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## "Spike, Don't Mess Malcolm Up": Courting Controversy and Control in *Malcolm X*

When Spike Lee made *Malcolm X* in 1991,<sup>1</sup> he was at the height of his popularity, his creative talents, his trademark outspokenness, and his audacious entrepreneurial successes. This timely confluence of Lee's artistic and commercial acumen, which no doubt helped secure his directorship of this long embattled project, also served to position him alongside Hollywood's pantheon of 1990s A-list film directors such as Oliver Stone, Michael Mann, Norman Jewison, and Woody Allen. At the same time, Lee's troubled production became yoked symbolically to the April 1992 Los Angeles Uprising and was instrumental in what Henry Louis Gates has called the "Malcolmania" that gripped American youth and consumer cultures at that moment. Whereas America's disenfranchised black youth and other sympathetic population segments struggled over the larger political implications of the meaning of Malcolm X, the man, opportunistic commercial enterprises rushed to market "X"-brand potato chips, "refrigerator magnets and trading cards, pins and air fresheners."<sup>2</sup>

Among the notable catalysts driving the political and cultural reawakening of Malcolm X's relevance were disaffected and rebellious black youths in urban spaces; white youths elsewhere; popular rap and hip-hop artists, including Public Enemy's Chuck D. and KRS-One; and Spike Lee films.<sup>3</sup> And like the subject of arguably his most important film to date, Lee has earned the reputation of "an enigmatic and controversial figure."<sup>4</sup> Michael Eric Dyson describes the overdetermined figure of unbowed, uncowering, and fierce revolutionary black masculinist nationalism as "explosively controversial."<sup>5</sup>

"Controversy," then, emerges as the adjective of choice for friends and foes, critics and reviewers of Lee's remarkable cinematic output at that historical juncture, and certainly regarding his affiliation with the *Malcolm X* film.

With the 1986 production of his celebrated first feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, and the culmination in 1991 of *Jungle Fever*, his fifth film in six years, Lee achieved a level of critical and commercial success and amassed a range of formidable production credentials that escaped many young directors of the era, black or white. By the time the *Malcolm X* film project was made available, Lee had not only honed his directorial skills, but he had also cultivated a bankable reputation both as mainstream media's favorite artistic combatant and as newsworthy darling of the independent filmmaking set. Unlike many of his black male contemporaries, including Bill Duke, Mario Van Peebles, and even his longtime collaborator Ernest Dickerson, Lee parlayed his love of cinema, shrewd marketing prowess, and media-made personality into a consistent filmmaking force and catalyst for change both within and outside the film industry.

This essay, then, considers *Malcolm X* as a uniquely and particularly salient aspect of "the 'Spike Lee Phenomenon' in popular dominant discourse."<sup>6</sup> Among my key concerns are *Malcolm X*'s discursive function in what I am calling "Lee's auteur vision," the film's position within the larger cultural struggle over the meaning of the political and intellectual legacies of El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (*Malcolm X*), and a number of high-profile controversies circulating around Spike Lee's making and marketing of his magnum opus *Malcolm X*.

### Recuperating *Malcolm X*: Controversy One

Anyone familiar with Lee's successful deployment of "militant rhetorics" will recognize immediately the aptness of contextualizing his work in terms of controversy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that when it came to the *Malcolm X* film project, controversy attracted Spike Lee like a moth to a flame and, to a degree, with similarly consuming results. Although burned by the pointed criticism from certain vocal members of the black community about his suitability for representing Malcolm—"our own black shining Prince"<sup>8</sup>—and the de rigueur, if heightened, barrage of racialized criticisms in the white mainstream media, Lee nonetheless was undeterred from his conviction that "the story of *Malcolm X* belonged to Black film, and there was no other way to look at it."<sup>9</sup> In April 1992, during the film's volatile production, even its star, Denzel Washington, commented that it "would not be the most controversial film of the year. [Rather, it's] going to be the most controversial film of the

decade."<sup>10</sup> In the intervening years, however, it has been Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, and not *Malcolm X*, that has been included among those film-title matches corresponding to a Web search for "the most controversial films" on Google. Nevertheless, *Malcolm X* remains at the very least the most controversial film of 1992.

It is the case that much of the controversy surrounding Lee's replacement of Norman Jewison as the director of *Malcolm X* is legend. However, for our purposes, certain aspects of the story are important for what they can contribute to our understanding of the film's unique status within Lee's oeuvre and the national disposition to embrace, reject, or ignore the film's status as American cultural artifact. Lee became affiliated with the project after Warner Brothers announced its intent finally to green light a dramatic film about the life and times of Malcolm X, with Marvin Worth as producer and Norman Jewison as director. It is important to note here that Warner Brothers had enjoyed earlier success with Worth's Oscar-nominated documentary about the slain black civil-rights leader, also eponymously titled *Malcolm X* (1971). Public disputes about Lee's eventual involvement with the latest iteration of the Worth and Warner Brothers *Malcolm X* project vary widely. And although Lee, Worth, and Jewison are on record with three separate perspectives, they each recount an essentially civil resolution to the controversy, as excerpts from their narratives reveal.

In *This Terrible Business Has Been Good to Me: An Autobiography*, Jewison comments candidly about the experience: "I had wanted to make this movie. I didn't because Spike Lee also wanted to make it."<sup>11</sup> These remarks are part of Jewison's discussion about working with Denzel Washington on their film *A Soldier's Story* (1984), which convinced him that Washington was a natural to play Malcolm X. Yet the circumstances surrounding Jewison's departure from *Malcolm X* were less than voluntary, despite efforts to cast the outcome as such after the fact. Jewison continues:

Marvin Worth . . . signed me to direct. We had a screenplay by Charles Fuller, who had written *A Soldier's Story*, and an older script by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl. . . . The media . . . picked it up and chewed it over. A white director making a film about a black hero? And it was now all about me and Spike, and not about the story of Malcolm X that we both wanted to make. Lee was on talk shows complaining that white directors should not make black movies. . . . Prejudice was everywhere. . . . In the end, the two of us met. . . . It was at my invitation, through his agent. He wore his baseball cap and I wore mine. We talked about Malcolm. I wished him well with the movie. "One thing, Spike," I told him, "just don't screw it up."<sup>12</sup>



Recalling the futility of resistance against this gathering storm—some nearly thirty years hence—Jewison's disappointment and acquiescence are clear.

Worth's position on the fracas, as reported contemporaneously in "A Movie Producer Remembers the Human Side of Malcolm X," seems less forthcoming, even contradicting Jewison's retrospective retelling. In the article by Bernard Weinraub, Worth reportedly claims that "Mr. Jewison was ambivalent about directing *Malcolm X*, saying that the film should be made by a black director." Worth, as Weinraub describes it, saw the growing interest in Malcolm X "especially among younger blacks," and Lee's public complaints "that the movie should be made by a black film maker," as rendering Jewison's continuation on the film untenable.<sup>13</sup>

Worth's project, which began more than two decades earlier, was known throughout the industry as one of the most famous unproduced movies in Hollywood. We are told simply, "Mr. Jewison dropped out, Mr. Lee took over and revised the Baldwin–Perl Script. Mr. Worth reluctantly agreed to take Mr. Baldwin's name off the credits, when the writer's family asked him to do so because of the revisions. The film's screenplay [therefore] is credited to Mr. Perl and Mr. Lee."<sup>14</sup> Worth comments, "Nobody can explain Spike. . . . Very difficult to understand. Very complex. . . . He panics the establishment. You're always getting phone calls about Spike from the studio: 'He's talking again to the press,' 'He's making trouble,' 'He's doing this,' 'He's doing that.' But we get along. We're still hugging."<sup>15</sup> For the flamboyant producer, the film's \$10 million weekend box-office showing in third place behind *Home Alone 2* (\$30 million) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (\$15 million) was better than expected, especially since the film opened in half the movie theaters of its competition. Still, the financial success was not the primary motivation behind the producer's twenty-year obsession. For Worth, the *Malcolm X* project was deeply personal. "Even if this movie doesn't make 20 cents, it's still history," he said. "It's something I *had* to do. My memories of this man go so far back." Although quoted as being "enormously proud of the film," Worth would have preferred that it focus on Malcolm X's incredible charisma and charm. He recalls the fated young man as a charmer who was "a lot of fun," a human characteristic that he fears was not adequately conveyed in the film.<sup>16</sup>

For his part, Lee's recuperative impulses regarding *Malcolm X* tracked according to the filmmaker's own life experiences and his specific processes of discovery about the black leader's life and times. In *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, Lee reminds readers of Malcolm X's thematic prominence in *Do the Right Thing* (where the charismatic leader's image is a powerful diegetic motif). In fact, according to Lee, it was *the earlier film* that persuaded Worth to approach Lee about directing his film even before Jewison became involved. Lee states:

It was because of *Do the Right Thing* that a man named Marvin Worth—who had the rights to the material on Malcolm's life—sent me a letter saying that he wanted me to direct the film, or would at least like to discuss with me the possibility of doing it. I never did receive the letter, but he later showed me a copy of it. . . . Marvin said Norman felt he needed the Black credibility of [Charles Fuller] to get Betty Shabazz on his side. . . . When it got out that Norman was going to direct this film, that's when I started to speak out about it. . . . So Marvin had gone after me before Norman even came on the scene. Marvin wanted me, Warner Brothers would take me, so it was a matter of how we could make the deal, and let it be Norman's decision to leave, to save face.<sup>17</sup>

If both Lee's and Jewison's recollections reveal anything, it is that the manufactured consensus about how they resolved the controversy over who would direct misses some important nuances. The controversy based on a binary construction of Jewison's noble sacrifice and Lee's brash usurpation of the film directorship, due to extant political exigencies and a highly charged and racially explosive social climate of the period, is not so black and white when we consider the foregoing colorful and significant details. As Jewison points out, both men wanted to direct this movie.<sup>18</sup> And as Lee confirms, there was no way he was going to let Warner Brothers' decision to contract a white director "go without saying something about it in public."<sup>19</sup>

For Lee, courting controversy over *Malcolm X* was a necessary act of political and cultural intervention that turned on matters of credibility, authenticity, and even profitability. Entrusting the still volatile and complex life and revolutionary philosophies of Malcolm X to Warner Brothers, Worth, and Jewison was not an option Lee was willing to abide. Fearing that Malcolm X's larger-than-life story would suffer Hollywood's usual diminutions and circumscription to the industry's two preferred genres of the period, the "home-boy shoot-'em up drug movie" or the "hip-hop musical comedy," Lee was advocating a broader vision.<sup>20</sup> After all, he had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as an impressionable youth in public school in 1969–70. Even then he recognized the man's greatness and thought, "This is a great Black man, a strong Black man, a courageous Black man who did not back down from anybody even toward his death. The Man. Malcolm."<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, Lee was not insulated from the burden of blackness in American society and thus could cast himself in the same fearless mold of black masculinist pride, militancy, self-determination, and group uplift that Malcolm X espoused. In fact, Lee followed in his father's footsteps and attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, where his father, Bill Lee, and Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr. were students a generation earlier. Spike Lee, no rigid black nationalist separatist, respected King's views on integration, which informed his own entrepreneurial practices. Nevertheless, Lee knew that it was the voice of Malcolm X that was, as he put it, "much more in line with the way I felt. So it wasn't a question of school loyalty of fellow alumni or knowing I would do a movie about Malcolm X one day. At the time, it was a question of being drawn to his intelligence."<sup>22</sup> Lee had no doubts about his own credibility compared with a white filmmaker's where directing *Malcolm X* was concerned: Not only had he read and apparently internalized much of Malcolm X's autobiography, he also listened to taped speeches by the slain leader as a matter of course to steel himself for battle against racism in the film industry in general, and his particular battles with Warner Brothers executives during the production of *Malcolm X*.<sup>23</sup>

### Making *Malcolm X* at the Gilded Plantation: Controversy Two

Malcolm X causes a reaction, so there is no way the film won't do the same thing.

—Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary*<sup>24</sup>

Where one might presume that Warner Brothers' grudging concession to have Lee direct the film would quell some of the controversy, the opposite was true. All the bad press attending Lee's wresting the film from Jewison and his well-publicized troubles making the film served to ramp up the usual level of controversy and criticism about Lee's involvement with the project. Dyson reminds us that there was great concern that Lee was hustling Malcolm X's memory through shrewd and crass commercialization and merchandizing of Malcolm memorabilia, which tainted the filmmaker's integrity.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, film and cultural critics and audiences can bracket such compromises in recognition of the fact that "Lee's *Malcolm X* is still an often impressive, occasionally stunning achievement. It is a richly textured and subtly nuanced evocation of the life and times of a supremely American paradox. . . . Lee's Malcolm is inevitably a creation of Lee's own oversized ambition."<sup>26</sup> Nothing manifests Lee's determination to make *Malcolm X* his way more than his ongoing contests of will with Warner Brothers, the production partner that he mockingly dubbed "The Plantation."<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, Lee's derogation of the studio responsible for his first big-budget feature seems typical of his grandstanding publicity seeking, at best, and of his self-serving race baiting, at worst. But on closer scrutiny, Lee's complaints are less self-indulgent and more indicative of the industry's racist double standard for funding film projects predicated on race. No one expected Lee to suffer silently Hollywood studios' willing big gambles on risky white film projects while

he was held to an unfeasible budget for an ambitious project that involved, among other things, second-unit shoots on three continents. In lamenting the industry's endemic double standard, Lee writes about his frustrations with studio heads over money. Expressing his gratitude to Oliver Stone for disclosing certain terms of his *JFK* production deal with Warner Brothers, Lee commented:

And we're going to kick and scream if we don't get the same mother-fucking shit they gave Oliver Stone and *JFK*. . . . [W]e're tired of being slighted, where we have to take the short end of the stick again and again. . . . They always try and say, "Well, Spike, Oliver Stone has made more than \$100 million with *Platoon*, and *JFK* might make that, and Denzel Washington's not the truly great movie star that has the box office appeal of Kevin Costner." I've heard this from them, that's their feeling, and it's bullshit.<sup>28</sup>

Bernard Weinraub confirms Lee's charge of underfunding: "What got the *Malcolm X* controversy going and has kept it bubbling—always good for business—are issues involving money and personality. . . . Mr. Lee, who has never been shy about his own endeavors, has described it as 'an epic picture.' . . . The problem with epics, though, is they are expensive and run far longer than two hours. . . . Initially budgeted at \$28 million, which is not elaborately expensive, the costs have climbed to \$33 million."<sup>29</sup>

Not only was Lee justified in rejecting Warner Brothers' financial lowballing, but his insistence on total control was necessary, given Hollywood's earlier ideas for project X. For example, at various stages along the way, Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy were serious contenders for the film. While Lee's assertion that the "film never got made" in more than two decades of attempts because "it wasn't s'pose to be made until now"<sup>30</sup> reflects his penchant for grandstanding public relations more than the actual facts of project X's troubled production history, few would argue that Lee's *Malcolm X* is not an impressive achievement. In fact, the film garnered two Academy Award nominations—best actor for Washington and best costume design for Ruth Carter. The foregoing cultural and industrial backstory provides an important context for our analysis of the film, and its particular location within Lee's remarkable career trajectory.

### Representin' Malcolm in Spike Lee's Auteur Vision: Controversy Three

A number of additional factors must be considered for any fair assessment of *Malcolm X* as an artistic tour de force and economic triumph. And whether or

not one accepts Lee's view that historical and other circumstances conspired to thwart production of a major feature film about Malcolm X because he was "s'posed" to bring it to fruition, one thing is certain: When Lee's *Malcolm X* hit the theaters in November 1992, the necessary historical, political, cultural, and economic preconditions were met, and the film opened amid a cultural maelstrom. It was the nadir of the Bush-Quayle era, as Bill Clinton and Al Gore successfully challenged and ultimately defeated the Republican incumbents; after twenty years and recognizing "Malcolm mania," the film industry finally became less risk-averse about green lighting the film; an all-white Simi Valley jury acquitted white officers in the assault on Rodney King, and a white police officer in Detroit was convicted of killing black motorist Malice Green; federal marshals violently subdued white supremacists at Ruby Ridge; and Dr. Mae Jemison became the first black woman astronaut in space.<sup>31</sup> Subtending these fin-de-siècle occurrences is their revelation about the status of American race relations and, particularly, their affirmation of W. E. B. Du Bois's prescience when he warned in 1903 that *the* problem of the twentieth century was the color line.

It is this truism that Lee unapologetically foregrounds in narratives about both his experiences in making *Malcolm X* and the thematic preoccupations within that text. Houston Baker makes the point convincingly about Lee's work in this regard:

Now, it is not that Lee's films are devastatingly original, telling us always things we do not know. What is striking about his work is that it is, in fact, so thoroughly grounded in what we *all* know, but refuse to acknowledge, speak, regret, or change. The strong kernel of critique in his films removes him decisively, I think, from the cult of the art-for-art's-sake campness and the Afrocentric posturings and Black filmic extravagance (or ennui) or neo-Black Arts cinematics.<sup>32</sup>

Where Baker provides a cogent read on Lee's cinematic populism and black cultural pragmatism, his view that Lee's work lacks Afrocentric posturings is arguable. In *Black Film White Money*, Jessie A. Rhines discusses Lee's role as "information conduit," willing to take "a public position on the side of the Black dis-advantaged despite the fact that he has never been one of them."<sup>33</sup> In fact, Rhines points out that Lee shares an Afrocentric uplift agenda of sorts in the tradition of "Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, and Jessie Jackson, among others."<sup>34</sup> Baker's and Rhines's observations are important pointers toward central ideological markers of Lee's auteur's vision that Paula J. Massood has astutely catalogued.

In *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*, Massood outlines several recurrent themes in Lee's work that are useful for

understanding his auteur vision. As Massood observes, Lee often focuses on "core themes that, while adapted over time, still remain seminal to his work." Lee's films, therefore, are notable to the extent that they are addressed to an African American audience (even though many also draw in a substantial mixed audience), they focus on the role of the city and history in shaping black life, they are highly reflexive in form, they often explicitly evaluate and rearticulate African American cinematic representation, they provide sympathetic and detailed glimpses of the [Brooklyn] borough's African American faces, personalities, and communities, they emphasize black community concerns, they emphasize the realities of location, indicated in grainy visuals, and extended to the use of sound as most characters speak in a combination of middle-class and contemporary urban speech idioms, they use music to set time and place, they provide a multifaceted glimpse of a black urban space different from other African American spaces most familiar to film audiences, and they craft a rich variety of black male characters.<sup>35</sup>

My construction of this typology is extrapolated from Massood's observations about significant themes in Lee's earliest works (i.e., *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* and *She's Gotta Have It*) that are adapted in and improved on in his later films. This cataloguing, for me, makes perfect sense because to a one, the themes are recurrent and foregrounded in *Malcolm X* to powerful effect. After all, as Andrew Sarris wrote in the early years of auteur criticism:

The strong director imposes his own personality on a film. . . . The so-called "big" pictures were particularly vulnerable to front-office interference. . . . The auteur theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression. It is as if a few brave spirits had managed to overcome the gravitational pull of the mass of movies. The fascination of Hollywood movies lies in their performance under pressure.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that Lee was and remains the sort of strong director that Sarris had in mind in his own adaptation and appropriation of the *Cahiers du Cinema* author-filmmaker's rubric that underpins our appreciation of the film director as the orchestrator of meaning in a film. While I argue that Lee's *Malcolm X* is a biopic constrained by a number of forces and factors, Lee's courting of controversy fits perfectly within Sarris's view of auteurist praxis under pressure. In effect, Lee was able to exert his own personality in the high-stakes contest of wills with the studio over final cut rights on the *Malcolm X* project.

What makes *Malcolm X* an important sociological, cultural, historical, and industrial moment is the film's participation in what Paul Arthur terms

"Jargons of Authenticity" wherein "documentaries and Hollywood narratives do not issue from separate and pristine worlds but over the course of their histories maintained a tangled reciprocity" by defining themselves each against its other all the while sharing technological, thematic, political and cultural codes.<sup>37</sup> As a result of his many professional and personal contacts and the force of his reputation, Lee was able to authenticate his docudrama by enlisting the support of X's widow, Betty Shabazz; his siblings Philbert and Yvonne; his Muslim brethren Benjamin 2X, Charles Kenyatta, and Minister Louis Farrakhan; and "many others who had been in the nation or who had known Malcolm X."<sup>38</sup> Biopics were among the earliest genres of cinema, and in fact the Warner Brothers studio achieved its earliest success with a 1918 biopic, *My Four Years in Germany* (1918).<sup>39</sup> In Lee's case, realizing his artistic vision of a Malcolm X biopic at Warner Brothers was problematic from the outset. Tensions were high not only because of how he became attached to the project, but also because the studio enjoyed a venerable tradition of biopics in general, and in particular it held the rights to its successful 1970s documentary film about Malcolm X. *Malcolm X* becomes even more interesting as a textual object because of its powerful amalgamation of the Alex Haley *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, footage from the Warner Brothers' documentary and Oliver Stone's *JFK*, a resurgent public interest in the life and times of the man, financial rescuing by prominent black celebrities, and Lee's own independent vision of how best to synthesize these disparate and often competing elements. What follows, is a view of Lee's film within the context of these foregoing discussions.

Lee envisioned *Malcolm X* as an epic film right from the start, and with a running time of three hours and twenty-two minutes, it signals one of his most important victories in the battles with Warner Brothers. For the most part, the film hews closely to the as-told-to autobiography of Malcolm X's life as penned by Alex Haley, and the original screenplay written by James Baldwin, and the later screenplay by Arnold Perl. Ultimately, however, the final script is Lee's adaptation of these earlier treatments to accommodate his more updated and dramatic retelling. Lee's version had a fealty to certain pivotal historical facts, though he also took dramatic license to fictionalize, expand, and compress events and temporalities and to construct composite characters. Dyson argues that there are inherent difficulties associated with "cinematically representing a man whose life has been reconstructed by webs of myth and romance . . . and the film's real-life subject impose historical limits, aesthetic constraints, and artistic conventions that work wonders for Lee's treatment of the complexities of race."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, aside from the rich materials that Malcolm X's life engendered for narrative possibilities, Lee's representation of race as an important narrative determinant in *Malcolm X* bridges an

important historical chasm between race relations in America as Malcolm X experienced them during the Civil Rights Movement and the so-called post-civil-rights era of our present time.

The film is structured as a narrative triptych, wherein roughly one hour of screen time is devoted to each of the three successive periods of growth and transformation that defined Malcolm X's short but monumental life. For Lee, it was important to eschew a reductive depiction of Malcolm X as either a hero or villain, saint or sinner. Instead, he stressed the fulcrum of the controversial leader's tumultuous life in terms consistent with what Malcolm X himself described as "up from the muck and the mire."<sup>41</sup> Following Haley's rather spectacular narrative, Lee delivers an equally sensational and powerful biographical discourse that engages each of the stages of Malcolm X's life that ended with spiritual and intellectual redemption and sociopolitical martyrdom. Of course, situating the film along a historical continuum of pathological race relations in America was another central concern for Lee, a concern that certainly resonated with audiences in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising.

### Opening Acts: Malcolm X and the Quest for Black Manhood

*Malcolm X* opens with Denzel Washington's disembodied voice channeling one of Malcolm X's provocative speeches containing the memorable refrain, "I charge the white man," wherein a litany of white crimes against black humanity, including murder, kidnapping, robbery, and enslavement, are inventoried. The voiceover continues, "He can't deny the charges. You can't deny the charges. We're the living proof of those charges." After Washington's star credit fades, a cut to a full-frame shot of the American flag in color fills the screen, with the words "Malcolm X" appearing center frame. Shots of the intact flag bursting into flames are disrupted by grainy clips from George Holliday's footage of the Rodney King beating as the production credits conclude.

The cross-cutting between the King beating and the fiery American flag constructs a visual dialectic wherein this revered American symbol is recoded through its proximity to the shameful video footage of police brutality and state-sanctioned oppression and racism. Juxtaposed in this way the flag and the King beating footage perform what Sergei Eisenstein referred to as a form of intellectual montage, in which the imagistic thesis (the flag) and its antithesis (the Holliday footage) are conjoined to effect a synthesis: America equals racial brutality and oppression. At the same time, the deployment of

the flag imagery instantiates Lee's homage to the film *Patton*, Francis Ford Coppola's 1970 epic about another larger-than-life American figure, General George S. Patton Jr. For Lee, such cinematic referents are not merely gratuitous; they serve a central signifying function in his auteur vision.

The opening sequence is also significant in its extradiegetic framing and intertextual references to the urban rebellions that erupted in the wake of the verdicts in the Rodney King trial acquitting white racism. Thus, the visual rendering of the flag burning at the end of this sound-image montage culminates in its transformation into a burned red, white, and blue X icon, suggesting the enduring nature and contemporary relevance of Malcolm's legacy for addressing the historical continuum of white oppression and supremacy. These volatile significations also tap into a "Burn-Baby-Burn" indexicality recalling the violent urban rebellions of the 1960s.

*Malcolm X* was released amid a cycle of hood, or ghettocentric, films, including *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Menace II Society* (1993), that according to Melvin Donelson "placed more black and Latinos on the screen" enacting a familiar boys-of-color masculinity "based upon nihilism, materialism, and misogyny."<sup>42</sup> *Malcolm X* surely depicted some striking similarities to these films in its presentation of Malcolm Little's early years as Detroit Red. Most important, however, it presented striking alternatives, as well. For example, the film showcases a panoply of black male characters, including Malcolm X's proud and defiant father, Earl Little (an acolyte of a strong model of black masculinity, Marcus Garvey), Cholly and Toomer (the barber-shop's old-timers and Greek chorus who witness daily the black male experience of the period), Shorty (young Malcolm's partner in crime), West Indian Archie (the mathematical genius-thug of Harlem's numbers racket), Baines (prison guard and Nation of Islam minister), Elijah Muhammad (spiritual and business leader of the Nation) and other members of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Dr. Payson (conservative Negro academic who debated Malcolm X on TV), cameo appearances by Reverend Al Sharpton and former Black Panther Bobby Seale, and, of course, the various masculinities of Malcolm X himself. I will explore, briefly, Lee's artistic rendering of the masculine discourses through film's look and creative stylizations.

### The Look

Spike Lee and his long-time cinematographer, Ernest Dickerson, state that the look of *Malcolm X* is based on Coppola's 1972 Academy Award-winning film, *The Godfather*, itself an epic film about changing masculinities. In addition, Lee's expressive camera, dialectical montage, and other formal elements demonstrate his virtuoso "mining of Black cultural themes and institu-

tions" to craft nuanced, hyperbolic, and fragile zones of black masculinity.<sup>43</sup> Several scenes in which Lee uses image and sound to reveal the fragile and treacherous bonds of brotherhood for Malcolm as both Detroit Red and Malcolm X are emblematic in this regard. Following the dark chiaroscuro lighting conventions of film noir, Lee renders visually the uncertainty, the untrustworthiness and suspect motives behind Malcolm Little's (a.k.a. Detroit Red's) close male relationships. With striking dramatic clarity, Lee dramatizes much of Malcolm X's psychosocial development in terms of the tragic loss of his father, who is replaced by a series of perilous mentors, beginning with West Indian Archie and his numbers-running minions, a relationship that clearly prefigures his later troubles with Minister Baines and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.<sup>44</sup>

Where Lee deliberately uses framing and composition to indict Detroit Red with his criminal cronies as they ply their illicit trades and illegal activities in Harlem's salacious underworld, he conveys effectively the spiritually transformed, more intellectually mature stages of Malcolm X's masculine trajectory via extensive individual shots, close-ups, and interior monologues as voiceover. Despite the film's running time of more than three hours, Lee's formal structuring of the biopic necessitates both temporal compressions and realignments and, to some extent, composite characters. Together they affirm Lee's talents at cinematic storytelling and narrative economy such that the film captures most of the crucial historic and biographical moments that follow "faithfully the lineaments of Malcolm's various emergences and conversions as detailed in his autobiography."<sup>45</sup>

Through the visual economy of dialectical montage, Lee juxtaposes key past and present events to explain Malcolm X's complex character. For example, in the first section of *Malcolm X*, Malcolm confesses his love of the movies in a scene that comports with a description from the autobiography:

It was at this time that I discovered the movies. Sometimes I made as many as five in one day, both downtown and in Harlem. I loved the tough guys, the action. Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, and I loved all of that dancing and carrying on in such films as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*. After leaving the movies, I'd make my connections for supplies. . . . I'd start my rounds. . . . I didn't sell and run, because my customers were my friends. . . . None of them stayed any more high than I did.<sup>46</sup>

What is particularly telling in this passage is its support of Lee's storytelling choices that might seem arbitrary to someone unfamiliar with the story, especially his exuberant portrayal of the prolonged musical scene at the Roseland

dance hall or the treatment of young Malcolm's underworld life. In these scenes from the film we can see the specific aesthetic influences informing Lee's auteur vision, including a penchant for the hyperbolic drama and fast-paced action of the classic Warner Brothers crime dramas of the 1930s. This aesthetic also pays homage to black dance numbers characteristic of independent race films and Hollywood's black cast films of the 1930s and '40s and the more contemporary musicals such as *West Side Story* (Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, 1961) and *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980). Black music traditions and popular artists spanning the period of Malcolm X's life are also featured, including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, the Ink Spots, Sam Cooke, and Aretha Franklin. The final result is a scene that putatively draws from Malcolm's own words to present the look and sound of black popular culture over a number of decades.

Other scenes continue with this polyphonic referential strategy—for example, a later scene of Detroit Red and Shorty frolicking through a park, playing a Warner Brothers-inspired cops-and-robbers game, is interrupted by a jarring close-up of Red feigning death from Shorty's air bullets. This playful death scene is intercut with an extreme close-up shot of the actual death of Red's father (whose tragic demise occurs as he lies prone facing an unstoppable train). Lee's choice, then, to link through editing Malcolm X's life and death struggles with those of his father is a powerful visual economy and recurrent motif that speaks clearly to repressive apparatuses brought to bear on black masculinity in America—a literal and figurative arresting of black masculine development. For instance, in the final third of the film Lee draws a visual and thematic parallel between the nighttime bombing of his childhood home with Malcolm X's own family fleeing the destruction of a nighttime bombing of their home. Through a creative arrangement of flashback scenes, then, Lee references important historical occurrences in Malcolm's X's past that foreshadow eerily similar tragic outcomes in his later life.

While it is clear that the film follows the autobiography, Lee appropriated the visual and thematic tropes of treacherous masculinity found in Coppola's *Godfather* films. For example, Dickerson used a chiaroscuro lighting design to convey the ruptured relationship between Malcolm X and his spiritual brethren. This is especially evident in the film's dim and ambiguous lighting and claustrophobic framing in several scenes between Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and the fictional character Baines. The scenes' expressionistic lighting distorts Baines's and Elijah Muhammad's faces and shrouds Malcolm X's in a fog of disbelief, rendering visually the duplicitous and increasingly dangerous nature of Malcolm X's one-time allies. Given the tragic fratricidal nature of Malcolm X's death, Lee's complex representation of the excesses of treacherous masculinity is warranted; however, Lee calibrates this masculine

problematic that again underscores Massood's point that black masculinity in Lee's discourse countermands dominant views of a one-dimensional black male subject. In *Malcolm X*, Lee also gives us compelling depictions of fierce black male loyalty, compassion, and redemption. Through the dense signifying chain of meaning and visual economies of mise-en-scène, Lee is able to underscore the more affirmative values and qualities that also defined the black masculine experience of that period.

Lee's construction of a masculine zone or sphere of influence throughout the film is called for by the subject matter and genre. From the start, Lee visually unifies black men by placing them in close physical proximity via tight framing. Lee also frames Malcolm X between his fiercely loyal underministers, the Fruit of Islam (FOI), who flanked him for protection at all public appearances. Furthermore, he uses mise-en-scène and framing to represent black male power. We see low camera angles used to full effect when West Indian Archie is introduced at the height of his powers and made larger than life in the youthful eyes of Detroit Red; a similar camera treatment of Malcolm X during his rise in the Nation of Islam organization appears later; and most dramatically, there is a scene in which Malcolm delivers a speech in front of a gigantic portrait of Elijah Muhammad. More than an evocation of Orson Welles's classic representation of egomaniacal power in *Citizen Kane*, the positioning of Malcolm X between the eyes of Muhammad's painted poster suggests that Malcolm X's spiritual mentor is both a benevolent protector and a jealous, all-seeing rival.

Nothing signifies black masculine unity and black nationalist solidarity more than Lee's framing of the orderly, disciplined phalanx of FOI ministers outside a police station after one of their own falls victim to police brutality. Lee shoots the crowd of FOI ministers standing at rigid attention in military formation and later moving with soldierly precision on the direction of Malcolm X's one black-gloved hand, shots that demonstrate the awesome unity of the FOI. It is in Lee's nuanced visual attention to the representational options for characterizing the various stages of Malcolm X's life that the complexities of black masculinity are played out. This of course leads us to consider briefly how Lee's very troubled discourse on women in general, and on black women in particular, unfolds in *Malcolm X*. Michael Eric Dyson remarks cogently, "As with the films of Dickerson, Lee, Rich, Singleton, and Van Peebles, this focus on black masculinity spells real trouble for black women."<sup>47</sup>

### Lee on Women in *Malcolm X*

Lee has been critiqued extensively for his narrow and sexist representations of women by a number of black film critics, and he even acknowledges his own shortcomings. So there is no need to retread through this well-known



and important discursive output.<sup>48</sup> I do, nevertheless, want to highlight a particular instance that speaks to Lee's filmic gender bias because it is at odds with his own authenticating narratives regarding his suitability to direct this film. While lobbying to direct the film, Lee linked his credibility to his blackness and community ties to key figures from Malcolm X's life, including his family members, former Nation of Islam members, and especially his widow, Betty Shabazz. It seems hardly surprising, however, that given his gender troubles, Lee's rapport with Shabazz became strained. Discussing the roles of women in his previous films, Lee appeared to be self-conscious of the need for change. Nonetheless, his statements at the time betrayed his sexist prerogative:

It matters to me what people have said in the past about my depictions of women in my films. The first thing I think they have to understand is, I'm not a woman, so I can't see women as women see women. I can understand women saying there should have been more or better-developed female characters in my films.<sup>49</sup>

As this passage makes clear, Lee is cognizant of his reputation for sexist depictions, but he is not necessarily penitent or interested in modification. Rather, he finds an alibi in the fact that, as he put it, "All I'm really doing is showing that the way it was. You can't really come down on me for this second-class status the Nation of Islam gave women, because the brothers in the Nation always made the sisters ride in the back seat."<sup>50</sup> In this regard, aspects of Lee's gender representations comport with what Dyson has called "the worst traits of Malcolm's lethal sexism."<sup>51</sup> This is particularly the case in the short shrift that Lee gives to Shabazz in the film and the complete narrative erasure of Malcolm's X's sister Ella.

According to Lee, tensions involved with having Shabazz as consultant revolved around their disagreements over the portrayal of marital strife in the couple's relationship, which Lee felt was necessary to the film's dramatic narrative arcs, despite Shabazz's vehement objections.<sup>52</sup> The contrived marital strife was not only Lee's dramatic license for propelling the narrative forward, but it suggests a view of gender politics wherein the heroic male's larger-than-life mission to save the world is invariably thwarted by the nagging self-interest of a female partner-spouse. In a telling scene, Shabazz (Angela Bassett) instigates an argument with her husband about money and the treachery of the ministers in the NOI. The scene, while prefiguring the split between Malcolm X and the increasingly volatile organization, suggests Shabazz's accusatory rather than supportive role in her husband's life. It seems clear why Betty Shabazz might object to this characterization; as an

educated and dedicated Muslim woman, she embodied the very antithesis of this flawed construct of self-centered, short-sighted female obstructionism.

In fairness to Lee, the autobiography recounts an instance of a "domestic quarrel" regarding money in which Malcolm X is quoted as saying that he and Betty "nearly broke up over this argument."<sup>53</sup> Lee stresses this discordant note with powerfully subtle visual cues. In the scene of Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz's wedding, for example, the camera pans the room to show a semiotically dense image of the embracing couple's reflection in a glass encasing a close-up photo of Elijah Muhammad. The superimposed imagery invokes a marriage triangle—or, at the least, too much interference in the young couple's lives by the minister. Lee reiterates this potent photo montage later in the film during the scene of the couple's violent disagreement over what Malcolm X described as "the ugly rumor" swiftly spreading about Elijah Muhammad's adulterous affairs.<sup>54</sup> Here Shabazz attempts to enlighten her husband about his need to be more concerned with money matters for their family.<sup>55</sup>

Wahneema Lubiano finds that, in the "Spike Lee discourse," "Men do," or they have narrative agency, whether dancing in "beautifully choreographed Greek stomps" or organizing protests, marches, or rallies. "Women, on the other hand," she argues, merely "show." Discussing *School Daze* specifically, Lubiano argues that Lee is "incapable of showing that women do anything



*Malcolm X* (1992). Denzel Washington as Malcolm X.

other than look like components of male aesthetics."<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it appears that women's agency in his films oftentimes bifurcates in terms of that familiar Madonna/whore construct so characteristic of mainstream Hollywood (and, for that matter, New Hollywood, New Wave, and independent) films. Shabazz's Madonna archetype is rendered with soft, flattering key lighting and intimate, close-up framing with Malcolm X and their daughters. By comparison, Laura and Sophia, Detroit Red's earlier partners, are "ghetto ho's" of dubious intent either mystified by low lighting or fully bared and sexualized by harsh lighting and voyeuristic camera movement. The anachronistic 1990s music video from the 'hood or Victoria's Secret costuming during the scene depicting Laura's descent into prostitution as Malcolm X laments the dream deferred of dutiful black wives, black nurses, black teachers, black scientists, and so on makes the point perfectly.

#### "How to Read Malcolm X": Controversy Four

To hear Spike Lee tell it, the controversy largely led by the poet-activist Amiri Baraka was the last thing he expected, given his close relationship with Baraka and his family before his involvement with the film. Contemporaneous newspaper articles, as well as later publications by black scholars and other critics, were rife with criticism and, in some quarters, downright condemnations of Lee's depiction of "our own black shining Prince."<sup>57</sup> The following press headlines of the period are indicative of the film's "hard sell to some factions," to use Dyson's terms: "The Real Malcolm X? The Search Widens, but Riddles Remain"; "Malcolm X, in the Eyes of Different Beholders"; "Just Whose 'Malcolm' Is It, Anyway"; "'Malcolm X' is Setting an Industry Brushfire Months before Release"; "Malcolm X: The Myth and the Man"; "Loving and Losing Malcolm."<sup>58</sup> Fueled by such headlines, skepticism about Lee's auteur vision and its capacity to do justice to Malcolm X's legacy abounded within the black community. In addition to Betty Shabazz, the press sought commentary from the ranks of the black literati, including Baraka, Cornel West, and Manning Marable. Most of the complaints involved fears that Lee would trivialize, distort, and taint the highly guarded and venerated reputation of the slain freedom fighter. As Dyson indicates, the controversies concerned fears about, "What happens to Malcolm when his life is treated by a cultural nationalist who is also a bourgeois black artist?"<sup>59</sup>

As one of the more vocal critics of Lee's *Malcolm X*, Baraka proffered some valid correctives calling attention to Lee's more suspect representational choices. At the same time, some of Baraka's complaints betrayed an often contradictory critical logic that seemed more about the poet's antipathy toward Lee than with what appears onscreen. Most troubling and unforgivable

for Baraka and other critics were certain of Lee's narrative choices and dramatic emphases, ranging from minimizing the role of family in Malcolm X's life to distorting his trip to Mecca and his later political and spiritual maturation. Joining Baraka were such critics of African American literature and culture as Mary Emma Graham and Clark Eldridge White, among others. Graham, for example, questioned the erasure of Malcolm X's sister Ella, an important and constructive influence on the young leader's life. Graham, like others, was concerned that the resurgence of popular interest in Malcolm X's life was not well served by such inaccuracies in the filmic discourse. Graham saw Lee's stereotypical treatment of Malcolm X's early life in Boston, and especially the film's complete disavowal of his sister and other siblings, as a major weakness because this elision of his family's role in Malcolm X's exceptionalism helps reify an errant societal belief in the myth of the naturally pathological black family.<sup>60</sup>

For most black critics of Lee's cinematic discourse, the issue turned on its fealty to the autobiography. Baraka, Graham, and White participated in a 1993 radio program discussing the legacy of the actual Malcolm X versus Lee's film. All three agreed that audiences should consult the book and not the film for accurate historical information. They did not want the legacy to be reduced to just another Hollywood biopic. Despite longstanding complaints about Haley's recounting, they insisted that it was the autobiography, and not the film, that participated in the venerable history and tradition of respected American literary forms, particularly the traditions of the slave narratives and autobiographical literature. Furthermore, for Baraka, "To Spike, Detroit Red is the real Malcolm." According to Baraka, this explains the film's disproportionate screen time devoted to this period of Malcolm X's early life. Baraka also took Lee to task for the prison segment, stating that the scene "of Malcolm in prison is very foul, he did not just read the dictionary."<sup>61</sup> Following the autobiography, Baraka and the others wanted it known that Malcolm X's prison self-education included grappling with the complex philosophical treatises of "Schopenhauer, Kant, Nietzsche . . . Spinoza" and others.<sup>62</sup> And like Graham, Baraka argued that Malcolm X's road to Islam came through his family ties, not through the troubled mentoring of a corrupt Nation of Islam minister or a composite prison-inmate character named Baines.<sup>63</sup>

I will conclude on Clark Eldridge White's observation that "Malcolm is bigger than U.S. history" to address critics' concerns about Lee's treatment of Malcolm X's visit to Mecca during his estrangement from the Nation of Islam in particular, and their more general concerns about his suitability to direct the film in the first place. I had the opportunity to visit Tunisia while completing this essay, where in my capacity as a visiting professor of film studies I screened *Malcolm X* for my Islamic students in the English Department and



the Civilization, Linguistics, and Literature programs. I presented students with a questionnaire about the film to try to get an informal sense of its reception more than a decade after its initial global release. My intention was to discern the students' opinion of the film's treatment of Mecca, as well as their assessment of how this relates to the practice of Islamic thought and teaching in a post-9/11 geopolitical context. None of the students had seen the film before (or any Lee films), though most had heard of Malcolm X through their classes in American history, literature, and civilization.

On the question about the film's treatment of Islam and the scene where Lee has Malcolm X in Egypt and Mecca, the students seemed to reach a consensus. By and large, they affirmed Baraka's criticism that Lee reduces Malcolm X's Mecca trip to a mere travelogue, and that the Egypt scenes are flawed because, in Baraka's words, "Spike has him going to Africa to look at the pyramids and the Sphinx"<sup>64</sup> rather than making the trip for spiritual enlightenment and to engage in political dialogues about African unity with black leaders of the Pan-African independence struggle. In response to the question, "What do you think about Lee going to Egypt to film the pilgrimage to Mecca? Does he capture the event effectively and properly?" one student replied: "Actually, I think that the scene of Egypt and showing the pyramids is superfluous and unnecessary, because Egypt, except the fact that it is an Arabic country, has nothing to do with the pilgrimage." Another wrote, "I think Lee selected Egypt among the other Arabic countries because it is the emblem of the Arab world's cultural heritage." Finally, one student's comments sum up the majority view: "Unfortunately, the film does not provide a true/real understanding of Islam, especially in the first part where E. Muhammad is presented as the 'GOD.' Nevertheless, the part which was filmed in 'Mecca' is quite good and authentic."

That the Tunisian students could respect this aspect of the film speaks volumes for Lee's tenacity and uncompromising stance with Warner Brothers in keeping to this element of filmic authenticity. Lee was able to lend authenticity to the look of the film through his choice of cutting between black-and-white and color film stock during the shooting in Egypt and at Mecca. Lee heightened the drama of the trip through this visual economy so that he could portray the FBI's grainy surveillance film, Malcolm X's saturated home-movie footage, and the putative invisible camera work of the main film's A-roll, 35mm film stock. For Lee, who understood his primary audiences' sophistication and knowledge of film culture and history, it is not surprising that he crafted the visuals of Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca according to well-known imagery from Ingmar Bergman's famous film *The Seventh Seal*, and that the Hajj trek across the desert landscape with Malcolm X and the devout throngs of Muslims walking in single file against the horizon also

references a similar visual stylistic in the beach scene in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Such intertextual referents remind us of Lee's professional education and training as a world-class filmmaker, one steeped in classic and contemporary film history and praxis.

To return to Baraka's and other black critics' concerns, one might be tempted to wonder about Lee's dealings with these controversies and challenges to his suitability to the task of directing this film in light of his own challenges to Jewison on similarly weighty, if not identical, grounds. As Baraka and other critics point out, the film should answer to some of the necessary and fair criticism because, among other considerations, it is a biopic, based on the life of a venerated, controversial, and beloved historical figure. Therefore, people expect verisimilitude, as difficult as this concept is to define when put to the test. Still, it is important to understand that Lee's *Malcolm X* is not the one-to-one narrative retelling of Malcolm X and Alex Haley's autobiography; nor is it the Warner Brothers documentary *Malcolm X* produced years ago. Consequently, the director was confronted with myriad creative, political, economic, and ideological choices during his struggles, from preproduction to theatrical exhibition. And although the familiar refrain that the book was better than the film comforts some, it seems important in retrospect to consider just how much better the film is, given Lee's ability to make a three-plus-hour epic and to raise the funds from other African American celebrities to avoid delaying the cinematic realization of an acceptable Malcolm X's film indefinitely. Without his insistence on controlling the central aspects of the film's production, Warner Brothers is unlikely to have green lighted shoots across the three continents that resulted in visually sumptuous scenes in Egypt, the historic access and permission to film the Hajj to Mecca, and the touching scenes with Nelson Mandela in South Africa (which contributed much to film's effective articulation of Malcolm X's global impact toward the end of his life).

To close, I will draw from Angela Davis's latter-day reflections on the influence of Malcolm X on her life:

Hearing him speak as an undergraduate at Brandeis University before an audience composed of the almost entirely white student population had a profound effect on my own political development. No one could have convinced me then that Malcolm had not come to Brandeis to give expression to my own inarticulate rage and awaken me to possibilities of militant practice. I therefore feel repelled by the strong resonances of unquestioned and dehistoricized notions of male dominance in this contemporary iconization of Malcolm X. This is not to imply that Malcolm was not as much a perpetrator of masculinist

ideas as were others—men and women alike—of this era. What disturbs me today is the propensity to cloak Malcolm's politics with insinuations of intransigent and ahistorical male supremacy that bolster the contemporary equation of nationalism and male dominance as representative of progressive politics in Black popular culture.<sup>65</sup>

Davis's thoughts may help us to decide for ourselves whether or not Lee "messed Malcolm up."

## NOTES

1. Once the word got out that Spike Lee would be directing the film, he was warned often to get it right and not "mess up" Malcolm X's life. Most notable were the admonitions by Amiri Baraka and Norman Jewison, among others. See, e.g., Amiri Baraka, in "The Real Legacy of Malcolm X versus Spike Lee's Film X," a panel discussion recorded for *Radio Free Maine*, dir. Roger Leisner, Brookline High School, Boston, February 10, 1993; Norman Jewison, *This Terrible Business Has Been Good To Me: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2004).

2. Phil Patton, "Who Owns 'X'?" *New York Times*, November 8, 1992, sec. 9, 1.

3. "Just Whose 'Malcolm' Is It, Anyway?" *New York Times*, May 31, 1992, H13.

4. James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcolm X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

5. Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii.

6. Sharon Willis, "Do the Right Thing: A Theater of Interruptions," in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 778.

7. Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 108.

8. Ossie Davis, quoted in Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964–65), 494.

9. Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 11.

10. Bernard Weinraub, "Malcolm X Is Setting an Industry Brushfire Months before Release," *New York Times*, April 20, 1992, C11.

11. Jewison, *This Terrible Business*, 217.

12. *Ibid.*, 217–18.

13. Bernard Weinraub, "A Movie Producer Remembers the Human Side of Malcolm X," *New York Times*, November 23, 1992, C11.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, C16.

16. Quoted in Weinraub, "Malcolm X Is Setting an Industry Brushfire," C11.

17. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 9–10.

18. Jewison, *This Terrible Business*, 217.

19. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 10.

20. *Ibid.*, 11.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 28–31.

24. *Ibid.*, 11.

25. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 131.

26. *Ibid.*, 132.

27. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 30.

28. *Ibid.*, 31.

29. Weinraub, "Malcolm X Is Setting an Industry Brushfire," C11.

30. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 9.

31. Weinraub, "A Movie Producer Remembers," C11; Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 27–28.; Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v., "1992," available online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992>.

32. Houston Baker, "Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 166–67.

33. Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film/White Money* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 106, 112.

34. *Ibid.*, 115.

35. Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 124–26.

36. Andrew Sarris, "Towards a Theory of Film History," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 246–47.

37. Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity: Three American Moments," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 108.

38. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 33.

39. George F. Custer, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 6.

40. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 133.

41. X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 313.

42. Melvin Donelson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), 101.

43. Baker, "Spike Lee," 167.

44. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 137.

45. *Ibid.*, 134.

46. X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 110.

47. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 126.

48. See, for example, Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Reid, *Redefining Black Film*; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), among many others.

49. Lee and Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary*, 92.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 127.

52. Gary Leva, dir., *By Any Means Necessary: The Making of "Malcolm X"* (Warner Home Video, 2005), 30 min., DVD.

53. X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 318.

54. *Ibid.*, 323.

55. While Shabazz's on-screen treatment is spared the worst of Lee's and Malcolm X's sexist constructions, such is not the case for Laura and her white rival for Malcolm Little's (a.k.a. Detroit Red's) affections, Sophia. These young, attractive women from Malcolm X's youthful days are emblematic of a particular mode of gender essentialism that Wahneema Lubiano, in a different context, observes is part of the "the Spike Lee discourse." See also Malcolm X's troubling views on women in *ibid.*, 103, 246.

56. Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," in this volume.

57. Davis, quoted in Malcolm X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 494.

58. Caryn James, "The Real Malcolm X? The Search Widens, but Riddles Remain," *New York Times*, December 3, 1992; Felicia R. Lee, "Malcolm X, in the Eyes of Different Beholders," *New York Times*, November 1, 1992; "Just Whose 'Malcolm' Is It, Anyway," *New York Times*, May 31, 1992; Weinraub, "'Malcolm X' Is Setting an Industry Brushfire"; Nick Charles, "Malcolm X: The Myth and the Man," *Cleveland Plain Dealer Magazine*, February 2, 1992; Betty Shabazz, "Loving and Losing Malcolm" (as told to Susan Taylor and Audrey Edwards), *Essence*, February 10, 1992.

59. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, 128.

60. Graham discusses the film and Malcolm X's autobiography in Leisner, "The Real Legacy."

61. Baraka, in *ibid.*

62. X and Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 196.

63. Baraka, in Leisner, "The Real Legacy."

64. *Ibid.*

65. Angela Y. Davis, "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X," in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 42.

## Through the Looking Glass and Over the Rainbow: Exploring the Fairy Tale in Spike Lee's *Crooklyn*

*Crooklyn* (1994) may very well be the least regarded film in Spike Lee's oeuvre. Yet it presents a rarely explored territory in American filmmaking: a story about a young black girl in the city. In its focus on the coming-of-age experiences of Troy Carmichael, a young girl living in Brooklyn, the film broke away from the more common African American subject matter being produced by Hollywood at the time; violence-laden hood or "gangsta" films, such as *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), featuring stories of inner-city African American males. Despite the obvious industry lack of interest in films about young black girls, Lee and his co-screenwriters and siblings, Cinque and Joie Lee, managed to bring the semiautobiographical story to the screen with Universal Pictures for a reported \$14 million. The result was a film that critics and viewers alike praised as enlightening, uplifting, and poignantly funny. Roger Ebert, for example, heralded the film for its many "wonderfully observed" scenes, while Peter Travers found it "rich in funny and touching entertainment."<sup>1</sup>

So what accounts for *Crooklyn's* appeal? First, unlike Lee's previous films, many of which were either controversial before release (*Malcolm X*) or immediately on release (*Do the Right Thing*), *Crooklyn* took on subject matter that was neither politically nor socially problematic.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, perhaps because of its semiautobiographical nature (which Lee doesn't admit to), the film takes a much more gentle look at African American life than the director's earlier films. Moreover, *Crooklyn's* presentation of Brooklyn's residents and streets in

"Spike, Don't Mess Malcolm Up': Courting Controversy and Control in *Malcolm X*," in this volume.

4. Matthew S. Scott, "Are You Ready to Invest in the Film Industry?" *Black Enterprise*, December 1996.

5. See Watkins, *Representing*, 159–66.

6. Erich Leon Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks, Demystifying the Man," *MovieMaker* 24 (March 1997), available online at <http://www.moviemaker.com/magazne/editorial.php?id=297>.

7. Todd McCarthy, "Lee Back on Track in 'Bus,'" *Variety*, October 7–13, 1996.

8. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

9. Ibid.

10. See Toni Cade Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*," in this volume.

11. Andrew Hindes, "'Sleepers' in a Walk; 'Bus' Stalls," *Daily Variety*, October 21, 1996.

12. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

13. *Hollywood Reporter*, November 11, 1996.

14. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

CHRISTINE ACHAM

## We Shall Overcome: Preserving History and Memory in *4 Little Girls*

*Perhaps more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history. We've fled the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of the national memory, and a great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at a cost of ignoring the process through which we've arrived at any given moment in our national existence.*

—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

September 15, 1963, was Youth Day at the Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Carole Robertson were in the ladies' lounge in the basement of the building freshening up, knowing that, along with their friends, it was their responsibility to help with the services of the day. At a little past ten in the morning, dynamite exploded in the church, instantly killing the four young girls and injuring over twenty.<sup>1</sup> To those African Americans living in "Bombingham," Alabama, and all across the country, it was another tragic reminder of how little their lives meant to the racist white residents of their city and to apathetic Americans as a whole. Indeed, a week before the bombing, as the federal government ordered that schools desegregate, George Wallace, then governor of Alabama, said in an interview with the *New York Times* that a "few first-class funerals" would end integration in Alabama.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Chambliss, a.k.a. "Dynamite Bob," was arrested in 1963 for the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church and for having dynamite without a permit. However, on October 8, 1963, he was only fined \$100 and given a six-month sentence for possession of the dynamite. While a 1965 FBI memo to J. Edgar Hoover indicated that four Ku Klux Klan members—Robert Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash, and Thomas E. Blanton—were responsible for the bombing, no charges were filed. Indeed, in 1980, a Justice Department report indicated that Hoover had prevented the

prosecution of the men responsible for the bombing. It was not until 1977 that Bill Baxley, attorney general for the State of Alabama, reopened the case against Chambliss. Based on information from FBI files, Chambliss was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison, dying there in October 1985.<sup>3</sup>

The four girls were martyrs to the cause of desegregation and would never grow to see the changes that resulted from their sacrifice. It was a case that shocked many across the United States and is now considered a moment that changed the course of the Civil Rights Movement in the nation. Along with the televised images of Police Chief Bull Connor's attacks on civil-rights protestors in Birmingham, these incidents brought the reality of black people's plight home to white Americans unwilling to acknowledge their complicity in the U.S. racial dictatorship.<sup>4</sup>

The revelatory and shocking nature of these images led to repeated viewings throughout the country at large and within the African American community specifically, first to comprehend, then to instigate change and eventually to remember and pay tribute to those who lost their lives for black survival and to open doors for future generations in this country. Over time, these images have become an important part of the national memory. However, in a disturbing trend in the 1990s and in this new century, many people have become desensitized to the horrors of the civil-rights struggle, and these scenes and stories do not seem to evoke what one would think to be an appropriate response. Indeed, many people do not even know of some of these specific stories, such as that of the four little girls.

One day while teaching the class Black Popular Culture, I casually referred to Jesse Owens and noticed the blank looks on the faces of many in front of me. When I asked who knew who Jesse Owens was, only one or two students raised their hands. I mentioned a few other black historical figures—Stokely Carmichael, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till—and received the same reaction. I quickly realized that when I teach my African American studies classes, I shouldn't assume that African American stories, no matter how significant, are passed down. Unfortunately, while from the days of slavery oral histories were a given part of the African American life, in this highly mediated world, these important traditions have fallen by the wayside.

It has also become clear that some African American students in my classes, while enjoying the fruits of the civil-rights struggle, consider this ancient history and a topic that does not need to be addressed. Although a significant black underclass still exists, the successes gained in certain areas of American industry and politics, the high visibility in sports and music, the embrace of hip-hop by mainstream America seemingly negates the presence of underprivileged black people, the high rate of black incarceration, and the reversal of affirmative action. Many African Americans assert that to address

these issues and to keep this history alive is to stir up an ugly past. Forgetting is colluding with the forces that wish to overlook the nation's legacy of racism.

Preserving, remembering, and recuperating black stories has been the work of African American documentary-film makers from the earliest days of the medium. Whether it was reporting on life at the Tuskegee institute in *A Day at Tuskegee* (1910), black military recruits in *The Negro Soldier* (1944), or the black freedom movement in *Eyes on the Prize* (parts I and II; 1987, 1990), black filmmakers and screenwriters have considered documentary film a political and social tool.<sup>5</sup> In their book *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler argue that black documentary-film making follows a tradition within African American society by creating historical narratives that address white American representations of black culture:

Many socially and politically committed film/videomakers view documentary as a tool with which to interrogate and reinvent history; their work fills gaps, corrects errors, and exposes distortions in order to provide counter-narratives of African American experience.<sup>6</sup>

While the authors acknowledge that documentary theory challenges that idealistic nature of documentary production as a whole, they alternately argue that within black society, documentary has been and continues to be a mode of political and social agency. Following within this tradition is the genesis of Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* (1997).

Moved by an article he read while in film school at New York University, Lee wrote to Chris McNair, father of the bombing victim Denise McNair, in hope of getting permission to make a film about the incident. Although McNair knew and respected Lee's father and aunts, he did not trust Lee with the story. McNair reveals:

Spike was still in school when he sent me a letter asking me if I'd be willing to participate in a documentary. It wasn't as though I didn't want to talk about it. . . . [I]t's cathartic for me. But I don't guess I was ready to talk about it on film, and at that time Spike wasn't ready to make the film.<sup>7</sup>

McNair, who became a politician in Birmingham in 1973, also did not want anyone to think that he would use the case to advance his own career and protected the girls' legacy fiercely.<sup>8</sup> Years later, Lee approached him again and met with both Chris and his wife, Maxine, who agreed to have their story told. In 1995, McNair met two Birmingham women who were almost thirty