

Malcolm X and the Hip Hop Culture

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THE looming billboards, the full-page ads, the T-shirts, the baseball caps, the potato chips, the automobile air fresheners—they all say “X.” To many admirers of Malcolm X, the hype surrounding Spike Lee’s latest movie is an insult. How dare Lee reduce Malcolm X’s extraordinary, ultimately tragic life to a logo, a trademark with no more depth than, say, the Batman symbol. As Jonathan Yardley wrote in the *Washington Post*: “This implacably serious man has become that most American of creatures, a brand-name superstar. It is impossible to imagine that anything more demeaning could be done to his name and his memory.” Even Malcolm’s widow, Betty Shabazz, expressed doubts, hiring a licensing firm to curb a marketing juggernaut that, in her view, “had gotten out of hand.”

I understand this reaction, but I don’t think it cuts to the heart of the matter. If Malcolm X’s memory is being demeaned, it’s not simply because somebody is making money selling items bearing his “X.” Like the yellow ribbons bought and sold during Operation Desert Storm, the ubiquitous “X” seeks only to remind the public of something, to set off a chain of associations. The real question is, what is the content of those associations?

I’ll admit it: my initial response to the “X” was almost entirely negative. Instead of the complex humanity captured in Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, that “X” conjured everything I dislike about Spike Lee’s public persona—and, by extension, about the hip-hop culture (meaning rap music, street fashion and videogenic attitude) from which Lee takes many (not all) of his cues. To the extent that this hip-hop culture loudly proclaims Malcolm X’s legacy as its own, I feel obliged to point out that there are important ways in which this wave of hero-worship is more travesty than tribute.

This is not to say that there is nothing good about either hip-hop or Lee’s film making. On the contrary, that ubiquitous “X” looks a whole lot better after seeing *Malcolm X*. My expectations for the film were modest, because although Lee is gifted in many areas of filmmaking (such as business, production design, hiring jazz composers and working with actors), he is deficient in the most important one, storytelling. To tell a good story, you must be able to think straight, and Lee shows minimal interest in that activity. Like so many other celebrities, black and white, who play at politics from the vantage point of entertainment, Lee seems (especially in interviews) to have nothing invested in clarity, everything in obfuscation—or, at best, in a clownish incoherence that would be funny if the issues were not so grave.

This incoherence has, until now, been faithfully reflected in Lee’s plots—a fact, I repeat, that does not distinguish him from most of his peers. It’s a cliché that writing is a lost art in Hollywood; unfortunately, so is thinking. Yet by the same token, I knew that the film *Malcolm X* began, not as a muddle in Lee’s directorial head, but as a thoughtful, writerly script adapted from a thoughtful, writerly book. Between Haley’s *Autobiography*, the labors of James Baldwin and the intervention of Arnold Perl, Lee would, for the first time in his career, have something solid from which to work. I dared hope that the film would retain that solidity—and it does. Despite its flaws, it is by far the best movie that Lee has ever made. The film’s solidity only helps to reveal the yawning gap between the popular culture that is now embracing Malcolm X, and the actual legacy of the man.

Most people would agree that Malcolm X’s legacy has something to do with truth-seeking, and with being unafraid to change one’s life, along with one’s mind, according to the truth one discovers. I hasten to add that by “truth-seeking” I do not mean total historical accuracy. Was Malcolm X’s father a proud follower of Marcus Garvey, or did he beat his wife and children? Probably both, but I don’t care. Let the historians quibble about whether Earl Little ever laid a hand on young Malcolm; God may be in the details in health-care reform, but not in legend. What matters is that Malcolm X’s father was an upright, demanding, forceful man whose loss destroyed the family and left his most brilliant son alone with the painfully open question of what it means to be a black male in America. The film gets that essential starting point right.

Yet here is where the gap between Malcolm X and the hip-hop culture yawns the widest. For, to a disturbing extent, the latter is ruled by a notion of black manhood that Malcolm X would find repugnant. Again, I’m not referring to commercialization. Yardley may be outraged at the mere thought of someone profiting from Malcolm X’s memory, but I daresay Malcolm X would not be. Recall that Betty Shabazz hasn’t forbidden the hype, only sought to control it—an approach that, in my opinion, keeps faith with her husband’s memory. Yardley finds it “impossible to imagine anything more demeaning” than such hype. But for Lee, and for anyone who respects his hard-won clout in Hollywood, it’s easy to imagine something more demeaning: namely, a film about Malcolm X whose content, and profits, are entirely controlled by whites. Granted, Lee didn’t make *Malcolm X* by gouging his own credit cards, the way he made *She’s Gotta Have It*. He made it with \$34 million from Time-Warner. But he kept creative control, and when

Time-Warner tightened the purse-strings, he got help from other black entrepreneurs and performers. Malcolm X, who witnessed the white exploitation of black jazz musicians in the 1940s and 1950s, would heartily approve. Indeed, Malcolm X's support for black enterprise was so strong, he would probably have tolerated those air fresheners.

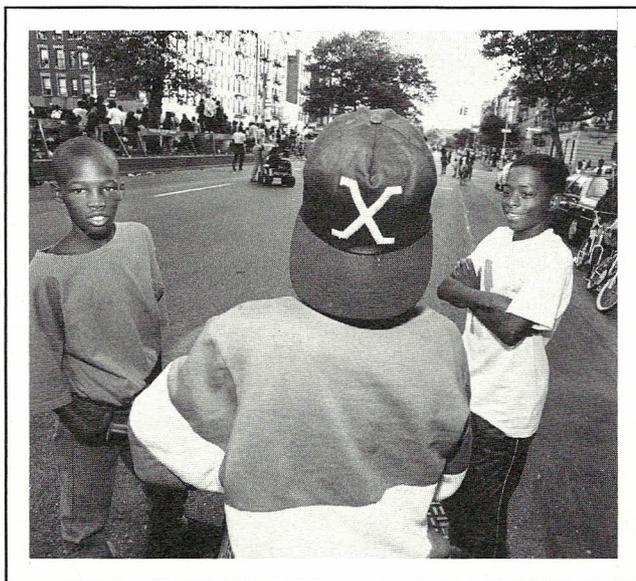
At the same time, I doubt whether Malcolm X would tolerate the stink being produced by some black entertainment ventures today. Consider gangster rap, the Los Angeles version of hip-hop that emerged in the late 1980s. Like Lee, gangster rappers such as Ice T and Ice Cube want to command the white market as well as the black. But they also want to heed the lessons of the past—that is, they want to control their product, and to make damn sure that, although it may appeal to whites, it cannot be stolen or copied by whites. All of this Malcolm X would applaud. What he would not applaud, however, is the nature of the product: a stereotype of black manhood that is so viciously degrading it has now traded much of its original black audience for a thrill-seeking white one.

"Blackness" has always been sold to whites, of course. And this has not always been a bad thing. In Malcolm's day, "blackness" was a cluster of musical skills, effectively monopolized by blacks because they were honed in settings—the chitlin circuit, the church—that were generally off limits to whites. But as anyone with ears can tell you, the emphasis in popular music has shifted away from musical sounds and toward visual and theatrical antics derived more from the European avant-garde than from the Afro-American tradition. Accordingly, the meaning of "blackness" has changed. It's no accident that gangster rap emerged at the same time as the best-selling white rap group, the Beastie Boys. To black rappers being outsold by these upstarts, the question was stark: if "blackness" no longer resides in music, then where does it reside? Equally stark was the answer: in the images, and postures, of the outlaw culture now laying waste to the inner city—the one setting that is still off limits to whites. As Rick Rubin, the white creator of the Beastie Boys, said about his own obscenity-spewing gangster rappers, the Geto Boys: "Because the group is made up of young blacks, it's viewed as scary."

The point is that Malcolm X abhorred the outlaw culture of his own time, which he witnessed first-hand; and he would be appalled at the virulence of today's. He would also condemn its commercialization, whether by blacks or

whites, and severely chastise any young man who poses as a bloodthirsty black sadist in order to satisfy the appetites of whites. Malcolm X would fathom all too well the irony that Ice T's notorious "Cop Killer" song isn't rap at all, but heavy metal, marketed to white suburbanites who like to dress in black and play at rage, albeit in a manner more likely to inflict bruises at a Fugazi concert than to "dust off" police officers. These young enthusiasts, shrieking approval at Ice T's supposedly killer instinct and "evil dick," would strike Malcolm X (accurately) as the spiritual heirs of the white adventurers who flocked to Harlem in the 1940s, hoping to be "steered" toward accommodating black prostitutes by a hustler called Detroit Red.

Malcolm X was Detroit Red, of course, and one of the



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most powerful themes in his autobiography is his revulsion at the hypocrisy of whites, including his girlfriend, Sophia, who secretly pursued sexual liaisons with blacks. This theme is soft-pedaled in the film: there's a veil of contempt in Denzel Washington's eyes when (as Malcolm) he orders Sophia to kiss his foot and feed him like a baby. Later, there's more than a hint of revulsion in the image of Sophia's white husband, a lumpish fellow sunk in an armchair who doesn't even look up when she brings his TV dinner. And finally, there's the judgment rendered through Laura, the black

girl who defies her strict upbringing to go with Malcolm, only to sink into drug abuse and prostitution when he drops her for Sophia. Together, these scenes evoke something of the indignation Malcolm X felt at the sick racist stereotypes that reduce black men to the status of stud animals and expose black women to every kind of exploitation.

I stress this sexual theme because it remains one of the most problematic, but least discussed, areas of Malcolm X's life. To put the matter bluntly, the vast majority of those who celebrate Malcolm X's legacy in contemporary popular culture are ignorant of, or indifferent to, his devout belief in the sinfulness of all sex outside marriage. It is significant that Lee's film portrays Elijah Muhammad losing Malcolm's respect less for fathering babies out of wedlock than for neglecting to support them. In this way, the film glosses over what Malcolm X himself made explicit: that to him, the adultery itself was the chief "betrayal." The full extent of Malcolm X's own rectitude is acknowledged only in the scene where a white FBI agent tapping his phone exclaims: "Compared to King, this guy's a monk!"

Now, the reader may object that we are living in the en-

lightened 1990s, not the benighted 1950s, and that therefore we can dismiss Malcolm X's rectitude as a quaint artifact with no bearing on his real legacy, which is truth-seeking. This objection would carry more weight if either Lee or the hip-hop culture showed any signs of respecting Malcolm X's manner of truth-seeking. But they're no better on that score than on sexuality and manhood.

To be fair, gangster rap is nearing exhaustion. In recent years, most self-respecting black people in the entertainment industry, Lee included, have defended it only when they feel that, because it is a black-dominated genre, it gets unfairly singled out for criticism. Given the extent to which the white mainstream is also saturated with obscenity and brutality, this is a valid point. But it's not a defense. Gangster rap is still vile, and it still comes as a relief to hear Lee and other influential voices proclaiming that the power of movies and music should be used to send "positive messages" to black youth. At this point, it seems that Malcolm X's name is being rightly invoked.

But is it? "Positive" rap groups such as Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions abjure the sheer moral ugliness of gangster rap—they do not, for example, boast about their mighty "dicks" ripping asunder the bodies of "bitches" and "ho's." But when it comes to truth, violation is still their game. Instead of emulating Malcolm X, who lived and died for the integrity of his ideas, these rappers copy the white rockers, heirs to British punk, who will say *anything*, no matter how mindless or contradictory, as long as it gets a rise out of the press. Punks do this because they value publicity above all else. Rappers do it for the same reason, only they add a pernicious twist, telling young people that seeking the truth through logic, reason, and the judicious use of language is nothing but a white man's trick. They forget, or perhaps they never knew, that it was also Malcolm X's trick.

It's hard to assert, in this erotically liberated age, that the sick racial stereotypes bequeathed to us by history will be overcome only when black Americans start living by a strict code of sexual morality. But, like it or not, this was one of Malcolm X's core beliefs. I would add, moreover, that there is a definite connection between his personal rectitude and his manner of truth-seeking. His puritanism remains the key to both his charisma and his credibility.

Recall that Malcolm X, like so many of his followers, was a child of the Great Migration. In addition to being a Garveyite, his father was also an itinerant Baptist preacher, hailing from Georgia but preaching hellfire sermons among his fellow migrants in Philadelphia, Omaha, Milwaukee and East Lansing, Michigan. Malcolm's mother was a native of

Grenada, also uprooted from the world of her black mother and the white man who had raped and impregnated her. Even before the Little family was torn apart, it must have experienced both the exhilaration and the terror of being set adrift in alien territory. It's no wonder that Malcolm and his siblings were drawn to the Nation of Islam; its peculiar ideology gave them, and millions like them, a way of coping with both the exhilaration and the terror.

The exhilaration, of course, came from getting out from under the segregated South. As bad as the North was, it was not as stifling as what these refugees from Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi left behind. In the North they had a bit more room to breathe, and feel—and, not surprisingly, one of the first things they felt was a powerful desire never to see white people again. The separatist impulse is usually described in negative terms, as a retreat from oppression. Watch Malcolm X's oratory, though, and you'll see the positive side, the exuberant leap out of the trap into a (relatively) safe position from which the trapped can tell the trapper what he thinks of him.

The Nation of Islam appealed to this liberating impulse, but it was Malcolm X who expressed it most fully—because, although he was deeply serious, he was not, in Yardley's phrase, "implacably serious." The word "implacably" suggests a relentlessness, and especially a humorlessness, that were alien to the man. Hard as Washington works to imitate Malcolm X's oratorical style, his performance skimps on the quality that most intrigued listeners, both white and black. That quality, a function of Malcolm X's extraordinary courage and intelligence, was his comic sense. I don't mean this frivolously, that Malcolm X was a comedian. I mean comic in the classical sense of irony, detachment, distance on both one's circumstances and oneself. When Malcolm X laid down the rhetoric about the white man being a "pale thing" bred from dogs by the devil Yacub on the Isle of Patmos, the effect was, in the highest sense, satirical. The curl of his lip, the glint in his eye, seemed to say: "This is what you sound like, you dumb crackers. Try it on for size." More effective than the blind rage that followed his death, now sadly ritualized into the pumped-up woofing of young hip-hop poseurs, was this devastating mockery. Malcolm X didn't invent it; it has always been part of Afro-American culture. But he brought it out for the white folks to see.

Why was Malcolm X able to do this, when so many other angry people have not? Because he had also found a way to master the terror of his Great Migration upbringing—terror that came, as always, from uprootedness, from the loss of an accepted belief system by which human beings make sense of the cosmos and distinguish between right and

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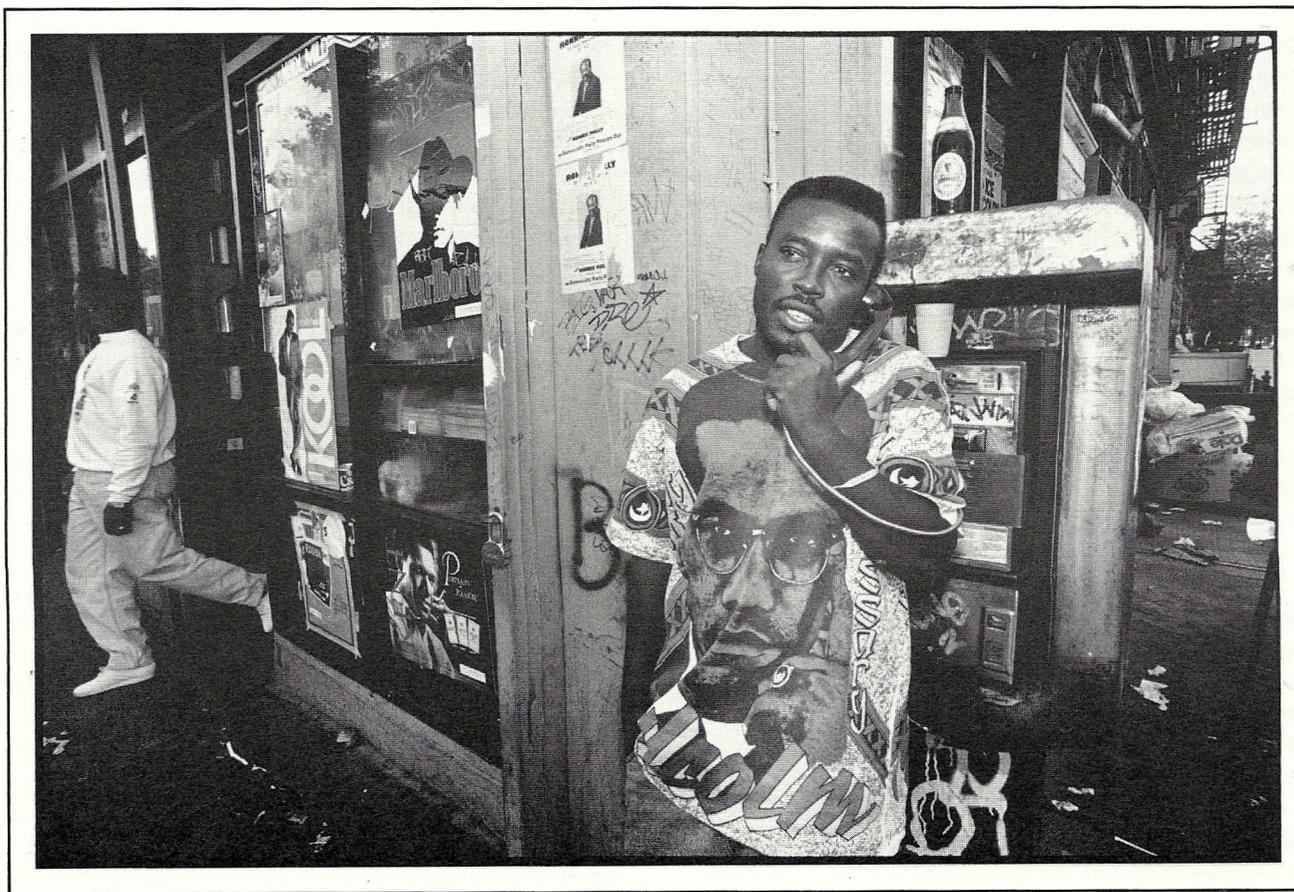
wrong. On this level, the story of Malcolm X's youth is a descent into nihilism.

But the nihilism that Malcolm X experienced was not the fashionable, artistic kind currently reigning as orthodoxy in the corridors of MTV. It was real, and so was the terror. That is why he converted to the Nation of Islam: he needed a system of total certitude, both cognitive and spiritual, that left no room for doubt. It has been frequently noted that the puritanical moral code of the Black Muslims harks back to that of Christian fundamentalism in the South. For Malcolm X, it would seem, adopting such a code was a way of keeping faith with his father, even though the name of the religion had changed. Consider, in this regard, the fact that Malcolm X's adherence to that code persisted even after he broke with Elijah Muhammad. White observers tend to focus on Malcolm's changing racial views as the cause of the break, but from Malcolm's own statements, it is clear that the most important reason by far was Muhammad's philandering.

Much to the chagrin of hard shell leftists such as Amiri Baraka, *Malcolm X* does not show its hero flirting with communism at the end of his life, allowing himself to be courted by Arab and African leaders with powerful sponsors in China and the Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, this flirtation was why the FBI and CIA found Malcolm X so fascinating;

possibly, it explains why there has been a conspiracy of silence, on both sides of the ideological fence, about his assassination. All I can say is, it's a shame that he was cut down in his prime, because, even if he was flirting with communism, he probably wouldn't have succumbed. His mind was too open and restless, too marked by that comic sense, to submit to another closed system of total certitude.

At the same time, Malcolm X would not, I think, have jettisoned the strict moral code he adopted at his conversion to Islam. Black sex appeal became a hot commodity in the late 1960s and 1970s, aggressively marketed not just by entertainers but also by quite a few would-be revolutionaries. It was all supposed to be terribly liberating, but, just as Malcolm X predicted, it has turned out to be pretty degrading. The gangster rappers are pushing what is left of the black stud mystique; the "positive" rappers are peddling neo-primitivist anti-intellectualism. Malcolm X would find these gambits infantile, and his judgment would matter to the exact degree that he still possessed that obdurate, unshakable core of fidelity—not just to his wife and children, but also to those who trusted his leadership. At the end of his life Malcolm X was a black man whose mind was free, and whose passions were under control. Look around today for the people who find that prospect threatening, or laughable, and you will have identified the real racists. ■



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