Malcolm X across the Genres

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Malcolm X, directed by Spike Lee; screenplay by James Baldwin, Arnold Perl, and Spike Lee, based on the book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley; produced by Marvin Worth, Spike Lee, Monty Ross, Jon Kilik, and Preston Holmes; released by Warner Brothers; rated PG-13.

Also mentioned are *Malcolm X*, a 1972 documentary produced by Marvin Worth and Arnold Perl, in association with Betty Shabazz, re-released by Kit Parker Films; Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965); and Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1991).

THE HISTORIAN IN ME DISTRUSTED A DRAMATIC EARLY SCENE in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* that is set in Omaha. The Ku Klux Klan comes pounding up to the Little family's house on horseback. Initially, the scene seems menacingly authentic— hooded white supremacy in its most recognizable guise bent on terrorizing a helpless black family—but as soon as one recalls that this is supposed to be Omaha, Nebraska, in the 1920s, the sense of realism breaks down.

I assumed this to be yet another employment of the iconography of southern white supremacy, which Americans still think of as the *real* white supremacy, to advance a narrative of black life anywhere in the United States. Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, like the 1972 documentary of the same name and countless other evocations of black life, uses photos and footage from southern history to hammer home the plight of black people in American life generally. Considering that in Lee's film, a still photograph from 1936 of a Florida lynch victim appears between cuts of the violence that met civil rights activists in Birmingham in 1963, it is hardly surprising that the need to show the Klan as always coming on horseback and riding off into the full moon triumphs again over regional and chronological logic. Once more in film, or so it appeared, D. W. Griffith's images cancel out the unlikelihood of twentieth-century, midwestern, urban Klansmen making their rounds by horse.

But I was wrong to think that Spike Lee had followed the dictates of film school; the image was not Lee's at all. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* opens with this very scene. Lee and his screenwriters were following Malcolm X as though what he had said was history, which it was not. According to Bruce Perry's *Malcolm: The Life of*

a Man Who Changed Black America, the story was Malcolm's own invention.[1] This vignette encapsulates the confusion about historical truth that surrounds the figure of Malcolm X in the two genres through which he is best known: his autobiography and Spike Lee's film.

Both *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the film *Malcolm X* simulate history by purveying autobiographical rather than biographical truths, for the source for each representation is Malcolm's own recomposition of his life from the vantage point of 1964. Alex Haley shaped the autobiography and took it from conversation to publication. A screenplay by James Baldwin, Arnold Perl, and Spike Lee recasts the published autobiography for the 1992 film. While each of these retellings invents a new narrative, neither the book nor the film is congruent with the life that Malcolm Little/Malcolm X lived, day by day, between 1925 and 1965.

The transubstantiations work on several different levels. First of all, autobiography, even when it is not "told to" another but is written by the person who lived the life, reworks existential fragments into a meaningful new whole, as seen from a particular vantage point. Even when the autobiography is not a collaboration, the narrator passes over much in silence and highlights certain themes that become salient in light of what the narrator concludes she or he has become. When the subject is racialized, the narrative nearly always aspires to (acquires in the marketplace) metonymic stylization, as captured in the dust jacket blurb of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* from 1965, which still serves to promote the *Autobiography* today: "In the agony of [his] self-creation [is] the agony of an entire people in their search for identity. No man has better expressed his people's trapped anguish." If Malcolm X is to work as a racial symbol, it is best not to look at him too closely.

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMING AN INDIVIDUAL into a racial symbol alters the subject's life (with its false starts and, above all, with its intra-racial conflicts) into a narrative whose plot is coded in black and white. Usually, the black protagonist faces "white society" or the "white power structure." Such stark dichotomies are hardly the sign of history that is written sensitively. History grows out of evidence, the more the better, we say—or at least so we said until the late twentieth century, when evidence in absurd abundance threatened to paralyze historians by swamping the research phase of the work.

The best drama, in contrast, is spun out of the fewest number of documents, the least amount of detail and nuance. For the sake of theater, the less we know of thoroughly racialized figures like Malcolm X, the better. When we know enough about a man to analyze his childhood family dynamics, as Bruce Perry has done, then we know enough to realize that what happened between self, parents, and siblings counts as much as—more than?—the oppressiveness of segregation in the public sphere. It is hardly surprising that Spike Lee's movie has reached millions, while Bruce Perry's debunking biography, a 1991 imprint by a small publishing house called Station Hill, is hardly known at all. Even though the makers of Spike

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[1] Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, N.Y., 1991), 3.

Lee's film conducted many interviews, for the purpose of the drama they chose to use a univocal source: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The movie should have borne the same title, for it is autobiography rather than history.

As a means of buttressing the historical claims of his film, Spike Lee takes the process of stylization a step further and plays havoc with the distinction between feature and documentary. The results are mind boggling. At crucial junctures, the narrative, which is shot in color, is punctuated with scenes in which Denzel Washington, the actor who plays Malcolm X, appears in black and white—in the press conference in which Malcolm announces his departure from the Nation of Islam, as well as on the stretcher that bears his bullet-ridden body away from the Audubon ballroom and to the hospital. This faux footage replicates documentary technique like that in the 1972 documentary of Malcolm X by Marvin Worth and Arnold Perl, whose authority was also *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Spike Lee is so skilled at fabricating documentation that when Nelson Mandela appeared at the end of *Malcolm X*, I questioned *his* authenticity! The movie's credits reveal more faux footage, as in the black-and-white scene of the Kennedy assassination that is cross-cut poststructurally with Denzel Washington's/Malcolm's reaction to the assassination.

This movie is not a documentary, but it wraps itself in manufactured images of documentary truth. When the images are real—as in footage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s remarks after the assassination of Malcolm X, the effect can be chilling, for viewers know that King would be the victim of assassination three years later. The verisimilitude of Spike Lee's faux footage is intensified by the cameo appearances of the Reverend Al Sharpton and former Black Panther Bobby Seale. Their roles as street-corner speakers establish a continuity of black nationalist leadership from Malcolm X in the 1960s to the Panthers in the 1970s to Sharpton in the 1980s and 1990s. Given the relative stability of black political grievances, notably police brutality and official harassment, this film may well reopen questions about the role of police and government in Malcolm X's assassination. If so, such an inquiry would underscore the political role of film in African-American life and further blur the line between art and life, between symbolism and history.

Viewed as an artifact of this time rather than of the 1960s, *Malcolm X* subordinates certain aspects of the problem of realism and accentuates others. Spike Lee's film heightens Malcolm's confrontation with the police over the beating of Brother Johnson, as though it were a major turning point rather than one of many steps (sideways and backward as well as forward) in the emergence of the Nation of Islam. For a 1993 audience, Denzel Washington is a good-enough Malcolm X: he looks and talks like Malcolm did in the 1960s; and, from this vantage point, it only matters slightly that Washington is significantly darker-skinned than Little/X and much older than Malcolm during much of the action. Although Washington is in his mid-thirties, Malcolm was a teenager during his years as a hustler. He went to prison before turning twenty and was only twenty-seven when he emerged from incarceration in Massachusetts and went to work as an organizer for the Nation of Islam. These are trivialities in racialized drama, where the conflict is posed mainly in terms of black and white and other

questions are less intelligible. When what happens outside the black-white nexus is not of much interest, the black protagonist needs only enough family influence and youthful experience to foreshadow the anguish that will come of being black.

In the movie, Malcolm X's siblings lose the roles they played in his personal and intellectual trajectory, roles that were clearly acknowledged in the *Autobiography*. In life, four of his siblings joined the Nation of Islam before he did, and his family, particularly his brothers Philbert and Reginald, brought him into the fold while he was still in prison. Later on, when Malcolm was acting as Elijah Muhammad's national representative and building the Nation of Islam from 400 to 40,000 adherents, part of the hostility he encountered derived from the fear that by promoting the interests of his brothers, who were also ministers in the Nation, he was building a family dynasty intended to rival that of Elijah Muhammad. After Malcolm left the Nation of Islam in early 1964, his half-sister Ella, a businesswoman in Boston, underwrote his pilgrimage to Mecca. While he spent months on end abroad in 1964–1965, Ella Little took over the leadership of his ephemeral new organizations, the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, continuing to head them after his assassination. Given the kind of roles allotted to women in the Nation of Islam and in this and Spike Lee's other films, the effacement of the strong and complicated figure of Ella Little is hardly surprising.

Even though their roles are circumscribed, the female characters in Spike Lee's film have bigger parts than they did in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. His girlfriend Laura's place in the autobiography is narrowly circumscribed, although Alex Haley notes in his epilogue that Malcolm blamed his own shoddy treatment of Laura for her eventual ruin (which seems unlikely unless his role in her life was far larger than the autobiography or Perry's biography indicates). In the feature film, the figure of Laura reappears at several junctures, first as the proper young black woman whom the teenaged Malcolm deserts for a white woman named Sophia. Laura sharpens the point that the *Autobiography* makes obliquely by telling Malcolm, "I'm not white and I don't put out, so why would you want to call me, Malcolm?" Young Laura's purity contrasts with the figure she presents as the film progresses. When Malcolm arouses her sexually, she becomes willing to jettison her grandmother's prohibitions. Later, she is naïvely vulnerable to the manipulation of a freeloading junkie boyfriend. Finally, as a prostitute at the bottom of the pit of degradation, Laura is seen giving a white john a blow-job in a Harlem doorway. (Spike Lee does not explain how she gets from Boston to New York.)

At other points, Lee phrases succinctly the patriarchal gender values of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm admonishes his wife Betty not to raise her voice in *his* home. A scene at a Savior's Day Rally hammers home the message, as the audience sees a banner stretched across the balcony in which the sisters are sequestered. It reads: "We must protect our women, our most valuable possession." Is Spike Lee using this prop ironically? I'm not sure, for popular black nationalism, in the 1990s as in the 1960s, often espouses precisely this sort of gender ideal. Lee may be using the Nation of Islam to preach a gospel that he also finds appealing.

SPIKE LEE'S *MALCOLM X* CAPTURES THE STRENGTHS of the Nation of Islam in redeeming poor, black incarcerated men for useful lives. Elijah Muhammad wrote to black inmates, many of whom lacked Malcolm's family, and the Nation played a unique role in educating and empowering the most vulnerable men in American society. The content of the Nation's beliefs is not well explained, however, and Lee's film (like the biography and documentary film) glosses over the weirder themes in Elijah Muhammad's doctrine, which he learned from Master W. D. Fard in Detroit in 1931. (Fard's portrait appears on the walls of Elijah Muhammad's house in the feature film. Fard was even more light-skinned than Muhammad.) Fard taught that when blacks separated from whites, they would enter heaven on earth, after four hundred years of hell on earth under the control of white devils. Fard and Muhammad said that the black man was the original man, and that whites had been purposefully bred out of the original man six thousand years earlier in order to put black people through hell. The end of time was near, and on a day of judgment Allah would defeat whites and vindicate blacks through racial separation.

Both the feature and the documentary films mention the Nation of Islam's apocalyptic vision of racial redemption, but neither fleshes it out. The Nation's solution to American racism, the creation of a black state out of Georgia and Alabama, is similarly phrased in terms that are suitably vague. Spike Lee's film reveals why so many black Americans were drawn to the Nation of Islam through Malcolm X's preaching of black beauty and power; but, by deleting the inane portions of the creed, it eliminates the mystery of why so intelligent a person as Malcolm X would stay twelve years in such a narrow-minded movement. Answering that question means stepping outside the framework of Spike Lee's film.

The Nation of Islam is a combination of two intellectual traditions: first, holiness religion of the sort that is commonly found in working-class black neighborhoods and that appeals primarily to women and, second, the masculinist tradition of black nationalism continued by the Black Panthers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Within urban Afro-American life, the first tradition is strongly class-based, the second is highly gendered.

Holiness religion is perfectionist and apocalyptic, maintaining that the end is near and the faithful must prepare for judgment by purifying their thoughts, behavior, and bodies. Black Muslims, like acolytes of holiness churches, must take baths frequently, dress modestly, and eat healthfully (little or no meat, no pork, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables); they must not smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, curse, gamble, steal, or fornicate. Men wear white shirts and suits, women wear long dresses, head coverings, and no make-up. Both holiness Christianity and the Nation of Islam have saved thousands of poor blacks from the snares of vice-ridden neighborhoods.

Critics of the Nation of Islam have sometimes remarked on the paradox of black nationalists' adopting the trappings of "the white middle-class," but that designation is flawed. Muslims, like many other people of color in similar clothing, are dressing for respectability, not for racial transmogrification. Respectability, like the putative characteristics of economic class, are for many Americans color-coded: the stereotypical vices of the poor (intemperance, laziness, feckless-

ness, immorality) are in the United States the stereotypical vices of blacks; the supposed virtues of the middle class (thrift, hard work, sobriety, moral rectitude) are associated with whites.

RACIAL STEREOTYPE, which has long tended to lump all blacks together, regardless of their class, gender, or region, deeded black nationalism an intellectual inheritance with many of white supremacy's serious flaws. Malcolm X, in autobiography, documentary film, and feature film, exhibits one such weakness, a preoccupation with whiteness, in three different guises. On the most obvious level, whiteness provides the measure of beauty and desirability for young Malcolm Little, who undergoes excruciating pain in order to conk (straighten) his hair. In the film and in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm and his composite sidekick, Shorty, display white girlfriends like trophies. In Malcolm's case, whiteness alone does not quite suffice. In the *Autobiography*, he emphasizes Sophia's elegant clothing. Her relatively elevated class standing is also indicated in the feature film, as Sophia presents herself as a classy dame who is better than the trashy poor white women, "harps" (Irish-Americans) with whom black men were more likely to associate.

In the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X outgrows the aesthetic of whiteness, but the gaze of the superego figure he terms "the white man" remains steady. While "the white man" is the devil and "the white man" has done only evil in this world, Malcolm X seems to agree with the judgment of "the white man" with regard to the self-destructive behavior of poor blacks. Minister Malcolm X hectors his audience for ingesting the white man's poisons: pork, cigarettes, white women. "The white man sees you and laughs," says Malcolm, calling on the scorn of strange white people to induce dietary and sexual reform.

At the very end of the Spike Lee film, "the white man" goes from stern parent to Islamic brother. After his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz/Malcolm X wrote an open letter to the Muslim Mosque, Inc., in New York that is quoted in both films and reproduced in the *Autobiography*.[2] In the letter, Malcolm marvels at the color blindness he encounters in Mecca and reports that he has prayed and eaten and slept with brother Muslims whose skin was the whitest white and whose eyes were the bluest blue and whose hair was the blondest blonde. (Those white Muslims may have been Bosnians, the very people whom Serbs are slaughtering and raping today in the name of "ethnic cleansing.") The geography of the Muslim world is such that fair-skinned pilgrims in Saudi Arabia would have formed a small minority, who were remarkable to Malcolm X because the figure of "the white man" had acquired such salience in his own ideology. The great majority in Mecca would have been more or less brownish people from Asia and Africa.

In 1964 and early 1965, as Malcolm traveled widely and came into contact with pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism, he grew intellectually and began to situate

[2] Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York, 1965), 339–42.

American racial issues within a broader context. Had he lived, he might well have outgrown the intellectually constricting aspects of black nationalism. But in 1964, he knew he would not live much longer. The Nation of Islam (with official support?) assassinated him, in a spectacular and tragic example of black nationalism's inability to tolerate intra-racial diversity. During most of his public life, Malcolm X, too, subscribed to the unifying tenets of the Nation, which lacked language with which to manage dissent or conceive of difference within the race.

The rhetoric of the Nation as preached so effectively by Malcolm X dwelled endlessly on "the white devil" and "the black man." Interracial conflict was not nearly so dramatic in Malcolm's own life, for he was as much the victim of poverty as of racism. Spike Lee emphasizes the dramatic parallel between the burning of the Little family's home in Lansing, Michigan, and the fire-bombing of Malcolm's family home in New York, but the parallel, no matter how spectacular, is flawed: Malcolm called the Lansing fire a white-on-black crime, while he blamed the conflagration in New York on the Nation of Islam.

THE LEADING THEME IN MALCOLM'S LIFE was actually intra-racial conflict, which, in the last analysis, took his life. Like Americans who lack a conceptual category for black respectability, Malcolm X (and black nationalists generally) found it difficult to envision a Negro race made up of people of different classes and clashing convictions. Malcolm much preferred to speak in the singular, as though all twenty-two million African Americans had identical interests and needs. The Nation of Islam offered solutions to "the black man," no matter what "his" education or income. Women in the Nation were to accept the interests of Muslim men as their own.

Racial unity is the great ideal of the various strains of black nationalism, and it is usually considered an attainable goal. If black people were united, so the reasoning goes, they could challenge racial oppression effectively; if black people were united, they could advance economically; if black people were united, they would represent a potent political influence. In this ideology, the impediment to unity is not the implausibility of tens of millions of people without their own governmental institutions or police power acting together in unison. Instead, racial unity is seen as being prevented by the actions of traitors who are in cahoots with whites. Malcolm X identified race traitors as educated blacks and house Negroes, and he usually treated these two kinds of people as one.

While he was proud of his own self-education and wanted young black people to educate themselves, Malcolm X denied that formal education was good for African Americans. He labeled black Ph.D.s "Uncle Thomases" and called them fakes and traitors, asking his audiences what a black man with a Ph.D. was called. Answer: "A n---er!" As if to say that for a black person, formal education serves for naught.

For Malcolm X before 1964, formal education served for less than naught, because he saw a close connection between blacks with education and what he called "the house Negro," the slave who loved his master better than himself or

other black people, that is, the traitor to his race. These lines always got a laugh when Malcolm appeared on television or on college campuses, and they still do in the movies that have appeared since his assassination. Even those who were skewered managed to laugh at their own expense, for, despite his harsh rhetoric, Malcolm X remained a good-humored man whose razor wit never became personal. This, at least, is my memory of seeing him in the early 1960s.

When he spoke at the University of California at Berkeley, I was one of a handful of black students in his audience, and I recall my realization that he was not really talking to us. Malcolm X spoke around us to white people, even though educated blacks like us were his rhetorical *bête blanche*. Like "the white man," we were a stereotype, but we were not nearly so interesting. As stereotype, we had a part to play in the drama of foiled race unity, but his real engagement was with the vast majority of his audience, whom he could bait and smile at with devastating effectiveness. As sidelined players in his American drama, we nevertheless relished Malcolm's appearance, for he was able to discomfort white people with an enviable skill that we did not possess. He was smart, assertive, funny, and, all in all, very entertaining. After he left the Nation of Islam, he realized what we had hoped, that he could do better than tailor his analysis to fit the demands of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's creed.

The second and last time I saw Malcolm X was in West Africa in the fall of 1964. Perhaps because ideologically he was becoming more like us—the well-educated Afro-American community sheltering in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana—our existence seemed to annoy him no longer. He was at home intellectually, but he was also utterly exhausted physically. When he returned to New York, Malcolm tried to implement what he had learned by founding new organizations that were still black nationalist. He also moved to the left politically, which, had he lived, would have ultimately strained his racial ideals.

Given the Nation of Islam's willingness to shed blood, I doubt it would have been possible for Malcolm X to survive much longer. He certainly felt, when he finished his work with Alex Haley, that he would not live to see the publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and he did not. Had he somehow managed to preserve his life, his intellectual trajectory would probably have continued leftward and away from black nationalism. Would he still have inspired Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to found the Black Panther Party, which repeated much of the Nation of Islam's tragic history? Probably not, for by 1966–1967, Malcolm X would have seen the danger inherent in a fascination with guns and come to resemble the Nelson Mandela of the late 1980s. Nelson Mandela, another symbol of race and manhood, is the figure with whom Spike Lee closes his film. The vision—still pan-African—raises hopes for another round of consciousness-raising among black nationalists.