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Biography, Volume 23, Number 1, Winter 2000, pp. 29-48 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/bio.1999.0011

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MALCOLM X: IN PRINT, ON SCREEN

THOMAS DOHERTY

In a rare motion picture memory related in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, the author sits in a Michigan theater watching Gone with the Wind (1939). “When Butterfly McQueen went into her act,” he recalls bitterly, “I felt like crawling under the rug” (32). For the young Malcolm Little, as for black Americans everywhere, the classical Hollywood screen was an inventory of negative stereotypes and a 35mm projection of white power. When the mature man came to tell his own story, he naturally turned away from the moving image and toward the written word. Appropriately then, until lately, Malcolm X has been remembered most vividly through the remarkable memoir written “with the assistance of Alex Haley,” his posthumous stature due preeminently to what has for years been the most popular autobiography of an African American in print. The Autobiography of Malcolm X—not documentaries or recordings of Malcolm’s speeches—preserved and assured Malcolm’s legacy after his murder at the Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965.

In 1992, however, the Malcolm X of the printed page ceded pride of place, at least temporarily, to the Malcolm X of the motion picture screen. After languishing for over two decades in “development hell,” Malcolm X, a $40 million Hollywood biopic, was released amid a torrent of hype, expectation, and skepticism. Director Spike Lee, then and now America’s most ambitious and controversial African American filmmaker, billed the film as part labor of love, part declaration of conscience, and every frame his own creation. Though based on the Autobiography and cowritten by screenwriter Arnold Perl, Lee asserted his auteurist primacy over rival interpreters of the life of Malcolm X, whether Perl, Alex Haley, or Malcolm himself. “Malcolm X is my artistic vision,” Lee proclaimed, “The film is my interpretation of the man. It is nobody else’s” (xiii–xiv).

From the outset, Lee conceived of Malcolm X not just as a memorial to a man who had become a demi-god to many African Americans, but as a
rebuke to the kind of Hollywood condescension that had so embarrassed and enraged Malcolm Little and generations of African American moviegoers. But if Lee’s *Malcolm X* challenged the Hollywood tradition, it also threatened the status of the *Autobiography*. In the age of the moving image, after all, what is seen on the screen tends to erase what is read on the page. Tellingly, however, the media face-off between the two images of Malcolm X—the literary creation and the motion picture version—indicates that even in an incessantly visual culture, a portrait in literature can outlive a depiction in film.

Published in November 1965, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has been perennially popular, selling millions of copies in paperback in the U.S. alone. At once a political tract, a religious conversion narrative, and an underground commentary on twentieth-century American culture, it has entered the restricted canon of American literary classics. Moreover, the *Autobiography* is one of the few multicultural additions to undergraduate reading lists that has not inspired the usual carping about lower admissions standards for affirmative action entries. Whether as a work of literary merit or cultural historical insight, its virtues have been self-evident.

Equally self-evident is the role the *Autobiography* has played in cementing the extraordinary prestige of Malcolm X since his death. Though today Malcolm X is paired in fame and influence with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.—just as Spike Lee paired them in the end credit crawls to his breakthrough film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989)—he ranked as a subordinate, even fringe character in 1965, known mainly as a specter haunting white America, and hardly more popular within the elite ranks of the black civil rights leadership. His list of accomplishments in legislation is nil, his message as a religious prophet is unheeded, and his one undeniable contribution as a builder of institutions served to benefit the group that engineered his assassination. Malcolm X’s legacy lies in who he was and what he wrote, a presentation of self crafted in literature. In 1993, when *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* returned to the New York Times paperback best-seller list on the wave of publicity for the film, the scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defined the difference between Malcolm X and his peers. “More than Martin Luther King Jr., more than any of the black nationalists or the neo-Marxists, Malcolm X was a writer, a wordsmith” (11).

Of course, like Malcolm X, the *Autobiography* has never been free of controversy. Criticism swirls around two familiar problem points with the genre of autobiography: the question of authorship and of fidelity to history. The precise nature of the creative collaboration between Malcolm X and Alex Haley awaits full examination of the original manuscript, auctioned off by the Haley estate in 1992, but reportedly awash in marginal notations
in red pencil from Malcolm over syntax, word choice, factual details, and narrative ordering. Yet, however the credit is finally parceled out between subject and amanuensis, the work is manifestly more in tune with Malcolm’s voice and vision, more an authentic expression of the man, than most “as told to” or ghosted memoirs, such as Tina Turner’s *I, Tina: My Life Story* (1987), written with Kurt Loder, or Colin Powell’s *My American Journey* (1995), written with Joseph E. Persico.

Questions about the work as a truthful account of Malcolm X’s life are less easily shunted aside. By the measure of autobiography, the most notoriously untrustworthy of genres, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is no less a work of hindsight reconstruction, strategic omission, and outright fabrication than, say, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. By the measure of the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, however, works whose verifiable authenticity was yoked to their political purpose and moral meaning, the *Autobiography* is more troubling. This is why the duplicities alleged in Bruce Perry’s revisionist *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, published in 1991, have cut so deeply. “For personal and political reasons [Malcolm’s] public image was carefully constructed,” Perry contends: “Its exaggerated portrayal of his youthful criminality enhanced his tough image and characterized the transformation of the pseudo-masculine, criminal Malcolm into the manly, political Malcolm” (ix). Perry marshals evidence that contradicts Malcolm’s account of his father’s death, his criminal past, and most damningly, the firebombing of his house in 1965. (Just as the Nation of Islam charged, Perry implies it was an act of arson committed by Malcolm himself.) Less seriously, Perry reports that despite Malcolm’s reported chagrin during *Gone with the Wind*, he was “addicted to the movies” as a young man, viewing “as many as five a day.” Malcolm Little not only “loved the Hollywood tough guys,” but enjoyed the all-black musicals *Stormy Weather* (1943) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) (72).

Whatever the outcome of scholarly debates over authorship and historical assaults on the integrity of the narrator, it seems unlikely to detract from the popularity of the tale. No wonder: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* tells a traditional American story with direct links to at least three venerable literary genres. Like Benjamin Franklin, Malcolm X is, in John Cawelti’s phrase, an apostle of the self-made man. Like Frederick Douglass, Malcolm journeys from slavery to freedom in a kind of twentieth-century slave narrative. Like Puritan fathers from Jonathan Edwards to Tom Dooley, he experiences a Damascus-like moment of conversion, and dedicates himself to missionary work among the infidels. Linking all three tropes is the theme of literacy, an almost religious reverence for the redemptive power of the printed word as the path to salvation and self-transformation.
As with the antebellum slave narrative, the formal strengths and incisive insights of the Autobiography give the lie to racist ideology. Mirabile dictu—the black man can think, write, and analyze. Yet the work defied another image, a new African American stereotype that Malcolm himself helped forge. The stance of the literary Malcolm refuted the hot television image of the angry demagogue showcased in documentaries such as WNTA’s *The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959) and ABC’s *Walk in My Shoes* (1961). Significantly, Malcolm X’s arrival on the national scene was concurrent not only with the renascent civil rights movement, but with a series of pivotal shifts in the nature of television journalism: the consolidation of three-network hegemony in the late 1950s, the extension of nightly newscasts from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes in September 1963, and the high renaissance of the prime time television documentary. Telegenic and quick witted, Malcolm courted the networks like a smitten suitor, and relished his verbal duels with patrician white broadcasters. As the critic Shelby Steele noted, Malcolm X spoke in sound bites before the term was invented, and used blunt street talk to punch through the fog of pretense, politeness, and euphemism on television.

For many Americans the first look at Malcolm X on screen came in the five-part series on the Nation of Islam entitled *The Hate That Hate Produced*, a production of New York station WNTA’s *Newsbeat* program hosted by Mike Wallace. Billed as “a study of black racism,” and focusing on “a Negro religious group who call themselves the Muslims,” the series was originally telecast over the week of July 13–17, 1959, but it caused so much stir that an edited overview was broadcast on July 22, 1959, with a post-screening discussion featuring less threatening black leaders such as Jackie Robinson and Roy Wilkens. Though Wallace assures viewers that “sober minded Negroes” reject the “black racism” of the “Negro dissenters,” he cautions, “let no one underestimate the Muslims.”

After some exposition on the Nation of Islam and film clips of Elijah Mohammed, the program zeroes in on the colorful figure naturally “of more interest to New Yorkers,” Minister Malcolm X. “He is a remarkable man,” admits Wallace, tracking a spiritual trajectory that the *Autobiography* would later flesh out:

A man who by his own admission was once a procurer and dope peddler. He served time for robbery in the Michigan and Massachusetts state penitentiaries. But now he is a changed man. He will not smoke or drink. He will not even eat in a restaurant that houses a tap. He told *Newsbeat* that his life changed for him when the Muslim faith taught him no longer to be ashamed of being a black man.
Interviewed onscreen by the African American journalist and writer Louis E. Lomax, Malcolm comes across as assured and animated. He calmly lays down the Nation of Islam line, reinterpreting the Book of Genesis to finger the white man as the snake in the Garden of Eden. Though placed alongside other black leaders (Elijah Mohammed, John Davis, and Adam Clayton Powell), Malcolm warrants the lengthiest biographical sketch. Toward the close of the program, Wallace again reminds viewers of Malcolm’s dope peddler/procurer/convict past, perhaps to plant the idea that his role of minister is less a new life than a new con. By contrast, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, with his finger on the pulse of the Harlem vox populi, calls Malcolm “a very brilliant man.” Wallace laments the success of the Black Muslims as “tragic irrefutable evidence” that many Negroes are “losing faith in the American dream,” and “consider themselves Americans of African descent.” Exhibit A is a sequence showing Malcolm at the pulpit, electrifying a congregation of once sober-minded Negroes at Powell’s Harlem church.

It was the angry black man on the television screen that Malcolm’s postmortem Autobiography forced Americans to see anew. The physical feature Malcolm fixated on in his most famous characterization of the opposition—“the blue-eyed devils”—pinpoints the site of contention. For Malcolm, the eyes reflected the white man’s perceptible failures of vision, eyes that saw him but did not perceive him, an intimation linking the Autobiography to that other great literary expression of African American culture in the postwar era, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. First presented on television, next represented in print, and finally projected on the motion picture screen, the popular image of Malcolm X has developed in three stages of multiple exposure: the televisual face transmitted on the small screen, the literary self conjured by the autobiography, and the motion picture incarnation fashioned by Spike Lee for the theatrical screen and videotape afterlife.6

To be sure, prior to the release of Malcolm X, Malcolm’s dynamic screen presence had remained before American eyes in archival documentaries on the civil rights movement, and in montages of assassinated leaders from the 1960s. Most notably, Marvin Worth and Arnold Perl’s same-titled Malcolm X (1972), a kind of documentary precursor to the Spike Lee biopic, showcased Malcolm’s screen magnetism to an audience that may have missed it the first time around. Though not widely distributed in its day—Variety’s bottom-line prediction proved accurate: “commercial outlook will be spotty” (Malcolm X)—and seldom seen today, the film retrieved many of the best clips of Malcolm and thereby provided in later years a convenient secondary source for news reports on Malcolm’s impact.
Worth and Perl’s *Malcolm X* opens “cold,” with a close-up of Malcolm at the podium delivering his terse “by any means necessary” promise while a protean rap tune (“Niggers Are Scared of Revolution” by the Last Poets) is mixed over a montage of contemporary African American life. (Perhaps another reason for the cold opening, without title credits, is that the names of filmmakers Marvin Worth and Arnold Perl do not exactly bespeak African roots.) Eschewing the standard “Voice of God” commentary, the documentary is structured around passages from the *Autobiography* as read by James Earl Jones: the death of Malcolm’s father, a childhood shadowed by the Great Depression (a soft, lovely interlude unfolding to Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child”), a youth spent Lindy Hopping in Boston and Harlem, and so on. One sequence is uniquely suited to cinematic elaboration. When Malcolm X extols the value of an all-black education “minus the little black sambo,” a montage of Hollywood stereotypes unfurls—bug-eyed spooks, tongue-tied servants, and Stepin Fetchit himself. The ugly pageant serves not only as visual history lesson, but as striking juxtaposition to the vital screen presence at the center of the documentary that is *Malcolm X*. Framed close up in big screen celluloid, whether in black and white or full color, Malcolm radiates the charisma of a motion picture star of the first magnitude.

As *Malcolm X* chronicles the growing fame of its subject, Malcolm’s life increasingly becomes a self-conscious public performance. He falters only once. Besieged by squadrons of journalists with sharp questions and open microphones, he makes a glib remark that stops his forward momentum when another series of archival images intrudes—the funeral cortege of John F. Kennedy. Malcolm’s infamous wisecrack that the president’s murder was “a case of the chickens coming home to roost” led to his disciplinary “silencing” for ninety days by Elijah Mohammed, and in time, to Malcolm’s permanent estrangement from the Nation of Islam. Even so, his sparring with reporters tends to be good natured and high spirited, with each side enjoying the battle of wits. Making his first public statement after his ninety-day silencing, he jokes to an interviewer that if he is talking too fast it is because he has been silent for so long.

In a resonant shift of scene, the urban, American interiors of *Malcolm X* are replaced by the desert landscapes of the Middle East. Malcolm’s trip to Mecca inspires a stunning spiritual transformation. “We are truly the same,” Malcolm states flatly, acknowledging that “many white people are fed up” with the treatment of the black man. To his former critic Mike Wallace, he asserts, “I never did hate.” Most ominously, he assails Elijah Mohammed and reveals the reason for his break with the Nation of Islam: that Elijah Mohammed has fathered illegitimate children with teenage girls.
The preordained climax to the documentary is no less shocking for being expected. In the aftermath of Malcolm's bloody assassination, reporters badger Betty Shabazz, still in a state of shock. Carefully worded responses are delivered by Elijah Mohammed (Malcolm was “a victim of his own preaching”) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (“an unfortunate tragedy”). A series of interviews with the people of Harlem better reflects the esteem from the street and the prevailing sentiment of the black community that Malcolm’s death was orchestrated by, or committed with the connivance of, the New York Police Department and the FBI.

After Worth and Perl’s _Malcolm X_, twenty years passed before motion pictures of Malcolm X again filled the theatrical screen. The release of Lee’s _Malcolm X_ on November 18, 1992, was a tribute to the tenacity of two men: Marvin Worth, the producer of the 1972 documentary, who had been pitching the project around Hollywood since 1966, and Spike Lee, who made it his personal business after hearing that the white, Jewish Canadian filmmaker Norman Jewison was in line to direct the biopic of the black, Muslim African American. How much of the long gestation can be attributed to Hollywood racism, how much to the usual difficulties in putting together a decent script and a salable package, is hard to determine, but not until Malcolm’s stature reached a kind of critical mass in American no less than African American culture could the project have been green-lighted. “It’s been a long journey getting to this point,” Worth commented upon the film’s release, sounding more weary than victorious, “It’s rewarding to finally be making a film about [Malcolm’s] life.”

Lee’s travails in bringing _Malcolm X_ to the screen are chronicled in his tie-in book, _By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X_. “The static, the resistance came from everywhere,” Lee claimed: “Presently in America a war is being fought. Forget about guns, planes, and bombs, the weapons from now on will be the newspapers, magazines, TV shows, radio, and FILM” (xiii, xiv). The all-capital highlighting of the motion picture medium underscores the strange omission of the source material: the book entitled _The Autobiography of Malcolm X_. When his story finally did become a major motion picture, the grainy Malcolm of archival memory and the Malcolm of the _Autobiography_ surrendered media dominance to an eclectic array of new visual representations: not just Malcolm X the movie, but Malcolm X the product. A flood of saturation imagery and ancillary marketing items swept in with the film, including X-marked caps, shirts, jackets, posters, coffee cups, and air fresheners. Malcolm’s rebirth as pop icon was a curious makeover for a self-described man of letters whose affinities were so emphatically print-based, whose faith in the transforming power of literacy was almost mystical.
In the film’s title no less than in the man’s surname, Malcolm’s “X” retained its almost talismanic force as an alphabetic sign with multiple significance. X is the mark of the illiterate, the mark of negation, and the mark of the condemned film. For director Lee and African American film buffs, the obliterating “X” logo, a negation with a positive value, also spotlights a precise cinematic referent. Typographically, the mark conjures the publicity tagline for Melvin Van Peebles’s seminal “blaxploitation” picture, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971): “Rated X by an all white jury!” Finally, the X provided the brandname signage for the film’s newspaper advertising and one-sheet posters. Crisscrossed between the upper arms of the X, a litany of identities labeled this most malleable of American self-made men: Scholar, Convict, Leader, Disciple, Hipster, Father, Hustler, Minister, Black Man, Every Man.

Not even that list exhausted the models coloring the cinematic backstory, however. Just as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was read by the light of classic American literature, *Malcolm X* unspooled in the shadow of one of Hollywood’s most durable motion picture genres: the biopic. During the classical studio era, the biopic thrived by celebrating the great (white) men of science, politics, and the arts, and the loyal women who stood behind them. While adhering to the rigorous codes of the Hays
Office, screenwriters discovered wellsprings of romantic yearnings and dedicated altruism in the lives of loveless inventors and narcissistic writers. Well-known anecdotes of the great man’s life—Alexander Graham Bell reaching out to touch Watson, young Tom Edison getting his ears boxed, Alvin York wetting his rifle sight at a turkey shoot—validated the authenticity of the screen incarnation even as blemishes in the public image were brushed over to fit commercial necessity and censorial oversight.

At their most fanciful, the bloated melodramas of Hollywood’s classical era gave celluloid biography a bad name. Writ large for the big screen, the grandiose biopics from Warner Bros. (The Story of Louis Pasteur [1936]) and The Life of Émile Zola [1937]) and MGM (Young Tom Edison [1940] and Edison the Man [1940]) were canvases for breathless romance, extravagant set design, and forward narrative thrust, not historical retrieval and psychological insight. Moral lapses, character flaws, and unmentionable proclivities were tactfully omitted from Hollywood’s lives of the secular saints—hence the brilliant military strategist General George Armstrong Custer in They Died with Their Boots On (1941), and the virile heterosexual composer Cole Porter in Night and Day (1946).

Not until the mid-1950s did the biopic become more critical, intrusive, and skeptical. Propelled by the popular dissemination of Freudian psychology and the decline of Hays Office censorship, a new breed of biopic exposed the lives of great men, warts and all: Vincent Van Gogh’s demonic Lust for Life (1956), baseball player Jimmy Piersall’s oedipal hitting slumps in Fear Strikes Out (1957), and the founder of psychoanalysis’s need for his own treatment in Freud (1962).9

From an African American perspective, however, the generic progress of the biopic occurred in the motion picture equivalent of an all-white neighborhood.10 Where the Hollywood biopic tradition is varied and complex, the specifically African American models are sparse and one-dimensional. The few exceptions prove the rule: The Jackie Robinson Story (1950), The Joe Louis Story (1953), and St. Louis Blues (1958), the story of W. C. Handy, were all noteworthy products of a postwar atmosphere congenial to civil rights, but though there was a Glenn Miller Story in 1955, and a Benny Goodman Story in 1956, there was no Duke Ellington Story in 1957. In crafting The Autobiography of Malcolm X, the writers Malcolm X and Alex Haley might draw for inspiration on a rich literary tradition. In creating Malcolm X, the filmmaker Spike Lee started virtually from scratch.

The Joe Louis Story, the biopic of another African American son of Detroit, illustrates the restrictions operative in even the most well-intentioned depictions of a black hero. Consigned to limited release due to its
African American subject matter, and the product of white filmmakers (producer Stirling Silliphant, director Robert Gordon, and screenwriter Robert Sylvester), the tale opens with newsreel footage of the lion in winter: Louis’s sorrowful swan song against Rocky Marciano, in an ill-advised return to the ring, the once indomitable champion trading his cultural capital for a desperately needed payday. After Louis’s defeat, a sympathetic white reporter sits down at his typewriter to write the elegy for the great fighter. It is the white reporter’s words and narrative voice-over that structure the spectator’s vantage on *The Joe Louis Story*. Denied a voice in his own story, played clumsily by the astonishingly lookalike but manifestly ineffectual novice actor Coley Wallace, Louis seems an empty vessel, a man with no psychological motivation or interior intellectual life. The matter of race—even the sobriquet “Brown Bomber”—is handled so discreetly that an inattentive viewer might never know that Joe Louis was black.

Passing mentions are made of the fact that a “colored man” has two strikes against him in the fight game, and that he is “a credit to the human race,” but even during the reenactments and authentic newsreel footage of Louis’s epochal fights with Max Schmeling, the extra-ring stakes in the bout between the Nazi Übermensch and the African American are barely acknowledged—perhaps not to belabor the meaning of a sports event alive in the memory of the 1953 audience, perhaps to avoid any uncomfortable domestic comparisons. In the final seconds of *The Joe Louis Story*, as the defeated champ walks into the urban night under the glow of the marquee of Madison Square Garden, the white reporter, not the black protagonist, gets the last word in voice-over: “And from me, who knows him better than most, I can see a beginning not an end. And from all of us tonight, Champ—good luck!”

With that biopic background, Lee’s resolution to wrest the means of production from Hollywood, to insist on the prerogatives of control and final cut due an auteur, seems less an act of artistic temperament than cultural self-determination. Due in no small part to Lee’s crafty and well-publicized pose as an activist/auteur under siege from studio philistines, *Malcolm X* attained the status of a high profile cultural event well before its official release date. Even for a synergistic entertainment industry where saturation marketing and full-throttle exploitation is normative behavior, the publicity wraparound for *Malcolm X*—from CBS specials to MTV rock blocks—was relentless.

After so mammoth a buildup, the arrival of the film was met with a deluge of commentary in op-ed pages and news magazines. In the main, the critical response to *Malcolm X* was quite favorable, ranging from wildly
enthusiastic (“Smashing. An event movie that lives up to the event!” blured Mike Clark in USA Today) to admiringly respectful (“not exactly the equal, or even the equivalent of the book, but it is an ambitious, tough, seriously considered biographical film that, with honor, eludes easy characterization,” ruminated Vincent Canby in the New York Times).

To adjudge Malcolm X fairly, with the benefit of some hindsight, and without the fog of the hype of the moment, demands (at least) a studied avoidance of the dreary gambit whereby the film version of an esteemed book is inevitably deemed to be organically less satisfying in psychological depth, symbolic texture, and thematic complexity than the print inspiration. But even allowing that a film is an autonomous artwork to be taken on its own, the backstory from The Autobiography of Malcolm X is so pervasive, its narrative trajectory and signature scenes so well known, that Lee’s Malcolm X assumes not only a familiarity with the predecessor text, but draws on it for emotional ballast and narrative orientation. No less than the director, the knowing spectator reads the film through the pages of the book.

Malcolm X begins with a blunt juxtaposition of elements that are at once religious (Islamic/Jewish), racial (black/white), and economic (black workers/white owners)—though, for once, black economic and artistic aspirations drown out the buzz of white corporate power. Even as the Warner Bros. logo fills the screen, the voice of a Nation of Islam adherent praises Elijah Mohammed and introduces Minister Malcolm X, whose voice booms on the soundtrack with his trademark “I charge the white man” litany of historical grievances. A huge American flag supplants the Warner Bros. shield, like the opening of Patton (1970), dominating every inch of screen space. The still image of the flag is intercut, and cut up, with videotape images from the Rodney King beating of March 3, 1991, the grainy camcorder recording looking blurry and otherworldly when blown up to 35mm celluloid. Flames ignite around the edges of the flag, eating away to the heart of the cloth, engulfing everything in tongues of fire except a red, white, and blue, stars-and-striped X, defiantly ablaze.

The story proper opens with a leisurely crane shot swooping in on a period recreation of Boston during the war years, a vibrant street scene bathed in a mellow sepia-toned sunlit glow—the first glimpse of a recurrent chiaroscuro effect that might be termed “high yellow” lighting. The establishing shot tracks on to the familiar figure of Spike Lee, playing Malcolm’s sidekick Shorty, decked out in flamboyant zoot suit threads, strutting down the street like a peacock, arms sashaying in tempo at his side. Lee the director cuts away from Lee the actor to a barbershop interior, where Malcolm (Denzel Washington) emerges to receive his first “konk
job,” an act of initiation into urban Negro-dom that is one of the great set pieces from the Autobiography and the metaphor for Malcolm’s psychological submission to the white world. “Make it straight,” he urges, willing to trade the pain of the lye burning into his skull for a caucasian feature. “Looks white, don’t it?” he beams with satisfaction afterwards, looking at his false image in the mirror.

Though the curtain raises on Malcolm’s young manhood in Boston, the three act structure of the Autobiography determines the narrative trajectory of the biopic, moving through Malcolm’s identities as street hustler, Nation of Islam proselytizer, and independent, reborn preacher after his haj to Mecca. Both the retrospective cast of Malcolm X and the offscreen shadow of the Autobiography are emphasized by the first intrusion of an off-screen voice-over from the reformed Malcolm, recalling his reprobate life. Moments after the konk job sequence, a freeze frame locks Malcolm’s image on screen, and the sober voice of Denzel Washington communicates a sane, reflective sensibility that can come only from the mature man and the pages of the Autobiography. This (offscreen) man is no longer the grinning fool in the glad rags frozen in his false consciousness.

“When my mother was pregnant with me, a party of Klansmen on horseback surrounded our house in Omaha, Nebraska,” Washington/Malcolm intones, cueing the first flashback, a visitation from white-robed nightriders straight out of The Birth of a Nation (1915), though D. W. Griffith’s heroes are Spike Lee’s demons. Throughout Malcolm X, a contemporary crisis triggers a flashback to the background that has warped the adult man. On film, as in the mind of Malcolm, the American racist past is present.

As Malcolm confesses in his Autobiography, one legacy of that past is the seductive allure of white women for the black man. In an eyeline match from across the floor of the Roseland Ballroom, Malcolm fixes his gaze on a backlit vision of the blonde Sophia (Kate Vernon), whose cream-colored convertible and lily-white flesh make irresistible objects of cinematic attraction. The sexual politics of the two women in Malcolm’s life, the blonde temptress Sophia and the black sister Betty (Angela Bassett), express the most extreme of whore-virgin oppositions: Sophia is sexual, aggressive, greedy, and vapid; Betty is chaste, quiet, caring, and aggressive only when her family is threatened.

In Harlem, Malcolm hooks up with his mentor in crime, West Indian Archie (Delroy Lindo), who teaches him how to dress, run numbers, and snort cocaine. In both the Boston and Harlem passages of Malcolm’s unregenerate life, Lee the director luxuriates in the high life of a big budget prestige project from Hollywood—lavish production numbers, panoramic crowd scenes, and precision recreations of period detail in set design, props,
and wardrobes. The showstopping sequence is an elaborately choreographed dance number in the Roseland Ballroom. Swinging and Lindy Hopping to a live Big Band, ecstatic dancers leap in line, all gyrating in perfect coordination, as in a vintage Hollywood musical. A tastefully chosen soundtrack of period music sets the mood and comments on the action—the original tunes by the original performers, the kind of material whose copyright permissions do not come cheap, among them Joe Turner, Billie Holiday, Jackie Wilson, and the whitebread Perry Como. When West Indian Archie and his goons come to kill Malcolm, ousting him from his table while Billie Holiday performs “Big Stuff,” his last request is they leave “after Billie finishes”—and though he is hustled out before her song ends, Holiday’s voice lingers on the soundtrack as Malcolm frantically flees from his attackers.

After his brush with death, Malcolm hightails it back to Boston. In another freeze-framed moment of retrospective clarity, Malcolm X’s voice-over describes the creature he had become to support his drug habit, high living, and white woman: “I was an animal.” During another konk job—again, a set piece from the Autobiography—the shutting off of the kitchen faucets robs him of the water to douse the pain of the lye. Desperate, Malcolm dunks his head in the toilet just as the police bust in: “The jig is up,” says Shorty, calling down the curtain on the first act.

The auteur as actor: director Spike Lee under the gun as Malcolm X’s sidekick, Shorty (From the Warner Bros. Press Kit for Malcolm X ©1992 Warner Bros. Photo by David Lee.).
As in the *Autobiography*, physical imprisonment leads to spiritual liberation. Brought to the words of Elijah Mohammed by the gentle ministrations of the convict Baines (Albert Hall), Malcolm Little becomes Malcolm X. In a duplicitous set up, Lee depicts Elijah Mohammed (Al Freeman, Jr.) through Malcolm’s blissed out perspective. Suffused with a divine aura, the Nation of Islam leader first appears as a God incarnate, materializing in a golden chair in Malcolm’s cell, beaming wisdom and promising salvation. Later, when Malcolm realizes that the “slander” from the white press about Elijah Mohammed’s philandering is all too true, even a spectator pre-warned by the *Autobiography* may feel something of Malcolm’s disillusionment in the man who was his savior. To the director’s credit, and despite the well-publicized fact that members of the Nation of Islam provided security for the film during location shooting in New York City, Lee did not whitewash the reputation of the leader.

For the final act, Lee milks the Hitchcockian suspense of anticipating an event whose climax is known in advance. On the soundtrack Jackie Wilson’s “A Change Is Gonna Come” wafts over the action as Malcolm X stoically prepares to meet his fate. An old black woman tells the distracted man that Jesus will protect him, but he knows otherwise. Lee saves his trademark vertiginous shot almost to the end. The stationary Malcolm X stands center screen, pinned in the vortex of history, as the background swirls woozily around him. “It’s a time for martyrs,” he mutters to a companion backstage at the Audubon Ballroom.

The murder sequence is fast and brutal. A staged scuffle distracts the crowd, two shotgun blasts bring Malcolm down, and a fusillade of handgun fire pumps into his prostrate body. In the chaos and confusion of the aftermath, Lee jump cuts into a free-for-all frenzy of running and shouting while Betty cries hysterically over her husband’s slain figure. A fruitless ambulance race to the hospital is followed by the blunt announcement from a spokesman that “Malcolm X is no more.” Ironically, where the depictions of Malcolm’s spiritual transformations and political declamations tend to be static, the assassination sequence comes alive on screen.

Whether for reasons of political expediency or legal liability, Elijah Mohammed is never personally implicated in the assassination. Instead, Lee blames Malcolm X’s murder on a vague cadre of jealous “ministers” acting, presumably, in collusion with white police power—perhaps the FBI, or the CIA, or the NYPD. “They’re not working alone—they’re getting a lot of help,” Malcolm concludes before his death. The personification of the conspiracy theory is a white police captain played by Peter Boyle, an icon of blue-collar bigotry since *Joe* (1970). After witnessing Malcolm’s power over a huge crowd of street demonstrators, the captain says, “That’s too much power for one man to have.” He reappears in the aftermath of the assassination and seems to scan the Audubon Ballroom with some satisfaction.
Unwilling to turn up the lights with the hero lying dead on the stage, Lee concludes *Malcolm X* with an extended tribute sequence. In voice-over, the actor Ossie Davis recites his moving eulogy to Malcolm (“Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood”), while newsreel images and still photos show the real Malcolm X, smiling, vibrant, alive. On the soundtrack a heavenly choir vocalizes soothingly.

Despite its undeniable power to move individual spectators, and for all its laudable motives, *Malcolm X* came to be the kind of prestige project more respected than enjoyed: a 201-minute hagiography that possessed all too little of the energy, passion, or wit of the man who inspired it. Against the fast pace, sharp asides, and direct trajectory of the *Autobiography*, the motion picture meandered, straightfaced and dour. Where Malcolm and Haley conjured the seductions of the unregenerate life with unrepentant glee, Lee’s depiction of Malcolm’s “Detroit Red” years as a young hustler in Boston and Harlem plays out as flat and joyless. The scenic backdrop to sin—music, dance, and fashion—should be congenial to the screen, but the reckless, reprobate Malcolm idles in neutral, and the earnest, ascetic Malcolm is often still and didactic. In this sense, the casting of Denzel Washington may have worked against half of the performance. Though his dignified bearing suited the portrayal of the converted Malcolm, the sober actor is difficult to imagine as the unhinged hustler who gets high on coke and bluffs his way through a game of Russian roulette. Not least, much of the sly humor of the book was bleached out of the film. The exceptions are welcome, if rare: Shorty’s wisecrack to the converted Malcolm that he could never become a Muslim because he likes pig’s feet and white women too much, or the irreverent exchange between two FBI men wiretapping the phone conversations between Malcolm and his wife, Betty Shabazz. “Compared to King,” cracks one agent, “this guy’s a monk.”

*A chaste match: Betty Shabazz (Angela Bassett) and Malcolm X (Denzel Washington as the idealized Nation of Islam couple (From the Warner Bros. Press Kit for *Malcolm X* ©1992 Warner Bros. Photo by David Lee.)*}
Moreover, a major portion of the film’s running time is given over to ritual reenactments, not just of passages read or depicted from the *Autobiography*, but of verbatim recitations of speeches, press conferences, and letters. Again and again, images of the archival Malcolm X are restaged, gesture for gesture, note for note, as if the director feels his biopic will be the only record of the man to pass down to future generations, and that, in the fullness of time, scholarly completion will be more salient than judicious cutting. Sometimes splicing together color and black and white footage of precisely the same scene, Lee shifts back and forth from dramatic to docudramatic styles for visual variety, but no matter how dynamic the performance and the crowd enthusiasm, the ritual reenactments still play like hectoring from the screen. Given this extensive homage to the archival record, a series of abrupt flash forwards to the historical present seems jarringly incongruous: the Rodney King video at the top of the film, the appearance of the Reverend Al Sharpton in a Harlem Street scene from the 1950s, and Nelson Mandela speaking to a classroom in the closing coda. A film that strives for historical verisimilitude by faithfully replicating period set design and reenacting speeches line-for-line is ill-advised to shatter the narrative illusion with a distancing device that thrusts the viewer out of the fiction and into the present. The flamboyant figure of Al Sharpton, flourishing a konk job that would shame Detroit Red, breaks the biopic frame with the force of a real life Forrest Gump seamlessly matched into newsreel footage.

To be fair, Malcolm’s moments of enlightenment by way of prayer and the printed word do not make promising source material for exciting screen drama. Notwithstanding a tense scene where Malcolm and his fellow inmate Baines search Webster’s Dictionary for the color-coded etymology of the words “black” and “white,” the acts of reading and writing are, almost by definition, cinematically inert. Finally, the film’s post-production troubles are reflected in some technical flaws—badly lit and mismatched shots—that are unusual in a big-budget Hollywood production.

Little wonder that despite critical esteem and a big opening week, the film’s box office gross declined sharply in the second week, and ultimately fell far short of the anticipated commercial pay off (in the six weeks following its opening, it grossed $45 million). According to a marketing post-mortem by Warner Bros. executives, the daunting combination of the film’s three-hour-plus running time and Lee’s severe message-mongering doomed *Malcolm X* with audiences who resisted “a tedious history lesson as opposed to dramatic entertainment” (Weinraub).

For his part, Lee was worried about more than box office returns. Despite his name-above-the-title braggadocio, the director knew he would
be answerable to rival claimants with a vested interest in the legacy of Malcolm X. The biopic needed to remain true to the spirit of the book and give due honor to the man, else alienate the target audience the director sought most to cultivate—his fellow African Americans.

Whether from a failure of nerve or because Malcolm X’s version of events accorded so perfectly with Lee’s own political and cinematic vision, the director opted for a deferential fidelity to the *Autobiography* rather than an independent inquiry into a contested life. Ironically for a self-styled Hollywood iconoclast and outsider, Lee assumed a reverent stance harkening back to the studio system biopics of the 1930s. In fact, the cycle of biopics that began with the pious Gandhi (1982), and peaked with the quartet from 1991–1992—*JFK, Malcolm X, Hoffa,* and *Chaplin*—regressed back a generation to the worshipful spirit of Warner Bros. and MGM, rather than to the wary skepticism of the biopics of the 1950s and 1960s. In *JFK,* Jim Garrison is the lone crusader for truth in an ocean of corruption and conspiracy. In *Hoffa,* the labor boss is a fearless protector of the working man and a fierce defender of civil liberties against bloated robber barons and a sniveling Robert Kennedy. In *Chaplin,* the priapic tramp is a transcendent genius who falls victim to Puritanism and McCarthyism.
Malcolm X is no less reverent and credulous. Following the script laid out in the *Autobiography*, Lee portrays Malcolm’s first encounter with racism as beginning while he is literally in his mother’s womb, during the nighttime assault by the Ku Klux Klan. The fire that is the central image of the book finds apt expression in Lee’s own primary colors, the blue and yellow color scheme that is his visual signature. Fire—the element that links the Klan’s arson of Malcolm’s childhood home and the firebombing of his own house days before his death—illuminates the arc of his life. The flames symbolize too the threat that “by any means necessary” is the fire next time.

In the last moments of *Malcolm X*, Lee collapses distinctions between drama and documentary by unspooling archival footage of the man just dramatized in fiction. A valedictory montage intercuts clips of the real Malcolm with a montage of black school children (“I’m Malcolm X!” they chirp in turn), and a cameo appearance from Nelson Mandela. Perhaps the desperate blizzard of screen images—video and film, real and reenacted—expresses the director’s recognition that the motion picture medium has fallen short of the mark, that the story of Malcolm X has, after all, been better told by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* than by the biopic *Malcolm X*.

**NOTES**

1. After the cathartic act of violence that climaxes *Do the Right Thing*, two statements fill the screen. They read in part: “Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates a bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers” (King). “I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don’t even call it violence when it’s self-defense. I call it intelligence” (Malcolm X).

2. In this context, an interesting generational face-off occurred on the political talk show *Inside Washington* between Carl Rowan and Juan Williams in the wake of the release of Lee’s *Malcolm X*. Rowan, an old-line civil rights leader who had little use for Malcolm in the 1960s or since, testily noted that Malcolm was missing in action during the crucial fights of the civil rights era. The younger reporter Williams accused Rowan of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Rowan replied he was fighting for civil rights when Williams was in diapers; Williams retorted that Rowan just didn’t understand what Malcolm meant to young black Americans.

3. The collaborative relationship between Malcolm X and Alex Haley is discussed in Wideman. For the story of the original manuscript, see “Text,” and “Alex Haley.”

4. Although the imagery of *Walk in My Shoes* may evoke “the gangster motif,” Michael Curtin argues that “even a white viewer could begin to glimpse the validity of Malcolm’s analysis” (169–70).
5. Of the shocking and “virulent anti-white movement,” *Variety* observed that “this quarter, probably like so many others, never before was aware of” the Black Muslims (“Tele Follow-Up”). Among other attentive televiewers were agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who filed extensive reports on the show back to headquarters (see Carson 149, 159–70).


7. *Malcolm X* Press Kit, Warner Bros, 1992. In 1966, Worth had acquired the motion picture rights to the *Autobiography* from Betty Shabazz. Arnold Perl, a seasoned Hollywood screenwriter whose varied career included adaptations of Yiddish theater, and whose political activism had gotten him blacklisted during the McCarthy era, wrote the screenplay. Ironically, he never lived to see Malcolm X produced in either documentary or biopic form. He died in 1971 while the documentary *Malcolm X* was still in production. He received a posthumous screenplay credit with Spike Lee on the biopic *Malcolm X*.


10. Not until the late 1960s did Hollywood seriously begin to court African Americans, a segment of the moviegoing audience that attends films out of all proportion to its numbers. A 1967 banner headline in *Variety* trumpeted the news “One Third Film Public: Negro,” and reported that “film companies are gradually learning that black power can mean green power. Although Negroes constitute only 15% of the U.S. population, recent surveys indicate they represent nearly 30% of total patronage in major city first run houses” (Beaupre). Perhaps not coincidentally, the next week a small item in the trade paper noted a forthcoming production on the life of the man described as the “former New York Black Muslim chief.” This first step in a tortuous path to production was a project being developed at Twentieth Century Fox, based on an original screenplay by Louis E. Lomax from his book *When the Word Is Given* (“Lomax”).

11. Oddly, although actor Coley Wallace gets full screen credit in the opening credits (“Introducing Coley Wallace”), his name is absent from the screen credits in the end credit reprise.
WORKS CITED


