Malcolm X, I'm going to give you my Federal Express account number; send me your papers, send me your transcripts, send me your manuscripts about Malcolm X. I didn't get shit. They didn't *do* shit. They're just running their mouth; they hadn't done any scholarly research, they hadn't done any work at all.

HLG: Baldwin said that when white people attacked him, that just got his blood up; but when black people at-

tacked him, that just made him want to cry. Could you talk a little about what it's like being trashed by black people?

SL: I don't think that just because you're black, you can take the attitude that you're beyond criticism, beyond being trashed. I think, for the most part, black people have been too lenient on black artists. If a black artist goes around doing stuff that we feel is an affront to the people of the race, we should stop buying their records or seeing their movies or whatever it is. But we never realize our economic clout the way we should.

HLG: But that's what people like Baraka are trying to do to you, get people to boycott your movies. . . .

SL: With Baraka, the vast numbers of black people don't know who he is. He can scream all he wants, people are not really going to heed him.

HLG: Still, is black criticism more painful than white?

SL: I think Public Enemy said it best in that song, "Every brother ain't a brother." You might think because someone's black that right away they're going to like your work, but it's not true. Among film critics, that guy Armond White, who writes for the *City Sun*, never likes anything I've done. Is it different? It is different. But you can't assume that because you're black and they're black, automatically they're going to love your work. In the end you have to please yourself.

HLG: Still, in a marketplace where the

crossover audience matters so much, what reality checks are there to preserve the "integrity" of a black production, or does such a thing exist?

SL: I think it's up to the creating force. I think that as a black person there are things you can do that will naturally bring in white folks to your work, whether a TV show, a record, or a movie. But at the same time, you don't want to water down your work, or make black folks pay for your efforts to attract this crossover audience. With people like Lionel Ritchie, there's a constant decision about what kind of audience they want to bring in. Black art has always had that dilemma. If I do choose to cross over, will I alienate my black audience? In a lot of cases, artists have gone for the crossover market, totally left behind their black audience, and once the white folks got tired of them, tried to come back to the black folks. Too late, often.

HLG: Too late, yes. Film history is littered with flashes in the pan: the black

A lot of guys making films today don't have any craft, and they're proud to say so

message films of the forties, Belafonte in the fifties, the blaxploitation era of the late sixties, early seventies. What have you done to render yourself flashproof?

SL: Flashproof means having a body of work. With *Malcolm X*, that makes six films over the last seven years. We need to grow and to get better, because there's so much to learn in filmmaking.

HLG: As to the movies themselves: what do you want them to be remembered for, and earn money for? Much as critics know what they mean when they talk about a Ford film, a Hitchcock film, and so on, what will a Lee film be remembered for?

SL: I want to be remembered for honest, true portrayal of Afro-Americans. And bring our great richness to the screen. Black cinema hasn't produced its Duke Ellington or James Baldwin yet . . . but if we stick to it, we'll make sure this isn't just a trend. And if we look at things for the long run, I think this will happen.

HLG: How do we keep it from being just a trend?

SL: By trying to be the best filmmakers we can be. By learning the craft. By having a love of cinema. Not being in it just for the money, for the glory, or the number of pretty asses you can bone when you're casting your films. That's what it's going to take. It was a love of music that enabled Duke to do what he did.

You got to have that love of whatever it is you're doing, the craft of it. And you have to go and spend time in the woodshed. John Coltrane, Wynton Marsalis, they practice five, six hours a day. They're not bullshitting. A lot of these guys making films today, they're bullshitting. They don't have any craft, and they're proud to say it: "I didn't go to film school, I never made a film before." Most of the time it ends up looking exactly like that. It looks like crap.

There are so many stories to tell. Hollywood—for the most part, their shit is dried up. Theater, too. I mean, there has to be a reason they're doing Shakespeare for the ten millionth motherfucking time. No other new white writer ever? Just this dude Shakespeare? Or Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*—how many times do you have to do that shit? I know there's such a thing as a classic, but to me that stuff is dead. And our stories have not really been told. Think of all the novels that have still to make it to the screen: *Song of Solomon*, *Bluest Eye*, *Their Eyes Are Watching God*. It's like virgin territory.