

## ABSTRACT

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IMAGE TRANSFORMATION OF MALCOLM  
X, 1965-1999.

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This dissertation examines and analyzes the transformation of Malcolm X's image from the representation as the "Angriest Black Man in America," to the intellectual, political American leader of the 1990s. Malcolm was recognized for his outspoken defense of oppressed black and poor people, his leadership in Islam, and transformation from an ostracized political figure to an authority on the plight of black Americans. Recently, X has become a symbol of American individuality, a champion of human rights. Seen by contemporaries and future admirers as the quintessential black man, X's image has been appropriated to represent facets of black male identity to mainstream culture, rendering it consumable to a variety of groups. This dissertation contributes to the evaluation of Malcolm's work in the civil rights movement and his resulting image. It does so in two important ways; first, it positions X as a theoretician on the black diasporic experience and secondly, it significantly cites the importance of X's

connection to the African diaspora and his work to connect blacks to that diaspora. By accounting for the images produced by Malcolm himself, it then chronicles the materialization of new images by black nationalists, scholars, black youth culture of the 1990s, Spike Lee, the Shabazz family, and mainstream popular culture beginning shortly after the assassination of Malcolm in 1965 and continuing until the end of the twentieth century.

Unlike the images of other civil rights leaders, X's image was contested when appropriated by the mainstream. Analysis of major developments, (X, the postal stamp of 1999, material produced during the 1990s, etc.), will demonstrate how the image circulated from the sole possession of the black community to American mainstream culture. The battle for control over the representations of his image and its meanings can be construed as the struggle between retaining a black champion and creating an American icon. Ultimately, the goal was to establish Malcolm as the ideal black man, who not only predicted the trajectory of the movement, but also established and demonstrated racial pride in black American manhood, in spite of the toll that this position took on his life.

FROM HOMEBOY TO AMERICAN ICON: IMAGE TRANSFORMATION OF  
MALCOLM X, 1965-1999.

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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## Dedication

To Malcolm X and Irma Watkins Owens (IWO).

Words will never be able to express my gratitude.

Thanks for changing my life.

## Acknowledgements

Although the process of writing a dissertation is a solitary endeavor, anyone who has ever written a dissertation would readily admit to the efforts of the people in their lives that made it possible to complete the work. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people who made this effort possible. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the support, guidance, patience, and time of my committee members. It is because of your energies that my dream was realized; thank you. A sincere debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. Wendy Carter. You pushed, steered, chastised, praised, and held my hand through most of this challenge. Thank you for being you! As we agreed, thank you for working my “ass.” The Promise Program and the Office of Minority, Retention and Recruitment also have my gratitude. To my dissertation partner, Heather Holden, the AMST 2003 cohort, and all of my UMCP family- thank you. Para mi Mama, tu eres mi ejemplo de una mujer fuerte y razonable. No hay mejor madre en el mundo! Gracia por tu apoyo, amor, billetes, y todo que me das sin mucho lio. To the Council (Janet, Amelia, and George), a.k.a. my ride or die crew, a girl could not have asked for a better group of people to have her back; y’al the best! J.D., my best-friend for life, who knew we’d end up here? Don’t worry I can here you saying, “I knew!” Thanks for keeping the faith on Germany, even when I had given-up and settled on something else, you made it clear that I that the blessing was coming true. You are a one-of a-kind girlie! George, you’re the big brother I never knew I wanted. Thanks for always making sure that I am alright. If you find someone to talk to in the mornings, you better let them know that I’m coming back for my spot.

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## **Chapter 1: The Signified Malcolm X**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this work is to trace and analyze the transformation of Malcolm X's image from the representation as the "Angriest Black Man in America" during his lifetime, to the intellectual, political American leader of the 1990s almost forty years after his death. A leader in the fight for civil rights in the United States, Malcolm X was recognized for his outspoken defense of oppressed black and poor people, his practice and leadership in Islam, and for his transformation from an ostracized political figure to an authority on the plight of black Americans. Once a hated and feared man, Malcolm X has become a symbol of American individuality and a champion of human rights and freedoms.

At the time of his rise to prominence in the mid 1950s to late 1960s, Malcolm X was a controversial figure. As a member of the radical Nation of Islam (NOI), X garnered a position in the national spotlight as the minister of Temple Number Seven in Harlem, New York, and the national spokesman of the NOI. After a very public separation from the Nation of Islam and a hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, X re-emerged as a changed man ready to disavow his ideological connection to the Muslim sect. Subsequently, Malcolm X moved away from the sole designation of NOI minister, with political sensibilities, toward the designation of political actor in the struggle for civil rights. Never as renowned as some of his contemporaries, like Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins, Malcolm X's contributions to the civil rights movement went unrecognized in the United States until he successfully represented the struggle of black Americans on

the international front, from the time of his Hajj (pilgrimage) in 1963 until his death in 1965. Following the rhetorical tradition of Patrick Henry, John Winthrop, and Great Awakening preachers, X urged white and black Americans to understand that the civil rights movement contained two tributaries – a non-violent coalition, visible in the words and demonstrations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and a reciprocal force-meets-force coalition represented most often by the NOI.

Although the primary focus of the NOI was the recruitment of blacks into the separatist, religious organization, Malcolm X actively cultivated a public persona that was in direct conflict with the non-violent image of black men that Martin Luther King, Jr. presented. A television special, *The Hate That Hate Produced*, placed Malcolm X and the NOI on the radar of black and white Americans outside of the urban centers where the NOI was located. The program focused attention on Malcolm X, his black supremacist ideology, and established an image of X primarily located in media formats, which also included radio. In addition, the mediated image of Malcolm X displayed X's oratorical skills for various audiences and led to his recognition as an authoritative orator and a formidable debater. Given the complex mediated positioning of Malcolm X as a skilled orator and a black supremacist, the members of the media were fascinated and repulsed by Malcolm and continued to seek him out. Malcolm became a fixture on television, magazines, and newspapers. Aware of his controversial image, compared to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm used his media time to promote a radical revision of black nationalism that initially included the religious and separatist views of the NOI, but eventually evolved into a pan-Africanist vision of humanity that sought to end discrimination in all facets of society. Malcolm X began to garner true support in the

United States from coalition building with local community based organizations and abroad with emerging African nations, such as Ghana and Nigeria, and from OPEC Moslem nations such as, Saudi Arabia. However, his work was cut short when he was assassinated on February 21, 1965. Faced with the tragedy, his family and his admirers committed to have Malcolm X's contributions to the fight for black rights remembered.

The struggle to have Malcolm X recognized as a significant contributor to the struggle for black rights emerged as an effort by X's family and supporters to reposition the two images of the man, the black supremacist often used by the media to describe X's actions and rhetoric and the radical Pan-Africanist often used by Malcolm X to describe his actions and rhetoric. His contemporaries used both the image of Malcolm as a black supremacist and radical Pan-Africanist to reconstruct the public persona of Malcolm X. As the image emerged transformed and filtered through different supporters and contemporaries, it remained popular in the black community and in radical liberal circles, mostly maintained by socialists. The publishing of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, speeches, and the circulation of items with X's image by supporters and the NOI located Malcolm X in a distinct category of black heroes, blacks who were distinguished for their service and sacrifice toward the demonstration of the ability of blacks to accomplish great feats in spite of repression from mainstream society. The label of a black hero ensured that Malcolm would be re-introduced to future generations of blacks who had missed the opportunity to witness the mediated image of Malcolm X in-real time. Thus, in a fragmented and mediated form, Malcolm X remained alive in the black community for decades after his assassination.

The image of Malcolm X has undergone a significant “re-creation” and division into four distinct images: the black hero/martyr; the American individualist; the shining black prince/real or ideal black man; and the American icon. Seen, by contemporaries and future admirers, as the quintessential black man, Malcolm X’s image has been appropriated to represent several facets of a masculine black identity through codes of American identity, rendering the image consumable to a variety of groups within the United States. In the months after his death, Betty Shabazz, Malcolm’s widow, struggled to complete two tasks – protect and raise her six daughters and ensure that her husband’s image would not be forgotten. The black hero/martyr, most closely associated with Betty Shabazz and photographs of either X’s funeral procession or photographs of Malcolm X in his coffin, helped the image of Malcolm X to remain current in the black community. Comprised of some friends of Malcolm and Betty Shabazz and family members, Shabazz’s extended network was small in comparison with the network of Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s widow. The lack of large numbers of supporters enabled the creation of “The Committee of Concerned Mothers,” who worked to secure donations for the financial support of Betty Shabazz and her children.<sup>1</sup> As she struggled to support her family financially, Shabazz continued to shelter her children from active involvement in the struggle for black equality, but Shabazz herself continued to participate in the movement primarily by giving speeches, attending events, and writing articles about her husband even as she continued to further her education and eventually receive her doctorate. In addition to the efforts of Betty Shabazz and other family members, such as Malcolm’s sister Ella Collins, black nationalist organizations began to feature Malcolm X

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<sup>1</sup> “The Committee of Concerned Mothers,” Letter 1965, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

as a significant leader in the struggle for black rights and equality. Organizers and leaders, such as those of the National Black Political Convention, began to use Malcolm's X rhetoric to support their platforms.<sup>2</sup> The lack of concrete improvements in the lives of a majority of black Americans after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill and the 1965 Voting Rights Act led many black leaders, including Amiri Baraka, to question the trajectory of the struggle for black rights and equality. In addition, many, including Harold Cruse, wondered how black organizations would meet the challenge of black leadership. Thus, as the movement for black equality moved toward black nationalist principles, interest in Malcolm X re-emerged.

The *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published after Malcolm's death, was the most significant contribution to the re-conceptualization of Malcolm's image as an American individualist. The image of Malcolm as an American individualist was connected often with the success of Malcolm's *Autobiography*. The *Autobiography*, read by mainstream and marginalized audiences, allowed the American public to learn and appreciate Malcolm X's life from infancy through his popularization as an international black leader. Similarly, the *Autobiography* allowed people who did not know Malcolm X personally to feel as though they understood the forces that commingled to create this confrontational black man. With the help of Alex Haley, the *Autobiography* exhibited literary tropes that were familiar to most American people. The image of Malcolm X, created by primarily by Malcolm and Haley, contained identifiable imagery of the self-taught, self-improved American man. In their desire to construct, an image of Malcolm that all Americans could relate to, Haley and X left out significant parts of the history of

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<sup>2</sup> William Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization for Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 182-183.



Malcolm's life. It is widely known that Haley omitted two chapters from the *Autobiography* that dealt primarily with X's political ideology,<sup>3</sup> but it is also true that Malcolm X himself was not as forthright with some details of his life.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some of his omissions may have come from his desire to protect loved ones, but other omissions, such as his relationship with a multi-millionaire white man from whom he received funds<sup>5</sup> were purposely left out so as not to conflict with X's image as an authentic representation of black manhood. The image constructed of Malcolm X from the *Autobiography* stood as a testament to the capacity of one man to contribute to society, against all odds. Accordingly, as Black Studies departments emerged in the universities and colleges of the nation, the *Autobiography*, along with slave narratives, and books by other black authors and scholars, became part of the curriculum. Once again, Malcolm's image was introduced to a myriad of people who had no contemporary exposure to the slain leader.

## **Original Contribution**

Determined that Malcolm's contributions would not be forgotten by future generations, the arbitrators of his legacy worked tirelessly to have Malcolm's image immortalized. The tremendous effort put forth by his relatives, friends, and heirs apparent (black nationalists and Black Power advocates) were greatly rewarded, and Malcolm X's image was visible in many facets of the United States, primarily within the black

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<sup>3</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A. Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press Inc., 1991).

<sup>5</sup> In the autobiography, Malcolm attributes this "hustle" to the man known as Rudy, but as Collins and Perry have stated in their texts, Malcolm also performed the task of undressing and powdering the man for money.

community. With the help of rap music and Spike Lee's film, *X*, Malcolm's image received continued exposure to mainstream culture. By the close of the 1990s, Malcolm X's image was a firm fixture in the iconography of American culture, particularly with the circulation of a United States stamp containing his image. A man the *New York Daily News* once called, "the most hated man in America," was the author of an autobiography listed in *Time* magazine's "ten most important nonfiction books of the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> According to the public relations material given to guests of the 1999 Commemorative Stamp ceremony, "Malcolm's ideas – and the legend of the man – continue to inspire Americans today."<sup>7</sup> It had only been a generation but the perception of Malcolm X and his image had experienced a powerful turnaround.

This dissertation seeks to interrogate and analyze the emergence and the uses of the image of Malcolm X as an expression of black male identity to present a complex representation of black American male identity to the American public during the second half of the twentieth century. Malcolm originally used his image to demonstrate an alternative to the characterization of black men as passive resisters and people in need of the white resources and assistance most often presented by Martin Luther King, Jr. Similarly, media outlets, including American newspapers, talk radio, and television programs, painted an image of Malcolm as a black supremacist/demagogue; employing this image, X, rather than expressing black supremacist ideology, created a black nationalist ideology that centered on black people, with black men in leadership positions, acquiring racial equality through their own methods and on their own terms.

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, new preface by Atallah Shabazz. (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), VIII.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Postal Service, *Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Commemorative Stamp*, Pamphlet, Cover photos: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, Stamp Design: Richard Sheaff, Layout and Design: Pat Marshall Design, Inc., 1998.

Realizing the limitation of black nationalist ideology informed by the Nation of Islam (NOI), after his expulsion from the NOI, Malcolm reformulated a Pan-Africanist/radical image of himself that allowed the black male image to be reconceptualized in connection to the larger world of color. X's use and development of terminology and ideology that connected black Americans to African, Asian, and Latin peoples significantly influenced the direction of the civil rights movement in the 1970s. By chronicling the initial images produced and used by Malcolm X himself, this dissertation then chronicles the materialization of new images produced by black nationalist, scholars, revisionist, black youth culture of the 1990s, Spike Lee, the Shabazz family, and mainstream popular culture beginning shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and continuing until the end of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the goal of this labor of love was to establish Malcolm X as the ideal black man, who not only predicted the trajectory of the movement but also established and demonstrated racial pride in black American manhood, in spite of the toll that this position took on his personal life.

I will explore the use of various theoretical frameworks. It is my argument that in our post-modern society, images are used as currency to represent identity. Thus, images are one form of language used in American society to convey meaning and group identity. As of late, what we buy and then choose to display marks as belonging to a certain socioeconomic status, social and political affiliations. My theoretical underpinnings come from seven major disciplines: critical race theory, media studies, Marxism, cultural studies, popular culture, visual literacy and semiotics. I use the work of Chantal Mouffe, Micheal E. Dyson, Arjun Appadurai, Jean Baudrillard, Herman Gray,

and Paul Shackel to understand how the image of Malcolm X transitions and moves throughout American culture in a relatively short period of time.

As Dyson and other critical race theorists argue, the experiences of black people in the United States are primarily informed by the history of slavery, institutional racism, and resistance to societal discrimination. The work of Stuart Hall and others in Cultural Studies explain that cultures are not developed in a vacuum nor are they static. Cultures are in constant conversations with the groups of people that live in and create them. Cultures inform one another and transform with contact from different people. The terrain where this is most visible and accessible is popular culture. Particularly in the field of media studies we can see the cyclical nature of popular culture and its dissemination throughout the world. As much as media studies informs it also hides. Without proper tools for seeing and watching we are left with loaded signs and codes that may appear empty but contain mounds of information. It is necessary to use semiotics and media literacy to deconstruct the messages that are being sent out, particularly about black people. For as Chantal Moufee and Arjun Appadurai contend in our socially constructed capitalist society everything has the potential to develop a commercial value, especially the items we consume. It is through our actions as consumers we develop the language we use to identify and inculcate ourselves to one another. Similar to Baudrillard, I too have a love affair with American culture, but I also agree with Baudrillard's evaluation of the hyperreality of American culture. This hyperreality forces cultural theorists, like Herman Gray, to note how blacks continue to contribute to the American cultural experience, while still experiencing and struggling with racially constructed spaces. Thus, the preponderance of blacks in media outlets does not equal

their position in society. It is in these spaces of American society that we find the reconstructed memory that Shackel alerts us to – the material culture that allows us to construct what either never was or what was through our own perspective.

To appreciate fully the subsequent images that emerged after his assassination, the focus of the remainder of this chapter will be to contextualize the image of Malcolm X and his affiliation with the Nation of Islam (NOI), first as a member and then a minister. Secondly, this chapter will analyze his meaning as a black nationalist and human rights activist during the 1950s and 1960s. Born on May 19, 1925, as Malcolm Little, Malcolm X was one of seven children of a Garveyite father and Caribbean mother.<sup>8</sup> After the murder of his father, Earl Little, allegedly by a white man, and the subsequent institutionalization of his mother, Louise Little, Malcolm was sent to live in a foster home in Lansing, Michigan. Following his placement in a foster home and his difficulty adjusting to the realities of life within the dominant culture, Malcolm was offered a place to live with his half-sister, Ella Collins, in Boston, Massachusetts. Once in New England, X became a member of the black community of Boston called The Hill, a neighborhood described by X and others as the affluent part of the Boston black community.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Collins's objections, Malcolm made his way to Roxbury, the non-affluent portion of the black community in Boston, and there he socialized with his older brother, Earl Little, Jr., who performed on stage under the name Jimmy Carlton. His nephew, Rodnell Collins, later explained why Malcolm wanted to emulate Earl.

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<sup>8</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, new preface by Atallah Shabazz. (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A. Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998).

... looking back now, it's obvious why Malcolm was so dazzled by Earl's (Jimmy Carlton) lifestyle. Here he was, fresh from a small city like Lansing, only aware of life in other small-to-medium-sized Midwestern cities, meeting a brother who dressed in the latest styles, seemed to know everybody, including Billie Holiday, had money in his pockets, and was the epitome of what was considered hip and cool. It's understandable that he was mighty impressed. In fact, he was so impressed that when started hanging out in the streets, he patterned himself after Earl.<sup>10</sup>

To appease Ella and as a necessity, Malcolm became an employee on the railroad, which required him to travel to black urban centers like Harlem. He continued to frequent nightlife establishments in Boston where he maintained relationships with other young black and white people, including his white lover, Bea, and his good friend, musician Malcolm Jarvis. According to his nephew, Malcolm never lived in Harlem,

he was there mostly doing short layovers while working with the railroad. ...In Harlem, for instance, he was free to hit the streets and the clubs anytime he wanted to; in Boston he had to duck and dodge cousins, aunts, and uncles who might alert Ma, Aunt Sas, and Aunt Gracie if they saw him or heard about his being in the wrong places with the wrong people. Uncle Malcolm often had to sneak out of the house with the help, initially, of Uncle Earl and Dad and later with the help of Dad and Jarvis. Uncle was well aware that until his twenty-first birthday he had to stay in line both in Boston and in Lansing.<sup>11</sup>

In Roxbury and Harlem, Malcolm discovered many of the vices he would continue until his incarceration in 1947. Soon after his introduction into the underground world of drugs and hustling, Malcolm either settled in (according to *The Autobiography*) or spent an enormous amount of time in Harlem. As a Harlemiter, he received his first introduction into numbers running, the prostitution business, and other illicit activities. In the end, forced to leave Harlem under duress because of a numbers payout gone awry, he moved back to Boston.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 43.

Back in Boston, he continued his criminal activity by becoming the leader of a burglary ring. Caught trying to get a stolen watch repaired, Malcolm was arrested and sentenced to a prison term of eight to ten years. As Malcolm suggested in his autobiography, his life at the time included a history of trouble with law enforcement, drug dealers, pimps, and numbers runners. His final act of rebellion, his sexual relationship with a white woman, landed him in a Massachusetts prison serving eight to ten years.<sup>12</sup> Hardened by his sentence and the perception of its injustice, he was unable to move on. In an effort to save him, his Detroit-based family, who had already converted to the NOI, worked to convince Malcolm to join the new Muslim sect.

The plan to get Malcolm into the NOI came through his favored younger brother, Reginald, and involved the suggestion that Malcolm could get out of prison through adherence to NOI policy. When the message came from Reginald that he could show Malcolm a way out of prison, Malcolm was quite receptive to what he perceived to be a sort of “hustle” that would free him from captivity. Following the instructions not to eat pork and to quit smoking, X waited for more information about the plan. A subsequent personal visit from Reginald led Malcolm to the realization that the plan was not a hustle but conversion to the NOI – the organization that his brother Philbert had originally described in a previous letter.<sup>13</sup>

It was during his penitentiary stay that he became familiar with the religion of Elijah Muhammad. Although Malcolm’s introduction to the NOI happened at the machinations of his siblings, Wilfred, Philbert, Hilda, and Reginald, he began to incorporate the core beliefs of the NOI as a prisoner in Massachusetts. He wrote to

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<sup>12</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, new preface by Atallah Shabazz. ( New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 158-167.

Muhammad often, even supporting Muhammad's decision to ostracize Reginald from the NOI for fornication. In 1952, after serving seven years in prison, Malcolm was released and planned to incorporate himself, officially, into the body of the NOI. After receiving notification of his parole, Malcolm moved to Detroit with his brother Wilfred and his family, a decision supported by his sister Ella Collins.

For Malcolm, the NOI and Elijah Muhammad offered an escape from the vicious cycle of criminal behavior that plagued many of his colleagues. Unlike his friend, Malcolm "Shorty" Jarvis, Malcolm never returned to prison. After a brief period in Detroit, Malcolm studied under Elijah Muhammad to become a minister in the NOI. By 1954, he had become an evangelical minister in the Nation, establishing churches in Boston, Philadelphia, and Harlem. After a whirlwind of traveling, recruiting, and teaching, X established himself as one of the foremost ministers in the NOI and one of its most recognized and impressive ministers.<sup>14</sup>

As Malcolm X more became visible in the NOI and in the local black community, he encountered tension with leaders in the NOI, including Elijah Muhammad. In 1963, after his discovery of Elijah Muhammad's illegitimate children, his "silencing" by Elijah Muhammad, and the realization that he would never be "un-silenced," Malcolm parted ways with the Nation of Islam. After a trip to Mecca, he reemerged as a Sunni Moslem. Upon completion of the hajj, X traveled around Africa and returned to the United States to establish two new organizations – the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI) and the

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<sup>14</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World*. (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963).  
Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press Inc., 1991).  
Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998).



Organization of Afro American Unity (OAAU). The first was created as an alternative to the NOI. The Muslim Mosque, in comparison to the tenets and operation of the NOI, would be a more accurate representation of an Islamic organization in the United States but that would reach out to a similar population as the NOI. The second organization, the OAAU, was to be an alternative to Southern and some Northern based civil rights organizations that did not appeal to Northern blacks. According to Rodnell Collins, X's nephew, X instituted the organization for those who "shared his political, economic, and cultural vision."<sup>15</sup> Both groups were to be Malcolm X's effort at collaborating with the community of supporters for black rights outside of the NOI who, unlike the NOI, believed in political agitation for civil rights. Shortly after the organizations were set-up, X proceeded to go on another trip to Africa and some European nations to recruit and garner support for his new organizations. When he returned to the United States, X continued to battle with the NOI, as well as the New York police department, the FBI, and the CIA, all of whom kept detailed records on the movement of the radical, Pan-Africanist. Continuing to fashion his organizations while dealing with death threats, court battles over his NOI owned resident, and multiple surveillance, X held what was to be his final meeting on February 21, 1965 to announce the charter of the OAAU. It was at this meeting that Malcolm X was shot and killed by an unidentified gunman.

## **Why Malcolm Still Matters**

Malcolm X was a man in transition at the time of his death; his ideas and arguments were being formulated through his engagement with new information. His contact with socialists, Marxists, ex-patriots and international freedom fighters, gleaned

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<sup>15</sup>Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 198.

from his travel overseas, profoundly altered his vision of the civil rights struggle in the United States. In addition to the transformation of Malcolm X as a political actor, he changed his strategic formation of his mediated image. Unrestricted by the NOI philosophy, X believed his contribution to the civil rights movement could be quite significant, but it would require a change in his current mediated image. X had always actively maintained an image of himself that was confrontational, particularly in light of the non-violent, integrationist slant of the civil rights movement and the NOI's radical stance. For his new ideas to receive any attention, X knew that he had to realign his position in the direction of the current trend of the civil rights movement. He would have to move away from his designation as a black supremacist/demagogue, in the eyes of mainstream society, to one of a revolutionary/Pan-Africanist. To realize his new contribution, X sent testimony of his new perspective to the media and others in the form of letters from Mecca describing his new appreciation for individual white action to fight white supremacy. Confronted with resistance from the media to his new agenda, Malcolm cultivated images that would speak to white and black audiences and; also acquire support for his new brand of black nationalism.

It is in Malcolm that we find a different kind of love for black people and by extension blackness. It is the Malcolm who criticized black leaders, told blacks to protect themselves against the actuality or threat of violence at the hands of whites or their system of governance, urged political affiliation with anyone who struggled against discrimination, and most importantly, told black people their history as a key component to beginning the process of self-love that we hold close. More than any other civil rights leader, including Martin Luther King, Jr., we continue to look to Malcolm to tell us the

hard truth - about ourselves, members of the dominant society, and our culture. Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X was defined and has remained (dead or alive) one of the few black leaders who fought for the viability of black culture in a society which continues to reinforce images of black culture as inferior. More than being ahead of his time, X never left his position as “one of the people.” Aided initially by his membership and ministerial position in the Nation of Islam (NOI), X could always be found in the community, among black people – at home or abroad. His classes and speeches on African history re-conceptualized the way black people in America thought of themselves as a part of the continent of Africa and as Africans. His work in the community not only helped to convince people that the NOI stood for more than just sanctified living and separatist politics, but also helped to solidify the NOI’s standing in the community as one of the few organizations that changed the lives of black people. His battle against New York and Los Angeles law enforcement, New York landlords, and school curriculum gave many black people living in the city their first experience at political organizing outside of religious (NOI) or cultural (such as Garvey, ethnic affiliations or lodges) groups. Malcolm’s significance to the movement laid in his synthesis and expansion of W.E.B. DuBois’s, Booker T. Washington’s and Marcus Garvey’s ideas into a functional form of black nationalist ideology that had the potential to influence the entire nation into a progressive American society.

### **From W.E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X**

Malcolm’s reformulation of black nationalism took form in his ideas about black Americans as political actors. To this extent, the concerns of the black community

should be the priority of the black Americans. Unlike many revolutionaries, Malcolm understood that the minority could not create a bloody revolution without enduring most of the casualties. To this end he began to advocate for a revolution in the thinking of blacks and in the political actions of blacks at the ballots. Unlike many civil rights leaders, he did not believe that white supremacy would end. To the contrary, he believed that overall white supremacy would flourish if it continued to go unchecked. In Mecca and Medina, he believed that he saw Islam correcting social inequalities. In the United States, Islam had not reached the capacity to curb the domination of white supremacy or to correct the effects of discrimination and racism. The agency to change the legal status of blacks in America could be secured through accessing the political system to benefit black communities. Agency could also be used to change the social status of blacks through the connection of black Americans to other blacks in the Diaspora. Armed with the belief that this could significantly alter the everyday lives of black Americans throughout the North and South, Malcolm set about to change the direction of the civil rights movement by combining the principles of black nationalism and the principles behind integration.

Black nationalism has primarily been understood as the efforts of blacks to collectively manipulate the representations and actions of blacks and black identity. Often issued as a proactive response to white supremacy, the organizing principles of black nationalism have changed depending on the needs of the community. From the words of David Walker (Walker's Appeal, 1829) to the actions of Marcus Garvey, black nationalism concentrates on the radical reversal of the operation of white supremacy. Although the principles of black nationalist ideology may change depending on the needs

of the community, there are certain mainstays of black nationalism ideology that are often highlighted by proponents of black nationalism. Collective political organizing (voting black), cultural support financially (buy black programs) or ideologically (perceived solidarity in numbers and naming others as part of a collective), historic views of black origins (connecting black Americans to black historical origins on the continent), and separatism (culturally or geographically) are some the main references of black nationalist ideology. Separatism, culturally or geographically, has been a major point of contention among nationalists.

The question of separation continued to be debated by nationalists of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century. Some, such as Henry Highland Garnett, argued that blacks could become full citizens of the United States. Nationalists, like Martin Delaney, who favored separation, often argued that too much history had passed between whites and blacks for a new beginning free from white supremacy to exist. Prior to his voluntary repatriation to Ghana, W.E.B. Dubois cultivated the belief that blacks could achieve full integration and full citizenship. Unlike his contemporaries, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, Dubois believed that change could take place without compromise of black agency or geographic separation. By the time of his decision to move to Ghana, similar to Delany, Dubois believed that full equality for blacks could never be achieved in the United States.

Booker T. Washington supported a myriad of programs that promoted black access to full citizenship. Often thought of as an integrationist, Washington also supported programs that went against his public persona. Although Washington expressed views that most black intellectuals did not agree with, he supported integration

on the basis that it would still keep blacks and whites racially separate. In his view, interaction would only be necessary for blacks to trade their services for economic gain. Notwithstanding Washington's lack of popularity among black intellectuals, his point is still significant. The manipulation of American societal organization seemed to be Washington's objective. If the majority of blacks lived without access to the vote, and were under legal separation, black people's agency would be limited in its functioning. Given the political situation, Washington thought it best to fight within the system. Thus, negotiating for economic solvency seemed, in Washington's mind, the best way for blacks to acquire some semblance of citizenship, albeit a second-class one.

Unlike Washington, Marcus Garvey believed it was impossible for blacks and whites to live in peace. The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was an organization based on the principles of Afrocentrism, economic self-sufficiency, and political manifestation of an absent agency. Physical manifestations to address the absence of black Americans' agency took place in the marches and political hierarchy in the leadership roles of the UNIA. Garvey took special pride in creating roles for his leaders that mimicked the governments of Western nations. With these roles, Garvey hoped to create cultural pride in blacks all over the diaspora and on the continent of Africa. His ultimate goal, to have a united Africa, would be secured with Africans from all over the world uniting and returning to Africa to restore the land to its former greatness. Unfortunately, what garnered Garvey influence with a certain population of the black community, also led to his visibility with many United States federal agencies. Soon enough Garvey was minimized and was eventually convicted of mail fraud through his first all-black venture, Black Star Shipping.

Written over a hundred years ago by W.E.B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* continues to provide insight into the difficulties of being black in the United States. The paradox of “double consciousness” posits that black people have a view of two distinct cultures existing in America. The reality of double consciousness can create a space for critical examination or possible dismissal of mainstream American ideology and culture. Conversely, existing in two worlds, but only truly living in one can lead to a pathology associated with culture and cultural representations. If, in comparison to mainstream or white culture, black or other cultures are perceived as lacking or deficient, minority cultures may struggle to find cultural representations that combat this particular arrangement of identity. In addition, if small groups of people within the minority are given privileges, while the majority is accused of having a lack of initiative in acquiring the same privileges, the existence of discrimination is then hidden by the misconception of equal access. Dubois, unlike Washington, could not see the economic power of blacks combating the inferiority complexes that they would surely develop if blacks were forced to acknowledge society the way it functioned currently. For Malcolm X this was also unacceptable.

By combining the idea of double consciousness with black nationalism, Malcolm X expanded black cultural expressions and political activity. He re-conceptualized what it meant to be black in America. First, he historicized an African past, giving people of African descent a history to be proud of, and he standardized an Afro-American male identity that supported and integrated an African past. Secondly, he publicized an Afro-American history that had not only resisted slavery, but also steadily made contributions to American society, even if whites would not readily acknowledge them. He also presented a cultural expression that had suffered setbacks due primarily to the

discrimination imposed by the dominant society on African Americans. Thus, blacks were not inherently inferior; they had been consistently placed in inferior positions. Finally, at the time of his death, he rejected the idea of full integration, based on the greatness of people of African descent. To integrate fully was to erase the connection to a great African past and the fortitude developed throughout the history of Africans in America, which continued into the present. To move away from a black community was to give away the solidarity that contained the only power base for blacks in America.

The contradictory traditions of Marcus Garvey (ardent supporter of black culture and a separatist) and W.E. B. Dubois (supporter of black rights in America and pan-African unity throughout the Diaspora), are joined in the political figure of Malcolm X. Although Garvey and DuBois were often at odds, their combined political legacy was inherited by X.<sup>16</sup> For Malcolm X it was not enough to be integrated into mainstream society because mainstream society would not, or could not, support the initiative of blacks to claim and control resources that would be used solely for the purposes of building the black community. Furthermore, it was X's contention that integration would not offer blacks a re-conceptualization of their image that would allow blacks to draw readily from the resources the Diaspora could provide, such as reinforcement of positive racial categorizations and political solidarity to bring desperately needed means back into the community.

Detailing the existence of an African past, Malcolm X taught about a historic people of African descent. His tales of African antiquity created a historic legacy that

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<sup>16</sup> All of these speeches are contained in the collected work By Any Means Necessary. We assume that the speeches are verbatim and they were all given within the period of Malcolm's supposed enlightenment, specifically 1964 -1965. Interestingly enough, this work was first published in 1970 by Pathfinder Press and reissued in 1992, the same year the film by Spike Lee was released.



black Americans could believe in and know that their history began prior to their arrival in North America. In addition, Malcolm X combined NOI philosophy and his historic reading of African history to support unique or new roles for Afro-American male and female identity. Secondly, Malcolm X publicized an Afro-American history that had not only resisted slavery, but also steadily made contributions to American society, regardless of the recognition by civil rights leaders or American society. He exposed discriminatory practices that whites had used as evidence to lay claim to the truth of black inferiority, thus, proving blacks were not inherently inferior. Rather, blacks, subject to the prejudices of society, had a tremendously difficult time surpassing racist conceptions of their ability, and were rarely given the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. Finally, at the time of his death, he rejected the idea of full integration because of the hegemonic realities of white supremacy and the unlikelihood of the dominant society to pass full citizenship to black Americans. Although Malcolm X rejected integration, he still believed that groups who wanted true democracy should work together to achieve a societal revolution. Furthermore, Malcolm X believed to integrate fully was to erase the connection to a great African past and to the present fortitude developed throughout the history of Africans in America. Similar to Washington, Malcolm understood that moving away from a black community was to give away solidarity, which contained the only power base for blacks in America.

Thus, the NOI represented publicly by Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, belonged to a tradition within the black community grounded in the belief that America was no place for a black man. Aided by time spent in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Muhammad made the NOI a separatist organization. As his

experience during the Great Depression had demonstrated, white supremacy was the guiding factor in race relations in the South and the North. Malcolm could also name white supremacy as the guiding force of race relations in his life. As his family had suffered unduly at the hands of white people who had allegedly murdered his father, white social workers who drove his mother to a nervous breakdown, and finally, sent him to prison for almost ten years on a first offense, the evidence was clear; mainstream society could not be trusted to give blacks treatment without regard to white supremacist actions and beliefs. To understand the unique efficacy of Malcolm X's approach, we must first articulate the history of black participation in counter-culture religious movements in the United States. This will demonstrate that the NOI is a continuation and combination of many religious organizations in the United States, including some that focused on the Islamic tradition.

### **NOI – Misconception of the NOI**

Considered the most ardent exhibitors of black nationalism during the late 1950s to the mid 1960s, the NOI inherited a legacy of black nationalism that was long-standing in the black community. First established in early part of the Great Depression, the leadership of the NOI envisioned it to be the leading organization in the black community that could bring about a significant gain in equality and a unification of middle/professional class, laborers, and the poor who inhabited the black community. This reasoning existed in part because of the history of the Nation of Islam and its leadership, in the form of Elijah Muhammad and his experience with other groups that

existed within the black community. Elijah Poole, as he was originally named, came of age during the period of time that noted historian, Rayford Logan, called the Nadir.<sup>17</sup>

Born on October 7, 1897, Poole would go on to lead the NOI from the early 1930s until the mid-1970s. Like many other blacks, Poole moved from his rural home in Georgia to the North and settled in the city of Detroit. Before coming into contact with Islam, Poole would traverse the many organizations that functioned during the Nadir, named so for the legal and social suppression of black rights. Like many other blacks, Poole moved from his rural home in Georgia to the North and settled into the city of Detroit. After becoming a member of the UNIA, according to Evanzz, Elijah Poole continued his odyssey into black organizations and into an exploration of the frailties of the human spirit.

As the UNIA spiraled downward, so did Elija. Strong drink became his communion wine and festering racial animosity the bread that sustained his dying dreams. ..., Elija wandered from organization to organization seeking spiritual fulfillment. One of his first expeditions was into the esoteric world of Freemasonry. ...The black shiners, as these Freemasons were known, were a large bureaucracy with a virtually impenetrable hierarchy. Nepotism ruled. As Elija was too new to the North to know any high-ranking officials, he soon realized that he had little chance of ever being anything but a dues-paying drone and quit the organization after a few months.<sup>18</sup>

During the Great Depression, many workers from the South became disillusioned about conditions in the North. Finding work became difficult during this time-period for many black Americans, including Elijah Poole. Jobs that had been promised as enticement to settle North were either no longer available or given to blacks as day work. As Thomas

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<sup>17</sup> Rayford Logan, *The American Negro in Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: The Dial Press, 1954). Roi Ottley, "Review [Untitled]," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The Future of the United Nations Issues of Charter Revision* 296 (November 1954) : 186-187.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999), 60.

Sugrue<sup>19</sup> notes in his seminal work on Detroit, conditions for blacks worsened right before and during the Depression. In fact, blacks suffered continuous difficulty in securing steady employment, proper housing, and a higher quality of life until during the first years of WWII. Elijah Poole was no exception, and he continued to live out the experiences of many of his compatriots in urban spaces in the North.

During the 1920s, two prominent religious movements successfully operated in the black community. Both Daddy Grace and Father Divine were precursors to the NOI. Daddy Grace and Father Divine first used many of the practices incorporated by Elijah Muhammad. Daddy Grace and Father Divine conducted services, provided meals for their constituents and visitors and at some point during their ministries, each claimed to be God's representative on earth or God in the flesh. According to James Reid, visiting Daddy Grace's service was very similar to other religious services he had attended.<sup>20</sup> When discussing the eccentricities of Daddy Grace, Reid also stated that Grace claimed to have been present when Jesus Christ was crucified and often strongly encouraged participants to give money, even going so far as to have a statue wrapped with money visible during services. Similarly, Father Divine traveled around the Americas to preach his brand of Christianity. Borrowing from religious organizations such as Daddy Grace and Father Divine for leadership examples, the NOI was a religious offshoot of Moorish Science Temples of America (MSTA). The MSTA, run by Noble Drew Ali, was the first black organization to proclaim Islam as the true religion of the black man. Thus, the basic operation of the NOI was familiar to the blacks encountering Muhammad's message for the first time. Many of the tenets of the NOI had been seen in some form or

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> James Reid, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, MD., 11 September 2008.

other since the 1930s. Both of these movements familiar to the blacks encountering Muhammad's message for the first time. Many of the tenets of the NOI had been seen in some form or other since the 1930s. Both of these movements established the criteria for religious movements that involved components of community activism and influenced the Moorish Science Temple (Noble Drew Ali's organization) and the Nation of Islam.

During his services, Father Divine interpreted text from The Bible and then went into a reading of the bible performed by a member of his congregation.<sup>21</sup> Also seeking financial assistance, Divine initially looked to funds contributed at services to foster his community building activities. During the Great Depression, Father Divine lavished food on his members and guests, often preparing banquets and feasts for those who suffered the most during this period. According to Miguel Gill, a participant at a feast in Central America, Divine's prayer for the feast was one that invoked the circumstances of his congregation, "Let us eat before we pray ...you can't pray on an empty stomach."<sup>22</sup>

Divine and Grace adhered to mystic beliefs. Divine and his ministers, male and female, dressed in white, could be seen eating from a special plant called the "tree of life" to ward off evil spirits and remain receptive to divine spirits.<sup>23</sup> Grace cultivated long fingernails as a way to display his health and wealth. Both men worked to foster the belief that they were divine representations of God on Earth among their congregants. Similarly, Elijah Muhammad would later extol his divine selection among his congregants. However, the link to this brand of divinity-in-the flesh came to the NOI not through Father Divine or Daddy Grace, but through a man initially known as Timothy

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<sup>21</sup> Margaret Reid interview by author, phone interview, College Park, MD., 11 September 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Miguel Gill, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, Md., 11 September 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Shirley Gill, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, Md., 11 September 2008.

Drew, founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, and a late-comer to his religion, Wallie Ford, also known as Wallace Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam.

The NOI was not the first group to bring Islam to the black community. In fact, the first group to try to convert African Americans to Islam was the Amhadiyya faction of Islam, created in Pakistan to incorporate Southeast-Asian culture into the Arabic practices of Islam. During the 1920s, the Amhadiyyas began to hold meetings in American cities in the hopes of garnering support for Islam in the West. Unfortunately, the movement did not attract a significant number of African Americans, but the Amhadiyya did manage to popularize and transmit Islam to a fraction of Americans with limited engagement with the religion. One of the African Americans that did find a temporary religious home in the Amhadiyya movement was Timothy Drew. By most accounts, Drew encountered the Amhadiyya in Newark, New Jersey and left the organization after a brief stint. Drew then established his own brand of Islam to suit what he believed were the shortcomings of the Amhadiyya movement and its lack of black converts.

Like many other Americans who suffered inconsolable loss and hardships, Elijah Poole continued to seek meaning for his state of life. “As a part of his spiritual quest, he attended meetings of a local temple that called its religion ‘Islam’ and whose members were called ‘Muslims.’ The founder of the temple, he learned during his first visit, was a strangely dressed man by the name of Noble Drew Ali.”<sup>24</sup> Drew’s version of Islam was a mix of other religious strains within the black community, including but not limited to

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999), 62.

Christianity, Islam, Sufism, mysticism, and uplift ideology. Drew also borrowed from other black men in the community who spoke of God and the plight of black Americans.

According to Drew, blacks would convert to Islam if they could see a direct link from their history, in either America or Africa, to that of Islam. Drew established the Moorish Science Temple of America as his attempt to succeed where the Amhadiyya had failed. Drew believed that diasporic people from the Americas could trace their true origins to ancient Morocco.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Drew and those who followed his message were convinced that black people were the creators of kingdoms and knowledge prior to the arrival of Caucasians on the planet. Asiatics and Moors, the nomenclature given to black people by Drew, were the original peoples of the world. Drew reasoned that ancient blacks were more culturally advanced than whites living in other the parts of the world. The position and lifestyle of blacks in the United States differed greatly from their lifestyle in ancient Morocco. In the United States, blacks had been conquered and enslaved, while in Morocco, they were in charge of their destinies and kingdoms. Moreover, blacks in the Americas had forgotten their true religion, Islam. To restore the Asiatic to his true position, someone would need to lead blacks back to their original position. Drew elected himself to be the messenger, and his vehicle to demonstrate the cultural expansiveness of blacks, to reconnect the black man to his Asiatic past and recapture his former greatness, was the Moorish Science Temple of America.

For Drew, the MSTa was more than a religious movement; it was a commitment to a new life. Drew created a lifestyle for black Americans who had no familiarity with

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999), 62.

the religious aspects of Islam. According to Evanzz, Drew changed names, gave people jobs, and cured ailments, as would Wallace Fard and Elijah Muhammad. Evanzz states,

Noble Drew Ali's combination of black nationalism and religion proved as popular as Garveyism, and within ten years, there were chapters of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MTSA) in cities in the Northeast and Midwest. By 1928, Drew Ali had established seventeen temples in fifteen states, the one in Chicago being the most profitable. From his office there, he manufactured oils and herbal remedies for countless ailments, among which were Old Moorish Healing Oil, Moorish Purifier Bath Compound, and Moorish Herb Tea for Human ailments.<sup>26</sup>

In a similar fashion, Elijah Muhammad would force members of the NOI to purchase merchandise from its headquarters in Chicago. Furthermore, Muhammad would require members to sell national black newspapers that contained articles or editorials written by Muhammad and Malcolm X; after the NOI began to publish their own newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, members were required to sell these as part of their religious duties.

Unfortunately, Drew became involved in a love triangle that threatened his organization's survival. The police arrested Drew as an accessory in a murder, allegedly orchestrating the murder of a former member and rival for the affections of a woman. His arrest and impending trial led to his downfall in the eyes of his affluent members, placing the MSTA in a precarious situation, according to Evanzz.

... Drew Ali desperately needed someone capable of overseeing his organization. Ford, who seemed to fit the bill, was renamed David Ford-el and promoted to Sheik. He rose rapidly to Grand Sheik and was put in charge of the Chicago temple. Less than a month after naming David Ford-el acting head of the Chicago mosque, Drew Ali died.<sup>27</sup>

When Drew Ali died of a heart attack, Ford-el claimed to be the leader of the entire MSTA. Other ministers in the MSTA disagreed with this assessment and went so far as to order the death of Ford-el. Ford-el, also known as Wallace or Wallie Fard, took the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>27</sup> ibid, 67.



faction of the MSTA that was loyal to him and defected to Detroit in hopes of keeping part of the MSTA under his leadership. Years later, Elijah Muhammad would face similar problems and decide to take the same action, as Ford-el Muhammad, faced with threats on his life and the threat of law enforcement, would opt to move to Chicago and change the former MSTA of Ford-el to the NOI.

According to the FBI, no explicit link between the NOI and the MSTA exists.<sup>28</sup> Although the FBI could find no direct literature joining the NOI and the MSTA, there are marked similarities between the two religious organizations. At some point in their lives, according to Evanzz, both Elijah and Fard were members of the MSTA. Many of the practices and principles of the NOI directly replicate those of the MSTA. For example, both Fard and Drew interpreted the Qur'an. Each combined their interpretations with the Christian Bible to create a new version of the Qur'an to be used in the MSTA and the NOI. Furthermore, each leader authored a text that contained religious doctrine that went against the teaching of the Qur'an but were fundamental to their respective movements.<sup>29</sup> Drew's and Fard's declarations of themselves as prophets and incarnations of the divine is expressly forbidden in the Qur'an. When Fard left the MSTA, he claimed to be the reincarnation of Drew, who claimed to be the physical manifestation of Allah. The ceremonial renaming of members is another example of similarities between the groups. In the MSTA, the surname of the member was given an extra, "el," "bey," or "ali." While Fard and Muhammad, on the other hand, removed the surname entirely and replaced it with an "el Shabazz," "Ali," or simple "X." In addition,

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<sup>28</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigations, *Report on the Nation of Islam*, [FBI Freedom of Information Act Files on-line]; available from [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm) ; Part I; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>29</sup> See Elijah Muhammad's "Message to the Black Man in America" and Noble Drew Ali's "Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America."

the selling of items related to worship was a part of membership in both groups. The time that both Fard and Muhammad spent in the MSTA left quite an impression on them. As witnesses of the success of the MSTA, Fard and Muhammad, particularly Fard, did fashion the MSTA into a better version in an effort to reach the majority of black people.

## **The Origins of the NOI**

There is no clear evidence of Wallace Fard's origins. Fard added to the mystery by developing many aliases, stories about his origins, and various occupations. While in the MSTA, Fard went by the name David Ford, and after becoming a sheik, he promptly was renamed David Ford-el. In November of 1929, Ford-el moved from Chicago to Detroit. Using the names Wallace D. Fard and Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, the former Moor renamed the faction he controlled of the MSTA the Allah Temple of Islam (ATI).<sup>30</sup> While in Detroit, Fard used several aliases, including but not limited to: Mr. Farrad Mohammad, Mr. F.M. Ali, Professor Ford, Mr. Wali Farrad, Wallace D. Fard, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, Prophet W.D. Fard, Prophet W.D. Fard Muk-Mud, W. D. Foad, and Mr. F. Mohammed Ali.<sup>31</sup>

According to many histories of the NOI, Fard was a man who gained entry into black homes, primarily in Detroit, by peddling silk wares door-to-door. Because of his complexion and his accent, it was easy to believe that Fard was from the Middle East. NOI histories detail that during this period Fard began to preach to blacks about Islam,

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<sup>30</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999), 69.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 41; Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Patheon Books, 1999), 69; Federal Bureau of Investigations, *Report on the Nation of Islam*, [FBI Freedom of Information Act Files on-line]; available from [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm) ; Part I; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010. FBI report.

his connection to it, and the evil nature of the white man. Fard described himself as a messenger from God. According to Fard, God's name was not Jehovah and his religion was not Christianity but that, Allah was the proper name of God and his true religion was Islam. Moreover, the true religion of the black man was Islam. Fard's message to the people who let him into their homes was that Christianity blinded the masses of blacks lost in the wilderness of America to their great histories in Africa and the Middle East. The ultimate goal of whites who forced Christianity onto blacks was suppression of their true history. Fard's mission as the messenger of Allah was to find the lost people of Shabazz and bring them back to their native religion.

As a messenger of Allah, Fard preached to blacks about their condition in America and urged them to prepare for a time when they would reclaim their rightful position in the world hierarchy. He urged them not to eat certain foods, to eat only once a day and begin to pray to Allah. Like his predecessor in the MSTA, Fard also changed the last names of his members to visualize their connection to their true religion and their connection to the true homeland. Much like Drew, Fard offered blacks a homeland and a tribe to which they belonged – the tribe of Shabazz. Similarly, he encouraged his members not to imbibe liquor, consume drugs, or continue in vices such as gambling, dancing, or swearing. Unlike Drew, Fard never claimed to be Allah in the flesh. According to Lomax and Evanzz, Fard was very knowledgeable about the Christian Bible and was skilled in his knowledge of human psychology.<sup>32</sup> Using both of these, Fard was able to convince members of the black community to convert to his version of Islam. As

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<sup>32</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963); Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

people saw improvements in their quality of life, Fard became quite popular and needed to conduct his meetings in larger spaces in the black community.

Similar to the circumstances that brought Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad together, Elijah and Fard's meeting happened through the careful cunning of a family member who heard Fard's message and believed it would change Muhammad's life. During the Depression, Muhammad spent time in jail for disorderly conduct and public inebriation. Because of his drinking, lack of connections, and difficulty in accepting overtly racist behavior, Muhammad's work acquisition and retention fell into a pattern of brief employment followed by frequent stints of unemployment.<sup>33</sup> The family suffered, as many did during the Depression, from poverty. As Clara Muhammad, or Clara Poole as she was called at the time, struggled to keep her family fed, she encountered the preaching of Fard and urged her husband to attend Fard's meetings. According to Wallace Muhammad, Elijah's son, Clara introduced Fard to Muhammad.

Elijah was either too inebriated or too ill (owing to a chronic asthmatic condition) to attend meetings sponsored by the mysterious traveler, so Clara went without him. After a particularly inspiring sermon, Clara concluded that the stranger was what he said he was - a prophet. ...Since Elijah wouldn't go to meet the prophet, Clara decided to bring the prophet to meet Elijah.<sup>34</sup>

After meeting with Fard, hearing his message, viewing his facility with books, especially the Bible and the Qu'ran, Muhammad decided that Fard was indeed a prophet.

Convinced by Fard to convert to Islam and to disavow all vices, which led to lifelong sobriety, Muhammad became a minister in the Allah Temple of Islam (ATI).

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 70.

According to Lomax, Evanzz and others, the relationship between Muhammad and Fard was quite similar to the relationship between Muhammad and Malcolm X. Fard and Muhammad spent enormous amounts of time together and eventually Fard concluded that Elijah was his true second in command. As the ATI spread, Muhammad was given the mission to proselytize to the masses of blacks and began to establish churches/temples in Chicago and other cities and states. As authorities became aware of the group, the ATI was singled-out for police harassment, with a primary focus on its leader, Wallace Fard. For Fard this was disastrous. Fard had a record of incarceration in California and had a listing with the FBI, as Wallace Don Fard, #56062.<sup>35</sup> In these documents, Fard was no prophet – he was a New Zealand national, with Pakistani and English heritage, a child that he did not support and a failed marriage to a white woman.<sup>36</sup> If any member of the ATI found this out, it could mean the end of the organization and its profit making ability – Fard and several of his ministers, including Elijah Muhammad, lived off the tithing of the membership. As the ATI grew, so did the interest from law enforcement, which eventually led to Fard being ordered to shut the ATI down. In response to these circumstances and pressure from law enforcement,

First, he (Fard) changed the name of the Allah Temple of Islam (ATI) to the Nation of Islam (NOI); that way, leaders could not be arrested for violating the court order to disband the ATI. ...He announced the formation of several new institutions. The first was the Fruit of Islam (FOI), a paramilitary training unit that all male members were required to join. They were taught self-defense, including karate, and the leaders were assigned military ranks. ... The Muslim Girls Training (MGT) class was designed to teach all females basic home economics. Members were urged to remove their children from the public

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<sup>35</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigations, *Report on the Nation of Islam*, [FBI Freedom of Information Act Files on-line]; available from [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm) ; Part I; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

schools for the school year beginning in the fall of 1933, and to enroll them in the University of Islam.<sup>37</sup>

Shortly thereafter, in a final act meant perhaps to secure his legacy or to establish that he was no longer associated with the organization, Fard turned the leadership of the group over to Elijah Muhammad, fading into the background and eventually from sight. Fard never appeared publicly again and the mystery about his disappearance fed into the mystery surrounding his role as the founder and leader of the NOI. There was no clear indication of Fard's whereabouts after his tenure in the NOI. According to Elijah Muhammad, after Fard introduced blacks to their true religion, his duty was fulfilled and he returned to paradise.

In charge of the NOI and facing the scrutiny of law enforcement agents, Muhammad moved to establish his power and prove that his power came from the highest authority. During his initial encounters with Fard, Muhammad believed that Fard was God and even went so far as to ask him if this was the case. According to Evanzz, Fard's response neither acknowledged nor denied the possibility.

Elijah's epiphany was so intense that he imagined Fard to be more than the Christ - he was God in the flesh. ...He was the Mahdi, he said, not God. "When I am gone, then you can say whatever you want about me," Fard said smiling, taking the edge off his harsh words and defusing a very tense situation.<sup>38</sup>

In Islam, the Mahdi is the spiritual guide who will lead the righteous to salvation at the end of the world. Given the nature of the NOI and its major tenets, it seems likely that Fard believed that this was his calling and his role. Yet, given the vacuum of authority that his absence left, it is no wonder that Muhammad decided to elevate Fard to god-like stature since this is what he believed. Again Evanzz states,

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<sup>37</sup>Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 94; 96.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 80.

In late 1934, a new rallying cry was heard in the Detroit branch he (Elijah Muhammad) controlled: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet." He claimed that Muhammad of the Holy Quran was not really a prophet but an "enthusiast." Elijah of Cordele was the real prophet, he said. In proclaiming himself Elijah of the Holy Bible's Book of Malachi and himself as the Seal of the Prophets, he combined two central tenets of Christianity and Islam.<sup>39</sup>

Fard was apotheosized and referred to as the Prophet of Allah; Muhammad proclaimed himself the Messenger of the Prophet of Allah. To this day, the wellspring of Muhammad's power flows from the fact that he was with Fard in life and possibly death.<sup>40</sup>

In elevating Fard to Allah, Elijah could then take over the position of the Mahdi and shore up his authority in the organization.

Many in the Nation of Islam received this information as heretical. In fact, within Muhammad's family, the news was ill received; according to Wallace Muhammad, Elijah's son, his uncle Kallat Muhammad could not adhere to Elijah's new wisdom.

Kallat considered Elijah's new theory - that Fard was God and that Elijah was his prophet - heretical. Kallat's views and the views of those who supported him were summarized by his nephew Imam Wallace (Wallace Muhammad). "I am convinced that he himself never told anyone that he was God in the flesh ...When he left in 1934 his successor, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad ...quickly began to erect Professor Fard Muhammad as the second coming of Christ. Gradually he introduced him as Allah, God manifest."<sup>41</sup>

Those who agreed with Elijah considered Kallat and those who opposed the new doctrine as jealous and bitter members of the organization who were angry they had been passed-over in favor of Elijah.<sup>42</sup> In the final installment, the doctrine produced a major power struggle in the NOI, which, along with newly introduced strange rituals of the sect and police scrutiny, aided in the decline of the newly formed Nation of Islam.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 47.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 104.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 104.

After a power struggle, according to Eric Lincoln,<sup>43</sup> who wrote the first book on the NOI, Muhammad solidified his power as leader and Mahdi in the NOI. Ministers who could not adhere to the new tenets of the NOI or could not believe that Muhammad was now the messenger of Allah left the NOI. Because of Muhammad's claim to be the Mahdi and his elevation of Fard to equivalency with Allah, he received death threats from former NOI ministers.<sup>44</sup> As Muhammad's life remained in danger, he needed to find a way to regroup the NOI and continue its practices. Muhammad decided to move the headquarters of the Nation of Islam to Chicago, following the power struggle with other ministers in Detroit.

After relocation to Chicago, the NOI continued to struggle to gain and keep members. Part of the problem lay in the lack of outreach by current members and Muhammad's delivery of standard NOI beliefs. "After a few weeks, new recruits became bored by Muhammad's monologues and his constant cries about the big, bad wolf in white skin."<sup>45</sup> In addition, the NOI continued to elicit the "cult" description. Reports of murders, either ordered or sanctioned by Muhammad, of non-NOI family members frightened many believers and deterred those who may have been interested in the organization.

As the Second World War began, Muhammad was plagued with another issue. Muhammad and other ministers of the NOI, including his son and son-in-law, had warrants issued for sedition and for their failure to register for the draft. A search for the-

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<sup>43</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslim in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961; reprint, Gran Rapids: Wm .B. Eerdmans ; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994 ), 181.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 104.

<sup>45</sup> Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 119.



on-the-run minister led to his capture. The subsequent arrest and conviction resulted in Muhammad and his relatives serving time in prison. Through the efforts of Clara Muhammad and other ministers, the organization remained afloat during his incarceration. Throughout the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the organization suffered low-membership and continued to struggle to retain its members. Until the arrival of Malcolm X, the Nation was in danger of fading into the shadows of the movement of black people to abolish American discrimination. Evanzz, supported by Lomax, contends,

Despite his boldness, the movement stagnated under Muhammad's leadership. ...And with the arrival of Malcolm Little - christened into Islam Malcolm X and elevated by Elijah Muhammad to be Malcolm Shabazz, but known to the pimps, prostitutes, and dope addicts as "Big Red" – the Black Muslim movement really began to move.<sup>46</sup>

The separatist ideas of the NOI comforted blacks who did not see an end to the discrimination and racism inherent in the American social structure. The Nation of Islam provided members with reasons for and answers to the discrimination that plagued their lives. The suffering of blacks in this country could be attributed to the legacy of white supremacy, meted out by white people or “devils” as the NOI referred to them. For the NOI, the key was not to agitate to change the system, but to create a separate system with recognition (and to some extent financial support) from the government.

Unfortunately, the separatism of the NOI, its particular practice of Islam and the shortcomings of its primary leader (his inability to articulate convincingly NOI ideology or his inability to demonstrate any concrete political agenda), made the NOI seem inflexible and unable to deal with the changing context of the United States, brought

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<sup>46</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 55.

about by the second wave of the civil rights movement. By the time Malcolm X was a NOI minister, he had already proven his ability to translate the practices of the NOI to a larger audience. Through his public crusade to provide Muslims in prison with proper meal options, X authenticated his ability to secure not only visibility for the NOI, but to win actual converts and official sanctioning of the NOI. As he continued to “fish” people into the movement, Malcolm showed his prowess in converting blacks into Muslims, thus positioning the NOI as a relevant black nationalist organization in the civil rights movement.

According to Bruce Perry, it is Malcolm who “made Islam a force to be reckoned with.”<sup>47</sup> Prior to Malcolm’s involvement, the NOI was basically a storefront religious movement with little credibility within the larger black community. According to the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X systematically went throughout the country, built temples, and converted black Americans into black Muslims. Following the recruitment efforts of Malcolm X, the NOI grew in its membership. The growth was significant because new membership included two specific groups of black people. First, the population of the NOI grew younger, and secondly, the population became more affluent. The effects of these two changes became evident immediately. Younger members recruited other young members. They also were visible in urban centers selling items to contribute to the fiscal health of the NOI.

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<sup>47</sup> Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press Inc., 1991), xi.

Increasingly, the membership of the NOI encompassed members of the community that either inhabited the professional class or were aspiring to be a part of the black professional class. Formerly, the NOI mostly counted the working class and the lumpen proletariat as members of their temples. Even prior to Louis Farrakhan's leadership of the NOI, which began after a split with Wallace Muhammad's organization in the mid-1970s, members of the black professional class began to find the message of the NOI appealing. As black professionals saw that the acquisition of civil rights was slow in coming, many entered into Muhammad's flock. As college students, nurses, and other professionals converted to Islam, they brought national attention to the group. C. Eric Lincoln, who wrote his dissertation on the NOI, became aware of the Nation of Islam because of a student's paper in his class. After reading the paper and speaking to the student, Lincoln decided to ask Muhammad for permission to write about the growing religious movement.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Louis Lomax, after he approached the reporter, Mike Wallace, about his knowledge of the current wave of black nationalism in Harlem, eventually orchestrated the production of the television special on the NOI, *The Hate That Hate Produced*, which aired in 1959.

*The Hate That Hate Produced* became a national-televised introduction of the NOI to the world. Touted as the black response to the Ku Klux Klan, the NOI and other black supremacist groups inspired fear in the hearts of a white majority who ignored or were ignorant of this kind of "preaching" in black churches. Much like the response received by Reverend Wright, President Obama's former minister, *The Hate That Hate Produced* forced white America to acknowledge their total oblivion to the sentiments of

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<sup>48</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslim in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm .B. Eerdmans ; Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994 ), xvi- xix

some black Americans as espoused by men in the pulpit, on the street, or on the soapboxes in Harlem. Shocked to hear and to see black Americans responding favorably to some of the more devastating indictments of the white race, white people immediately wanted more information about the NOI, their leader Elijah Muhammad, and their most outspoken minister, Malcolm X.

Propelled into national prominence by a television special, X became the voice of the NOI, the organization's national representative, and Muhammad's visible second-in-command. With his increased visibility, X took on a new role as the most sought after minister from the NOI for speeches and comments for the national press. Indeed, X was increasingly the face of the NOI. Poised, charismatic, handsome, fiercely intelligent, and spewing sensational rhetoric, Malcolm X represented to many the best and the worst of American society. The NOI reluctantly held the position as the premiere black nationalist civil rights organization. Elijah Muhammad believed that the race question was resolvable through adherence to the NOI's core belief system. The NOI's solution to racism and the creation of an equal society resembled a pamphlet from the American Colonization Society. Separation, either in the continental United States or in a colonial territory, was the NOI's answer to anyone who wanted to discuss black equality in America. If colonization were not possible, then blacks who wanted to be "equal" needed to look for economic solvency and separation within the United States. Muhammad envisioned truckloads of blacks creating, operating, and supplying the needs of other blacks in the community.

The creation of black owned and operated business was a serious priority for many members of the NOI and they contributed heavily toward this goal. Black people

needed to support producers in their own communities and if there were not black producers to buy from, following NOI tenets could produce opportunities for blacks to own community resources. Blacks who belonged to the NOI were implored to either buy from other NOI members or pool their economic resources to create their own businesses to supply their needs. In addition, the practicality of being a member of the NOI necessitated that members would organize with each other. NOI members ate one meal a day, often cohabitated with each other or lived as family. Moreover, NOI members were encouraged to leave households where their beliefs were not supported and told to join other households that would support NOI ideology. Similarly, blacks who wanted to expose the virtues of integration were sellouts or “Uncle Toms.” Integration was a dream that had no hope of support by the realities of American society. Malcolm brilliantly mixed NOI ideology with his own interest in history and philosophy to present a message that drew NOI members and non-members to Harlem to hear him speak. No one was better than Malcolm X at explaining how America was “the wilderness” for the “original man.” He spoke publicly at Christian churches, including Adam Clayton Powell’s Abyssinian Baptist Church, and for the Harlem Youth Opportunity Unlimited (HARYOU) rally. Harlem could not contain the popularity of the young minister. After his visibility increased, Malcolm received invitations to debate integrationists on the finer points of separatism, black nationalism and the NOI.

Conversely, the more popular X became the more he faced trouble from the hierarchy of the NOI. Elijah Muhammad, among others, believed Malcolm to be addicted to publicity and the attention he received from it. Deteriorating relations aside, Malcolm continued to grow in his political aspirations and his personal relationships. It

is during this time that Malcolm began to talk seriously about civil rights and the NOI's place in the movement. Unfortunately, Muhammad and the majority of the NOI did not follow Malcolm's thinking. The leadership of the NOI continued to support separatist views of black civil rights. They maintained that any effort toward addressing the state of black America should be placed in converting the masses to the Nation. Increasingly this led to a contentious relationship between the leadership of the NOI and Malcolm X. Forced to reevaluate his commitment to the civil rights movement, Malcolm X pulled away from a strictly separatist outlook.

At the end of 1963, Malcolm was keenly aware of his opposition to the NOI's political doctrine (or lack thereof) and his problem with their religious practices. Following his silencing, an official announcement of the break between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, and his trip to Mecca, Malcolm began to apply his intellectual capabilities to his political activity and religious leadership. Freed from the bonds of the separatist ideology of the NOI, X began to contemplate a civil rights movement that would offer change to the majority of black people. He attempted to organize with civil rights leaders, immersed himself in local politics, continued to speak around the country and world, and started to organize to garner African support for a proposal in front of the United Nations court to charge the US with violation of black human rights.

### **Malcolm's Image after he leaves the NOI**

Living under tremendous pressure and fear of retaliation against his family or himself from the NOI or the CIA, X continued to work for the human rights of black people all over the Diaspora, with particular attention paid to the plight of black Americans. After severing ties with the NOI, X worked as an international black

humanitarian until his death. By creating the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI) and the Organization of Afro American Unity (OAAU) X defined his commitment to social justice movements. The OAAU was a collective organization comprised of local civil rights leaders and some expatriates, who envisioned the end of racism and discrimination in practical terms. The final charter of the group, which X would have read the day of his assassination, is clear evidence. Calling for citizens of the black community to vote as a unit was the group's primary method at coalition building and advocating access to resources and agency.

Similarly, the Muslim Mosque operated as the only sanctioned representation of Islamic practice in the United States managed under the auspices of an American citizen. Prince Faisal and other Saudi Arabians welcomed Malcolm's effort to establish a Sunni branch of Islam specifically geared toward blacks. Rather than viewing Malcolm X as the "singularly" acting heroic figure of the civil rights movement, Malcolm should be located within a black nationalist tradition that includes the major positions of separatist and integrationist. As X was developing his political stance, he remained a public figure without a formal network of associates. With his popularity soaring, X continued to tour, give speeches, and collect information from different groups that sought his particular brand of politics. It is in this period, 1963-1965, that X became the most open to different ideologies, such as Marxism, civil disobedience, direct-action (voter registration), and political agitation. In an effort to link any ideologies that would support full black citizenship, Malcolm became a staunch supporter of worldwide coalition building particularly with newly emerging African states. As he blended and mixed

people in an effort to garner support for racial equality, ideologies and practices, Malcolm continued to advocate for the equality of blacks in the United States.

We should never let the white man represent us to them (African people on the continent), and we should never let him represent them to us. It is our job today to represent ourselves, as they represent themselves. We don't want anybody to tell somebody how we think. We will let the world know how we think. We don't want any handkerchief-head set up by the State Department as a spokesman for us, telling the world how we think; we want the world to know how we think. We want the world to know we don't like what Sam is doing in the Congo to our brothers and Sisters.<sup>49</sup>

By violence they only mean when a black man protects himself against the attacks of a white man. This is what they mean by violence. They don't mean what you (blacks) mean. Because they don't even use the word violence until someone gives the impression that *you're* about to explode. When it comes time for a black man to explode they call it violence. But white people can be exploding against black people all day long, and it's never called violence. I even have some of you come to me and ask me, am I for violence? I'm the victim of violence, and you're the victim of violence. But you've been so victimized by it that you can't recognize it for what it is today.<sup>50</sup>

As demonstrated by his own words, Malcolm clearly advocated a complex black nationalist policy up until his death. This did not change when, as he often did say during his college tours, he began to see the "collective" white man, as opposed to each individual white man, as the devil. He continued to agitate for black control of resources in the community. Malcolm's flirtations with the Marxist and socialist groups of the day also aided in his belief that black people needed to secure voting rights and elect legislative officials who would act as representatives of the people. If Malcolm had remained in the NOI his ability to participate in and speak on civil rights matters would have been limited at best; at worst, Malcolm would have been perpetually silenced the more he attempted to be involved in world affairs. Unfortunately, the interactions

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<sup>49</sup> Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* ed. George Brietman ( New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 147.

<sup>50</sup> Malcolm X, "HARYOU-ACT Forum, New York December 12, 1964" *By Any Means Necessary* ed. George Brietman ( New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 176.



between Malcolm X and the NOI became more contentious. Subsequently, Malcolm began to think that the NOI, CIA, or FBI wanted him dead. After his assassination, most of the efforts at actualizing a human rights charge in front of the United Nations ceased. Left with only the potential legacy, his compatriots seized the moment to solidify the slain minister's contribution to the cause of racial equality.

## **The Image Transformation of Malcolm X**

The assassination of Malcolm X propelled the slain leader into the legacy of black American heroes. He was counted, similarly to Medgar Evers, among the sacrificial lambs for the freedom of black people. Shortly after his death, relatives and followers made many efforts to commemorate his life and sacrifices as a civil rights organizer. Immediately there were attempts to re-name streets, schools, and public places after Malcolm X. Additionally, there were efforts to continue both organizations that Malcolm X created prior to his death – the Muslim Mosque Incorporated and the Organization of Afro American Unity. Audio tapes, posters, and other paraphernalia continued to sell in major cities around the country; some made available by the NOI. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, Warith Deen Mohammed, formerly known as Wallace Muhammad, transitioned the NOI toward Sunni Islam and renamed the Harlem temple in honor of Malcolm X. Unsatisfied with the new direction of the NOI, Louis X, known as Louis Farrakhan, defected from the NOI, led by Warith Mohammed, and reestablished the NOI, complete with all of the ideology and tenets that Fard and Muhammad had established. “Although several thousand followed Louis Farrakhan when he split from Warith to re-establish the Nation of Islam, most members remained with Warith as he rapidly moved his community from the race-based, separatist beliefs of the Nation of

Islam toward the orthodox practice of Sunni Islam.”<sup>51</sup> Both men shared a close relationship with Malcolm. It was Mohammed who first broke the news of his father’s infidelity to Malcolm and persisted with his view of Malcolm as a man who loved and supported his father. Farrakhan patterned his style of ministering after Malcolm X and after the revelation of a plot to murder him by X’s daughter, Qubilah Shabazz, Farrakhan admitted to inciting members of the NOI to act against Malcolm. Although Malcolm had left the NOI, his influence on the movement continued even after his death.

Although Malcolm’s death halted the construction of his public image, Malcolm’s image continued to function within the black community. The broadening of constructions of the images of black males opened the possibilities for a broadening of Malcolm’s image. In fact, most new information, other than those produced by scholars, came from the media. In 1972, Arnold Perl produced the first documentary film on Malcolm X, titled *Malcolm X: His Own Story as it Really Happened*. The script used for this documentary is the same script Spike Lee used for his film, *X* (1992). In 1981, A&E cable station released a biographic special on Malcolm X. In addition to mainstream media outlets producing mediated images of Malcolm, black cultural producers like Orlando Bagwell (*Malcolm X: Make It Plain*) and co-directors Jefri Aalmuhammed and Jack Baxter (*Brother Minister: The Assassination of Malcolm X*) made documentaries on Malcolm X. As Malcolm’s popularity increased, mainstream and minority producers began to circulate mediated images of Malcolm.

Those who were not familiar with the images of Malcolm produced within his lifetime were introduced to new images of Malcolm. Blacks immersed in Malcolm X’s

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<sup>51</sup> Public Broadcasting Station , “People of Faith: Warith Deen Mohammed, ” *This Far By Faith*, 2003 [profile on-line]; available from [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/warith\\_deen\\_mohammed.html;internet](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/warith_deen_mohammed.html;internet); accessed 5 August 2010.

pan -Africanism and black nationalist ideology promoted several images of the leader on buttons, earrings, t-shirts and other forms of material culture. With the advent of the merchandizing associated with Spike Lee's film, images of Malcolm X were seen worn all over by the fashion conscious. Malcolm X's image had moved from a central location within the black community to commercial success within popular culture, thus establishing the mechanisms that allowed Malcolm's image to become part of American national iconography. As Yousman contends, the shift from the 1960s version of Malcolm's mediated image to the 1990s version of Malcolm's mediated image was a striking reversal.

Just as a man biting a dog represents a reversal of the seemingly natural flow of events, iconicizing Malcolm X as an American hero in the mold of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Babe Ruth represents an ironic turn from the days when he was one of the central demons of mainstream American culture. More than just trivial irony, however, this event may be understood as only one manifestation of the ongoing transformation of the meaning of Malcolm X.<sup>52</sup>

Yousman's assessment is correct. The process that allows Malcolm's image to circulate through mainstream culture and enjoy such prominence could not be accomplished with images of Malcolm X that existed during the 1960s. Neither the image of Malcolm as the black supremacist/black nationalist nor the image of X as the radical/pan-Africanist could facilitate the American iconization of Malcolm X.

Simply stated, Malcolm's inclination toward a radical formulation of black nationalism that included coalition building with communists, Marxists and socialists in the United States and activists around the developing world was too controversial for many Americans. Thus, many of the images of Malcolm that currently circulate are de-politicized or have very little connection to the political being that was Malcolm X.

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<sup>52</sup> Bill Yousman, "Who Owns Identity? Malcolm X, Representation, and the Struggle Over Meaning," *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 1.

Undoubtedly, Malcolm remained popular in certain segments of the black community, but in recent years, particularly in the 1990s, X became popular within the dominant culture, which had not readily celebrated his legacy. According to historian and noted Malcolm X scholar Manning Marable, just a generation after Malcolm's assassination his image and historical representation were profoundly transformed; "Malcolm was now praised by many of the same interests who had condemned his ideas and teachings when he was alive."<sup>53</sup> The struggle to keep Malcolm aligned to his political and religious affiliations became one of the causalities of his image transformation. On the one hand, Malcolm was more popular and well-known dead than he had been alive. On the other hand, X became a sort of black everyman, with a composite so broad that "Vice President Dan Quayle's revelation that he was mining the slain black nationalist's autobiography for clues to racial conflict and to its mitigation," seemed disturbing only to a minority of people.<sup>54</sup> Malcolm had become available to all people without any necessary interaction with his political message. By extension, it became easier to appear familiar with black equality struggles and black people; because a simplified or de-politicized Malcolm gave the impression that the only attributes one needed to be sympathetic to black solidarity was to be the owner of an "X" on a t-shirt. The more fashionable Malcolm X became, the more difficult it became to distinguish which image of Malcolm was being used. Subsequently, two different types of images of Malcolm X were available for public

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<sup>53</sup> Marable Manning, "Introduction to the life and legacy of Malcolm X," *Harvard Journal of Africa American Public Policy* 8, no. 8(Summer 2002) : 115-124.

<sup>54</sup> Sam Roberts, "Metro Matters: Dan Quayle, Malcolm X and American Values," *New York Times*, 15 June 1992, New York/Region, [newspaper on-line]; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/15/nyregion/metro-matters-dan-quayle-malcolm-x-and-american-values.html>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

consumption. Depending on the political stance of the user, the image of Malcolm X could signify divergent ideologies.

For example, in her work on the Fox television network, Kristal Brent Zook has commented on the use of political imagery in the set design of the Fox show *Roc*, 1991-1994. Zook noted that during the early portion of the series, Malcolm X imagery was quite visible on the set. Even more fascinating is her reasoning for the subsequent disuse of the imagery.

“They had become “overdone,” Lathan [Stan Lathan, director of the show] told me, and had simply begun to “bore” him. Instead Malcolm X imagery was replaced with, for example, shots of Africanesque fabrics draped on the walls – a shift more significant than I suspect Lathan realizes. Rather than framing hopes of justice around a single, heroic figure, the fabric imagery (used as a backdrop in one of Roc’s election speeches) connotes the distinct possibility of a collective *social movement*.<sup>55</sup> (Emphasis in the original)

Zook’s assessment of Lathan’s sentiment complicates the image signification of Malcolm X. Agreement with Zook’s reading of Lathan’s decision to remove the images from the set would mean that by the time Lathan had decided to use the imagery of X, Malcolm had already been relegated to a position of popularity and somewhat stagnating political affiliation. Furthermore, that his image could be replaced by Afrocentric fabric equaled the two as racialized consumer items. The “hopes for justice” in Zook’s assessment are positioned on a lone figure, similar to the characterizations of Martin Luther King, Jr. Thus, Malcolm is not connected with the NOI, MMI, or the OAAU. He is not active in local politics or influencing the likes of Kwame Ture or the Black Panther Party (BPP). Malcolm X becomes a public, unattached, radical fighting for civil rights. Yet, it seems that by the Fall of 1993, the image of Malcolm X continued to be reproduced by rappers,

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<sup>55</sup> Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, The W.E.B. Du Bois Institute Series, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 82.

academics, and eventually the United States Post Office. Indeed as Malcolm's nephew noticed, the interest in Malcolm progressed during and after mainstream culture's fascination.

From the year after his assassination right up to the present, thousand of African Americans held memorial tributes on the anniversary of the assassination and celebrations on the anniversary of his birth. Annual pilgrimages are made to his gravesites in Westchester County. During those times, forums are held, plays written, programs presented, and a host of items, such as T-shirts, cassette tapes, and posters, are sold and distributed celebrating his legacy.<sup>56</sup>

Zook's assessment fails to take into account the nature of the transformation of Malcolm's image and the divergent patterns that each of the images have taken and embodied. For instance, the academy has contributed to the mainstreaming more than ever before, universities have continued to use *The Autobiography* as a central text in courses, and academicians continue to teach classes on his life and legacy, along with supplementary books focusing on Malcolm range in topics including geography, African-American self consciousness, and black experiences with Islam.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The theoretical framework for this dissertation involves an examination and analysis of the example of the image manipulation of Malcolm X. As African Americans continue to gain prominence in the political life of American society, it becomes necessary to reconfigure popular images into a reconciliatory narrative of a society that has made peace with its past and strives toward a more egalitarian future. The image transformation of X is significant because it answers key questions about black political identity in an increasingly mediated world. Materials centrally located by their position

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<sup>56</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 205.

as media products that are easily transferable in the globally connected marketplace are used to convey political meaning to others who lack experience with, in this context, black males.

Employing several theoretical frameworks, I referenced texts that explore racial projects and black masculine identity in America for their insights into expressions of black masculinity as a means of cultural survival in a hostile environment that is the United States. In addition, this dissertation conducted textual analysis of media products containing the image of Malcolm X to as the image of Malcolm X was used to inform and represent black masculinity. Online resources such as The Malcolm X Collection Papers, 1948-1965 (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), as well as printed and audio collected speeches, interviews and articles of Malcolm X were examined to assess the usefulness of the images the represent Malcolm X. Furthermore, a discussion of the commodification of black masculinity through the examination of the production of material containing the image of Malcolm X was conducted to explore the role of cultural producers and their products (hip-hop culture, films, and fashion) in light of the ability of collective memory to unify or separate members of society. Lastly, using ethnographic methodology, I explored the practical applications of the image usage and transformation of Malcolm X at different events sponsored to honor the memory of Malcolm X.

The following chapters of this dissertation chart the four images of Malcolm X in operation since the time of his death in 1965. While Chapter One dealt with the introduction of Malcolm X's images, the formation of the NOI and Malcolm's significance in the NOI, the political organization of Malcolm outside of the NOI, and the

symbolism accompanying the images after Malcolm's demise, the second chapter will delve further into Malcolm's control of his image during his lifetime and the national press' image of Malcolm. The second chapter discusses the image of Malcolm X as a black hero/martyr.

In addition, the second chapter will deal with the imagery in Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax's special, *The Hate That Hate Produced*. The significance of this production cannot be understated. This was the world's first introduction to the man who would later be the subject of philatelic material of two countries, Iran and the United States. The discourse of the third chapter considers the image of Malcolm X as the "shining black prince," the term coined by Ossie Davis. As rappers of the 1980s and 1990s encountered the image of Malcolm X as the ideal or "real" black man, they also contributed to the signification of Malcolm X as one of the "real" men of the civil rights movement. This characterization led many to believe that the Malcolm image spoke directly to their circumstances. Male and female rappers used images of Malcolm in their videos and on their records before and after the distribution of Spike Lee's film.

In Chapter Four two important aspects of the material culture produced during the 1990s will be examined. The first, Spike Lee's film *X*, will be discussed at length. The film sparked a controversy among academics, the inheritors of Malcolm's legacy (black nationalists) and Spike Lee. Lee's concept of Malcolm's image seemed as problematic as the national press' images of Malcolm during the early 1960s. Yet, Lee produced and sparked the most significant display of material culture concerning the image of Malcolm X. If Lee did not produce, sell, and market items relating to the distribution of the film, Malcolm X image would not have become the symbol of hipster fashion that it became in



the 1990s. Confronted with the proliferation of her husband's image for the first time, Betty Shabazz copyrighted Malcolm's image and hired a firm to handle the request for use of the image.

The 1990s also saw the final major piece of Malcolm X related material culture produced in the United States, the official United States Post Office Black Heritage Malcolm X stamp. The first stamp to contain the image of Malcolm X was issued by the government of Iran almost twenty years after his death. This stamp shows a side profile of Malcolm with the caption "universal day of struggle against race and discrimination." Unlike many pictures containing the image of Malcolm X, the stamp pictures X wearing a loose fitting shirt that resembles a dashiki. Unlike the United States stamp, the Iranian stamp associated Malcolm with the struggle to end racism. Similarly, it notes that the struggle affected people all over the world. The replication of the primary image in different colors can stand for Malcolm's attempt to have racism recognized as a crime against humanity at large, figured in the stamp by the different colors of people that Malcolm eventually represented with his cause to have the United States brought to the court of the United Nations. The connection that Malcolm had to Islam is not directly stated, but can be noticed through the Arabic writing and the image of the Great Mosque in Mecca in the background and bordering of the stamp. In contrast, the United States stamp has no Islamic references. Although the stamp lists Malcolm's hajj name, El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, under the typecast for his name, it is insignificantly displayed compared to the larger and bolder "Malcolm X." It is highly doubtful whether a viewer would associate this display with his X's religious life. In addition to the lack of religious affiliation, the stamp displays a photo of Malcolm X in a contorted "intellectual" facial

expression. X, pictured mouth agape, index finger on his left earlobe folded hand supporting his chin, seemed involved in expressing facial a thought. The photo is not one of happiness or anger but rather displays the emotions of someone explaining a deep thought or explaining the heart of a concept. The eyes, looking far off direction, give credence to the textual analysis that X in the process of recalling information as he conveys that information to someone else. While the Iranian stamp also shows X with his hand to his face and/or ear, it can be perceived in similar fashion to someone calling out to an audience; that this portion of the stamp has been replicated in several colors adds to this reading of the text.



Although the images are similar, the Iranian stamp seemingly invests in recognizing the political contribution of Malcolm X; while the American stamp seemingly invests in the process of detaching Malcolm from a political legacy and creating a new legacy of a public intellectual.

<sup>57</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, "The Malcolm X Stamp and Malcolm X: The Iranian Stamp," *Brother Malcolm .net*, 8 January 2003 [repository on-line]; available from <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/2002/stamps/index.html>; <http://www.brothermalcolm.net/2002/stamps/iran.html>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the image of Malcolm X has undergone significant transformation from the time of his assassination to the present. His leadership in the NOI necessitated the creation of political persona and led to his visibility. Although Malcolm maintained a public image that might have caused some people to reject his message, he was willing to sacrifice his life for his belief in the veracity of black equality. His commitment never wavered and his legacy emanates from this position. Forced to deal with a press that had already associated him with the vilest acts against humanity, X constantly reinforced the idea that black people should be responsible for their own image in American society. Unwilling to allow others to dictate who he was, Malcolm X fought for most of his public life to define his own image. Aware of what media outlets such as New York Daily News and local NBC affiliates wanted from him, X made sure to give them enough to get his message out. His first attempt at this was at the hands of the national press and from that point on, Malcolm learned how to maneuver the press to serve his purposes. Determined to speak to the masses of blacks, Malcolm entered public life as a faithful minister and a champion of black equality.

## Chapter 2: The Creation of an Image

### Introduction

The public persona of Malcolm X underwent a major transformation when he became a recognized figure in the civil rights movement. Catapulted into the national scene by the quasi documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced*, the television special produced and narrated by reporter Mike Wallace, Malcolm X became one of the most publicly visible Nation of Islam ministers. In addition to his visibility, Malcolm was named the national spokesman for the NOI, by Elijah Muhammad. This position necessitated the creation of an individual image(s) of Malcolm X that would be displayed to the national press, other civil rights leaders, and to potential recruits in the black community. During the years that Malcolm X held the position of national spokesman, (1959-1963) he would employ several images to publicize the NOI agenda. Two of those images, that of a black nationalist and its reinterpretation (coined by many media outlets, including, initially, Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* fame) a black supremacist, would catapult X into the national spotlight for the next six years.

After his silencing and eventual separation from the NOI, Malcolm X continued to need and use his black nationalist and black supremacist public personas to cultivate different kinds of following and visibility among different audiences: the national press, the dominant community, and black people who supported and would support his transformation into a human rights activist. In addition to these public faces, Malcolm X included the image of an international Pan-Africanist. Using this persona, X could acquire additional support to his political philosophy of transitioning the acquisition of

civil rights for black Americans to the acquisition of human rights for oppressed colored people worldwide.

## **Public Persona Usage**

Aided by his time as the national spokesman of the NOI, X was able to parlay his experiences into different public personas that not only deftly handled the press and law enforcement officials, but also helped to reposition the major debate on human rights for black Americans into a peaceful demonstration versus armed resistance. For the members of the dominant society who televised the violent and peaceful aspects of the movement daily and gave mediated racialized action versions of the philosophies of movement leaders, the choice of what to cover positively was clear – peaceful renegotiation of societal norms rather than property destroying riots. Aware of his position in this debate, Malcolm X sought to use his public personas, and ultimately his image, to sway majority opinion toward acceptance of black citizens’ entitlement to equal rights. In the case of the federal government, Malcolm X hoped to use his image to frighten the government, through international shame and locally built interracial committees, to defend and protect the struggle for black rights. In his speech to the African Summit Conference in Egypt Malcolm X said,

We in America are your long-lost brothers and sisters, and I am here only to remind you that our problems are your problems. As the African-Americans “awaken” today, we find ourselves in a strange land that has rejected us, and like the prodigal son, we are turning to our elder brothers for help. We pray our pleas will not fall upon deaf ears. We were taken forcibly in chains from this mother continent and have now spent over three hundred years in America, suffering the most inhuman forms of physical and psychological tortures imaginable. During the past ten years the entire world has witnessed our men, women, and children being attacked and bitten by vicious police dogs, brutally beaten by police clubs, and washed down sewers by high-pressure water hoses that would rip the clothes from our bodies and the flesh from our limbs. And all these atrocities have been

inflicted upon us by the American governmental authorities, the police themselves, for no reason other than we seek the recognition and respect granted other human beings in America. ... We stand defenseless, at the mercy of American racists who murder us at will for no reason other than we are black and of African descent.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, during the height of Cold War activity, Malcolm X actively sought African nations that would support a United Nations charge against the United States for the discrimination and racism that black Americans endured in the face of a government who did not come to the aid of its citizens.

### **Usage of Malcolm's Public Persona, 1965 and beyond**

After his assassination, members of various groups sought to use the image X had created to support a myriad of causes connected to human rights, black civil rights, black nationalism, Marxism, and Islam. Simultaneously creating images of Malcolm X that would lend credence to each cause, members of various groups cultivated images of Malcolm X as a hero/martyr and an American individualist; both continue to operate in American culture to this day. Using Malcolm X as the sign for freedom, activism, and revolutionary political thought, black and white public figures sought to establish themselves as part of a historical legacy in American society. Redefining Malcolm X as a major figure in the fight for citizen rights during the 1960s led to the repositioning of X as a political theorist who saw the real trajectory of the movement before any other civil right leaders. In addition, the visibility of the many images of Malcolm X led to the accessibility of the leader to a larger portion of the American population. Malcolm became a champion of the idea of political freedom and liberation, with the ability to influence people who came from a wide range of experiences, including members of the

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<sup>58</sup>Malcolm X, "Speech to African Summit Conference, July 17, 1964," *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 289-290.

Black National Convention, who cited X as a influence on their political philosophy; Dan Quayle, who believed Malcolm would give insight to the race relations of the 1990s; and Mike Wallace, who paid tribute to X at the First Day of Issuance Dedication Ceremony for the Malcolm X stamp. More than when he was alive, the popularity and influence generated by the various images of Malcolm X, due in large part to the various groups who helped to construct these images, led to the larger than life stature of Malcolm X.

Far from constructing a “true” image of Malcolm X, this chapter aims to “make plain” various images of the man. All of these images have led to a resurgence of interest in Malcolm X as a significant historical figure in American society, in general, and as a participant in black struggles of the mid twentieth century, specifically. Similarly, the production and re-production of these images has led to Malcolm X’s representation as a major influence of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century struggles for black equality and cultural presence. Thus, connection to any of the images automatically aligns the user with an often used body of information that has been distilled to display images of an ideal black male or radical American citizen. The interpretation of that citizenship may include activism, human rights struggles, or just plain rebellion against the dominant power structure. Regardless of the image of Malcolm X that the user is invoking, the connection to an image of Malcolm X affords the user access to a radical positionality vis-à-vis the mainstream representations of the citizen actor. For example, a tattoo of Malcolm X’s image on the body of a black person versus the same tattoo on the body of a white person can inscribe different meaning to each citizen. The tattoo might signal an affiliation or belief in radical black politics or some of the principles of black nationalism that Malcolm X practiced on a black body, in total denial of his interracial politics.

Meanwhile, the same tattoo would connote a different meaning on the body of a white American, or as in the case of the sneaker bomber, Richard Reid, and the American Taliban member, John Walker Lind, connections to Malcolm X, in the form of inspiration toward conversion to Islam, were used to explain their inclinations toward insurgency. In the case of both the white and black body, inspiration, of any kind, from Malcolm X was presented as radical or a movement beyond the status quo. This was certainly the case in the media portrayal of Reid and Lind and my own as a participant in the visual culture of the image of Malcolm X.

## Original Image

There is a stark difference between the public persona of Malcolm X and the man that many people knew and loved. Because of his membership in the Nation of Islam and his position as the national representative of that organization, Malcolm X maintained distinct public personalities. X could use his persona as a black nationalist to vilify the non-violent strain of the civil rights movement for its inability to organize for black rights without the integral involvement of whites and without all available means as other groups had done. For example, in a 1963 interview with Kenneth Clarke, X chided Jewish and black members of mainstream civil rights organizations:

That's a strange thing. You know, the Jews here in this city rioted last week against some Nazi, and I was listening to a program last night where the other Jew – where a Jewish commentator was congratulating what the Jews did to this Nazi; complementing them for it. Now no one mentioned violence in connection with what the Jews did against the Nazis. But these same Jews, who will condone violence on their part or hate someone whom they consider to be an enemy, will join Negro organizations and tell Negroes to be non-violent; that it is wrong, or immoral, unethical, unintelligent for Negroes to reflect some kind of desire to defend themselves from the attacks of whites who are trying to brutalize us.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Malcolm X, "Malcolm X Talks With Kenneth B. Clarke, June, 1963," *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 175.



He also used his public persona to threaten armed resistance in the face of assault on non-violent blacks.

For the past month I've been beating on the Klan and beating on Rockwell and beating on these so-called right-wingers. You may wonder why. I sent a wire to Rockwell warning him if anything happened to Black people in Alabama that we would give him maximum retaliation. ...Rockwell disappeared because he's scared of power like anybody else. Because they know that he has strength only as long as he's dealing with somebody that's nonviolent. Good Lord.<sup>60</sup>

According to John Henrik Clarke, "The many dimensions in the personality of Malcolm X made him a difficult person to understand and interpret. He was a person always in the process of growth and change."<sup>61</sup> To members of the NOI, he was a minister and teacher of Islam who led by example, forsaking the life of a hustler and small-time gangster. Members of his immediate family saw another side of Malcolm. His sister, Ella Little Collins, and his wife, Betty Shabazz, maintained close relationships with him and often described Malcolm as friendly, witty, playful, while acknowledging his ability "of making people feel relaxed and close and at the same time ...holding them at a distance."<sup>62</sup> The press presented another image of Malcolm. Armed with what can be construed as sensational NOI tenets, Malcolm X took to the airwaves and was introduced to the American mainstream in 1959 for the first time on *The Hate That Hate Produced*. Prior to his first exposure on national television, Malcolm X was a minister for the NOI recognized for his ability to attract people to the growing Islamic sect.

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<sup>60</sup> George Lincoln Rockwell headed the American Nazi Party, which later became the National Socialist White People's Party. Malcolm X, "There's a Worldwide Revolution Going On, 15 February 1965," *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), 115.

<sup>61</sup> John Clarke, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 81.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

## The Image of Malcolm X in the NOI

The first image that X maintained was that of a NOI minister from 1955 to 1963. In this role, X was the public and mediated representation of the NOI. As the most publicly sought after minister in the Nation, X maintained a schedule that had him ministering to his temple, speaking at different colleges and churches, debating the major civil right leaders of the day, including Constance Baker Motley, Kenneth Clarke, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins, and Bayard Rustin,<sup>63</sup> and traveling around the country to mitigate NOI issues. X was popular with the media, according to Mike Wallace, because of his articulation of NOI ideology and his ability to present the information in a charismatic manner, as opposed to Elijah Muhammad, who had difficulty with public speaking.<sup>64</sup> As a minister for the NOI, Malcolm X routinely spoke to his congregation and at special NOI events such as Founder's Day celebrations. In addition to speaking at these events, Malcolm often introduced Elijah Muhammad to the burgeoning crowds of NOI members and attendees. As a chief orator for the NOI, Malcolm X honed his skills in front of the masses of blacks who came to hear him "proclaim the divinity of the black man and systematically curse and blame the devilish nature of the white man for the plight of the black man,"<sup>65</sup> in his teachings and speeches.

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<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) , 52-53.

<sup>64</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced (1959)*, 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 16.

As a minister for the NOI, Malcolm X described often as an authoritative speaker that was all but hypnotic.<sup>66</sup> According to Wyatt Tee Walker,

Malcolm "brought whitey down front" and men who had cowered inwardly and outwardly in the presence of the nameless white face in whose world he moved admired his spunk and grit. Vicariously through him, some Negro men got up off their knees for the first time in their lives and touched their manhood as if it were a new Christmas toy.<sup>67</sup>

From his place as head of temples in Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, and eventually New York City, Malcolm X garnered quite a reputation as an orator on par with some of the best speakers of the day. According to Jeffrey Ogbar, "the NOI spokesman 'slew' John Davis, another college professor; Rev. Milton Galamison (organizer for NY public school integration), and Gloster Glover of the Urban League at the same debate he figuratively murdered Kenneth Clarke."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, "Martin Luther King, Jr. refused to accept any debate with Malcolm, despite ample opportunity, even going so far as to threaten to cancel his appearance on *The David Susskind Show* after a 'Malcolm-King Talk' was proposed."<sup>69</sup>

King's secretary informed one radio station that proposed a King – Malcolm X discussion that King had "taken a consistent position of not accepting such invitations because he feels it will do no good. He has always considered his work in a positive action framework rather than engaging in consistent negative debates."<sup>70</sup>

When trying to dissuade James Farmer from debating Malcolm, King noted:

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Wyatt Tee Walker, "Nothing But a Man," *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 67.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) , 52-53.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 52.

I was asked to be on that panel with Malcolm X, but I declined and told them Wyatt Walker, the executive secretary of SCLC (Southern Conference Leadership Coalition) would be there instead of me.<sup>71</sup>

X continued to be sought after to start other temples in other cities, while remaining the head of Temple Number Seven and conducting courses in African history, the nature of the sexes, and NOI ideology.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, to becoming popular within the NOI, X also contributed articles to black newspapers that Elijah Muhammad agreed to sell prior to the creation of *Muhammad Speaks*. In these articles, Malcolm X tried to reach out to the majority of blacks whom had either not heard of the NOI or who had disagreed with NOI ideology. Similarly, X also had a strong following in Harlem, New York, the location of Temple Number Seven. Often found in Mr. Michaux's bookstore, Malcolm sometimes also spoke in front of the Africa National Memorial Bookstore.<sup>73</sup> As the head minister of Temple Number Seven, Malcolm also cultivated relationships with other prominent figures in Harlem. Asked to speak at Abyssinian Baptist Church, by Adam Clayton Powell, X gathered a following in the black community that made him recognizable to black people from a range of social classes. Thus, Malcolm X had been introduced to black America for sometime before his formal introduction to mainstream Americans in *The Hate That Hate Produced*.

Prior to the airing of *The Hate That Hate Produced*, Malcolm X had already crafted an image of himself that held most of its basis in black nationalism. As a minister

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>72</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 230-231.

<sup>73</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 93-94.

in the NOI, Malcolm X became somewhat of an anomaly. Given that Fard and Muhammad fashioned the NOI ideology to incorporate basic tenets from Christianity, the Ahmadiyya Islamic sect, Noble Drew Ali's incorporation of Islam, and their own beliefs, the space for new information was limited at best. Yet, Malcolm X incorporated his own brand of preaching and his instruction on African/Afro-American history. According to Malcolm X in his autobiography, as an incarcerated new convert to the NOI, he continued to find evidence that supported Muhammad's view about the nature of race relations in the United States.

The teachings of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had "whitened" – when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out. Mr. Muhammad couldn't have said anything that would have struck me much harder. ... This one reason why Mr. Muhammad's teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among *all* Negroes, whether or not they became followers of Mr. Muhammad. ... You can hardly show me a black adult in America – or a white one, for that matter – who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man's role. In my case, once I heard of the "glorious history of the black man," I took special pains to hunt in the library for books that would inform me on details about black history. ... I found books like Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. I read H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*. *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois gave me a glimpse into the black people's history before they came to this country. Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History* opened my eyes about black empires before the black slave was brought to the United States, and the early Negro struggles for freedom. ... Mr. Muhammad's teaching about how the white man had been created led me to *Findings in Genetics* by Gregor Mendel. ... Reading it over and over, especially certain sections, helped me to understand that if you started with a black man, a white man could be produced; but starting with a white man, you never could produce a black man – because the white gene is recessive. And since no one disputes that there was but one Original Man, the conclusion is clear.<sup>74</sup>

When my brother Reginald visited, I would talk to him about new evidence I found to document the Muslim teachings. In either volume 43 or 44 of *The Harvard Classics*, I read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The devil, kicked out of Paradise, was trying to regain possession. He was using the forces of Europe, personified by the Popes, Charlemagne, Richard the Lionhearted, and other

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<sup>74</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 177-178.

knights. I interpreted this to show that the Europeans were motivated and led by the devil, or the personification of the devil. So Milton and Mr. Elijah Muhammad were actually saying the same thing.<sup>75</sup>

Using these texts and others, Malcolm X continued to develop a repertoire of knowledge that aided in his teachings, sermons, and his support for his readings of the foundational truths of black nationalism. In these books, Malcolm found “armor” for the black man to combat white supremacy, yet even as Malcolm noted that the progress of a nation could be gleaned from the progress of its women, the business of radical black nationalism was men’s work.

Clarke notes that, “in public speeches, where he nearly always prefaced his remarks with the statement ‘the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us,’ Malcolm X was teaching lessons about the black American’s fight for basic dignity that were more meaningfully logical than anything that Elijah Muhammad had ever conceived.”<sup>76</sup> Yet Malcolm maintained a god-like belief in Elijah Muhammad. Commenting on his faith in the frail and immoral Muslim leader Malcolm later publicly stated:

And I might point out right here that it was not a case of my knowing all the time, because I didn’t. I had blind faith in him, the same as many of you have had and still have blind faith in me or blind faith in Moses or blind faith in somebody else. My faith in Elijah Muhammad was more blind and more uncompromising than any faith that any man has ever had for another man. And so I didn’t try to see him as he actually was.<sup>77</sup>

According to Malcolm X, his interest in black nationalism was based on Muhammad’s teachings. Yet, a quick glimpse into Malcolm X’s past will show that not only was there a trajectory in Malcolm X’s past to support black nationalist inclinations, he continued to

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<sup>75</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 189.

<sup>76</sup> John Henrik Clarke, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), xvii.

<sup>77</sup> Malcolm X, “There’s a Worldwide Revolution Going On, February 15, 1965.” *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), 111-112.

surround himself with people out of the NOI who supported similar positions. Support initially arrived in the form of knowledge about his father and mother's Garveyite past. Although in Malcolm X's past there were points where he wanted to either assume the tropes of whiteness – for example his conked hair during the Detroit Red period of his life –or participate more actively in the benefits – his interactions in his eighth grade class – he never let go of the assumption that the white power structure, in the form of the state welfare agency, destroyed his family. Similarly, X sought the companionship of men like Mr. Michaux, Dick Gregory, and Robert Williams.

Turner said, "I first saw Malcolm at Micheaux's. He would come in there, and he and Micheaux would talk. Micheaux was, of course, well known throughout Harlem as a major nationalist spokesman himself, and he would speak out on the street corner. Sometimes he would have Malcolm speak right in front of the store. He would introduce Malcolm at rallies. The more I listened, the more their broad analysis in terms of our lack of power, our people having no sense of their history, all those basic nationalist tenets - internal self-contempt, lack of ability to cooperate - began to resonate."<sup>78</sup>

Despite his strong adherence to the philosophy of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X was clearly drawn to black nationalist ideology based on his life's experiences.

In his speeches, Malcolm X began discussing his formulated theories about the lack of political ideology to frame the civil rights protest of the late 1950s and early 1960s. For Malcolm, the movement was narrow in its focus on black civil rights. Similarly, the refusal of organization like the NAACP and CORE, refusal to make black men and women the true leaders of the movement angered him. White money and protection led to white decision-making power. For X this seemed counterproductive.

Jesus never said Abraham Lincoln would make you free: nor the Congress, Senate, Supreme Court, nor John F. Kennedy. He knew that their tricky high-court decisions would only lull you into deeper sleep, and their deceitful promises

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<sup>78</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 93-94.

of civil rights legislation would be designed only to advance you from ancient slavery to modern slavery:<sup>79</sup>

He emphasized this point of contention when he talked about the March on Washington Movement. Based on notes for a speech, Malcolm X concluded that the March on Washington was a prime example of black leadership's corruption by white money and protection. Insinuating that John F. Kennedy asked the so-called "big six" black leaders to call the march off; on finding that the masses were behind the movement, Kennedy then endorsed the movement, met with Stephan Currier of the Taconic Foundation, Whitney Young, and other members of the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership at the Carlyle Hotel to offer them money and press coverage to "organize" the march.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to pushing a black nationalist's view of black leadership to aid black people's struggle against second-class citizenship in the United States, Malcolm X continued to organize around the ideology of black humanity instead of black civil rights primarily based on a connection to a historic past that was grounded in the African continent. Malcolm X's theory concluded that:

1. Negroes were considered "not human" because they lacked an identity. Identity is made-up of a nationality – a language, culture; a history. Negroes - just a savage, wild animal.
2. The removal of human characteristics or the lack of evidence of humanity was a tactic to kill the Negro – spiritually, mentally, morally, socially, economically, politically, etc.
3. By destroying the history (cultural roots) of people (Negro people), they would die. That death would result in Negroes being cut-off from the human family making it possible for white supremacist ideology to continue and thrive. It would also help Negroes to remain in constant separation from the freedom that all citizens were afforded by the state.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Malcolm X, *Speech Notes*. The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



Malcolm X hoped to instill pride in blacks about their African heritage. In a speech given in 1965, Malcolm X described the connection of black Americans to blacks on the continent. Detailing how the circumstances of effected blacks all over the diaspora, particularly in America. In this speech, he also highlighted the significance of the NOI and their desire to show blacks in America their “roots” in Africa.

Why should the black man in America concern himself ...with what happens in Africa? ...They projected Africa in a negative light. In hating Africa and hating Africans we ended up hating ourselves without even realizing it. You can't hate your origins and love yourself. Because you can't have a positive attitude toward yourself and a negative attitude toward Africa at the same time. To the same degree that your attitude that your understanding of and your attitude toward Africa becomes positive, you'll find that your understanding of and your attitude toward yourself will become positive and this is what the white man knows. They very skillfully made us hate ourselves...We have become a people that hated. In hating our features, our skin, our blood, why we had to end up we hated ourselves. Our color, to us, became a chain ... a prison which we felt was keeping us confined. We felt all these restrictions were based solely upon our color. ...It made us feel inferior. It made us feel inadequate. It made us feel helpless. It became hateful to us. When we fell victim to this feeling of inadequacy ...we turn to somebody else to show us the way ...We did not have confidence in a black man to show us the way, in black people to show us. We did not think a black man could do anything except play some horns...In serious things, where our food, clothing, and shelter and our education were concerned we turned to the Man. We did not have confidence in the black man to do anything for us. We never thought in terms of doing things ourselves...because we felt helpless. What made us feel helpless was our hatred for ourselves.

One of the things that made the Muslim movement grow was its emphasis upon things African... African blood, African origin, African culture, African ties, and you'd be surprised but what we discovered is that deep within his subconscious down ...he's still more African than he is American. He *thinks* that he is more American, because the man is jiving him, ...because he is brainwashing him telling him you American, you American, but he really is more African. Man how could you think you are American when you have *never* had any kind of American treat? ... their dining, I got a plate in front of me but nothing is on it. Because all of us are sitting at the same table makes us diners? I'm not a diner until you let me dine. ... Just because you in this country does not make you an American. It takes more than that ... You have to enjoy the fruits of Americanism. You have enjoyed the thorns ...the thistles.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Black Media Archives, “*You Can't Hate the Roots of a Tree and Not Hate That Tree*(1965), Malcolm X , (Episode 149, 16 September 2008), Podcast.

Although Malcolm X continued to accredit the idea of linking an African past and present to a black struggle against American apartheid to the NOI or Elijah Muhammad, there is no evidence to suggest that either the NOI or Elijah Muhammad developed any depth concerning the connection to Africa before Malcolm X began making speeches and teaching. After X established the precedence (and the material), it became standard NOI practice to use historical evidence to establish a basic African history of greatness and translate this greatness as promise of the potential of black Americans to overthrow their own colonial forces and claim their status as first-class citizens. Furthermore, Elijah Muhammad's brand of black nationalism was similar to many separatists who desired a black physical space but no real solution as to where this land would be or how blacks would actually lay hands to this area. Elijah Muhammad's third grade education and lack of communication skills made it difficult for him to convince the majority of black people to abandon their hopes in the American dream. In addition, many of Muhammad's forays into black nationalism came through his involvement in other organizations, like the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Unlike Martin Delaney, the NOI did not establish back to Africa plans. In fact, Elijah Muhammad had as many reservations and complaints about Africa as did many black Americans of his time.<sup>83</sup> The only concrete manifestation of his idea to separate from America and inhabit a separate black land came from his meeting with the Klu Klux Klan, in 1960, to acquire land and monetary donations.<sup>84</sup> With Malcolm as the leading public face of the NOI, the NOI entered the debate about black civil rights with a

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<sup>83</sup> Evanzz, Karl. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad*. New York: Patheon Books, 1999

<sup>84</sup> Evanzz, Collins

television program that tried to capture the spirit of the movement by offering an alternative to the non-violent notions of Martin Luther King, Jr.

## The Hate That Hate Produced

*The Hate That Hate Produced* was a series of interviews conducted by Louis Lomax for a nightly news program called *Newsbeat*.<sup>85</sup> The show's host, Mike Wallace, was unable interview any member of the NOI because of his racial heritage. An independent New York City television<sup>86</sup> station, WNTA, which aired *Newsbeat*, touted the series as a documentary. In truth, the show was a news-special with narration and explanation by Mike Wallace, footage of NOI and other black nationalist organizations, and primary interviews done by Louis Lomax. According to Thomas Doherty,

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 Wilkins. Though Wallace assures viewers that "sober minded Negroes" reject the "black racism" of the "Negro dissenters," he cautions, "let no one underestimate the Muslims."<sup>87</sup>

Lomax became interested in the story after he witnessed the physical violence experienced by his friend, Robert Maynard, and his white wife while they strolled through Harlem.<sup>88</sup> Lomax was unaware of the black nationalist fervor in Harlem, immediately wanted to do a story on the rise of black nationalism.

On the following Monday morning I discussed the experience with my immediate superior on the Mike Wallace staff, Ted Yates, ...Ted rented a miniature tape recorder and I strapped it to my body for my return visit to Harlem the following Saturday night. ...Not only did I tape the speeches, but I managed to have private talks with such black nationalist leaders as Carlos Cook and James Lawson. As I

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Malcolm X: In Print, on Screen," *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000) : 32.

<sup>86</sup> <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/W/htmlW/wallacemike/wallacemike.htm>

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Malcolm X: In Print, on Screen," *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000) : 32.

<sup>88</sup> Louis Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968), 52.

sat in the Chock-Full-σ-Nuts at the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> street and Seventh Avenue, I was struck by that they consistently referred to “Brother Malcolm X.” When I asked who was Malcolm X, they replied that he was the local leader of the Black Muslims. And when I asked who, in God’s name, were the Black Muslims they both broke with laughter.<sup>89</sup>

The one population that did know about the NOI were people who lived in the urban spaces that the NOI actively sought members and set-up business and temples. In one particular urban space, Harlem, New York, the NOI gained much visibility. During the summer of 1954,<sup>90</sup> Malcolm X became the minister of temple (mosque) seven. By 1955, Malcolm had attained “obtained business certificate for luncheonette,”<sup>91</sup> and on May 11, 1956, incorporated temple seven “with the city and county of New York.”<sup>92</sup> To further the visibility of the NOI in urban space, X decided to create and publish the first *Muhamad Speaks* in 1957, which was then sold by individual Muslims in urban spaces, like Harlem.<sup>93</sup>

Along with the publishing and distribution of Muhammad Speaks, 1957 proved to be a progressive year for the NOI’s public visibility. The event that brought significant attention to the New York chapter of the NOI was the brutal beating of Johnson X Hinton in Harlem. According to Malcolm X,

...a sizeable organization can remain practically unknown, unless something happens that brings it to the general public’s attention. Well certainly no one in the Nation of Islam had any anticipation of the kind of thing that would happen in Harlem one night.<sup>94</sup>

On an April night in 1957,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>90</sup> Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*, (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 109.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>93</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999) , 241-242.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 238.

Two white policemen, breaking up a street scuffle between some Negroes, ordered other Negroes passer-by to 'Move on!' Of these bystanders, two happened to be Muslim brother Johnson Hinton and another brother of Temple Seven. They did not scatter and run the way the white cops had wanted. Brother Hinton was attacked with nightsticks. His scalp was split open, and a police car came and he was taken to a nearby precinct.<sup>95</sup>

Following a phone call from the second Muslim brother who was not attacked, patrons of the Luncheonette, including Malcolm X, went to the precinct to discover the state of Hinton. According to Malcolm, fifty Fruit of Islam members (FOI) stood outside the precinct where Hinton was being held.<sup>96</sup> Observers noticed the formation of the well-dressed men hovered to find out why the men were in this location. On reaching the precinct, X entered and negotiated the movement of Hinton to Harlem Hospital where he was treated for his wounds. Initially, told that Johnson was not there and not injured X was forced to threaten the 28<sup>th</sup> precinct officers with non-removal of the FOI men and the growing crowd; it was only after this interaction that X was allowed to see Hinton and visually assess his wounds, which included a fractured skull.

According to theologian Louis DeCaro, X did not give the full story of the event in his autobiography. DeCaro notes,

In fact, Malcolm was the major figure in two emergency meeting with the police department. The first meeting took place on the night of the incident, when Malcolm met with several high-level representatives of the New York City Police Department. The emergency meeting was held in the office of James Hicks, the editor of the New York Amsterdam News, who was asked to mediate. According to Hicks, the police officials initially tried to intimidate Malcolm, telling him that they would not be him to ask his followers outside of the Precinct building to disperse. However Malcolm called their bluff, walking out of the meeting without saying a word. The police officials were forced to ask him to return to the meeting, and thereafter found themselves humbled before a righteously indignant Malcolm X.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid 238.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 238

...Johnson X was treated and released into the custody of the police, who returned him to the 28<sup>th</sup> Precinct. Malcolm's account gives the impression that this was the climax of the event, but actually it continued further into the night. Followed by his Muslim disciples and thousands of other Harlemites who had gathered at the hospital, Malcolm went back to the precinct, marching along 125<sup>th</sup> street, the main thoroughfare in Harlem. Malcolm and an attorney then discussed bail for Johnson X and the two other Muslims involved in the incident. Meanwhile, outside the precinct building, the crowd had grown to several thousand. ...the sight of orderly Muslim men and women, lined along both sides of the street for a full block and in several rows, was intimidating to the police, who were keeping a nervous watch from inside. Suddenly Malcolm came outside, raised his arm, and gave a signal.<sup>97</sup>

Once the signal was given, according to James Hicks, "...these people just faded into the night...It was the most orderly movement of four thousand to five thousand people I've ever seen in my life – they just simply disappeared – right before our eyes."<sup>98</sup> Following this display of authority, Malcolm began to be observed by the New York Police Department (NYPD) and remained under surveillance by the NYPD (the FBI and eventually, the CIA) for the rest of his life.

By the time the spring of 1959 rolled around, the Muslims were known in the New York area. Other police interactions and the growing Temple Seven brought Malcolm and the NOI to the attention of the New York media. It was under these circumstances that and the repeated urgings of other black nationalist that the NOI came to be the focus of "*The Hate That Hate Produced.*" Although the Johnson Hinton case gave the Muslims a standing as a radical organization in black urban spaces, it was the leadership of Malcolm X as minister of Temple Seven that radicalized the Muslims in Harlem. The activism of the NOI was a direct result of Malcolm's presence. The

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<sup>97</sup> Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*, (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 112-113.

<sup>98</sup> James Hicks, "Another Angle: Sick of It All," *New York Amsterdam News*, (2 July 1960), quoted in Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*, (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 113.

preexisting NOI policy forbade Muslims to involve themselves in the affairs of non-Muslims. It was X who understood the zeitgeist of the 1950s and understood that the NOI could position itself as the radical contingent of the movement by converting black nationalist teachings (a militant devotion to a strict moral code, black fiscal empowerment, a vocal rejection of black inferiority, and an infusion of positive black images) into an alternative to the burgeoning non-violent section of the movement. Armed with belief that made Islam was the proper religion of black people, X went about to convert the masses in Harlem and the country. After the series, the exposure of the NOI reached the nation through other media formats including major newspapers, local and national television programs, and presentations or speeches given by top leaders in the NOI – most notably, Malcolm X.

From the onset of the program, it was clear that the focus of the series was on one black nationalist organization in particular, the Nation of Islam (NOI). The piece was designed to introduce the majority of the New York City whites to the goings-on of the “new” Islamic sect. Introduced by Mike Wallace as a view into black supremacist groups, the interviews, live footage of rallies, the NOI’s Founder’s Day celebration, and other events focused its attention on Malcolm X. Clearly enamored with the man, Lomax wrote, “‘Big Red’, as Malcolm was called when he was peddling prostitutes and dope on the streets of Harlem, is a dashing and handsome man. Women of all races and creeds are drawn to him. He speaks with an authority that is all but hypnotic.”<sup>99</sup> For the first time in his journalist career, Lomax had the racial advantage. Lomax had to protect the white

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<sup>99</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 21.

camera men as they shot at NOI functions.<sup>100</sup> Eventually Lomax developed a friendship with Malcolm and even went so far as to write a book on the life of Malcolm X.<sup>101</sup> As the national face of the NOI and the most articulate, handsome minister, it came as no surprise that Malcolm became an overnight celebrity, and the NOI, because of the celebrity of Malcolm X, became known nationwide as the most radical civil rights organization. Malcolm X described the situation prior to the airing of *The Hate That Produced*:

You also quote the comedian Dick Gregory, whose scriptwriter has him saying that most Negroes never knew the Muslims existed until the white man ... put the Muslims on television. I must confess that this is part true. The Muslims have been in the Negro Community for a long time, but Negroes such as yourself, who regard yourselves as Negro "leaders" never know what is going on in the Negro Community until the white man tells you.<sup>102</sup>

It was true what Comedian Dick Gregory, a friend of Malcolm X, said about the NOI. The NOI, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, was insignificant as a civil rights organization. In response to a critique of the NOI by Jackie Robinson, Malcolm X constructed a letter that was published, along with Robinson's, in the *Amsterdam News*, the leading black newspaper in New York. Among other things that Malcolm X and Robinson discussed, was the NOI and its influence on the black community in Harlem. Robinson, a black Republican, lamented the creation and the agency of the NOI. It is particularly damaging to Robinson that Malcolm X, in such a short period of time and with a criminal background, was touted as a leader in the black community in Harlem and increasingly, around the country. The manner in which this was accomplished was even more troublesome to Robinson.

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<sup>100</sup>*The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959), 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

<sup>101</sup> Louis Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Company, 1968), 54.

<sup>102</sup> Malcolm X, "Malcolm X's Letter," *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 November 1963.



Prior to the arrival of Malcolm X and the television production of *The Hate That Hate Produced*, the NOI was a religious sect similar in fashion to the Moorish Science Temple of America or the Christian-like religious movements Daddy Grace and Father Divine. The NOI had not yet reached the stature and influence of a political organization, such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The movement of the NOI into a religious/political organization took a two-fold approach; the first was the articulation of political philosophy created by Malcolm X using the ideology of Elijah Muhammad and Farad Muhammad. The second approach was filming and subsequent release and re-release of *The Hate That Produced*.

The special began with an introduction by Mike Wallace to the nature of race relations in 1959. Wallace was quick to admit that blacks in America have been confronted with a practice of discrimination supported by the ideology of racism. Unlike organizations of the past, such as the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and unlike men such as Martin Luther King, Jr., the organizations that were the focus of this documentary did not support peaceful or political acquisition of civil rights. Wallace set the stage for an introduction to the audience and growing portion of the black community. It is at this point that Wallace detailed the focus of the black supremacist group – the proliferation of the message of hate for the white man. To add in his characterization of black supremacist groups in general and the NOI in particular, Wallace started with a description of the play *Orgena*: “A Negro” spelled backwards. In *Orgena*, “its theme was the all-black trial of a symbolic white man for his world crimes against non-whites; found guilty, sentenced to death, he was dragged off shouting about

all he had done ‘for the nigra people.’”<sup>103</sup> After describing the message of the play to his audience, Wallace moved to the demographics of the NOI and the size of its membership. This is all done in preparation for the clips of the NOI in action. The first clip included a still photo of the Muslim’s parochial school in Chicago, where, according to Wallace, “black children are taught to hate the white man.”<sup>104</sup>

The stills detailed a concise photographic history of the NOI, from the operation of department stores to the familiar relationship the NOI maintained with prominent black political representatives such as Manhattan Borough President, Hulan Jack. The first action footage was a series of camera shots panning the entrance of blacks attending a meeting where Elijah Muhammad was going to speak. Wallace let the viewing audience know that Muhammad was the revered leader of the Muslims and that his security was a high priority. So guarded was the leader that all persons who entered the meeting had to be thoroughly searched, a procedure to which all participants gladly agreed.<sup>105</sup> As the camera panned and the frame moved to the seated audience, the viewing audience was lavished with images of immaculately dressed black people, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Elijah Muhammad. As Muhammad was seen cutting across the walkway to the stage, the viewing audience heard the tale of Muhammad’s arrest record and refusal to register for the draft. Wallace believed it was pertinent for the viewing audience to know that during World War II, Muhammad was “arrested and convicted of sedition and draft dodging.”<sup>106</sup> Prior to any words by Elijah Muhammad, the

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<sup>103</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 254.

<sup>104</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced (1959)*, 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

viewing audience was introduced to Malcolm X, the New York minister and ambassador at large. Wallace explained to the viewing audience that the speech that Malcolm X used to introduce Elijah Muhammad to the stage was one that heralds the end of a period in time where the white man ruled.<sup>107</sup> After listening to Malcolm X praise Muhammad, the viewing audience was finally introduced to Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad, after briefly detailing the plight of the black man, was shown being interviewed by Louis Lomax.

The first frame of the segment was a full nineteen-second close-up of Elijah Muhammad facing Louis Lomax. The camera did not expand the frame to include Lomax until the viewing audience had had a long opportunity to look at Elijah Muhammad. The long pause the camera took was the first opportunity that many in the viewing audience had to look at the man who, as they had been told, would like to end the white race. The unassuming, small framed, stern-looking, fair-skinned man spoke with a high voice. It was easy for the audience to assume that in any other situation, this man would not be seen as a threat to American society. That was exactly the point; the look of Mr. Muhammad was deceiving; the audience was forced to listen to what he was saying as Lomax pressed him on questions about the destruction of the white race.

After a brief introduction by Mike Wallace, the program moved into the interview between Malcolm X and Lomax. Wallace, after providing a detailed list of the past grievances of Malcolm X, went into a description of Malcolm's new life and his understanding of how he came to that new life – acceptance of himself as a black man. Instead of having the camera stay on Malcolm X for a frame, the camera stayed briefly on X for a few seconds, expanded out to include Lomax and then zoomed back on Malcolm X as he explained NOI ideology of the designation of the white man as the devil

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

or serpent. Lomax, unlike in his interview with Elijah Muhammad, allowed Malcolm to do most of the talking. The camera spent long amounts of time either framing X or zooming in and out to capture both Lomax and Malcolm X's mannerisms or just focusing on Malcolm's stature, body movement and language. Unlike Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm was clearly aware of the camera. He attempted to answer the questions posed by Lomax but he also seemed plagued as to how to position his body toward both Lomax and the camera. The interview was cut into segments and the audience was then taken back to Wallace, who introduced more Malcolm X footage. He prefaced that the video the audience was about to view was of Malcolm X speaking to a non-Muslim, Christian majority black audience. In addition, the video, according to Wallace, had been garnered through some struggle. This was a reference to Lomax's necessary protection of the white cameramen. This information suggested to the audience members the signal that they were about to enter into a secret world that, if not for the efforts of *Newsbeat* to investigate, they would be ignorant of. Malcolm did not disappoint. In his particular brand of fiery oration, Malcolm X posed the question of how a people who "wore silks, ... and knew to chart the stars and the universe before they [Europeans] knew that the world wasn't flat" could end up as "hitched to the plow?"<sup>108</sup> As the camera returned to Wallace, the audience was told that this was "the psychology (read trickery) of the Muslims, they know that the American Negro is angry because he has been cast in an inferior role and they seek to convert him to the Muslim doctrine by drenching him in a doctrine of black supremacy."<sup>109</sup> Wallace made clear that the Muslims were a serious

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<sup>108</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959), 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

<sup>109</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959), 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

threat because they were “the most powerful of the black supremacist groups;”<sup>110</sup> letting the audience know that there were more black supremacist groups and that the Muslims were by far the worse.

The video then moved on to United African Movement and their attack on liberal white Americans, including “Eleanor ‘phony’ Roosevelt, the African white Queen.”<sup>111</sup> In an interview with the president of United African Nationalist Movement, James R. Lawson, Lomax interrogated him about his involvement in the third Founder’s Day celebration of the NOI. The question was an attempt to connect General Abdel Nasser of Egypt, through James Lawson, to Elijah Muhammad and the NOI. In attempt to ostracize Lawson and by extension all black nationalists, Lomax continued to question Lawson about his feelings on integration, Ralph Bunche, Roy Wilkins (executive secretary of the NAACP), and Arthur Spingarn (president of the NAACP), whom Lawson called a “Zionist Jew.”

Wallace provocatively described the position of most black nationalists on the color of Jesus Christ and Christianity. To show how many black nationalists disavowed a belief in the whiteness of Jesus or Christianity, Lomax showed the audience an artist’s rendition of a black Jesus – the fact that the portrait bore an uncanny likeness to Lawson (the owner of the photo) seemed to be a point of contention for Lomax and Wallace. In addition, Wallace again drew the NOI into this debate about Christianity’s suitability for black Americans. Toward the very end of the special Wallace attempted to offer a balanced position to the response of blacks, “a small but growing portion of the American

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced (1959)*, 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

Negro has learned to hate before the white man could learn to love.”<sup>112</sup> Yet Wallace’s non-verbal cues offered a different rendition. Wallace’s face seemed perplexed and downcast at the end of the documentary and his body was rigid. Frustration and anger were thinly veiled and responses to the growing influence of the NOI.

Toward of the end of the interview portion of the documentary, Wallace returned to the subject of Malcolm X. With a still photo of the NOI minister visible, Wallace went on to reiterate much of the same information he had said earlier about the minister. After this reiteration, Wallace went into a segment that asked whether whites and Christianity deserve the designations they had been given by the black nationalist. To support this segment, Lomax interviewed Dr. Anna Arnold Hedgemon, an assistant in the cabinet of New York Mayor Robert Wagner, 1954-58, and the person who originally told Lomax that he “had better interview Malcolm X if he wanted a true picture of black national activity in Harlem.”<sup>113</sup> The interview between Hedgemon and Lomax was a bit argumentative, with Hedgemon forcefully letting Lomax know that “he better get it right”<sup>114</sup> when discussing her quote on the color of Jesus. Hedgemon and Lomax went back and forth on the questions that the black nationalists have brought-up.

Lomax: Let’s get down to brass tacks so to speak. What would be your reaction if a white group held a rally at on 42<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway and said the things about Negroes that these street corner orators are saying about Whites and Jews?

Hedgemon: First of all, I would be opposed to it no matter who did it. I want that on the record. However, the situations are not analogous.

Lomax: Why aren’t they analogous?

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Louis Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Company, 1968), 53.

<sup>114</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced (1959)*, 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

Hedgemond: For the very simple reason, that America has bottled up the Negro in such fashion that what he pours out is his complete reaction to frustration on the one hand and his objection to the much of the unintelligent way in which he has been handled as an American on the other.

Lomax: But now, pardon me aren't you saying that previous condition of servitude or state of persecution justifies the preaching of race hate where as the absences of this historical business does not justify it?

Hedgemond: No, I did not say it justifies it, I said this is the reason.

Lomax: But it is right.

Hedgemond: Absolutely it's not right; no matter who does it

Lomax: Does it offend the democratic ethic?

Hedgemond: yes, but you see America's policy offends it <sup>115</sup>

After the interview with Hedgemond, Wallace appeared dispirited, his eyes downcast laden with expressions of recognition and defeat, with the conclusion that indeed black nationalist ideology was growing in segments of the American Negro population.

And there you have it, ...tragic and irrefutable evidence that a small but growing segment of the American Negro population is giving air to a flagrant doctrine of black supremacy.<sup>116</sup>

Wallace then held his own interview with Lomax. The two discussed how Lomax felt conducting these interviews and doing the research for the piece. It was never mentioned that Lomax was pulled into the project because of Wallace's inability to conduct the interviews on his own. Although it may be easy to forget that Wallace was the principle investigator on this project because he did not conduct any interviews, it must not be forgotten that Wallace, a white man, was orchestrating and framing this program. Years later, when being interviewed for the documentary, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, Wallace

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<sup>115</sup> *The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959), 26 November 2008 [television program]; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6140647821635049109>; Internet; accessed 6 August 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

stated, “this was a group about which I knew nothing about, about which white New Yorkers simply knew nothing.”<sup>117</sup> The information was presented to inform white people, in New York, what was happening undetected in their country; unbeknownst to the producers, a large segment of the black community previously unaware of the Muslims became familiar with the organization. Wallace made no serious case for laying the blame for black supremacy at the feet of white supremacy. To the contrary, Wallace seemed focused on detailing the emergence of the NOI and more importantly, Malcolm X.

*The Hate That Hate Produced* introduced Malcolm X to the country and eventually the world. Many of the same conclusions that Wallace encouraged did influence the introduction of Malcolm X. For most of X’s time in the national press, he continued to be introduced as either the converted Muslim minister or a black supremacist. As a result of Wallace’s designation, the NOI became known as the primary black supremacist organization in the country. Unexpectedly the NOI profited by the designation through increased membership and exposure in the national press. The man to herald this newfound attention was none other than Malcolm X.

## **Black Nationalist/Black Supremacist**

*The Hate That Hate Produced* helped to project the NOI into the civil rights movement and to project Malcolm X into the leadership of the civil rights movement. Although there were other black nationalist organizations, the NOI became the most visible of the black nationalist organizations. Included in the public conceptualization was the idea, attributed most clearly to Mike Wallace, that black nationalism was a

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<sup>117</sup> Bagwell, Orlando *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* 1994.



response to white supremacy. Hence anyone attached to black nationalism during this period was seen as a black supremacist. The label of black supremacist groups seemed one that the NOI was willing to handle. Seemingly the NOI, including Malcolm, considered the characterization to be among the slew of derogatory statements used to describe any force in the black community that defended a separate destiny from that of their former enslavers. Actually, the NOI enjoyed the recognition as a black nationalist group. According to Essien-Udom one of the first scholars and orthodox Moslem to examine the NOI,

Black nationalism assumes that the distribution of political power between whites and black in the United States will not allow a solution of the Negro problem. Therefore, they have not sought to change either the prevailing American ideology or institutions.<sup>118</sup>

In addition Essien-Udom characterized the brand of nationalism from the NOI as,

The Nation of Islam, however, lacks both a territorial base and the symbolism drawn from either the Negro's past in the United States or from his African origins. This peculiar nationalism has placed its antecedents in what it believes to be 'Arabian civilization,' the highest development of which was reached in Egypt.<sup>119</sup>

Essien-Udom, who spent two years attending meetings and activities, also interviewed prominent members of the NOI including Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Although Essien-Udom believed that the NOI was the most viable of the black nationalist groups, he also believed they were doomed to fail. The finding of separate land was one among many issues the Muslims faced according to Essien-Udom. In addition, the Muslims were incapable of bridging the class gap between working class or poorer blacks and the newly emerging black middle class. In fact, the NOI wanted

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<sup>118</sup> E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) , 258.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*,7.

middle class blacks to join their ranks and often believed that, once they had derided middle class blacks and shown them the error of their ways, middle class blacks would join the NOI. Furthermore, in Essien-Udom's view, the NOI did not offer radically different ideology to contradict the legacy of slavery that black people in the United States confronted in their everyday lives. There were already a small number of middle class blacks who did support NOI ideology even if they were unwilling to become NOI members; Dr. Anna Hedgemond, interviewed by Lomax in *The Hate That Hate Produced*, and C. Eric Lincoln, the first scholar to document the inner workings of the NOI, are prime examples. Lastly, the Muslims supported a radical self-reformation that led Malcolm X to call on "the Black Man to recover the dignity the white man robbed from him."<sup>120</sup> This included promises against fornication, the rejection of alcohol and illegal drugs, strict adherence to NOI philosophies, and the financial support of NOI activities. The Muslims believed that it was in the power of the black man to change his circumstances within American society. Malcolm X as a member of the NOI, and even when he separated from the NOI, believed that black women's role was one of support of the black man's fight to improve the entire community's position in American society. Similar to his contemporary, Martin Luther King, Jr. X believed that women should adhere to strict roles that afforded women leadership roles in the homes or as the helpers of nationalist men.

Yet Malcolm could be contradictory, citing that the judge of progressiveness in any society was the role of women. A research website based on the activity of and about

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<sup>120</sup> Rita M. Kissen, "Core Leader to Meet Malcolm X Tonight." Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

Malcolm X offers interesting insight into X's view on women. According to a study guide at [brothermalcolm.net](http://brothermalcolm.net), maintained by Professor Abdul Akalimat of the University of Chicago, Urbana-Champaign:

One of the great leaps that Malcolm X achieved is when he changed his views on women. In his last year or so of rapid transformation he rejected the sexism of conservative tradition and moved toward a revolutionary position that insisted on the principle of absolute equality between men and women. He frequently repeated the revolutionary maxim that the progress of a society can best be gauged by the condition of women in that society, therefore a revolutionary society can exist only when women have been liberated from the chains of male supremacy.<sup>121</sup>

Although Malcolm was progressively confronting his own gender bias, there is no evidence to suggest that Malcolm was ready to see black women leading organizations that actively fought against white supremacy. This could be attributed to his desire to protect black women from the physical atrocities of race work, but it is evident that X wanted women in the struggle to adhere to some kind of black patriarchal concept of traditional roles. Yet X actively supported women in the movement. He included women in both of his organizations after he left the NOI, Lynn Shiffett had a leadership role as well as Sarah Mitchell, who held a position as the Organization of Afro American Unity's (OAAU) secretary and Malcolm's confidant.<sup>122</sup>

As a member of the NOI, Malcolm X taught that NOI's particular brand of black nationalism was the answer to black people's problem.

You may be asking at this point: "What does the religion of Islam have to do with the American so-called Negroes' changing attitude toward himself, the white man, segregation, integration, and separation? What part does this religion play in the current "Black Revolution?"

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<sup>121</sup> Abdul Akalimat, "The Malcolm X/Malik Shabazz Study Guide," *Brother Malcolm .net*, 4 February 2003 [repository on-line]; available from [http://www.brothermalcolm.net/studyguide/sg\\_main.html](http://www.brothermalcolm.net/studyguide/sg_main.html); Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>122</sup> William Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization for Afro-American Unity*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 112.

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that Islam is the religion of Naked Truth, and Truth is the only thing that will truly set our people free. Truth will open our eyes; truth enables us to see the white wolf as he really is. Truth will stand us on our own feet; truth will make us walk for ourselves instead of leaning on others who mean our people no good. Truth not only show us who our real enemy is, truth also gives us the strength and the desire to separate from that enemy. Only a blind man will walk into the open embrace of his enemy. And only a people who are blind to the truth about their enemy will seek to embrace or integrate with that enemy.<sup>123</sup>

Malcolm could make these statements because, in his eyes, Elijah Muhammad had saved him from the fate that befalls black men with a prison record. Elijah was the “leader, teacher, guide”<sup>124</sup> of black people. According to Malcolm, Muhammad felt the pain of his people – “our hurt was his hurt.”<sup>125</sup> He had “divine understanding, love, patience, mercy, and forgiveness.”<sup>126</sup> For Malcolm, the teachings of Muhammad solved the problems of the black man and could elevate his suffering. The discipline offered by the Muslim life was the key to the transitioning of black men into a higher place another society. The problem was getting to that other configuration of a society where black people could be without the struggle against discrimination.

As Malcolm interacted with other activists, it became clear that the NOI lacked the money and the community support to become the lead organization that it had hoped in the early days of its leadership under Muhammad. One of the major problems was the idea that Malcolm and the Muslims were no more than just words.

It could be heard increasingly in the Negro communities: “Those Muslims talk tough but they never do anything, unless somebody bothers Muslims.” I moved

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<sup>123</sup> Malcolm X, *Speech Notes*. Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>124</sup> X, Malcolm, *Who is Elijah Muhammad – Various Notes*. Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

around among outsiders more than most other Muslim officials. I felt the very real potentiality that, considering the mercurial moods of the black masses, this labeling of Muslims as “talk only” could see us, powerful as we were, one day suddenly from the Negroes’ front-line struggle.<sup>127</sup>

After a while, even the Muslim protest for their members became lax. Unlike the earlier response to the Johnson Hinton case of 1957, in 1962, when two Los Angeles Muslims were victims of police brutality Elijah Muhammad ordered Malcolm X not to get too involved in public protest for fear that the NOI would be known as a radical civil rights organization involved in the daily affairs of living in America. Furthermore, the fiscal matters of the NOI began to breed contentions among the membership and others outside the organization. In a letter written to Malcolm X, a former Muslim detailed the reasons why she left the organization,

The Messenger’s (Elijah Muhammad) family lacks no convenience from Him down to the great-grand yes? What small industry Muslims lay claim to are run by his family yes? The privileged make Mecca and elsewhere yes? It would appear that in Islam it would depend upon who you were born to that insured your comfort.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to the financial issues that surfaced, Malcolm X faced a crisis in the discovery of Elijah Muhammad’s illegitimate children.

He took at least nine that we know about. And I’m not speculating, because he told me himself. ...Nine of them. Not two of them who are suing him, but nine of them.<sup>129</sup>

Muhammad’s son and heir apparent Wallace D. Muhammad (Imam Warith Deen

Muhammad) had told X of the illegitimate children. In his diary writings about the event

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<sup>127</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 296.

<sup>128</sup> Malcolm X, *General Correspondence*. Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>129</sup> Malcolm X, “There’s a Worldwide Revolution Going On, February 15, 1965,” *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989) , 117.

X commented according to Wallace, “the family thought I knew, yet feared for me to know.”<sup>130</sup> Malcolm also learned of Elijah Muhammad’s distrust of him and feelings that Malcolm “was too big, ambitious.”<sup>131</sup> It was at this meeting that Malcolm learned of the separation between Elijah Muhammad’s philosophy and teachings and Wallace Fard’s teachings. Malcolm was told by Wallace, who was also dismissed and eventually returned to the NOI, that

1. Allah not a man
2. In person of
3. Never told M he was Allah
4. This is M teaching<sup>132</sup>

Malcolm wrote Muhammad about this information and was told that he was “trying to turn him against his family. Elijah also told Raymond Sharieff, a NOI minister and son-in-law to Muhammad, that “Malcolm, Louis (Farakhan), Lucius, are plotting.”<sup>133</sup>

Malcolm left Chicago and did not speak to Elijah Muhammad about these issues again.

Increasingly, it became clear to Malcolm and others that the NOI would have a difficult time being the vanguard of the black nationalist portion of the civil rights movement. The NOI’s policy of separatism politically and emotionally made it nearly impossible for the group to be a part of the vanguard of the movement. Despite a clear distinction as a political black nationalist organization, the NOI was not active in the political portion of the civil rights movement. The contribution of the NOI was Malcolm X’s Africanizing of the NOI doctrine. In addition, the naming of the white man as the devil, culpable for the position of black people in American society, was another

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<sup>130</sup>Malcolm X, *Diaries*. Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York. (Sc MG 721) Box 9 (Reel 9)

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Ibid

contribution of the NOI to the struggle for civil rights. In this respect, the NOI changed the movement and helped to usher the changes of the black power movement by offering an alternative to mainstream organizations of the civil rights movement.

In similar fashion to the Mike Wallace documentary, the image of Malcolm X contained in newspapers and other periodicals was that of a black supremacist. Powell and Amundson describe the media representation of Malcolm X as, “day after day...negative words and images ...portray[ing] primarily an extremist, power hungry, violent desperado.”<sup>134</sup> According to their study,

violence is an idea that is connected most often with Malcolm X, especially since he was always placed in opposition to the nonviolent Martin Luther King, Jr.; The media connected Malcolm X with a negative image of power by clustering it with such terms as: demanded, denounced, disciples, demagogue, exclusive, evil, followers, fiery, icon, lieutenant, lust for power, militant, outspoken (outspoken implies that he is overusing his power to attract media attention), personality, rival and split.<sup>135</sup>

Yet, there is no one singular violent act that can be directly associated with Malcolm X. It must be noted that the image of Malcolm X in the black newspapers was different. Since he wrote a column that appeared in the *Amsterdam News* and the *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch* before *Muhammad Speaks* was printed and sold, X was able to maintain a strong relationship with the *Amsterdam News* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the leading black papers, and throughout his entire time in the public sphere they covered his activities. James Hicks of the *Amsterdam News* originally broke the story of the Johnson Hinton police brutality incident, the first news story on Malcolm X that featured his bold confrontation with the New York City Police department.

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<sup>134</sup> Kimberly Powell and Sonja Amundson, “Malcolm X and the Mass Media: Creation of a Rhetorical Exigence,” *North Dakota Journal of Speech and Theater* 15 (September 2002) : 43 .

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

After making a calloused statement responding to a question about the assassination of the late President Kennedy, "...the chickens have come to roost," Malcolm X was officially silenced as national representative of the NOI. In addition to limiting his speaking on behalf of the NOI, Muhammad stopped all of Malcolm X's public speaking engagements. Although the time-period of the silencing was never agreed upon, it became increasingly clear that Malcolm X would never again speak on behalf of the NOI. After coming to grips with the truth of his situation, Malcolm decided to officially leave the NOI. After the split between Malcolm X and the NOI, Malcolm X's image underwent a transformation. Although X was still considered a black nationalist and/or supremacist, the press seemed to notice a change in him. At a press conference Malcolm X is called "so charming – so intelligent" by a female reporter.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, X became skillful at presenting his new image to the press. Initially, shortly after the split, Malcolm aligned himself with Elijah Muhammad while simultaneously making statements advocating for "better food, clothing, housing, education, and jobs *right now*"<sup>137</sup> – a contradiction for Muslims, who did not believe in active participation in the civil rights movement. Meanwhile his friend and informant, Wallace Muhammad returned to the NOI, leaving X completely alone in his rejection of Elijah Muhammad.

After his hajj, the transformation was complete. He made a point of sending letters to his assistant to be distributed to the national press.<sup>138</sup> Malcolm also tried to reach out to mainstream civil rights organizations. Unfortunately, many were unwilling

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<sup>136</sup> Malcolm X, *Printed Matter* Malcolm X papers, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 346.



to accept his new perspective and continued to separate themselves from the former Muslim; even after X's death Bayard Rustin wanted nothing to do with the legacy of Malcolm X. When commenting on the press' desire to continue to characterize Malcolm X as a black supremacist, George Brietman contends,

The truth is that they understood (as the ultra – left so-called militants did not) that the corner Malcolm wanted to turn was to the left, not the right. They believed that the “new” Malcolm could pose a greater threat to the status quo than the Black Muslim Malcolm.<sup>139</sup>

Brietman's assessment gives insight into the political significance of X's actions. With Malcolm's move toward Pan-Africanism, orthodox Sunni Islam, and revolutionary movements around the world, Malcolm X ostracized himself from the civil rights movements more central advocates. His advocacy for the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam further alienated X from, not only the mainstream civil rights activists, but from any positive attention he might have received from the federal government. As he traveled to Africa and made close connections with some the world's leading anti-United States and pro-Soviet Union leaders, it was evident that Malcolm X would not be in the vanguard of the civil rights movement.

Resulting from these two connected images are two images of Malcolm X, the black nationalist/black supremacist and the radical/Pan-Africanist. The first is a combination of the projected persona of the NOI minister and the press' classifications of X mentioned above. The persona of Malcolm X as a NOI minister is complex. On the one hand, most ministers employ a bit of dramatic performance to encourage members who follow similar beliefs. Ministers may also employ dramatic methodology to illicit a response from the congregation (particularly, in the black religious tradition), and to urge

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<sup>139</sup> George Brietman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary*, (New York: Pathfinder, 1967, 1989), 27.

financial support to the organization and its endeavors. As a minister, X was heavily involved in his temple's activities.

At Mosque No. 7 in New York City, where Malcolm was the principal minister from 1952 to December of 1963, there were three public lectures a week – two on weekday evenings and one on Sunday afternoon – before standing-room-only crowds frequently reaching 1, 000 in number; ...Monday nights were reserved for the Fruit of Islam, to which all men technically belonged, with sessions in self-defense and martial arts training, instructions in male behavioral conditioning, and court tribunals before whom appeared wayward members. Wednesday and Thursday evenings, in turn were devoted to Student Enrollment and Muslim Girls' Training and General Civilization Class, respectively...His desire to engage people at the level of their humanity was gain evident on Saturdays' "Unity Nights," when members gathered to socialize in a controlled but "relaxed" environment where they were served a light fare while listening to African and "Middle Eastern" music as well as selected jazz...However, perhaps the most distinguishable indication of Malcolm's commitment to his immediate flock was that he would gather the children on Saturday mornings and take them on field trips to the museums, the planetarium, and to other enriching experiences.<sup>140</sup>

His lessons, according to Malcolm's friend and colleague, Benjamin Karim, were simple.

Be honest. Harm no one, and take nothing that is not yours. Treat others as you would be treated by them. Practice charity. Exercise self-control. Avoid extremes, keep a middle path. Pay your taxes. Obey the law.<sup>141</sup>

His focus in preparing assistant ministers was extensive. "Rather than presenting a course on elocution, Malcolm was much more concerned with the broader education and exposure of aspiring ministers, and he was demanding in the volume and sophistication of the readings he required for the class."<sup>142</sup> As Gomez has noted, X "executed his ministerial responsibilities in ways consistent with his quest to recreate a sense of

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<sup>140</sup> Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 346-347.

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin Karim with Peter Skutches and David Gallen, *Remembering Malcolm: The Story of Malcolm X from Inside the Muslim Mosque by his assistant minister, Benjamin Karim*. (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1992), quoted in Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 346.

<sup>142</sup> Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 347.

wholeness.”<sup>143</sup> Yet even Gomez notes that Malcolm’s public image was that of a “firebrand...with powers of persuasion.”<sup>144</sup> There was a marked and clear difference in Malcolm’s public speaking and his personal ministering. The fact that Malcolm combined his political efforts with his religious fervor meant that he was constantly “fishing.” Thus, Malcolm X as a minister using performance or drama rich techniques in front of his congregation was recognizable, and acceptable to the degree that he was using the performance to stir his congregants. On the other hand, Malcolm X using performance to minister to his congregants fully aware that he was being filmed for television drastically altered the interpretation of his performance, as his intended audience may not only be the congregants but also the nation at large who viewed his performance on their televisions.

Malcolm usually changed his tone, cadence and re-arranged his message depending on his audience.

It is not necessarily the case that he intentionally conveyed competing concomitant messages, but it should be borne in mind that Malcolm possessed an expansive intellect, part of which paid careful attention to the perception of his character and mission. It is possible, therefore, that in his quest to mobilize his constituency as well as attract those sitting on the fence, he so skillfully managed his public persona that those of differing perspectives and beliefs within the African-derived community focused on those components of his message most suited to their interests.<sup>145</sup>

To non-Muslims he appeared radical, as Ossie Davis and Sonia Sanchez remarked about being frightened by the speeches that each heard.<sup>146</sup> In addition, seeing these images of Malcolm X as a radical, conservative black nationalist was new and exciting to the press, particularly with the portrayal of blackness offered by a calmer Martin Luther King, Jr.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 346.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 346.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 332-333.

<sup>146</sup> Orlando Bagwell, *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*, The American Experience Series, (New York: PBS, 1994).

Besides being useful as piece of sensational journalism, Malcolm X's ability to perform a divergent black identity helped Malcolm to garner television and mainstream newspaper attention early in his career. His performance of black angst and anger gave the white majority knowledge of some of the inner workings of black thought and mentality.

After his move out of the NOI, Malcolm X still attracted attention, but of a different nature. After his silencing and subsequent parting with the NOI, X's public persona took on three heavily media informed images; as an official member of Sunni Islam, radical humanitarian, and a Pan-Africanist. All of these positionalities caused X to become visible to the American law enforcement agencies, including the CIA, FBI, and the New York Police Department. His radical humanitarian persona allowed X to operate politically in interracial circles. X used this persona or image to build coalitions with groups that were calling for massive changes or revolutions of the status quo in the United States. He aligned himself with Marxist organizations, gave regular speeches to Communist and Socialist associations, went to the South for SNCC, and continually reached out the Civil Rights leaders of the day to form a pact for peace. It was in this time that Malcolm X began to petition African Nations to support a UN indictment against the United States for crimes against humanity, and the period when he became a strong advocate for local government co-optation by members of the community, often telling community members to organize against unfair legislation in public schools and housing.

From the time of his departure from the NOI and his subsequent formal entrance into the civil rights arena, Malcolm X remained in a process of evaluation, acceptance and rejection that allowed him to redirect and expand some of his former positions.

Freed from the mental shackles of Elijah Muhammad, X began to explore the political landscape of the United States and black peoples' positionality in that landscape. As he expanded his understanding of black people living in America, Malcolm X became clear that moving to Africa was not necessary for every black diasporic member. Similarly, the trip to Mecca allowed X to begin to configure his approaches to the race question differently than Elijah Muhammad. It is unclear whether X believed that all white people were the devil, but what is clear is that after Mecca, Malcolm X changed his language about all white people being individual devils. This is not to say that Malcolm X moved away from his black nationalist beliefs – because he did not – it is to say that X began to expand black nationalism to incorporate a myriad of black thought and positionalities.

His expanding notions of black nationalism made it possible for Malcolm X to become the active political citizen that he longed to be during his time with the NOI. X's main complaint was that, "Mr. Muhammad was with Allah, and he has been granted divine patience; he is willing to wait on God to deal with the devil. Well, the rest of us have not seen Allah; we don't have this divine patience, and we are not so willing to wait on God. The younger Black Muslims want to see some action!"<sup>147</sup> The break from Elijah Muhammad allowed X significant traction in the civil rights debate as an alternative to the NAACP, SCLC and CORE. Unlike these organizations, Malcolm X and eventually, his Organization for Afro American Unity (OAAU), created a mix of political activity that dealt with citizens at the local level. Malcolm X continually advocated for community-based control as the means to gain black civil rights. On a national and international level, X advocated for human rights as opposed to civil rights,

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<sup>147</sup> Louis Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Muslim World* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), 91.

which allowed other movements gaining prominence at the time, such as the anti-war movement and Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), to unite under the principles of X's ideology. In advocating for human rights, Malcolm X attracted many comrades outside of the civil rights movement, including foreign diplomats, radical white communist and socialists, and African heads of state. In acquiring the attention of African heads of states, including N'krumah (Ghana) and Toure (Guinea), Malcolm X set the stage for worldwide attention to the crisis of racial disparity in the United States. Similarly, by advocating for newly freed African states to formally charge the United States, Malcolm X astutely surmised that it would call attention to the African States and the actions and activities of black people freed from colonial rule. Thus, if Africans in Africa could govern and meet the needs of their citizenry effectively, Africans in America would be able to do the same.

The two symbols of Malcolm X coalesced into two distinct yet connected images of Malcolm X. The angry, violent black nationalist image was often connected with words like "black supremacist," "demagogue," and "black nationalist" – most prominently displayed in *The Hate That Hate Produced*.<sup>148</sup> The radical, politically active, citizen of the world image of Malcolm X is linked to words like "revolutionary," "militant," "socialist," "radical," and "Afro or African American."<sup>149</sup> The image was visible mostly in the letters that Malcolm X wrote to the press on his travels, the formation of meetings about and for the formation of the OAAU and his political activity in the New York. To understand how these images operated and contributed to representations of Malcolm X that existed after his assassination, it is necessary to

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<sup>148</sup> Kimberly Powell and Sonja Amundson, "Malcolm X and the Mass Media: Creation of a Rhetorical Exigence," *North Dakota Journal of Speech and Theater* 15 (September 2002) :35-45 .

<sup>149</sup>Booker, James. "Is Mecca Trip Changing Malcolm?" *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 May 1964, 14.

explore each sign and its material representation during the late 1950s through the early 1960s. By mapping the uses of the images of Malcolm X, clear and concrete connections can be drawn to the images used to represent the man after he was no longer participating in the production of his image.

## **Black Hero/martyr**

After Malcolm X's assassination, things in the civil rights movement changed dramatically. The majority of blacks believed that the operation of their daily lives would improve with the passing of the Civil Rights bill of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the introduction of Great Society programs, and the seemingly increasing opportunities for blacks to participate equally in American Society. By the end of the 1960s, this sentiment decreased, particularly with the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the beginning of the Black Power Movement. As blacks moved toward cultural acceptance of blackness in the form of ritualistic configuration of African behavior (wearing of African clothing, celebrated African ceremonies, choosing African names), the image of Malcolm X resurfaced as one of the civil rights leaders who thought of civil rights in a theoretical framework. Moreover, in the 1970s and early 1980s, as the economy went into a recession and the federal government moved toward the right politically, the accessibility of blacks severely declined. As black nationalism became the focus of the movement, Malcolm X's words and philosophies were increasingly more relevant.

Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz, his supporters in the socialist party, and civil rights/black nationalist participants of the civil rights movement aided in the reconfiguration of X as a hero and martyr. Invited over for dinner by a colleague who

was a black Muslim, Betty Sanders went and was then invited to listen to the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.<sup>150</sup> Eventually Betty Sanders met the minister of Temple # 7, the man who was to become her husband, Malcolm X. Continuing her forays into the NOI temple and the nurse's aide's home-cooked dinners, Sanders eventually became friendly with Malcolm X and joined the NOI. After joining the NOI in 1956, Betty X confessed to her cousin Ruth Summerford, that she had met someone special, meanwhile Malcolm X confessed to Percy Sutton that he was sweet on a young convert with a killer smile."<sup>151</sup> Following NOI ideology, the young couple did not date, but still became acquainted through conversations and public meetings.<sup>152</sup> The couple married in 1958, less than two years after Betty's conversion. Shabazz remembered her marriage to Malcolm as "hectic, beautiful, and unforgettable."<sup>153</sup> Malcolm refused to allow Betty to work outside of the home, even though she had trained and graduated as a registered nurse. X's schedule also caused tension in the marriage, and Shabazz left him three time during the first years of their marriage, 1959, 1961, and late 1962 or early 1963.<sup>154</sup> After X was assassinated, Shabazz left New York City to raise her children in Mount Vernon, a Westchester county suburb.

Although Betty Shabazz became a recluse in regards to her public appearances, shortly after the assassination, her own image transformed into that of a mother of six fatherless children. Through her own words about her husband, those of close friends, and Shabazz's press interviews, Malcolm's image transitioned into that of the loving

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<sup>150</sup> Russell J. Rickford, *Betty Shabazz, Surviving Malcolm X: A Journey of Strength from Wife to Widow to Heroine*, (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2003), 36.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 105.



father and husband who suffered the distance that his work took him from his family because he knew his time away from his family was for the advancement of black people. Often described by Betty as an interested and active father, the absence of Malcolm as an active member for his family was felt by the black community. Never mentioning her increasing hatred of the NOI and her fear for the safety of her children, Betty Shabazz suffered her loss without attracting the attention of Mr. Muhammad.

Betty, too, believed that Uncle Sam had colluded in the slaying. But she was convinced that Black Muslims had been the executioners, and that the order had come from the kingdom's highest echelons. ...After the trial some of the minister's apostles guessed that Betty was lost to them forever. There was no love lost between them and the Nation, but they feared that the widow's overt hatred for the sect would work in white establishment's favor, deflecting attention from the government's complicity in the death of their hero.<sup>155</sup>

In addition, Shabazz hardly ever mentioned her brief separations from Malcolm and nor did she acknowledge, that had Malcolm lived, she would have not been allowed to work outside the home. For all purposes, Malcolm became a martyr, taken away from his loving family before his time.

Additionally, as Brietman, Bruce Perry, John Henrik Clarke and others continued to talk and write about Malcolm X he was re-configured as a black hero. Malcolm X himself had laid the groundwork for this transition of his image. His connection with Africa and his desire to see real connections made between diasporic peoples allowed the Black Power advocates to see Malcolm as the first Pan-Africanist leader of the civil rights movement. In addition, Malcolm's advocacy of reciprocal violence also propelled him into the Black Power movement. As riots became more commonplace, blacks saw reciprocal violence, even violence against property, as a way to fight the status quo. As Malcolm X had generally supported redistribution of racial power, it was no surprise that

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 291-293.

Malcolm X's birthday was chosen by the National Black Political Convention of 1972, organized by Amiri Baraka and others, as the date to have final documents organized to present to the Republican and Democratic parties.<sup>156</sup>

X became more American after he died than when he was alive. People were convinced that the trip to Mecca really did change X's outlook on white supremacy and the acquisition of human rights. The belief that Malcolm was either a socialist/communist or converted from black nationalism surfaced during this time. It cannot be denied that after Mecca and Medina X's philosophies were broader, so too his image as an American. Thus, Malcolm X's image was converted to a belief in the principles of the American character – the ability to adapt to a new frontier – physical or mental. All that was left was for the image of Malcolm X to address the majority of Americans as opposed to the factions of black or white supremacists. As Malcolm's image was moved toward the majority of Americans, he garnered the attention of the majority and laid the foundation for his legacy as a black hero/martyr.

On occasion death can freeze the image of public figures and for some it immortalizes them or their work. Unfortunately, because of their inability to continue to contribute to the image, they are often conceived of as caricatures of their former selves with the favorable portions of themselves brought to light without any mention of their faults. In the case of Malcolm X, death makes him famous. The context of his death is partially responsible. The fact that he was murdered by the group he once participated out of anger and resentment is critical to his persona as a black martyr. This is the same organization he devoted all of his money to, faithfully supported its policies and

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<sup>156</sup> Robert Charles Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post Civil Rights Era*, (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1996) , 52.

leadership, and helped to bring to national prominence by lending some credibility to the organization. Secondly, he is assassinated in the act of coalition building. The speech that Malcolm would have given at the meeting of the OAAU was to present the finalized mission statement for the organization. If he had lived the group would have been a premier organization in the fight for black equality. Particularly with members and affiliates like Julian Mayfield, Maya Angelou, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, A. Peter Bailey, Herman Ferguson, Lynn Shifflet, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. Additionally, Malcolm's forays into socialist groups, education and housing reform associations positioned him and his organization to be one of the most progressive, and all encompassing, of the civil rights movements. However one of the most significant details in the process of the creation of the image of X as a martyr was his vivid and valid knowledge that he would be murdered and his decision to continue to struggle for black equality. By all accounts, the knowledge of his impending death took its toll on Malcolm. Yet, his commitment to his mission never waned. By the time of his death, X was already a black hero for his intellectual capacity, his unwavering commitment to black equality and people, lessons on black self-worth, his message and the delivery of it, and his ability to "move the crowd." Death catapulted the image of Malcolm X as a black hero into that of a martyr who was now ahead of his time and the forbearer of the black power and cultural movements.

In memory, X becomes larger life. Seizing on his political messages of black equality, radical reorganization of western political thought, and burgeoning message of human rights for all, followers, friends, and admirers saturated the landscape taking whichever portion of Malcolm that best described their connection to him and

refashioned X's public image into that of a martyr stolen from his people and the future. The supposition into what could have been gained prominence and Malcolm became the great black leader, coalition builder, human rights advocate. Leaving the image of Malcolm X politically available to just about anyone, even someone as politically opposed to him like Dan Quayle. The image of Malcolm X was primed and ready for its eventual inclusion into the lexicon of American popular culture.

### ***The Autobiography as Image of Malcolm X***

Were it not for *The Hate That Hate Produced* and the media attention that followed, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* would have never been written. Originally conceived of as a document that would demonstrate the transformative powers of Elijah Muhammad and the NOI, the *Autobiography* became Malcolm X's definitive answer to why he became one of America's angriest black men. Written from a series of private interviews conducted by Alex Haley, what would eventually become the *Autobiography* started sometime in 1963 and would be published posthumously even though Haley had finished it in its entirety two weeks before X's assassination.<sup>157</sup> Interest in a book about the life of Malcolm X came after X had been interviewed by Haley in *Playboy*.

According to Haley,

Malcolm X began to warm up to me somewhat. He was most aware of the national periodicals' power, and he had come to regard me, if still suspiciously, as one avenue of access...I was in this stage of relationship with the Malcolm X who often described himself on the air as "the angriest black man in America" when in early 1963 my agent brought me together with a publisher whom the *Playboy* interview had given the idea of the autobiography of Malcolm X. I was asked if I could get the now nationally known firebrand to consent to telling the intimate details of his entire life...I said that the question had made me aware of how

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<sup>157</sup> Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*, (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 4.

careful Malcolm X had always been to play himself down and to play up his leader Elijah Muhammad.<sup>158</sup>

Despite X's ability to pepper everything he said with some reference to Elijah Muhammad or the NOI, he was recognized by the American public to be one of the most articulate ministers of the NOI. By the time news had spread that X had agreed to do the book (with the approval and permission of Elijah Muhammad) with Haley for Double Day & Company, he had received a letter of interest from the publishers Marzani & Munsell for the same book.<sup>159</sup> X went on to complete the book with Double Day and Haley, slowly building trust with Haley which allowed him to communicate intimate details of his life to Haley.

The book with Double Day was to be "80,000 – 100, 000 words in length, but not less than 80,000 words."<sup>160</sup> The contract stipulated that there was to be an "advance to the author of the sum of twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000), payable five thousand dollars (\$5000) on receipt of this signed agreement and fifteen Thousand dollars (\$15,000) on receipt of complete satisfactory manuscript."<sup>161</sup> The agreement expressly states that "all monies due the author under this agreement, shall be divided as follows: Fifty per cent (50%) to Alex Haley and Fifty per cent (50%) to Malcolm X, with Ten per cent (10%)

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<sup>158</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 392.

<sup>159</sup> Malcolm X, *Letter from Marzani & Munsell Inc.*, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>160</sup> Malcolm X, *Book Contract, 27 May 1963*, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

going to Paul R. Reynolds & Son for commission.”<sup>162</sup> Initially all monies due to Malcolm X would be forwarded to “Muhammad’s Mosque No. Two.”<sup>163</sup>

The success of *The Autobiography* allowed the life of Malcolm X to be examined by scholars and lay people alike. People who believed that X was some kind of anomaly were able to read about his life within a familiar literary tradition. The book, written by Malcolm X with the help of Alex Haley, described Malcolm X’s life from infancy to his final year. Initially conceived from a well-received article by Alex Haley for *Playboy* magazine interviewing Malcolm, Haley approached X about extending the interview into a book. Reluctantly, X received permission from Muhammad, and the project began at the behest of Muhammad who thought the book would be a financial success and good publicity. During the writing process, after being “silenced” and denied reinstatement, X left the NOI and entirely changed the trajectory of the book. According to the final contract, Haley received 50 percent of the profits for his work on the autobiography and Betty Shabazz was named the new recipient of any royalties from the book.<sup>164</sup>

*The Autobiography* was the clearest effort of Malcolm X to create a favorable image of himself. Key elements were left out of his life in the text. X hardly mentioned half-brother Earl, whom he emulated, or that he always maintained a real job while he hustled in and out of Harlem.<sup>165</sup> Secondly, Malcolm did not mention his relationship with either Evelyn, his first girlfriend in the NOI, or Jackie Massey, an older woman who

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<sup>162</sup> Malcolm X, *Book Contract 27 May 1963*, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid

<sup>164</sup> Malcolm X, *Book Contract, 27 May 1963*, The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>165</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 39, 42-43.

seduced Malcolm during his early life in Boston.<sup>166</sup> After Muhammad hired Evelyn as a secretary, she subsequently became one of the mothers of his illegitimate children. X felt profoundly responsible. In addition, Haley made major editorial decisions by leaving two chapters that dealt with the political philosophy of Malcolm X at the time of his death, out of the final copy.

It is apparent that X was aware of his mediated image and wanted to protect that image from people who constantly thought and wrote the worst about him. Similarly, X could have wanted to maintain some privacy in his very public life. Moreover, Malcolm could have used the book the way a minister used his pulpit to perform the ultimate sermon. In any case, *The Autobiography* is the re-introduction of X to American society. It was his – and to a visible extent Alex Haley’s – production of X as a truly American figure following in the literary tradition of Horatio Alger. The fact that X was no longer alive to support or contradict this notion was a necessary factor in his transition out of the purely black nationalist fold and into the American tradition of freedom fighters.

*The Autobiography* detailed the story of Malcolm X’s return to American individualism. Outside of the NOI, Malcolm was fascinating to most Americans. His oratory skills as well as his intelligence and charm, should have made him like the middle class preachers he rejected; and if it were up to his sister Ella Collins, they would have. Yet, Malcolm rebelled against the status quo. As Gambino contends, he may have recognized his inability to conform to the status quo at an early age, producing fertile space for the teachings of the NOI.<sup>167</sup> As much as Malcolm would like to credit Elijah Muhammad with the transformation of his life, Malcolm actually adhered to the

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 74-76.

<sup>167</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, “The Transgression of a Laborer: Malcolm X in the Wilderness of America.” *Radical History Review* 55, no. 7 (Winter 1993) : 7-31.

philosophies and teachings of the NOI, unlike the Messenger. Ultimately, the NOI was a conservative black organization. The chastising of members' involvement in American society was not radical so much as it was an insular technique to prevent blacks from suffering the rejection that American society offered to blacks. Malcolm's acceptance of NOI ideology and the desire to widely publicize it (which actually was radical) was another form of his outward rebellion of the American ideal of the exceptionality of the American character. That is to say, his rejection of the coveted position as American citizen, and by extension inheritor of American exceptionality, was the ultimate act of rebellion. His rejection of nationhood before nationhood was denied to him, while mirroring acceptable codes of American behavior (charismatic, articulate, handsome, and intelligent), was the defining strategy that held the American public's attention, while frightening them at the same time. Malcolm X fascinated the American public because of his ability to walk the space of a rebel and conformist.

X's rejection of the NOI, a group that maintained an organized paramilitary force, positioned him for martyrdom. The information that X had accumulated on the transgressions of Elijah Muhammad, the financial misuse of NOI funds to support Elijah Muhammad and the NOI leadership, and his public rejection and airing of the truth concerning Elijah Muhammad made Malcolm X a target. In addition to his growing schism with the NOI, Malcolm befriended and nurtured strategic friendships with socialists, Marxists, prominent Middle Eastern Moslems, and African revolutionaries in the United States and around the world, at the height of Cold War activity. For blacks, Malcolm became a martyr because he understood that he would ultimately succumb to



these forces, yet he endeavored to continue to tell the non-filtered truth to whites, blacks and anyone across the world who would listen.

Yet, these very actions solidified his position in the tradition of American individualists. His transformation made him a fighter of injustice and a champion of justice/freedom for all, not just blacks, placing him in the long tradition of American individualist who fought against the “wrongs” in mainstream society. Like Walt Whitman his rejection of the corrupt notions of American behavior as opposed to rejecting Americans entirely, made him acceptable to Americans and ensured that he would be considered an American. The protests of these American individualists are eventually incorporated in the mainstream and they are applauded for their forward thinking in an area that does not really change the fabric of American society. As X underwent this process, he became an American individualist, partially severed from his message and his life’s work.

## **Conclusion**

The image of Malcolm X as a martyr and American individualist existed long before Malcolm X “reappeared” as a fixture in popular culture during in the 1990s. X worked very hard to make sure that his image contrasted that of Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and other civil rights leaders who advocated non-violence or an accommodationist political perspective to ensure the end of black inequality. Initially, edifying the message of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam and later by walking the tightrope between black nationalist, socialism/anti-capitalist, Pan-Africanist, Sunni Moslem, and international spokesman, Malcolm assured that he would be referred to as a different kind of civil rights worker. An admitted orchestrator of the press’

attention, Malcolm admitted that he was aware of his ability to get the press' attention by making incisive statements.<sup>168</sup> The astute observations of Nadle pointed to the calculated public personas that X used and displayed for various audiences. For Malcolm, there was only one point to his public/political life – to end the inability of most blacks to access their rights as citizens of the United States. Some like Thurgood Marshall claimed that, “all he did was talk.” But more than talk Malcolm X restructured the NOI into a viable alternative to mainstream civil rights organizations by offering a national perspective on black male identity that differed sharply from the non-violent alternative. Furthermore, X was the first civil rights leader who dismissed civil rights accumulation, considered the acquisition of civil rights as limited, and instead opted for the equal rights access because of its ability to expand and include coalition building, direct civil action, and armed resistance. He was also the first American activist to court and attain international diasporic relationships as a method to ending racism in the United States.

More than any other civil rights leader, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm expanded the image of black cultural identity. Instead of believing in the exceptionality of the American character, X offered black people connection to a history of blackness that extended beyond the existence of American culture. Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X was associated and remained in the eyes of the black community, as the one black leader who fought for the viability of the culture of black people. Aided initially by his membership and ministerial position in the NOI, X could

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<sup>168</sup> Marlene Nadle, “Malcolm X: The Complexity of a Man in the Jungle.” *Village Voice* 25 February 1965.

always be found in areas where blacks lived, preaching and teaching about black history and culture.

On the international scene, Malcolm continued to lecture about the connection among black people and the existence of cultural legacies transmitted through the diaspora. His classes and speeches on African history reconceptualized the way black people in the United States thought of themselves, of the continent of Africa and Africans. His battle against New York and Los Angeles law enforcement, New York landlords and school curriculum gave many black people living in the city their first experience at political organizing outside of religious (NOI) or cultural (Garvey, ethnic affiliations, lodges, etc.) motivations. His work in the community not only helped to convince people that the NOI stood for more than just sanctified living and separation politics, but also helped to solidify the NOI's standing in the community as one of the few organizations that changed the lives of black people.

This chapter has constructed the various public personas that X employed in his public life. The continued use of these images has led to the presentation of the image of Malcolm X as the ideal image of black male identity. Furthermore, the construction of Malcolm X as the real/ideal black male created the opportunity for a new image of Malcolm X as an American icon, referring back to an image of Malcolm as an American individualist. The following chapter explores the creation and use of X's image as the ideal black man.

## Chapter 3: Malcolm X and the Ideal Black Masculine Representative

### Introduction

In his eulogy of Malcolm X, Ossie Davis referred to Malcolm X as “our manhood, our living, black manhood.”<sup>169</sup> In an article whose sole purpose was to answer questions Davis received about eulogizing Malcolm X, Ossie Davis declared Malcolm X to be the expression of black masculinity. Featured in *Negro Digest* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1966, the second paragraph of the article clearly examines Malcolm’s significance for blacks:

At the same time – and this is important – most all of them took special pains to disagree with much or all of what Malcolm said and what he stood for. That is, with one singing exception, they all, every last, black, glory-hugging one of them, knew that Malcolm – whatever else he was or was not – Malcolm was a man! White folks do not need anybody to remind them that they are men. We do! This was his one incontrovertible benefit to his people.<sup>170</sup>

According to Davis, it was important for black people to have a visual representation of their ability to be men in a society that constantly reinforces the idea that their manhood was not the standard of society at large and prone to instability. In this statement, Davis did two important things. First, he established that there was a need for blacks – particularly black men – to have reminders that they fit into American society. Secondly, Davis noted that Malcolm X demonstrated an ideal black representation of American manhood that was reinforced by the color of his skin and his radical politics, that could not be shaken from the media oriented dominant society or from the minds of the black people (particularly men) for which he advocated. Malcolm’s particular representation of

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<sup>169</sup> Ossie Davis, “Eulogy for Malcolm X,” [article on-line] available from <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Studios/2469/malcolm3.html>; Internet; accessed 18 May 2004.

<sup>170</sup> Ossie Davis, “Why I Eulogized Malcolm X,” *Negro Digest* 25, no.4 (February 1966) : 64.

black manhood garnered attention in American society as an unapologetic example of black male identity which he prominently displayed across the country. For Davis, not only did black men, in particular, need to be reminded of their manhood, but so too did, black women and children. More than just coveting patriarchic ideas of white society, the image of Malcolm X stood to remind blacks (and whites, for that matter) what a real black man looked like. It is this action that solidified Malcolm's position as a black hero. Malcolm's performance of black manhood endeared him to black people, even if they were opposed to his stance, they appreciated his ability to forcefully interpret manhood to whites and blacks who were not familiar with this kind of black manhood.

Throughout the article, Davis identified several characteristics of Malcolm's performance of black manhood. In doing so, Davis plainly constructed an illustration of Malcolm's actions that contributed to his performance of black manhood. Central to the illustration was the idea that Malcolm's performance of black manhood was not an act, but an actual character that X had adopted (due in part to his life in the NOI and his practice of Islam). Davis wanted to emphasize (through a textual depiction of his reasons for eulogizing X) that Malcolm was the archetype, but his example could be emulated and practiced by any black man interested in being like Malcolm. Some of the characteristics, disclosed through analysis of the text itself, were as follows:

- willingness to fight for human/civil equality without assistance, direction, or leadership from whites
- willingness to die for your principle belief or belief system
- charming
- attractive
- free-thinker and freedom from an obligation to adhere to societal norms
- involved in transformation/transformed; constantly seeking transformative experiences.
- fascinating
- articulate; ability to reach various audiences at their level of comprehension

- intelligent; eternal learner; analytical mind
- advocate of true democratic practice within in society
- willingness to point to the hypocrisy of others who are not committed to equality at any cost
- radical positionality vis-à-vis the mainstream ideas about the struggle for human/civil equality
- brave
- ironic gallantry (earmarked by a “zing of fire-and-be-damned-to-you.”)<sup>171</sup>

For Davis and others, these characteristics summed up the legacy of Malcolm X. For the generation of blacks who would inherit this legacy this would be proof positive that not only did X deserve emulation for his deeds and words, but also for the standard he set to measure all black leaders and men who practiced black manhood. At a time when it was not obvious how to be a black man or a black leader in the United States, X became more than a black leader; he became a black hero with special status. Malcolm X would become the representation of the best of black people – particularly to black men within the subculture of hip-hop during the 1980s and 1990s.

## **Race in America**

Within the dominant narrative of American society, the positionality of the products of black culture is complex. Because of the history of slavery and the practice of American apartheid for hundreds of years afterward, blacks in America have struggled to have cultural representations that clearly delineate their particular experience as part of the American citizenry. According to Winthrop Jordan, a portion of that struggle is dedicated to contest the stereotypes in existence before the first contact between Africans

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p.64-66

and Europeans in the fifteenth century.<sup>172</sup> Thus, as Europeans encountered Africans on the continent, there was a built-in prejudice that allowed Europeans to consider all things African, including cultural practices, to be strange and inferior in comparison to all things European. Hence, once Europeans and Africans co-existed in the same physical space, as in the New World, Europeans continued to consider themselves superior to Africans, allowing the practice of American slavery to appear justifiable (white man's burden, etc.) because of the sub-human interpretations of Africans, African-Americans and their culture. Paradoxically, the belief in European superiority allowed Europeans to co-opt African knowledge about food cultivation, language, and other cultural products such as music and dance.

For the dominant society, Black masculinity is still measured through European codes. Many of these frames of reference come from past encounters between African and European cultures; specifically, from slave-capturing on the African continent, the middle passage, chattel slavery and American apartheid. While many African Americans welcomed integration with hopes of leaving behind their second-class citizenship, the power dynamic has proven to be resilient. Over time, African Americans developed strategies for cultural survival. Black people have demonstrated the elasticity of black culture by dismissing mainstream negative interpretations of blackness and by creating black representations that not only negate these negative interpretations but also influence the cultural expansion of American society.

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<sup>172</sup> Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va., (University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

The radical tradition of “making plain” the ways in which mainstream American society has openly endorsed different treatments of black and white citizenry and failed to protect black citizens from attacks of white supremacy has led black protestors to delineate the differences between American ideological references and the actual practice of ideology. When asked to clarify his position on his support of armed resistance in the absences of government protection from wanton violence Malcolm X stated:

No, no. I respect government and respect law. But does the government and the law respect us? If the FBI, which is what people depend upon on a national scale to protect the morale and the property and the lives of the people, can't do so when the property and lives of Negroes and whites who try and help Negroes are concerned, then I think that it's only fair to expect elements to do whatever is necessary to protect themselves. ...I'm not advocating the breaking of any laws. But I say that our people will never be respected as human beings until we react as other normal, intelligent human beings do. And this country came into existence by people who were tired of tyranny and oppression and exploitation and the brutality that was being inflicted upon them by powers higher than they, and I think that it is only fair to expect us, sooner or later, to do likewise.<sup>173</sup>

Black survival has included cultural products that embraced integration and radical dismissal of dominant society norms. American society has consistently maintained a hierarchical prejudice against blacks' successful acceptance of societal norms. Thus, it becomes important for blacks to construct heroes that are successful in gaining access into the American society's construction of societal norms (which is difficult) and heroes that are successful in resisting/fighting the construction of American societal norms. In the light of dominant ideas surrounding authenticity (to be authentically black is to be from the ghetto, poor, criminal, undereducated, drug user/seller, etc.), the struggle for black culture to produce authentic cultural products becomes even more regulated and narrow, given the tendency for the dominant society to compensate, financially, only

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<sup>173</sup>Malcolm X, “Whatever is Necessary to Protect Ourselves: Interview with Les Crane,” *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 84- 85.



those products that promote a questionable view of black culture. Hip-hop culture can be a useful example of the battle of blacks to authenticate their experiences in American society and resist dominant constructions of black maleness.

Although Hip-hop began in the late 1970s in the South Bronx; it did not really generate the possibility for blacks to gain fiduciary solvency or monetary success until the 1990s. Appropriation of black culture did not begin in this period, but it was transformed with the advent of the viability of rap/hip-hop culture. During the 1980s and 1990s, black men and their images were under severe attack. This period saw an increase in the criminalization of black men, an alarming acceleration of the rate of incarceration of black boys and men and the further collapse of many Great Society programs that had been instituted during the 1960s and 1970s. It also witnessed the failure of Reaganomics/Thatcherism and the hope and disappointment of the Clinton administration. The movement of Rap/Hip-hop culture into the mainstream can be viewed as the destruction of the transformative and reaffirming cultural response of black youth in Rap music. With Hip-hop music, only some black young men, and even fewer women, were able to articulate their positions in American society and create an avenue for economic solvency. The growth of commercial Rap/Hip-hop culture as a viable economic crossover medium with white youth sponsorship in the forms of compact disc and clothing purchases can also be included in this list of attacks against the black community. It must also be stated that Rap/Hip-hop culture would have never grown into a viable avenue of recognizable labor for working-class or poor black youth without the infusion of mainstream dollars.

Because of their visibility, rappers, some DJs, producers and record label owners, publicly model the black experience to both black and white people. Scholarship addressing the leadership potential and the performance of the black experience of rappers, DJs, label owners has not been fully examined. Thus, to illustrate the argument of the leadership potential and performance of the black experience I will analyze the interesting career of the rapper 50 Cent, also known as Curtis J. Jackson, III. Prior to signing with Eminem and Dr. Dre's music label, Jackson experienced ups and downs in his musical career, including signing with Columbia records and being released from his contract after he almost died in a shooting attack in front of his grandmother's house for his song *Ghetto Qur'an*. Forced to create his own opportunities for musical success, 50 cent went on to release mixtapes. One of his mixtapes, caught the attention of Eminem and eventually Jackson was re-introduced to the industry and hip-hop culture. Instead of minimizing his criminal past and his shooting, Aftermath/Shady/Interscope fully embraced 50's reality and marketed the rapper as a man who had been shot nine times and "came from the streets." 50's hip-hop image had never been one of middle class black culture, but the emphasis on the fact that he had been shot nine times seemed to overpower any other aspect. 50 Cent quickly became one of the "hottest" rappers in the music business. Because of his survival from bullet wounds and his direct link to criminal activity, perceived or actual, 50 Cent became "street" or "cool," viewed by the mainstream as more authentically black than other rappers.

At this particular moment in history, Hip-hop culture is one of the most visible and lucrative cultural products of black people and critical to the discussion of black leadership and masculinity. Rap may have crossed-over with Run-DMC, but the

sustained formula for the commodification of cross-over potential and success did not materialize until the advent of “Gangsta-Rap” from the East and West Coast – N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) to the Notorious B.I.G. (Biggie Smalls). Once this occurs, it becomes difficult, in mainstream circles, to be authentically black and not have some ghettoized version of the black experience. Even those rappers who have no criminal background are forced into the narrow definition of blackness. Since the rappers are predominantly male, by default, the expression of black manhood in Hip-hop are equally collapsed into the idea of a “hard,” ghetto life. The career of 50 Cent serves as examples of the nature of commodification and the battle for authentic representation. In his early career, 50 had commercial success with his song *How to Rob*. As a thieving rapper, 50 Cent was authenticating his experience as an outsider in the commodified Hip-hop industry. His underground and mix-tape success added to his ability to gain mainstream recognition and fiscal prosperity. Yet, it was not until the marketing blitz of his “slinging rock” career and its subsequent pitfall into a drive-by shooting that 50 Cent became a viable commodity or brand.

In the 1990s, two significant forms of rap music emerged that authenticated black culture and named black heroes that had agency in the form of gaining access into the American society’s construction of societal norms and resistance the construction of American society. Although the process of authentication came in the form of verbal assaults, rap music of the 1990s, expressed for a generation of young people a method of resistance that required very little financial or social access. Black youth looked to the past to find archetypes that might best represent their current circumstances. For young black men, who struggled to make sense out of the diminishing opportunities for access

to societal norms (particularly the means to support themselves and their families), the increasing criminalization of their image in the media and the lack of the circulation of positive images of black men prompted rappers to seek out heroes that offered an ideal representation of how to be a black man facing what felt like and appeared to be insurmountable odds. The archetype that attracted the most attention from black youth of the late 1980s into the early 1990s was Malcolm X.

Rappers, on both coasts, questioned the criminalization of blacks by law enforcement agencies (Ice T, N.W.A., Public Enemy, and Slick Rick) the destructive properties of crack use and sale in black communities (as in campaigns by New York City Mayor Ed Koch that involved rappers and DJ, Grand Master Flash, the Furious Five, and Kurtis Blow against crack use: “*Crack is Wack*” and “*Don’t do Drugs*” )<sup>174</sup>, the violence in black communities and in rap music (various artists on the *Self Destruction* Remix). Given the popularity of rappers and their cultural product, rappers chose to present black heroes who emulated their particular view of society. By using the image of Malcolm X that began with Ossie Davis’s eulogy, the real or ideal black man, rappers were able to identify with Malcolm as a hero who understood their respective positions and as a leader who could teach a variety of black people lessons on what it meant to be black and actively resisting oppression. According to Tricia Rose, “rap refutes postindustrial urban life in the U.S. while also revitalizing life among its producers and consumers,”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Tricia Rose, “Orality and technology: Rap music and Afro-American cultural resistance,” *Popular Music and Society* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1989), 35 – 44.

<sup>175</sup> Fay Yokomizo Akindes, “Sudden Rush: Na Mele Paleoleo (Hawaiian Rap) as Liberatory Discourse,” *Discourse* 23 no.1, (Winter 2001), 89.

Young African Americans are positioned in fundamentally antagonistic relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct them as a dangerous internal element in urban America – an element that if allowed to roam about freely will threaten the social order, an element that must be policed. The social construction of rap and rap-related violence is fundamentally linked to the social discourse on Black containment and fears of a Black planet.<sup>176</sup>

The first form, “Gangsta Rap,” originated in the ravaged black communities of Los Angeles, similar to the origins of Hip-hop culture in the South Bronx. The former suburban areas of black Los Angeles suffered devastation from the loss of economic solvency, an increase in criminal activity including the trafficking of illegal narcotics, and police brutality. As blacks living in this community encountered rap music from the East Coast, music that did not speak to their particular black experience, they began to transform the cultural product into one that represented their reality. The group credited with the formation of “Gangsta Rap” was N. W. A. (Niggaz with Attitudes). Comprised of four primary members and two additional revolving members, N.W.A was the first rap group out of the West Coast to have major success. *Straight Outta of Compton*, the group’s second release, contained songs titled, *Gangsta Gangsta*, *Express Yourself*, and *Fuck tha Police*. Ushering a wave of rap that dealt primarily with criminal activity, violence in general and specifically toward “punks” and women, the group created a forum for black men and women rappers who were not trying to uplift the people as much as locate themselves in a genre that was about creating space for the fiscally, politically, and racially disenfranchised. According to Eithne Quinn, author of *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*, “the tension in gangsta

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<sup>176</sup> Tricia Rose, “‘Fear of a Black Planet’: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s,” *The Journal of Negro Education : Socialization Forces Affecting the Education of African American Youth in the 1990s* 60, no. 3 (Summer, 1991) : 279.

rap centers around three major themes: a critical social commentary, a rapper's authenticity, and a 'ruthless drive for profit.'"<sup>177</sup> Reviewing Quinn's text Cantor stated that Quinn argued that;

some of the lyrics in gangsta rap discuss the limited opportunities that poor African American men encounter in post-industrial Los Angeles. Instead of offering lyrics laced with optimism or concerned with uplifting the race, gangsta rap rejects the "burden of representation." These artists are not worried about offending white and black middle-class sensibilities. Moreover, the rise of gangsta rap coincided with the rise of the Republican Party and the nation's shift towards the right. During Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush's administrations, the wealth of the nation's top 1 percent increased, and the federal government deregulated business and decreased spending on job training and social programs. Quinn refers to these Republican policies as the "New Times," and the "New Times" required new solutions to address these complex political and economic problems.<sup>178</sup>

The agency exhibited by these men and women was significant at a moment when young black men and women seemed perplexed as to their place in society. Clearly an imperfect arrangement, Gangsta rap did create opportunities for visibility and exposure to the happenings in parts of black America to a larger society that had assumed the power to define without any inquiry from those primarily affected by the conditions. In ways that had not previously existed Gangsta rap gave a voice to the voiceless.

At the same time, in the East Coast, rap music continued to reflect the lives of teens and young adults of the urban North. The same year that Eazy E and Ice T released albums reflecting a part of the West Coast format, East Coast rappers released songs like, *Don't Believe the Hype*, *Top Billin*, *Children's Story*, and *Shake Your Thang*. The reason for this according to Rose rested in the success of groups like Public Enemy,

Lyrically, rap's thematic territory has grown more complex and direct. Public Enemy's success opened the door to more politically and racially explicit

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<sup>177</sup> Cantor, David. "The Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Tensions in Gangsta Rap," *Reviews in American History*, Volume 34 Number 2, 2006, p.245

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, p.245-246

material, some of which has made important interventions while other material seems dedicated to its potential sales value.<sup>179</sup>

Lest, we move toward dismissing gangsta rap for its lack of direct political content Rose warned scholars,

While a shift in rap's political articulation did take place, confining the definition of the cultural politics of rap to lyrical content addresses only the most obvious and explicit facet of the politics of Black cultural expression. To dismiss rappers who do not choose so-called "political" subjects as "having no politically resistive meaning" requires ignoring the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subject.<sup>180</sup>

Although rap critics like to believe that the genre turned toward the more violent West Coast format, in fact, East Coast rappers contributed two new forms of rap music during this period of the late 1980s. Rap music generally fell into three categories: Gangsta or Hardcore, Party or Dancing, Political or Nationalistic rap music. More so than their counterparts, East Coast rappers mixed formats of rap music. East Coast rappers could produce records that reflected political aspirations or produce records that sang the praises of the male members. Instead of producing one influential kind of rap music, the genre opened up to include many formats that reflected the lives of the young men and women who were creating the songs.

The cultural product of rappers was significant to the public and mediated separation of Malcolm X into several different images. Gangsta/Hard-core rappers used Malcolm X's image as a rebel or, as Ferruccio Gambino argued, the image of Malcolm X as Detroit Red, the first acknowledgement of Malcolm X's inability to conform to the

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<sup>179</sup> Tricia Rose, "'Fear of a Black Planet': Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s," *The Journal of Negro Education: Socialization Forces Affecting the Education of African American Youth in the 1990s* 60, no. 3 (Summer, 1991): 276.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

status quo,<sup>181</sup> to proclaim their independence to live above or beyond the laws of a society that did not seriously consider their circumstances. As Detroit Red, a representation of Malcolm X's criminal past, rappers could justify their hardcore lifestyles as rebellious representations "of an image that was [un]acceptable to white America and ...reminded middle-class African Americans about the realities of the inner city."<sup>182</sup>

Similarly, rappers who chose to create dance music represented an image of Malcolm that encouraged community building through the shared experience. As Robin D.G. Kelly has argued in his article about the dancehall as a political space,<sup>183</sup> rappers who brought the community together in revelry reinforced the experiences – the joy and the pain, physically – of being black in America. The dancehall had long been a place where blacks could lose themselves in a rhythm or a lindy-hop, converse or be praised for talents that might be recognized by the larger society but were definitely praised and applauded by black culture. These kinds of songs were cultural celebrations of one of the best things of the black community – intra-cooperation between black bodies to move to the beat to produce energy to reinforce and refresh the people. That energy circulated throughout the community and provided another portrait of the black experience that was different from the energy of Gangsta Rap, but, similar to Gangsta Rap, created a space for energetic black cultural expressions.

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<sup>181</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, "The Transgression of a Laborer: Malcolm X in the Wilderness of America." *Radical History Review* 55, no. 7 (Winter 1993): 7-31.

<sup>182</sup> David Canton, "The Political, Economic, Social, and Cultural Tensions in Gangsta Rap," *Reviews in American History* 34, no. 2 (2006) , 250.

<sup>183</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot Suit: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During World War II," *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class*, (New York: Free Press, 1996).



In addition to using the dance hall as a space of political action, there were rappers who chose to “represent” an image of Malcolm X that spoke directly to the aspirations of blacks. Political or Nationalistic rap contained lyrical references to Malcolm X’s black nationalist image and used visual representations to corroborate their interpretation. Boogie Down Production’s (BDP) album cover for their 1988 release was an example. Deeply affected by the murder of his friend and partner, DJ Scot La Rock (Scott Sterling, who was a social worker and DJ), KRS-one (Lawrence Parker) “remerged... calling himself the Teacher and rapping mostly about issues facing the black community,” a significant shift from the gritty reality of his first album *Criminal Minded*.<sup>184</sup> Titled, *By All Means Necessary*, the album contained a photo of KRS-One peeking out a window, slightly holding back the curtains with his left hand, holding an UZI Pistol gun in his right hand away from the window, hand on the trigger, a direct imitation of a photo of Malcolm X in a similar position with a shotgun (below). Developed in the 1990s, “the Micro UZI was designed to assume the role of Personal Defense Weapon (PDW).”<sup>185</sup> The album cover is an imitation of the famous rifle photo of Malcolm X, after the bombing of his home in Elmhurst, New York. Similar to Malcolm X, KRS-one had experienced an attack on his family. The senseless murder of Scot La Rock<sup>186</sup> forced KRS-One to redirect his focus as a MC; no longer content with a lyrical depiction of ghetto life, KRS-One went on to condemn violence, admonish those who

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<sup>184</sup> All Media Guide Editorial Staff, *Allmusic Website Review*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Rovi Corporation, 1995) ; accessed 21 July 2010; available from <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:lnouak4k5m3n>; Internet.

<sup>185</sup> UZI Brands International Ltd. , *The UZI Official Website*, available from <http://www.uzi.com/firearms.html>; Internet; accessed 21 July 2010.

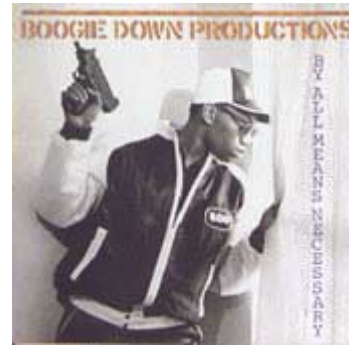
<sup>186</sup> According to many reports Scot La Rock was killed trying to mediate a dispute between the ex-boyfriend of Derrick “D-Nice” Jones’s girlfriend while sitting in a parked car in the South Bronx. SOHH Reckless, *Happy B-Day and R.I.P Scott La Rock*, (4Control Media, Inc. , 2 March 2009), available from [http://blogs.sohh.com/nyc/archives/2009/03/happy\\_b-day\\_and\\_rip\\_scott\\_la\\_r.html](http://blogs.sohh.com/nyc/archives/2009/03/happy_b-day_and_rip_scott_la_r.html); Internet; accessed 21 July 2010.

practiced it and urge all black people to stop the violence. This album contained some of BDP and KRS-One's most nationalistic lyrics contained in songs like: *My Philosophy*, *Necessary*, *Stop the Violence*, *I'm Still #1*, and *Illegal Business*.

In the photograph, Malcolm X is holding an AK-47 rifle (which is primarily thought of as an offensive weapon) in his right hand, slightly parting the curtains with his left, stands in preparation to defend against any impending danger that might be lurking from the outside world. KRS-One assumes an identical position with the exception of the weapon in the window. X made a statement and issued a warning with the photo. The choice of a rifle allowed X to reverse the role of the attacker; he would be ready and waiting for any assault against his loved ones. The weapon that KRS-One displays is a semi-automatic personal machine gun; with rapid fire capabilities and the facility to hit many targets in a short amount of time. Unlike the image of Malcolm X, the image of the UZI in KRS-One's hand is to summon the idea of easily maneuvered personal protection. The deadly weapon signified that KRS-One was ready to protect himself to the fullest extent, by all means available. As KRS-One made clear in his decision to use familiar nationalistic images of Malcolm X, Malcolm represented the kind of black leader that was missing from the black political landscape of the late 1990s.



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The dissatisfaction of young black men and women with black leadership of the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the resurrection of Malcolm as a popular black leader. Young black men who used Hip-hop to articulate their experiences used Malcolm to express their desire for leaders like X and to praise his efforts. Rappers who used Malcolm's name/image or referenced his deeds/politics brought Malcolm into the mainstream. Popularization of the image of Malcolm X led to the resurrection of X as the standard of black masculinity. Rappers from both coasts positioned Malcolm X as the ideal black man in the face of many attempts by the Reagan administration to equate

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<sup>187</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, *Malcolm X: Research Site*, available from <http://brothermalcolm.net/2002/photographs/4/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 21 July 2010.

<sup>188</sup> N. Lam, *Movie Recommendation From the UW Libraries Media Center Staff*, University of Washington Libraries. Media Center, available from <http://www.lib.washington.edu/media/hiphop/about14.html>; Internet; accessed 21 July 2010.

black masculinity with criminal behavior. Using various types of Hip-hop music, rappers showed Malcolm as an ideal representation of black masculinity through the different eras: zoot suit wearing, Lindy hopping dance/party craze; the rebel in hardcore/gangsta rap most cleverly represented by Detroit Red; or the political pan-Africanist represented in the raps of Public Enemy, KRS-One and, eventually, X-Clan.

Two things made these representations possible: The first was the assassination of Malcolm X and his legacy as a martyr for black people. The second was Malcolm's ability to dramatically transform himself, best noted in his autobiography, speeches and interviews. The legacy of Malcolm X, as explained by Davis<sup>189</sup> and others, defined for a generation of young blacks ideas and ideals about black masculinity and its operation in American society. Rap groups such as Public Enemy (PE) went as far as to mimic the military formation of the NOI's Fruit of Islam, using their own paramilitary dance group, who performed dances in the *Fight the Power* and *Shut'em Down* videos that followed the line formation of the FOI and positioned large photos of Malcolm X in the background of both videos. In an unprecedented move, Queen Latifah, a female rapper, used a small sample of Malcolm X's voice in the song *Ladies First* to establish her credibility and garner respect of women rappers in a male dominated genre. As rappers continued to sample and use Malcolm X's image and speeches in their music, Malcolm X's legacy continued to be explored to find solutions to the problem of black leadership and the role of black men in American society.

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<sup>189</sup> Ossie Davis, "Why I Eulogized Malcolm X," *Negro Digest* 25, no.4 (February 1966) : 64 - 66.

## Why Race Still Matters

In their work on racial formation theory in the United States, Omi and Winant,<sup>190</sup> in the second edition of their seminal work, set out to describe the post civil rights situation of race in America. Frustrated by class and ethnically based theories that do not encompass the transforming nature of racial oppression in the United States, Omi and Winant propose using racial formation theory to address the continuing circumstances of race in America.

... [T]he theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial 'subjection' is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus, we are inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes 'common sense' – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. A vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other.<sup>191</sup>

The progression of racial projects in society continues the process of naming each citizen as a racialized subject. Racialized subjects are imbued with difference that is localized in a hierarchy that inevitably favors one subject. Within society, as racialized subjects interact, the hierarchy acts as a tool to negotiate space. The enhancement of the agency of one racialized subject over the other is inevitable, in this negotiation; leaving both subjects with prime examples of how society communicates and operates within these large and small racial projects. Regardless of conscious or subconscious acknowledgement, race clearly still matters.

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<sup>190</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 60.

In spite of the recent presidential election and much to the chagrin of the some leaders of the civil rights movement – black and white – racism is still very much alive.<sup>192</sup> Presently, some blacks are included into the hegemonic classes in a way that could not have happened before *Brown vs. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Although mechanisms in place regressed certain types of institutional projects that promoted racism, the effects of those programs were never actualized to the masses of black people. The realization was similar to the words uttered by noted black psychologist Kenneth Clark, “...the masses of Negroes are now starkly aware that recent civil rights victories benefited a small number of middle-class Negroes while their predicament remained the same or worsened.”<sup>193</sup> Even with the advent of Black Power and the vocalization of the need for accessibility to resources, the majority of blacks never escaped a majority of the discriminatory practices that continued to operate in the United States. Although it may have been passé to exhibit openly racist ideology or lexicon, covertly, discriminatory practices still generated results similar to the openly hostile racial projects of the past – from the Nadir through the 1960s.

The downturn of the American economy did not aide in the expansion of inclusive racial projects. To the contrary, the 1970s saw the beginning of the end of

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<sup>192</sup> Omi and Winant describe race as conceived initially, as a biological concept, a matter of species, to justify the ‘discoveries’ of nations with exploitable resources. Race then began to be approached as a social construction that again justified the hegemonic institutional system of favoring white, heterosexually, male Americans.”(63,65,68) Race, they contend, “has no fixed meaning, a preeminently political phenomenon ...constructed and transformed through competing political projects, through necessary and ineluctable link between the structural and cultural dimensions of race in the U.S.” (65,71) Racism is then any “project that creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.”(71)<sup>192</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>193</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.

semi-skilled and no-skilled positions that were once located in urban centers and in the United States. Once these positions moved out of the city into the suburbs and across the ocean, many blacks, men especially, lost a source of income generation that had effectively aided in reversing some of the disparity between the earning power between blacks and whites.<sup>194</sup> In addition to the economic potential loss by blacks, the start of the Black Power movement brought a new and different view of equal access to resources as well as a new methodology to thinking about the political and cultural life of the civil rights movement.

The problem, according to many adherents to Black Power, was no longer an acquisition to the rights of American citizenry, but an end to de facto discrimination. Robert Allen suggests that, “the black power militants identified the deficiency as a general lack of black participation in the political process. As a result of this orientation it is not surprising that black power emerged initially as an effort to reform the social system.”<sup>195</sup> Initially, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton, the authors of perhaps the only tome solely devoted to Black Power,<sup>196</sup> believed that political access would then guarantee access to economic resources and inclusion into the societal structure. The idea behind Black Power was to advocate for a collective struggle, armed or not, where blacks obtained necessary access by their own hands. Once in control of those resources, blacks could self-determine how best to manage those resources for the good of the majority (of blacks) instead of the few advances made by some of the newly

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<sup>194</sup> See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). <sup>194</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>195</sup> Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytical History*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 49.

<sup>196</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (London: Cape, 1967).

emerging middle class. Disagreement between the diverging organizations and disagreements about which methodology to use for the implementation of Black Power ideology, gave way to two main tenets of the movement. The first included a re-evaluation of the position of blacks vis-à-vis the rest of the world; the second included a re-evaluation of the political legacy of the movements, most visible through a discussion of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the US (US vs. Them) organization.

At the end of the 1960s, social movements and revolutions happening around the world influenced the perception of Black Power militants and activists. By force, peaceful demonstrations, or colonial decision, Africans, Indians, Vietnamese, Cubans and others attained political independence from colonial powers. For the first time, a majority of blacks began to align themselves ideologically, and sometimes physically, with anti-colonial revolutionaries, believing themselves to be under the same kind of repressive colonial forces that occupied countries in the Third World. Malcolm X, commented on the situation growing around the world,

But a change has come about. In us. And what from? Back in '55 in Indonesia, at Bandung, they had a conference of dark-skinned people. The people of Africa and Asia came together for the first time in centuries. They had no nuclear weapons, they had no air fleets, no navy. But they discussed their plight and they found that they there was one thing that all of us had in common – oppression, exploitation, suffering. And we had a common oppressor, a common exploiter

...But when you brought the oppressors together there's one thing they all had in common, they were all from Europe. And this European was oppressing the people of Africa and Asia. And since we could see that we had oppression in common and exploitation in common, sorrow and sadness and grief in the Bandung Conference that it was time for us to forget our differences.

...From '55 to '60 the flames of nationalism, independence on the African continent, became so bright and so furious, they were able to burn and sting anything that got in its path. And that same spirit didn't stay on the African continent. It somehow or other – it slipped into the Western Hemisphere and got into the heart and the mind and the soul of the Black man in the Western



Hemisphere who supposedly had been separated from the African continent for almost 400 years. But the same desire for freedom that moved the Black man on the African continent began to burn in the heart and the mind and the soul of the Black man here, in South America, Central America, and North America, showing us we were not separated. Though there was an ocean between us, we were still moved by the same heartbeat.<sup>197</sup>

...the word *African*, was used in this country in a derogatory way. But now, since Africa has gotten – it's getting its independence and there are so many independent African states. The image of the African has changed from negative to positive.<sup>198</sup>

The re-framing by activists in the Black Power movement of the idea of colonial occupation within the United States, a direct result of the speeches and political ideology of Malcolm X, profoundly changed the Black Power movement. As Kwame Ture noted,

Later, the movement presented us in SNCC with many urgent and immediate problems that focused our attention locally. This would begin to change after the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X. In SNCC this change was due almost entirely to the work of one courageous activist sister...Our sister<sup>199</sup> had studied Latin American Affairs and Middle Eastern history in college, after which she took a job in South America. ...Upon returning to the States, influenced by Malcolm, she worked with the Nation of Islam. Upon his expulsion from the Nation, she followed Malcolm into the Organization of Afro-American Unity. After his assassination, the sister joined SNCC, where she organized a study group on the question of Palestine. ...My last act as chairman was to work with our sister in drafting a position paper, possibly for distribution in the SNCC newsletter, intended as the basis for internal discussion. ... This is what later came to be known in the press as SNCC's "anti-Israel" position.

I pointed out that the Nation of Islam had been the first (African organization in the U.S. to support Palestine). I could vividly remember in '64 seeing a picture of Malcolm X meeting publicly with a PLO representative. I pointed out that about

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<sup>197</sup> Malcolm X, "Not Just an American Problem, but a World Problem: Corn Hill Methodist Church, Rochester New York, 16 February 1965," *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 160-161.

<sup>198</sup> Malcolm X, "Our People Identify with Africa: Bernice Bass Interview, 27 December 1964" *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989) , 91.

<sup>199</sup> Kwame Toure refused to name the sister who worked with Malcolm X even when prompted by his friend, fellow activist, and biography Ekwueme Michael Thelwell. Given the circumstance that Toure had experienced throughout his life, the assassination of Malcolm X, and the dangerous political activity of the sister in question Toure's silence can be understood.

the only place we could read accounts of events in the Middle East that represented the Palestinian position was in the Nation's newspaper.<sup>200</sup>

Furthermore, many activists and revolutionaries seriously re-thought the possibilities of advocating within the system and coalitions with progressive whites based on the thinking of Malcolm X:

But we also realize that the problem facing Black people in this country is so complex and so involved and has been here so long, unsolved, that it is absolutely necessary for us to form another organization. Which we did, which is a nonreligious organization in which – is known as the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), and it is so structured organizationally to allow for active participation of any Afro-American, any Black American, in a program that is designed to eliminate the negative political, economic, and social evils that our people are confronted by in this society. And we have that set up because we realize that we have to fight against the evils of a society that has failed to produce brotherhood for every member of that society. This in no way means that we're antiwhite, antiblue, antigreen, or antiyellow. We're antiwrong. We're antidiscrimination. We're antisegregation. We're against anybody who wants to practice some form of segregation or discrimination against us because we don't happen to be a color that acceptable to you...

We don't judge a man because of the color of his skin. ... We judge you because of what you do and what you practice. And as long as you practice evil, we're against you. And for us, the most – the worst form of evil is the evil that's based upon judging a man because of the color of his skin. And I don't think anybody here can deny that we're living in a society that just doesn't judge a man according to his talents, according to his know-how, according to his possibility – background, or lack of academic background. This society judges a man solely upon the color of his skin. If you're white, you can go forward, and if you're Black, you have to fight your way every step of the way, and you still don't get forward.

We are living in a society that is by and large controlled by people who believe in segregation. We are living in a society that is by and large controlled by a people who believe in racism, and practice segregation and discrimination and racism. We believe in – and I say that it is controlled, not by the well-meaning whites, but controlled by the segregationists, the racists.

... So we're not against people because they're white. But we're against those who practice racism. We're against those who drop bombs on people because their color happens to be of a different shade than yours. ... Because the white

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<sup>200</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, (New York: Scribner, 2003), 558-559; 605.

public is divided. Some mean good, and some don't mean good. Some are well meaning and some are not well meaning. This is true. You got some that are not well meaning, and some are well meaning. And usually those that are not well meaning outnumber those that are well meaning. You need a microscope to find those that are well meaning.<sup>201</sup>

Some like, H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton, and Kwame Ture concluded that attainment of full civil rights would never take place unless blacks created revolutionary methods similar to those of people of color around the world. Activists went back and forth on the question of white alliances; some agreed that the revolution would have to include whites, as the idea would be to create a new societal structure that would be inclusive of all. Amiri Baraka and the United Brothers, concluded that whites, whether they advocated for the current structure or not, were the enemy and could not be trusted to truly advocate for a system where they could be at a disadvantage.<sup>202</sup> Still, others like Ron Maulana Karenga and the members of the US Organization believed that the revolution should take another approach and revolutionize the minds of blacks.

Ron Maulana Karenga, a scholar, activist and creator of the Kwanzaa holiday, was one of those who advocated for a political agitation in the form of revolutionary ideology. In the late 1960s, he formed the US Organization. Karenga's mission was two-fold. First, he wanted to give black people a direct inheritance to an African tradition, by creating a distinct Afro-American identity. For Karenga, African culture offered many possibilities for the coalition of black American culture. Malcolm X also influenced his belief in the possibility of coalition building among Afro-Americans,

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<sup>201</sup>Malcolm X, "Not Just an American Problem, but a World Problem: Corn Hill Methodist Church, Rochester New York, 16 February 1965," in *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry, (New York: Pathfinder, 198) , 151-153.

<sup>202</sup> Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 196.

The key to our success lies in *united* action. Lack of unity among the various Afro-American groups involved in our struggle has always been the reason we have failed to win concrete gains in our war against America's oppression, exploitation, discrimination, segregation, degradation, and humiliation. Before the miserable condition of the 22 million "second-class citizens" can be corrected, all the groups in the Afro-American community must form a united front. Only through united efforts can our problems there be solved. How can we get the unity of Afro-American community? Ignorance of each other is what has made unity impossible in the past. Therefore we need enlightenment. We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity. Once we have more knowledge (light) about each other we will stop condemning each other and a *united* front will be brought about.<sup>203</sup>

Using a combination of traditions and practices, Karenga would create an identity that incorporated the distinct circumstances of blacks living in America. In addition to the influence of Malcolm X, Karenga was inspired by the political actions and writings of Senghor, Nyerere, and Sukarno. From these men, Karenga estimated that "the will and value of the people were genuine pillars of socialist transformation," and "collectivism or communism represented the European model, whereas 'communalism' was ...African... 'to be communalistic was to share willingly.'"<sup>204</sup> His recovery and reinterpretation of African communalism led to the formation of a distinct African/Afro-American holidays, Afrocentric naming ceremonies for adults and children, and religious rituals, brought together under the principles of Kawaida and defined broadly by Karenga as a way of life.

Black Power, constructed by Karenga as a restructuring of the self and the actions of the people, would replace a sense of worth destroyed by institutional and local discriminatory practices of the dominant culture. This newfound sense of self-worth

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<sup>203</sup> Malcolm X, "Racism: The Cancer that is Destroying America," *Egyptian Gazette*, 25 August 1964, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 304.

<sup>204</sup> Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism*, Foreword by Claybourne Carson, (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 15.

would result in the immediate implementation of agency on the part of Afro-Americans. Although the US Organization never surpassed five hundred members, the lasting effects of Karenga's ideology can be noted in the habitual practice of thousands of African American's celebration of Kwanzaa.<sup>205</sup>

One of the most dynamic organizations to materialize during the black power movement was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). Formed in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the party went on to create community programs, coalitions with radical/liberal white groups, and actively engage in violent actions with/against the police. Considered by the state and federal government 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country,' the BPP issued a Ten Point Program that articulated their desires for community control and improvement.<sup>206</sup> The platform in its inception was nationalist yet, in 1972, Newton claimed that the group was actually a "revolutionary intercommunalism organization."<sup>207</sup> Newton, under the influence of the political philosophy of Malcolm X, defined revolutionary intercommunalism is a mixture of viewing the nations of the world as communities and, in true Marxist format, separating the haves from the have-nots, revolting against the ruling classes of the world to transform society, and create a new distribution of wealth. As Malcolm X concluded,

The only time that man has let the black man go one step forward has been when outside pressure has been brought to bear upon him. It has never been for any other reason. World pressure, economic pressure, political pressure, military pressure: When he was under pressure, he let you and me have a break. So the point that I make is that it has never just been on our own initiative that you and I have made any steps forward. And the day that you and I recognize this, then we see the thing in its proper perspective because we cease looking just to Uncle Sam and Washington, D.C., to have the problems solved and we cease looking to just

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 69, 161.

<sup>206</sup> Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America*, (New York: Harlem River Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 27.

within America for allies in our struggle against the injustices. ...Racism is a human problem and a crime that is absolutely so ghastly that a person who is fighting racism is well within his rights to fight against it by any means necessary until it is eliminated. When you and I can start thinking like that and we get involved in some kind of activity with that kind of liberty, I think we'll get some ends to some of our problems almost overnight.<sup>208</sup>

Black Power politics for the BPP meant meeting the needs of the people, then asking the people to meet the needs of their community as interpreted by the Panthers. The programs of the BPP operated through maintenance of community members, in the communities in which they lived. The programs not only tied the BPP to the community but also gave the community an investment in the Panthers. Providing necessary services such as the free food and breakfast programs, assisting with police brutality, and healthcare led many in the community to not only support BPP programs but also their political candidates who ran for public offices. Newton believed that the Party existed for people and because of them. Yet, many disagreed with the manner in which the BPP wanted to secure freedom for the masses. The alliances with radical whites and even some black capitalists in the community caused some leaders in the BPP to resign (Kwame Ture) and other organizations to question the legitimacy of coalitions with whites of any political persuasion.

Minority youth, who grew-up in the 1970s under the influence of Black Power and came of age during the 1980s, faced with a lack of economic prospects, diminishing educational opportunities, and a systematic patrolling by law enforcement agencies turned to heroes who did not bow to the status quo like Malcolm X. As William Sales states, "today's youth generation, out of the desperate conditions of its existence, is much

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<sup>208</sup>Malcolm X, "Communication and Reality, Speech to Domestic Peace Corps 12 December 1964," *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), 319-320.

less shocked by Malcolm's rhetoric and seeks to embrace his revolutionary speech and example."<sup>209</sup> The quote below illustrates his point:

Dennis O'Neill has written about the striking parallels between the life of Malcolm X and the thematic content of rap: the hustler bravado, the ever-present threat of jail, the transformative effect of Islam, the condemnation of Black-on-Black violence, and the reconciliation with Africa. ...the rhythms of Malcolm's voice are the rhythms of rap itself in a very real sense...the emphasis on the words – their content – rather than the emotion can be wrung from them or even injected into them by the passion of the performer – this is Malcolm and this is rap.<sup>210</sup>

The resurgence of black nationalism/black cultural pride was evident in every rap song from Public Enemy (*Fight the Power*) to Sir Mix-A-Lot (*Baby Got Back*). Lyrical content in most songs praised black culture, exhorted black youth to show pride in their culture, and to fight against discrimination in all its forms.

Additionally, the new “silent majority” of whites, who felt the federal government had done all that was necessary to end racial disparities, looked to the new administration of Ronald Reagan/George H. Bush to address the country's “new” drug problem and the elevation of criminal activity surrounding drug sales and usage. As the Reagan/Bush campaign machine criminalized blacks, affirmative action programs were under attack in the judicial branch of the government. The Supreme Court heard the first wave of cases (DeFunis v Odegaard 1974, Regents of the University of California v Bakke 1978, et al.) that charged that affirmative action programs increased discrimination against whites. Policies to address the “Reverse racism” charge were quickly developed and instituted in the Reagan/Bush administration. According to Omi and Winant, “he [Reagan] opposed racial equality and civil rights for minorities in a manner which seemed on the surface

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<sup>209</sup>William Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

‘color-blind.’”<sup>211</sup> For instance, in spite of blatant efforts of non-compliance with federal mandates, Bob Jones University went on to receive tax exempt status through the machinations of the Reagan administration.<sup>212</sup> Reagan’s economic policies took monies earmarked for Great Society programs and invested them in Cold War weaponry and the development of the space program – dubbed Star Wars. At the same time, he developed a “War on Drugs” that resembled a war on poor blacks and Latinos by instituting mandatory prison terms and longer sentences for crack usage and sales, while continuing policies enforcing shorter or no prison terms on the more expensive powder form of cocaine.<sup>213</sup>

Entrance into the twenty first century has not guaranteed any improvements for the situations of the majority of black Americans, despite the racial background of the newly elected American President, Barack Obama. The rates of joblessness, lack of health care, poor housing are still usually higher for blacks than those of whites with comparable educational levels.<sup>214</sup> The racial projects, as Omi and Winant have suggested, have not ended. The mutation of racial projects from one format to another continuing the disparities and the legacy Stuart Hall has described as the signification of the term “black,” left (and leaves) black men and women at a severe disadvantage as they

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<sup>211</sup>Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 135.

<sup>212</sup> Jack White, “Lott, Reagan, and Republican Racism,” *Time Magazine*, 14 December 2002 [magazine on-line]; available from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,399921,00.html>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>213</sup> The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform, “It’s Not Fair, It’s Not Working,” Drug Policy: Crack Reform, [advocacy group on-line] available from <http://www.sentencingproject.org/crackreform/>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>214</sup> In 2005, the jobless rate for blacks was 10.6%, twice the rate of whites <http://www.jobbankusa.com/News/Unemployment/unemploy120505a.html> According to the Commonwealth Fund Report, in 2005 “uninsured rates for Hispanic and African American adults are one and-a-half to three times greater than the rate for white adults.” [http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr\\_doc/941\\_Doty\\_hlt\\_care\\_disconnect\\_disparities\\_issue\\_bri.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/usr_doc/941_Doty_hlt_care_disconnect_disparities_issue_bri.pdf) Ac <http://centeronbudget.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=850>



navigate the process of American society. Mainstream patriarchal responses to gender advance the differential experiences of racism for black men and women. For example, black women are often stereotyped as less of a threat to mainstream society and are afforded more opportunities because of their ability to exhibit American societal norms. While the stereotype of the well-educated black men would have society believe that this men are rare and should be treated like endangered species. At the same time, they share a legacy that connects them communally to racial projects of resistance. The focus of the following section will be the racial projects of resistance practiced by black men in American society.

## **Masculinity, Culturally Speaking**

According to Malcolm X, racists and the hegemonic nature of racism classified the majority of blacks as criminals,

The racists ...use the press to get public opinion on their side. When they want to suppress and oppress the Black community, what do they do? They take the statistics, and through the press, they feed them to the public. They make it appear that the role of crime in the Black community is higher than it is anywhere else... This keeps the Black community in the image of a criminal. It makes it appear that anyone in the Black community is a criminal. And as soon as this impression is given, then it makes it possible, or paves the way to setup a police-type state in the Black community, getting the full approval of the white public when the police come in, use all kind of brutal measures to suppress Black people, crush their skulls, sic dogs on them, and things of that type. And the whites go along with it. Because they think that everybody over there's a criminal anyway.

During these riots, or because of these riots, or after the riots, again the press, very skillfully, depicted the rioters as hoodlums, criminals, thieves, because they were abducting some property. Now mind you, it is true that property was destroyed. But look at it from another angle. In these Black communities, the economy of the community is not in the hands of the Black man. The Black man is not his own landlord. The buildings that he lives in are owned by someone else. The stores in the community are run by someone else. Everything in the community is out of his hands. He has no say-so in it whatsoever, other than to live there, and pay the highest rent for the lowest-type boarding place, pays the highest prices for

food, for the lowest grade of food. He is a victim of this, a victim of economic exploitation, political exploitation, and every other kind.

...But the one who's exploiting him doesn't live in his neighborhood. He only owns the house. He only owns the neighborhood. So that when the Black man explodes, the one that he wants to get at isn't there. So he destroys the property. He's not a thief. He's not trying to steal cheap your furniture or your cheap food. He wants to get at you, but you're not there.<sup>215</sup>

In a society where black people are marked as "other," stigmatized black men are categorized as *persona non grata* when attempting to realize the agency as citizens of the United States. American society's ideas of masculinity have changed with the introduction of technology. Since the Industrial Revolution, masculinity has been defined in part by the ability to exercise actions that women were restrained from exercising, such as the freedom to interact in the market place unfettered. The role of white women has changed as white women gained entry into the market place and patriarchal definitions about manhood and the role of citizens altered significantly. For white men, manhood or masculine identity – as bell hooks describes – is the ability to exercise agency without institutional hindrance.<sup>216</sup> By defining masculinity as the ability to demonstrate agency without question, black men are at a severe disadvantage. As was noted previously, racial projects continue to impede, institutionally and individually, the ability of black men to become actors in full possession of their agency.

Other scholars have doubted whether the way that manhood is defined in the United States is the tradition that best suits black men culturally. Definitions of manhood, particularly in the United States, are confined by the ability of men to compete

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<sup>215</sup> Malcolm X, "Not Just an American Problem, but a World Problem: Corn Hill Methodist Church, Rochester New York, 16 February 1965," *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 153-155.

<sup>216</sup> bell hooks, "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, ed. bell hooks (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

in the marketplace and secure not only economic solvency, but also position vis-à-vis competition with other men. In addition, manhood in the United States contains the ability to access the mechanisms that regulate the actions of citizenry as individuals determined to secure their own futures for themselves and their personal relations. Scholars such as Karenga, Asante, Hutchinson,<sup>217</sup> and others contend that in an African context men are defined by their ability to demonstrate strength, service to the community – in the form of regular contributions to the maintenance of society, and most importantly, as warriors engaged in a communal enterprise. Their main argument is that black men removed from their true cultural definition of manhood by slavery suffer a cultural dilemma of schizophrenic proportions. According to these scholars, black men who adhere to an American societal definition of manhood will be disappointed because of their inability to incorporate traditional American masculine definitions of manhood. Following an Afrocentric model, these scholars contend that African American men should adhere to an African model of manhood, such as communalism. The difficulty of this position is not lost on black men who must navigate an American society with a lack of ideology that speaks to the reality of the black American experience of race in America.

Black men, having to contend with a society that regulates their ability to be men, faced with the prospect of having to incorporate dominant society practices in order to facilitate their inclusion in American society, have developed strategies to expand their possibility for manhood, such as the Million Man March, Tavis Smiley's State of the

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<sup>217</sup> Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*, (Los Angeles: Middle Passage Press, 1994). Mualana Karenga, "Black Male/Female Relationships" *Introduction to Black Studies*, (Los Angeles: Kaiwiada, 1982). Molefi Kente Assante, "Black Male and Female Relationships: An Afrocentric Context," L. Gary ed. *Black Men*, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publishing, 1981).

Black American Union conference, Kevin Powell and Hill Harper's *Black Male Handbook* or Harper's *Letters to a Young Brother*. Prior to the post-industrial revolution, the expansion involved a two-prong approach of resistance and/or acceptance to systematic racial projects that involved institutions or operated on institutional level. For example, the resistance campaigns of the NAACP to the film *Birth of a Nation* involved on some level of resistance to the image put forth by D.W. Griffith, including boycotting campaigns and protesting showings of the film. However, other campaigns involved the combination of tactics that had to deal more with public safety than the discrimination faced by blacks.

To ban *The Birth of a Nation*, blacks had to go beyond showing that the film slandered African Americans and utterly distorted history. Like their counterparts in other northern cities, the leaders of Boston's NAACP and Trotter argued that the film was a threat to public safety, that it heightened racial tensions, and could incite violence.<sup>218</sup>

The expansion of black manhood has included a dominance of cultural areas such as music, sports, and the stylization of clothing. "In the context of race and masculinity, authenticity imbues the subject with a mythic sense of virility, danger, and physicality; in representations of hip-hop, authenticity most often manifests itself through the body of young black male who stands in for 'the urban real.'"<sup>219</sup>

Involved in these expansionist projects has been a struggle to articulate a realistic idea of black manhood. Efforts to expand black manhood have often included a response from the dominant culture that borders on recognition, to an extent, rejection, and/or

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<sup>218</sup> Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, "William Monroe Trotter: Birth of a Nation Sparks Protest 26 April 1915, *Mass Moments*, [Massachusetts Humanities on-line]; available from <http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=125>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>219</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, "Hip-Hop Fashion, Masculine Anxiety, and the Discourse of Americana," *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson eds. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 327.

suppression. “As far as mainstream culture is concerned, it is as though the representation of African American culture operates only monolithically, and that only one form of popular representation may be available at any given time.”<sup>220</sup> As the battle to show a realistic view of black manhood encounters the dominant society idea that only one representation of black manhood is valid at a time, dialogues about authenticity, continue to involve myopic views of black masculinity and its expressions. Accordingly, the dominant black American narrative becomes a didactic of resistance and struggle against the dominant white narrative and accessing and inclusion into the white superstructure; giving those blacks that fall into either category status in the collective memory.

In the United States, black people have lived and continue to live in an oppressive society that has limited the avenues of cultural representations available to them. As such, they have developed a collective memory surrounding oppression and resistance, that contains two dominant threads of heroes - the resisters/pride-producers and the exhibitors of W.E. B Dubois’ theory of double consciousness. Some black male heroes, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackie Robinson, or Crispus Attucks, become part of the dominant narrative. Others like, Malcolm X are denied a smooth entry into the dominant narrative.

In the case of Malcolm X and other male heroes, gender plays a significant role. In part, it is significant because it speaks to the notion of male authority and adherence to dominant notion of patriarchy as marker of authenticity. Yet as Jackson has noted,

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<sup>220</sup> Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) , 23.

The public narratives pertaining to Black men's lives comply with several racialized projections about the Black masculine body as: (1) exotic and strange, (2) violent, (3) incompetent and uneducated, (4) sexual, (5) exploitable, and (6) innately incapacitated.<sup>221</sup>

All of these public narratives speak against authority. Considering these are the racial projects in which black bodies are represented, hooks's comments that "within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, rebel black masculinity has been idolized and punished, romanticized yet vilified. Though the traveling man repudiates being a patriarchal provider, he does not necessarily repudiate male dominion."<sup>222</sup> It is within these circumstances that Malcolm X emerged as a battleground for the machinations of both those who wanted to promote idealistic notions about black manhood and those who wanted to co-opt black masculinity to continue racial projects of the past.

## **Black Men and Their Images in Popular Culture**

In his book on race, Michael Eric Dyson states two crucial axioms for the study of race in America. The first is that black people's skill and skin are commodities in white America.

Race has always been a deep, characteristic American problem. The refusal to face race, or our courageous confrontation with its complex meanings, defines our national identity. And it goes in cycles. At some points in our nation's history – for instance, during the civil rights movement – we were forced to contend with race. At other times, such as during the erosion of racial progress in the Reaganite '80s, we believed we could just as well do without all those remedies like affirmative action, which, in any case, had been manufactured to give a leg up to undeserving blacks... If there is one fact of black life in white America we can't deny, it's this: black folk go in and out of style. Most of the time our identities are exploited for white commercial ends, or ripped off to further the careers of white imitators. Blackness is today a hot commodity, but of course, it always has been: the selling of black bodies on the slave market, minstrel shows,

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<sup>221</sup>Ronald Jackson II, "Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics" *Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>222</sup>bell hooks, "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, ed. bell hooks (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 96.

Elvis's cloning of black gospel and blues singers all point to the fetish of black skin and skill in American popular culture... Black bodies are “in” now, that is, if you don't happen to be a black man with a car, tangling with the police in Los Angeles or the white suburbs of Pittsburgh.<sup>223</sup>

The cultural capital that is evidence from the resistive and creative efforts of blacks to survive and build in American society is extraordinarily useful as American society is currently mirrored and reflected around the world. No longer the great industrial producer that it once was, America is still the producer of great cultural artifacts/products and cultural knowledge that can be easily translated across generations, races, genders, sexualities, etc. The cultural capital produced in the United States comes largely out of the experiences of producers on the margins of dominant society, margins that tend to be rigid and regimented. As Dyson argues, as a marginally represented group, blacks are allowed to float in and out of the production of dominant culture cultural capital along with other marginalized groups in American society. As the main producers and exhibitors of ‘cool,’ black men play a large role in this process. As the representation of the ideal black man, Malcolm X was presented as cool.

As Lawrence Levin has discussed, the division between high and low culture is one of appropriation of symbols or the power to create symbols in a constantly changing world.<sup>224</sup> Power in this construction is given to those who possess some kind of measure to determine what should be appropriate behavior, style, and consumption for a select few. In the present time, this idea has been modified to include an assortment of things. As Stuart Hall has noted popular culture continues to be seen as belonging to the masses, but as he has also noted, it is increasingly difficult to determine the identities of the

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<sup>223</sup>Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Lines*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1997) , 52-53.

<sup>224</sup>Lawrence W. Levin, *High Brow, Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

masses that supply and demand popular culture. Others, such as Morgan and Legget, determine that “what is dominant is neither monolithic nor static.”<sup>225</sup> Inherent in this schema is the need for popular culture to remain current and new. The freshness of popular culture determines its need to “constantly ‘borrow’ from other cultures” to maintain its attraction.<sup>226</sup> In a post-modern world, marginalized cultures have usually served as a breeding ground for popular culture.

Speaking about the position of black public intellectuals (himself, West, Gates, and hooks), Dyson concluded that these are the people who white America has allowed to be the interpreters of black culture. Dyson argues that “we [black public intellectuals] are involved, however much we might not like it, with the translation, interpretation, explanation, and demystification of black culture to white masses.”<sup>227</sup> Undoubtedly, the black public intellectuals are explaining black popular culture and its producers to a mainstream culture that is unaware of the meanings and implications of black cultural expression. Specifically, they often are interpreting and sanctioning black male youth culture and their creative expressions – offering details as to the usefulness (read ability to be commodified or a commodity) and merit of black culture expressions.

Part of white culture's fascination has to do with American culture's adulation of youth - the virgin, the new, and the rebellious attitude associated with youth. Black male youth culture is at the center of American youth culture. It is the originator of many of the trends that are then reinterpreted by region/class, gender/sexuality, and most importantly, race. As these trends are incorporated into mainstream youth culture, black

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<sup>225</sup> Michael Morgan and Susan Legget, *Mainstream(s) and Margins: Cultural Politics in the 90s*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>226</sup> Discussions with Sheri Parks, Ph. D.

<sup>227</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Lines*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1997) , 60.



male youth culture is sometimes repositioned in the forefront allowing black men to be seen and deconstructed (black good or black bad for a myriad of reasons). In the process, black men's expressions have been qualified and authenticated as "real blackness;" Leaving other black cultural producers and products (women, intellectuals, ethnic and high culture expressions) outside or auxiliary to "real" blackness - inauthentic or imitating white culture. Within this dialectical deconstruction, black men's youth culture is given a limited agency, but agency nonetheless. Thus, black young men or those still holding onto and displaying their youthfulness become the purveyors of "cool" as Herman Beavers and Richard Majors have already argued.<sup>228</sup> As articulators of cool, their cultural products become commodities and can be traded in the marketplace.

Evidence of this can be seen in the rap industry. Artists who were producing rap songs during the mid-to-late 1970s established the genre which then gained currency among young white people who were coming out of other genres of black music and black influenced music including jazz, rock and roll, disco, funk, and some rock-n-roll influenced genres like British punk music. The profit potential of these artists was small, but steadily increasing with legitimacy of rap as a musical form - which white artists like Blondie provided. Artists who came along in the late 1970s and early 1980s began to realize the potential for commodification; as Sylvia Robinson author or thief of the first rap certified gold song, *Rapper's Delight*, clearly appreciated. With the recognition that rap music could make money, there was a push to include the genre into the mainstream. Black men, mostly, were given full control to make music, produce, and even own record labels. Even so, hip-hop did not become a billion dollar business until the mid to late

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<sup>228</sup> Herman Beavers, "'The Cool Pose:' Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy," *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) , 256-258.

1990s, when it crossed-over – with the majority of sales coming from white males.<sup>229</sup>

Although there have been platinum selling female artists, like Da Brat, women remain on the margins of the scene as do other black men who are not interpreted as representing “authentic” black youth culture; another casualty in the discussions of dominant interpretations of black masculinity. White men who represent black male youth culture are also given an entryway into the genre, for example, the life and careers of Eminem and MC Everlast as a part of House of Pain and his rap/folk alter ego Whitey Ford demonstrate the successful white rappers that are respected and appreciated by black and white audiences.

The cycle of appropriation and revitalization the other has made it possible for some of the members of marginalized groups to dominate as the symbol for “cool” or to be the archetype of coolness. As Pillai states, “The problem with understanding cultural processes through binary oppositions such as inside/outside or core/periphery is that they do not adequately account for the interconnectedness and complexity among different histories, identities, and social formations.”<sup>230</sup> Without proper recognition of the cyclical nature of popular culture, marginalized cultures often bare the brunt of the negative cast; which, of course, is then translated on to the people of that marginalized culture – specifically black men. Hence, the reflexive dialectic between the media, who is often the visible displayer of popular culture, and society becomes a discriminatory one. When the discussion focuses on blacks in popular culture, this representation often reduces

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<sup>229</sup> Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 149 -150.

<sup>230</sup> Poonam Pillai, “Notes on Centers and Margins” *Mainstream(s) and Margins: Cultural Politics in the 90s*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 5.

blacks to a synonym for sexual, emotional, uneducated, compliant, suspicious, criminal, etc. usually taking place on the plane of the black body.

Susan Bordo (1989) asserts, 'the body is ...a medium of culture.' That is, the body is a direct translation of a cultural negotiation between ourselves and others. When the body is inscribed, a palimpsest script emerges based on several considerations such as how we see ourselves, how others see us, and how others' perceptions influence how we define ourselves.<sup>231</sup>

Blackness becomes synonymous with descriptions that often characterize the process of its position as either signifier, sign, and signified. Blackness is then associated with the signified popular culture, negative connotations and all; this is not to say that all the representations of blacks are bad, yet it is increasingly troublesome that such representations are so monolithic and simplistic. Those representations of black men specifically have become more and more regimented and symbolic of their use to convey messages about American culture.

Manthia Diawara observes that black male film characters (think of the characters of Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor, and Will Smith) are "made less threatening to whites ... by white domestication of black customs and culture."<sup>232</sup> Particularly useful is the discussion of Herman Beavers of "The Cool Pose." "The Cool Pose," first discussed by Richard Majors, is a tactic that black men have used to confront the racial project they encounter in their daily lives and an indication of the ingenuity of black men to critically effect change in a system that constantly reinforces the powerlessness of black men.

On the one hand, it issues from the ways black men have learned "to mistrust the words and actions of dominant white people [and thus], black males have learned to make great use of 'poses' and 'postures' which connote control, toughness, and

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<sup>231</sup> Ronald Jackson II, "Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics" *Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>232</sup> Herman Beavers. "'The Cool Pose' Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy," *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 256.

detachment.” Conversely, however, Majors indicates that cool can also represent a problem when “cool suppres[ses] the motivation to learn, accept, or become exposed to stimuli, cultural norms, aesthetics, mannerisms, values, etiquette, information or networks that could help them overcome problems caused by white racism.”<sup>233</sup>

Malcolm X, more than any other black male activist of the civil rights period, is involved in the construction of the cool pose. As Dyson contends, “the rigid racial reasoning of several black males who appealed to Malcolm’s masculinity, his blackness, and his ghetto grounding as the basis for their strict identification with him”<sup>234</sup> continues the popularization of the image of Malcolm X as cool. More so, in spite of indication and evidence to the contrary, black militant representations of Malcolm X remain tied to a narrow configuration of the man as either a criminal or a black supremacist. Simplified configurations of a black nationalist Malcolm X leave him in the NOI without any real political activity or strength. Yet as Dyson says of his black male students, many black men are still locked into “fighting over Malcolm’s tall body and short life, allowing no dibs on a legacy they felt Malcolm had bequeathed to them alone.”<sup>235</sup>

The difficulty with the “Cool Pose” as well as other mechanisms for deconstructing the large racial project of society is that it may actually hinder the growth of other mechanisms that may aid in the creation of inclusive racial projects by society and its members. Conversely, what Majors and other critics do not acknowledge is the high visibility of the “Cool Pose” in popular culture. It is very possible for the “Cool Pose” to be so popular among black men because it is the most visible and familiar coping mechanism. “It is important to the mainstream because its postulation of a style of

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>234</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, xiii.

resistance is easily transformed in advertising, for example, into the consumption of goods and services that signify nonconformist behavior, a refusal to be co-opted by the mainstream.”<sup>236</sup> The facility of transferability to the larger American society does not negate the usefulness coping mechanism in black men’s struggle to define their reality. Black men use many tactics, including the cool pose, to manage their status in American society. According to Lott, Herman Gray’s theory:

... acknowledges that representations of black people derive their meanings (and countermeanings) from their circulation in popular discourses and the commercial media. ... representations of black people gain significance from "the ways those images situate, activate, and structure alliances of identification and pleasure." Television representations of black people, as well as those in popular culture, are resources that different constituencies within the black community employ in their struggle to affirm their humanity and counter the denial of this.<sup>237</sup>

Although some black men may be stuck in its perpetual grasp, it is clear that others use this and a myriad of mechanisms to survive the many ways that racism/discrimination renders black men flat, one-dimensional figures; simultaneously obstructing their humanity. “It is this role as the ultimate purveyors of popular culture, always providing the excitement, angst, irony, tension, and comic relief that are needed to sustain any cultural movement that has kept black men in the mix when all indicators suggest that they should have been extinct many years previous.”<sup>238</sup> The image of Malcolm X, as a fearless, articulate, uncompromising, traditional race man, as constructed by Ossie Davis, US Organization, and the BPP became popular, once again, during this period of heightened racial discrimination that amounted to an aggressive

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<sup>236</sup> Herman Beavers. “‘The Cool Pose’ Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy,” in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities* ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 258.

<sup>237</sup> Tommy Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation*, (Malden, Massachusetts, 1999) , 154.

<sup>238</sup> Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) , 14.

attack on black manhood. Attracted to the kind of masculinity that Davis and others recounted, Malcolm X's image as the ideal black man found its way into rap songs and videos. Young black men responded favorably to the image of Malcolm X as t-shirts, medallions, posters, cassette tapes of speeches and other items with a photo, voice, or quotation from X were prominently displayed. The imprinting of Malcolm's image on the body of black males was a conscious effort to transfer the image of masculinity and perform blackness that was connected to the image of Malcolm X as the ideal black man. Black men under the weight of the pressures of American society looked to a man who had dealt with the same pressures and withstood the onslaught. Among black men, this consciousness created a solidarity that infused urban spaces with an energy that could only be described as fearlessness and demand for respect. For the second time since his assassination, the image of Malcolm X, constructed primarily as a black hero who practiced black nationalism, inspired a generation of black.

## **Symbols & Signs**

The black nationalist image of Malcolm X is often represented by pictures of Malcolm with a shotgun, a grimacing face, or a pointed finger posted high in the air, suggesting resistance, armed if necessary, and suggesting the authority and ability to judge integration seeking blacks and segregation enforcing whites. These images symbolize the representations of the defiance that Malcolm X presented to a nation only willing to confront racism that was televised and representational of a small portion of the country. Seizing upon this image, black nationalists and their inheritors, cultural rap artists continued to imbue their rhetoric and music with the same brand of defiance. Their Malcolm had never changed. He still hated the white devils without exception and

told them so with just a cool look or a gesture. Malcolm became the “icon hovering in the background and looking down upon the mass of his following or emerging out of the depths of the sea.”<sup>239</sup> Cone’s articulation that Malcolm’s image began to resurface in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan became president resonates with the fact that at this point in American society; black men became the target of a systematic government “clean-up” that equated their likeness to the “dirt” of either criminal intentions or activities, as drug addicts or sellers/dealers. Furthermore, funding for higher education, War on Poverty programs, and Affirmative Action programs received cutbacks that severely limited their ability to create real equality; at the same time, the country experienced an economic recession. Black men were not only criminalized, they were also impoverished, with limited accessibility to the methods to change their situations, or as defined as in America, to manhood. It is no wonder that they sought a hero who could re-establish their sense of worth and rescue their self-concept in the face of obstacles that threaten to deny their masculinity. The image of Malcolm X as the ideal black man reaffirmed and provided evidence, that despite the barriers, black men could express manhood. Malcolm’s version of black manhood was a difficult thing to accomplish. Yet, it was a standard that placed the agency for the recovery of black manhood squarely on the shoulders of black men. If these men struggled and adhered to the constructed example of Malcolm’s ideal black man, young black men could reclaim their manhood in a society that constantly sought to undermine their efforts. In similar fashion, these young black men also had the standard to evaluate other black men, especially black leaders, and verify if they were truly attempting to manifest the example of manhood left by Malcolm

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<sup>239</sup> William Sales, Jr. *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-Unity*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 5.

X. Accordingly, the case of Rev. Calvin Butts, III is a prime example. When Butts leveled his high-profile attack on rap music, he received no support from rappers who were not “Gangsta” rappers or black youth; the principle target group to sustain Butts’ idea. As this image of Malcolm appeared in Hip-hop videos, songs and on the bodies of young black people, other images of Malcolm X began to surface, including the commodified image of Malcolm X represented most cleverly by Spike Lee and his film, *X*.

During the late 1990s, the image of Malcolm X went through a fierce competition with the previously mediated images of Malcolm. This conflict between the varying branches of the mediated images lasted until the late 1990s, finally culminating with the inclusion of a new iconic image presented by the United States postal stamp in January 1999. The path of this conflict shows the progression of not only Malcolm’s image in popular culture but also the desire to use a symbol for the purposes of representing black male identity. The struggle for representation and its symbols looms large on the cultural landscape; in an effort expand the spaces of society that are confined by racial discrimination marginalized people battle to include representatives in the dominant narrative that represent an actual picture of black identity. Contrary to the monolithic, pathologic representation of blacks presented by the racial projects of the moment, the desire of the black youth movement of the early 1990s was to spread the positive and progressive image of a relevant and consistent Malcolm X. According to William Sales:

There has been intense competition for the image of Malcolm X not only in the marketplace but in the ideological and political arena as well. In this regard the treatment of Malcolm X parallels that of leader like Marcus Garvey and Nelson Mandela. Once the image of these leaders can no longer be suppressed or ignored, their value and their significance is distorted, often by being reduced to



slogans, which satisfy temporarily but whose superficiality masks the deeper meaning of the issues and analysis these leaders tried to convey.<sup>240</sup>

Once Malcolm became popular in black youth culture and in particular Hip-hop culture, Malcolm's co-optation by the dominant culture was inevitable. Despite renewed interest by the dominant society in Malcolm X, blacks were not willing to let Malcolm X become an American icon devoid of his black nationalist inclinations. The articles written against the use of Malcolm's image on a U.S. postal stamp is a prime of example of this. The battle to keep Malcolm as a "racially traditional" black hero continued despite the continuation by the dominant culture to move Malcolm into the realm of iconic American figures. The stamp which figures prominently in this struggle will be explored in chapter four.

### **Cultural Representations: Blackness En Vivo**

According to Alain Locke, the second Executive Secretary of the NAACP, "We are a race because we have a common race tradition, and each one of us becomes such just in proportion as he recognizes, knows and reverences that tradition."<sup>241</sup> Locke's statement forms the basis for the traditional definition of black collective memory. Because of conditions described above, black Americans have come to identify in a concentrated way that produced a collective memory. The collective memory created reinforced basic proponents of survival in an unequal, oppressive American system. "The bottom line here is that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective

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<sup>240</sup> William Sales, Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-Unity*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>241</sup> Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Blackwell Publishers, 1999) , 91.

memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experiences.”<sup>242</sup>

In her article about the Rodney King Video, Elizabeth Alexander articulated the notion that collective memory could be activated by the knowledge and watching of the Rodney King beating video. “To see [the Rodney King beating] is unbearable, both unto itself as well as for what it means about one’s own likely fate. But knowledge of this pervasive violence provides necessary information of the very real forces threatening African-Americans.”<sup>243</sup> Citing Alain Locke and Elizabeth Alexander, I offer that a black collective memory exists and is a long-standing tradition within the black community because of the oppressive racial system collectively experienced by black Americans in the North and South of the United States. This memory enables black Americans to navigate the terrain, develop responses to their particular situations in the United States, and pass this knowledge to their offspring.

Black cultural representations include information from ideologies for the interpretations of sign, symbols, and images that are at work in American society. As Daniel Boorstin states, Americans expect everything and anything.<sup>244</sup> In our rush to have our desires met, we create events that may not even exist and we confuse with our own meaning. Heroes are thus made by the media technologies that announce them. Although Boorstin complains of the accessibility of heroes, the ability to consume the image of the hero is very powerful, and necessary for a healthy emotional outlook. In the context of American discrimination, exclusionary practices kept blacks from having a

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<sup>242</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can you be Black and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” *Public Culture* 7, no.1 (Fall 1994) : 80.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>244</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A guide to Pseudo-events in America*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 4.

myriad of heroes on display. Visible black images often reinforced dominant perceptions of black culture or mimicked white culture; with significant implications for blacks' accessibility to the dominant superstructure and the forms of agency exhibited by those who succeed in navigating the terrain. Without the ability to consume their own heroes it is doubtful blacks would have been emotionally accomplished at living in a society where real and perceived inequality existed for so long. Some of the signs and symbols of blackness have a direct relationship with the condition of black arrival in the United States. According to Guerrero, "when slavery is rendered in cinematic terms, it is presented from a dominant, usually evasive, sentimentalized, or nostalgic perspective that counters African Americans' rendering of it in their folktales, ruminations, narratives, songs, and novelistic reconstructions."<sup>245</sup> By denying the existence of another story, the dominant structure invalidates black culture and by extension black people as inauthentic. "...African Americans are constructed in the popular imagination as one-dimensional, cardboard celebrity cutouts."<sup>246</sup> Faced with the prospect of reproducing this image or 'telling the truth' black directors and other image creators are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, forced to gain dominant audience's attention and maintain black spectatorship.

"Everything we do sends messages about us in a variety of codes, ... We are also on the receiving end of innumerable messages encoded in music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies or advertisements. Yet we seldom realize that we have received or sent such messages, and would have trouble explaining the rules under which they operate."<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup>Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 9

Using Roland Barthes' categorization of narrative codes, Snead notes the how blacks have been seen as "eternal, unchanging, and unchangeable."

There are according to Barthes, three major categories of narrative codes: codes which involve conventions of plot content (code of enigma and action); codes involving the structure of the plot (symbolic codes); and codes that the text borrows from outside sources (cultural or semic codes), or what we might call "stereotypes."<sup>248</sup>

By using varying codes in society, dominant narratives still suggest and perpetuate the myth of blacks as jezebels, mummies, sambo, studs, and sapphires; limiting the possible expressions of blackness, coding other expressions of blackness as inauthentic and unbelievable. Indeed, it is in this conflated amalgamation that we create, recreate, and transform the signs already in use and develop new ones.

According to Daniel Chandler,

Signs do not just 'convey' meanings, but constitute a medium in which meaning are constructed. Semiotics helps us to realize that meaning is not passively absorbed but arises only in the active process of interpretation. ...Individuals are not unconstrained in their construction of meanings. ...Semiotics can help us to realize that such notions are created and maintained by our engagement with the sign-systems: our sense of identity is established through signs.<sup>249</sup>

It is through the knowledge of learning of codes, symbols, and signs that we have the ability to change or unlearn the meaning of these codes, symbols, and signs. The fluidity of signs or symbols becomes crucial to understanding the historicization of culture. The change over time of culture allows for the fluidity of different symbols, so much so, it is impossible for one to believe that archetypal symbol of the "Angry black Man," Malcolm X, will convey the same meaning today as he did almost forty years ago. It is the shorthand of semiotics that allows us to convey social meanings to particular objects

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<sup>248</sup> James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

<sup>249</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 217-218.

without attaching a singular specific meaning to that particular object each time it is displayed. This is not to say there are not overarching meanings for particular objects. It is for this express purpose that metasigns are developed.

During the 1990s, many mainstream black directors attempted to present the myriad of black expressions and experiences. From films like *Malcolm X* to *Boyz n the Hood*, black directors' interpretation of the story usually included a black male protagonist who exhibited a strong sense of black manhood. This projected manhood enabled him to be taken seriously and become an authentic representative of black masculinity. Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the Hughes Brothers with their films *Do the Right Thing*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, respectively, all used this formula to establish dominant black male narratives of authenticity. Their position as part of the new "talented tenth" gave them the leeway to do so. In spite of their privileged position, many of the cultural filmmakers produced images that were masculine and rarely offered positive or complex feminine images. Their protagonists might have survived obstacles, yet they never offered any kind of complex understanding of manhood that dealt with the position that black men occupy in relation to black women.

### **Hero Construction: Double Consciousness Exhibitor and the Pride Producers**

...[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled

strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>250</sup>

As DuBois saw it, blacks in America existed in a didactic terrain. By being American and being descended from Africans brought as slaves to America after 1619, blacks would not be fully integrated into American society. DuBois' solution to this inconsistency was to have a cadre of blacks who exhibited the best of the dominant ideology of acceptance. His talented tenth, named after the "top" tenth of the population (of blacks) who would lead the path toward integration, would be the cream of the crop and represent the best the black community had to offer. They would also adopt dominant ideologies in order to gain entry into white American society and "prove" the worthiness of blacks by their ability to succeed in the same structures as whites. Many members of the black community ascribed to this theory. Black Club Women based their uplift ideology on theories of intra-racial superiority similar and inspired by DuBois' theory. Because they held middle-class beliefs, and sometimes middle-class economic status, they considered themselves capable of guiding the actions of poor and working class blacks for the betterment of the race. Similarly, black first accomplishments were always praised and lauded by black intellectuals. DuBois himself notes the exceptionalism of black ingenuity in creation of the Negro Spirituals. Following this pattern, black accomplishments that mirror those of the dominant culture have been revered for their ability to legitimize black humanity.

Conversely, there has consistently been a tradition of revering black accomplishments that have been resistant and combative of the status quo. Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, David Walker, and others who exhibited actions of resistance against

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<sup>250</sup> W.E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *Three Negro Classics: Up From Slavery, The Souls of Black Folk, The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*, (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 214-215.

slavery are also lauded as heroes in the black collective memory. Likewise, the actions of people who resisted racism during the Jim Crow Era are often retold and memorialized in the black community; for example, rap artist Kanye West's claiming his place in the tradition of his family as resisters because of his grandfather and mother's participation in the sit-ins of the 1960s or Tupac Shakur's praise for his mother's involvement in the Black Panther Party.

As both resisters and double-consciousness exhibitors demonstrate, the black community applauds both resisting and succeeding in American society. As Lott has suggested, "it is a misguided idea to assume that cultural assimilation and cultural resistance are contrary notions."<sup>251</sup> It is important to note the role of exhibitors in contributing to the power of the resisters' ability to produce pride in the race. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave Kwame Ture his footing in the civil rights movement. If Kwame Ture and Student Non-violent Coordination Committee (SNCC) had not explored the levels of non-violent social protest, they might have not landed on the side of Black Power and inspired Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to start the Black Panther Party. Booker T. Washington also gave funds secretly to black colleges and universities that did not believe in his accommodationist teachings. While they smiled and danced in Hollywood during the 1940s through the 1960s, Hattie McDaniels and Sammy Davis, Jr. gave some of the money they earned to more radical black organizations.<sup>252</sup> Despite the projection of one message and a self-perception of community, black culture is and was more complex and multifaceted.

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<sup>251</sup>Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 100.

<sup>252</sup> Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniels: Black Ambition, White Hollywood*, (New York Amistad /HarperCollins, 2005) , 126-127. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) , 314.

Black artists have also supported resisters/pride producers' actions – witness Ossie Davis' relationship with Malcolm X. As part of the same community, both heroic elements have co-existed to construct images of black authenticity. Many of these images contain gender-based constructs similar to the dominant society. Most traditional black heroes are male and their images reflect this circumstance. Black females who are heroes also display “male” or traditionally masculine characteristics. For example, the projected image of Harriet Tubman is pictured as serious, non-smiling. According to cultural critic, Sheri Parks, Tubman also laughed and cried although this image is seldom ever shown.<sup>253</sup> “Authenticity” has been written in terms of masculinity, certification of our worthiness because like the dominant society, we too can show evidence of patriarchy.

## **Conclusion**

On his purported final album, former rap artist, turned mogul Jay-Z collaborated with comedian Cedric the Entertainer to write the introduction to one of the albums tracks, *Threat*. The song is about all the ways Jay-Z, and by extension Cedric the Entertainer, would confirm his authority. From the title of the song, one could assume that the way these black men intend to maintain and demonstrate their authority is by threatening those who may try to usurp their positions. At the intro, Cedric the Entertainer utters the phrase that signals to anyone familiar with the black vernacular the gist of the song – “I’m so sincere.” Within this one phrase, he has established his authority over any threats, real or imaginary, managed to declare the seriousness of the matter, and stated his commitment to his position. Similarly, when writing their seminal

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<sup>253</sup> Sheri L. Parks, *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*, (New York: One World/Random House, 2010).



work on the theoretical components of black power, Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton stated emphatically that black people needed to develop a space and a structure to combat injustice that worked for them.

Some white Americans can afford to speak softly, tread lightly, employ the soft-sell and put-off (or is it put-down?). They own society. For black people to adopt their methods of relieving *our* oppression is ludicrous. We blacks must respond in our own way, on our own terms, in a manner, which fits our temperaments. The definitions of ourselves, the roles we pursue, the goals we seek are *our* responsibility.<sup>254</sup>

Like Ture and Hamilton, historian Robin D. G. Kelley also shows World War II (WWII) era veterans in Alabama contesting the limited terrain of black authority. When confronted with racial injustice from bus conductors, many service men and other blacks either initiated or maintained arguments about the incidents, claiming that they felt like men in the process. "...[B]lack men in uniform saw themselves as representing a higher authority and, therefore, felt empowered to act on principle. More importantly, their uniforms signified a clear, active opposition to fascism and Aryan supremacy, which is precisely what African Americans experienced in the South as far as black soldiers were concerned."<sup>255</sup>

The three examples above note the ways in which blacks have resisted the confinement of black authenticity through the format of black authority. Jay-Z and Cedric the Entertainer are black men who have been successful at remaining popular in black and white American spaces while articulating their own brand of black masculinity. Conversely, Kwame Ture, also known as Stokely Carmichael, Charles Hamilton and the

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<sup>254</sup>Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Vintage Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), xvii.

<sup>255</sup> Robin D.G.Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 64.

black service men were not successful at remaining popular in black and white spaces while inhabiting authoritative spaces as black men.

The truth contained in Davis's statement about the visual symbol that Malcolm X provided as a reminder of the reality of black masculinity is unavoidable. Yet, it is much more complex than Davis envisioned when he eulogized the assassinated civil rights leader. Unlike living icons, like Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X's death encapsulated his presentation of black masculinity forever. Similarly, as Dyson contends, X left high standards to be followed for those who wanted to emulate his lifestyle. His own masculinity went through many changes that included a transformation in the way he developed his masculinity, particularly as a young criminal transitioning to a Muslim minister. The resurgence of Malcolm X's image in the 1980s signified Malcolm's entry into the dominant popular culture narrative and also harkened the emergence of discussions over the representation of black masculinity in the post-civil rights era. With the 1990s looming on the horizon, black men would continue to struggle with a clear idea of what it meant to express black manhood in American society. The desire to keep Malcolm as a part of the black community was also the desire to retain black masculine connections to a multifaceted and varied black community. As black men and Malcolm X's image struggled to remain connected, the dominant society also struggled to create an image of both Malcolm and black men that could be translated across the country. The battle lines for the 1990s had been drawn.

## **Chapter 4: Commemorating Malcolm X: Nostalgia versus Memory**

### **Introduction**

Upon the re-introduction of Malcolm X to popular culture by the hip-hop community of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the image of Malcolm X became the focus of a fierce competition. The shining black prince/ideal or “real” black man image of Malcolm and the American individualist image of Malcolm were at odds in the beginning of the 1990s. The 1990s marked the production of materials connected with the image of Malcolm X, including Spike Lee’s film, *X* but also, the production of the U. S. Postal stamp and a resurgence of interests by mainstream society into the life of Malcolm X. Because Hip-hop acts as a style leader, Hip-hop culture and Spike Lee helped to make Malcolm X “cool” throughout American society. The desire of some Americans to be a part of the growing pop-culture phenomenon of Malcolm as represented in jewelry, clothing, snack-foods, and other accessories surpassed the efforts of those Americans who wanted to remember Malcolm for his contribution to civil and human rights struggles. Thus, a conflict erupted between the between proponents of the politicized, black nationalist Malcolm and those of a more popular, de-politicized festive Malcolm. The battle for Malcolm X’s legacy boiled down to the right of the presenter to represent a particular image of Malcolm X that was then scrutinized for its veracity against the memory that certain groups had of Malcolm. Depending on the representation, as in the case of Spike Lee and Amiri Baraka, presenters could find themselves in a discussion over their right to represent Malcolm X.

The conflict over the possession of the legacy of the image of Malcolm X was really a question of which image of Malcolm X was being presented. There had been an

investment from former allies and colleagues as well as new admirers to ensure that Malcolm X remained significant to blacks in America. As the image traveled with blacks who migrated into institutionalized spaces of American society, it received more exposure. The exposure of the image of Malcolm as an ideal black man or even a black American individualist was supported as long as the image was contained in a revered black encasing; the encasing detailed all the meanings that had been inscribed on the image of Malcolm X that was then translated by extension to members of the black community, some of who worked to stabilize and contain the image. Yet, exposure guaranteed that the image would become popular in the mainstream, and that a division between the meaning of Malcolm X as a black hero and an American icon would arise.

Those who witnessed the de-politicization of the image found it disturbing and often clung to a static image of Malcolm X, the lives and political power of black Americans were changing in dramatic ways.<sup>256</sup> The static image of Malcolm X was at odds with the image of Malcolm on bags of potato chips and handbags. The popularity of X's image during the 1990s came, in the minds of black nationalists, like Paul Lee (lead historian on the Spike Lee film) and Amiri Baraka, at the expense of a black community that had supported and nurtured the image, in contrast to the dominant culture, that had never before celebrated his legacy. The rendering of the image into consumer product raised the question: To whom did Malcolm really belong?

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<sup>256</sup> I use the time period of the late 1960s and early 1970s because this is the point of history when there are significant changes in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in 1968, enough time has passed since the passage of key civil rights legislation to notice the effects of these bills on the lives of the average black person, and the mobility of the black middle class is in full effect. For more information on the subject see: Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, (Albany: State of New York Press, 1996), Part I.

## Collective Memory and Commemoration

Questions of possession of cultural heroes often imply discussions about the role of collective memory and commemoration in society. Academics in the fields of ethnic studies, history, sociology, and psychology have contemplated this issue in a myriad of texts.

Schwartz (1996) identifies three related aspects of 1960s-1970s intellectual culture that gave rise to interest in the social construction of the past. First, multiculturalists identify historiography as a source of cultural domination and challenge dominant historical narratives in the name of repressed groups. Second, postmodernists attack the conceptual underpinnings of linear historicity, truth, and identity, thereby raising interest in the relations linking history, memory, and power. Finally, hegemony theorists provide a class-based account of the politics of memory, highlighting memory contestation, popular memory, and the instrumentalization of the past.<sup>257</sup>

According to Olick and Robbins, “since about 1980, however, both the public and academia have become saturated with references to social or collective memory.”<sup>258</sup>

According to Kammen and Schwartz, this attention to collective memory and commemoration practices could be due in part to “the rise of multiculturalism, the fall of Communism, and a politics of victimization and regret, among other factors, including a decline in presidential reputations under the rubric of postmodernity.”<sup>259</sup>

Olick and Robbins contend that “contemporary usages of collective memory are usually traced to Maurice Halbwachs, who published his landmark Social Frameworks of Memory in 1925.”<sup>260</sup> Halbwachs, a student of Emile Durkheim, contemplated the role of

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<sup>257</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998), 108.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 106.

collective memory as an informant to historical practice and nationalist ideology.

During the 1970s,

Historians like Aries (1974) and Agulhon (1981), Hutton writes, began to study the history of commemorative practices, which they saw as mechanisms of political power, thus shifting historiographical interest from ideology to imagery and from meaning to manipulation. Writers like Hobsbawm--whose much-cited Invention of Tradition was a hallmark work in this vein--extended this desacralization, seeing traditions as disingenuous efforts to secure political power. According to Hutton, it was on this foundation that interest in Halbwachs revived; his apparently presentist position was seen as anticipating postmodernism.<sup>261</sup>

In his seminal work,

Halbwachs ...argues that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts: "There is [thus] no point," he argues, "in seeking where... [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them..."<sup>262</sup>

Thus, Halbwachs maintained that "individuals required the testimony and evidence of other people to validate their interpretations of their own experiences, to provide independent confirmation (or refutation) of the content of their memories and thus confidence in their accuracy."<sup>263</sup> From this understanding, collective memory is the work of communities of people that reflect similar experiences. Although nationalism<sup>264</sup> plays a role in this formation, a multicultural society such as the United States, may articulate sociological-cultural concepts like a mixing bowl. Cultural groups may desire to

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>262</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser ed. and translator, Heritage of Sociology Series, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 38. Ibid, 109.

<sup>263</sup> David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (Mar., 1989), 1122.

<sup>264</sup> My understanding of this concept has been informed by the work of Jay Winter. In his work on Film, Winter states, "Collective memory" is not the same as national memory. National collectives never create a unitary, undifferentiated, and enduring narrative called "collective memory." Nations do not remember, groups of people do. Their work is never singular, and it is never fixed. Jay Winter, "Film and the Matrix of Memory," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001), 864.

represent and work actually to represent their unique experiences using available technology. Technological advances, thus, facilitates the ways in which different groups or ethnicities experience the larger American society. Their particular display of their American experience through technology and material items, in turn, informs historical interpretations of the American experience at large. Hence, as Gramsci proposed in The Prison Notebooks,<sup>265</sup> the superstructure is always incorporating information from outside groups into the dominant narrative of society. As Berger and Luckmann<sup>266</sup> concluded, society uses this information to maintain institutional structures and limit agency of divergent groups.

In the case of black Americans, Dereck Alderman suggests that Rhea has noted that the practice of memory and commemoration “is part of a larger movement in the United States to affirm the historical importance of minority groups and challenge traditional, white-dominated conceptions of the past that frequently ignore these contributions.”<sup>267</sup> Shackel suggests that,

memories can serve individual or collective needs and can validate the holders' version of the past. In the public arena, they can be embedded in power to serve the dominant culture by supporting existing social inequalities. It is common for subordinate groups explicitly or implicitly to challenge the dominant meanings of public memories and create new ones that suit their needs.<sup>268</sup>

The creation or incorporation of black memories and commemoration practices serves a dual purpose. As Ruffins notes, there are differences

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<sup>265</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (International Publishers Co, 2008).

<sup>266</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ( New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

<sup>267</sup> Dereck H. Alderman, *Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African American Community*, *Area* 35, no. 2 (June 2003), 165.

<sup>268</sup> Paul A. Shackel, *Public Memory and the Search for Power in American Historical Archaeology* *American Anthropologist*, *New Series* 103, no. 3 (September 2001), 655.

...between interior and exterior views of the past. Interior interpretations of the past are those produced by African Americans about their own experiences. Exterior interpretations originate from outside the black community.<sup>269</sup>

In the case of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and historical actors that involve significant black participants or contributions, both interior and exterior treatments exist. Referencing the case of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Shaw memorial, Shackel asserts that “the events of the civil rights movement of the mid- and late twentieth century, along with the Civil Rights Act, have given African Americans a greater representation in our public memory.”<sup>270</sup> At the public ceremony for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the memorial, both exterior and interior programs functioned to reimagine the meaning of the Shaw memorial. Shackel noted that the “Shaw memorial centennial celebration, backed by many prominent political and social figures, also helped to solidify and sanctify a new public meaning and memory of the memorial.”<sup>271</sup> As racial projects continue to construct the social context, in which these events are viewed, it becomes important to solidify the legacies of those historical figures and events that are able to convey American cultural ideals to a variety of Americans. If the goal of public memory, as Shackel suggests, is “to produce obedient, patriotic citizens,” then Frisch furthers his argument with the idea that, “the argument has traveled a long way from its humanistic origins, arriving at a point where education and indoctrination-cultural and political-seem almost indistinguishable.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Dereck H. Alderman, “Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African American Community,” *Area* 35, no. 2 (June 2003), 167.

<sup>270</sup> Paul A. Shackel, “Public Memory and the Search for Power in American Historical Archaeology,” *American Anthropologist*, *New Series* 103, no. 3 (September 2001), 659.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, 659.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid*



## Malcolm X: Memory and Commemoration

Assuming that the humanistic origins of public memory existed and are now indistinguishable from educational and propagandistic purposes of public memory, the appropriation or the practice of the interior and exterior projects are crucial to the histories and political legacies of minority or subjugated peoples living in the United States. In other words, the representations of black people produced by blacks or whites are a critical part of the assessment made by both blacks and whites of the political realities that blacks find themselves in American society. For example, in an article detailing her incorporation into the education and propaganda of the Black Power movement, Angela Davis discussed the March 1994 issue of *Vibe* magazine fashion-spread where the model and actress, Cynda Williams, portrayed Davis's image during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Across several pages, Williams donned reproductions of items Davis had been photographed in during her time in the Black Power movement. To Davis's dismay, several items featured in the photographs were also offered for sale. After detailing the random violence faced by women who looked like her during her days as a fugitive-on-the-run, Davis expressed her anger at the nonchalant way that *Vibe* chose to market the time-period.

This is the most blatant example of the way the particular history of my legal case is emptied of all content so that it can serve as a commodified backdrop for advertising. The way in which this document provided a historical pretext for something akin to a reign of terror for countless young Black women is effectively erased by its use as a prop for selling clothes and promoting a seventies fashion nostalgia.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn, 1994), 44.

The same frameworks brought up by Davis toward the representation of her hair, clothing, and accessories can be used to examine some of the issues concerning the commemoration of the legacy of Malcolm X. Similar to Davis's image, the image of Malcolm X has been appropriated by the mainstream popular culture. Particularly, during the 1990s, the mediated image of Malcolm X could be found on film, clothing, jewelry, labels for food, books, comic books, articles, music, posters, paintings, stamps, and accessories. Created by whites and blacks, many of these images entered the domain of popular culture as references to Malcolm X's perceived legacy. Images, such as the bolded letter "X," could be found on earrings, t-shirts, or on a bag of potato chips. Most of these items contained very little reference to the political activism of Malcolm X or his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. As Davis notes,

The unprecedented contemporary circulation of photographic and filmic images of African Americans has multiple and contradictory implications. On the one hand, it holds the promise of visual memory of older and departed generations, of both well-known figures and people who may not have achieved public prominence. However, there is also the danger that this historical memory may become ahistorical and apolitical.<sup>274</sup>

The ahistorical treatment of Malcolm X's image led to a political vacuum concerning the image. Fragmented and partitioned the images of Malcolm X could be traced throughout the decade in degree to their separation from the political message of Malcolm X. In the beginning of the 1990s, the image of Malcolm X was that of a black man, considerably similar to the image of X as the real or ideal black man. Expressed primarily through rap music and urban black youth, the image contained some reference to the political activities of X, but focused primarily on his stance as the ideal black man. By the time of the release of Spike Lee's film, *X* (1992), the popular image of Malcolm is that of a cross

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 38.

between Malcolm as Detroit Red, (rebel against society) and that of hate-monger of the 1950s and 1960s (black supremacist minister of the NOI). Each representation had the potential to be used as a rejection of white societal norms, symbolized by most clearly by the wearing of an “X” on the body of the adherent or as an affront to white society and “sell-out” black leaders for the critical state of the black community. After the release of Lee’s film, the representation of the image shifted. Any connection to the political activities of Malcolm X was removed for the readily accessible and commodified version of Malcolm X as a rebel. From 1992 through end of 1993, the image reached its height of popularity as a representation of Malcolm X as a rebellious, societal outlaw. The X fashion phenomenon broke boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Divorced, at times, from any pictorial representation, the image of the “X” stood alone to remind all Americans how cool it was to be a rebel without any connection to a movement, political agenda, or group in American society. By 1994, the rebellious image of Malcolm X had been exhausted and the X phenomenon dissipated in popular culture. Prompted by the revival and then dismissal of popular interest in Malcolm X, the production of serious works containing the images of Malcolm X entered into the realm of American culture. Since the interest from academics, followers, and scholarly admirers’ never waned, new information repositioned Malcolm as a significant member of black intellectual community, particular for his insight into the nature of civil rights in the context of the world revolutions taking place across the globe. The attention afforded the image of Malcolm X by the scholarly community created the opportunity for the treatment of Malcolm’s image to be re-configured and expanded from black male hero to an iconic American who participated in past activities that added to an expanded version of cultural

characteristics of Americans. In this new light, particularly, after the inclusion of the United States Postal stamp, X's image included designations as a freedom fighter and inspiration to all Americans. As the image of Malcolm X gravitated toward the lexicon that surrounded American icons or great men, the de-politicization of X's image became more apparent.

The events that characterized the image of Malcolm X did not exist in a void. At every turn, there was contestation from scholars, filmmakers, family members, friends and invested parties regarding the legacy and meaning of Malcolm X. Several commemoration events took place during each of these periods that reminded society about the political contributions of Malcolm X. Gil Noble, presenter and producer of the famed WABC new show *Like It Is*, wrote, produced, and narrated a documentary on Malcolm X, called *El Hajj Malik El Shabazz*, in 1978.

The documentary presented a different image of Malcolm X, focusing on the footage of Malcolm X giving speeches around Harlem and interviews with Noble and other media people. The documentary also offered an analysis of the legacy of Malcolm X. Citing the change in Malcolm after his hajj, the documentary alluded to the potential of Malcolm to transform the civil rights movement into an international struggle for human rights. In addition, the documentary explored conspiracy theories connected to the assassination of Malcolm, including the CIA's spying on Malcolm in Africa and his subsequent food poisoning that some linked to the activity of the CIA. The final segment directly stated Malcolm's political contribution, as the words the "price of freedom is death," scrolled across the screen.

Others besides Noble contested the ahistoric and apolitical image of Malcolm X. Pilgrimages to the gravesite continued to be made by every year on the date of Malcolm's birth, May 19. The first Malcolm X stamp produced in Iran was issued in 1984 and made Malcolm's political contribution evident on a stamp honoring him on the "Universal Day of Struggle Against Race Discrimination." Articles and books from an international perspective described the image of Malcolm X as a Pan-Africanist and international activist. Both the books written by Jan Carew and Cook and Henderson speak to the international perspective. Theologian James Cone constructed an image of Malcolm as one in line with the direction the movement was heading, including a direction that would align X and Martin Luther King, Jr. by the time of the formers' assassination. DeCaro's perspective on Malcolm offered up the image of Malcolm X as a spiritual man concerned, from the time of his conversion, with the spiritual manifestations that would lead to the freedom of all people. According to DeCaro, "religious issues were above all those that pertained to the lives and struggles of his people living on this side of paradise."<sup>275</sup> Gambino, on the other hand, saw X primarily as a laborer empowered to see the disparities between the conditions of laborers within the prison industrial complex, the post- WWII boom of the 1950s, and finally as the minister/builder of the NOI congregations. Malcolm moved within these different spaces primarily as a laborer, and Gambino believed Malcolm was able to recognize his inability to conform to the status quo of American society, which propelled his journey as an opponent of imperialism inside and outside the United States. A radical who labored legally and illegally since the time of his late teens and who lived most of his life in opposition to the

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<sup>275</sup> Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 270.

status quo, Malcolm X became the outsider who was able to offer insight through his criticisms of American society.

Despite the varying images of X that existed during the thirty some-odd years since his assassination, the prevailing images of Malcolm X, during the 1990s, were presented in two mediated forms. The first was the image of X crafted by Spike Lee and viewed by audiences all over the world in the film *X*. From the beginning of his involvement in the project, Spike Lee was determined to create an image of Malcolm X that reflected his own understanding of the international political activist.

Seven years after the release of Lee's film, the image of X that is most associated with Malcolm X's American iconization is the United States Postal stamp issued on January 20, 1999. Created and distributed sixteen years after the first Malcolm X stamp, the United States stamp was part of the Black Heritage Series and went on to sell-out of its initial printing, 100 million copies.<sup>276</sup> Both images stand as bookends on the spectrum of the image production of Malcolm X during the period of heightened interest by a majority of Americans. The following sections will discuss the creation and operation of both images.

## **Filming Malcolm X**

Shortly after the publishing of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which was published posthumously, there was talk of making a film on the life of Malcolm X. According to Rodnell Collins, X's nephew, the first effort at producing a film on Malcolm came from Louis Lomax, the author of a book about Malcolm X.<sup>277</sup> Lomax's

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<sup>276</sup> United States Post Office, Postal Bulletin 21988, 12 December 98.

<sup>277</sup> Rodnell Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*, with A Peter Bailey (Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 201.

book, under contract by Twentieth Century Fox, was slated for production, but the project was put on hold in 1968 because of the death of Lomax and the machinations of Herbert Hoover.<sup>278</sup> Marvin Worth, who was connected to project at Twentieth Century Fox, moved on to produce for Warner Brothers. Worth secured the rights to the production of a film based on *The Autobiography* for Warner Brothers and moved to have the script for the film written. Rodnell Collins notes that the

...next major effort to do a film on Uncle Malcolm involved Ma (Ella Collins), James Baldwin, and Marvin Worth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. ... Others involved with the project were Art Avelhe, of J.B. Lippincott Company, a book publisher; Bruce Perry of the Socialist Press Media; Arnold Perl, Baldwin's business partner; and a relative of a prominent banker. The last became a real problem, often coming to meetings completely intoxicated. ...Baldwin would write the screenplay... (Ella Collins and Baldwin) envisioned a film that would focus on him (Malcolm) as a black nationalist, as a man serious about his Islamic religious beliefs, as a man with prophetic visions about race relations, ...That was not the film envisioned by Marvin Worth and Warner Bros. ...(the film) produced by Worth, ... focused on Malcolm as a street hustler, a convert to the Nation of Islam and an adversary of the N.O.I.<sup>279</sup>

The script that was eventually produced was used for Worth's documentary, *Malcolm X*. Although he received a nomination for the documentary, Worth's desire was to produce a major motion picture on Malcolm's life.

From the onset, a major conflict surrounded the script writing and production of a Hollywood film on the life of Malcolm X. Though the script was set to be written by Baldwin, he dropped out of the project after Warner Brothers wanted changes made to the script. After contributing to a significant portion of the script, Baldwin wanted his name erased from the script. Baldwin claimed that he would not participate in "the

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 203-204.

second assassination of Malcolm X.”<sup>280</sup> In a 1976 interview with Jewell Handy Gresham, Baldwin stated,

...To put it brutally, if I had agreed with Hollywood, I would have been allowing myself to create an image of Malcolm that would have satisfied them and infuriated you, broken your hearts. At one point, I saw a memo that said, among other things, the author had to avoid giving any political implications to Malcolm’s trip to Mecca. Now, how can you write about Malcolm X without writing about his trip to Mecca and its political implications? It’s not surprising. ...Hollywood’s fantasy is designed to prove to you that this poor, doomed nitwit deserves his fate.<sup>281</sup>

The text that was used for Worth’s documentary and Lee’s film was indeed the screenplay partly scripted by Baldwin. Despite his desire not to be a part of the project, Baldwin’s words and experience were forever attached to the controversial Worth project.

## **Malcolm X (1992)**

The script used for the movie *X*, was indeed the Baldwin and Perl script, written twenty years earlier, bringing Lee his first controversy in conjunction with his production of the film.<sup>282</sup> Buhle describes Lee’s contribution to the original script written by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl to be “less than half” excluding his directional contribution and the ending.<sup>283</sup> Lee does not deny using the script. According to Lee, it was the best script that he had been given and he did not want to start writing a script.<sup>284</sup> Dyson stated that the film was

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<sup>280</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, (New York: Dial Press, 1972) , 11.

<sup>281</sup> Herb Boyd, *Baldwin's Harlem: A Biography of James Baldwin* (New York: Atria Books, 2008), 83.

<sup>282</sup> Paul Buhle, “The Hollywood Left: Aesthetics and Politics” *New Left Review A*, (1995) : 119.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid

<sup>284</sup> Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X*, with Ralph Wiley, Introduction by Terry McMillan, (New York: Hyperion 1992), 27.



...divided between the three major stages in his career: as street hustler and criminal; devotee of Elijah Muhammad and preacher par excellence of black nationalism; and as an independent black leader who formed two organizations, the Muslim Mosque and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, to reflect his changed religious and political view after his departure from the Nation of Islam (NOI) and his pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>285</sup>

The three hours and twenty-two minutes film relied heavily on X's autobiography in spite of Lee's extensive interviews with people who knew Malcolm. Overall, visually stunning, the film contains scenes taken directly from X's tome and scenes created by Lee. The film moves through Malcolm's life from the retelling of his father's death at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan to the day X was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom. The film opens in the same way a NOI meeting would have began. The speaker, who is never identified, recites the NOI creed and then asks the audience to welcome Brother Malcolm to the stage. Following the greeting and introduction is an American flag that cuts to the video of the Rodney King beating. In the background, Denzel Washington, who plays Malcolm X, starts to speak to the invisible audience who has been waiting to hear Malcolm X. In the speech, Malcolm charged the white man with the atrocities he has committed across the world, listing each one. Intermittently, the King video is spliced with the American flag. Eventually the flag is sent on fire. As the flag burns, the scene moves back to the Rodney King video. After King is severely beaten and on the pavement of a hard Los Angeles street, the scene returns to the flag that has been burned into the shape of a large X. As Malcolm finishes his speech, the X remains on the screen, alerting the audience to the idea that Malcolm X was an American who, similar to Rodney King, received no justice in the United States.

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<sup>285</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 134.

The film then proceeds to show a young, green Malcolm receiving his first “conk” or chemical processing of curly black hair in imitation of straight hair. The film goes on to detail X’s life in Boston, his interactions with Sophia (Bea), his relationship with his friend Malcolm “Shorty” Jarvis (played by Lee), his arrest, subsequent incarceration, conversion to Islam, life in the NOI, his speeches and television appearances, his marriage to Betty Shabazz, his silencing from the NOI, discovery of Elijah Muhammad’s illegitimate children, the hajj, and the events of February 21, 1965. The film ends with a montage that began with Ossie Davis’s oration of his eulogy of Malcolm X.

As Davis delivers his eulogy, the scene is spliced with video footage and photos of the real Malcolm X, present day Harlem (1992), and Soweto, South Africa. At the end of Davis’s speech, the camera cuts to a classroom in Harlem, where the actress Mary Alice Smith tells a classroom full of black children about the birthday of Malcolm X and eventually how each student should be like Malcolm X. This cues some students in the class to proclaim that they are each Malcolm X. The film then goes to Soweto, South Africa where Nelson Mandela, recites a quote from Malcolm X describing the need to have his masculinity and humanity recognized. Once again, the students in the classroom begin to proclaim that they are all Malcolm X, as the film ends with a large X and Aretha Franklin singing a gospel song. Here, Lee ended the film in a similar manner to which he began it; the connection between the image of black male identity and the life of Malcolm X is so tightly tied that one need only proclaim to be Malcolm X to assume it. Problematic as this concept is, it is the one with which Lee chooses to end the film. For Lee, Malcolm X is a black man whose greatest contribution was his exhibition of black male identity. The two final scenes are Lee’s attempt to give the impression that any

black person can prove their agency through incorporating characteristics that have traditionally be defined as masculine. In the same way that Lee used his “X” baseball cap to promote his film, Malcolm X becomes an item that can be put on to display masculine identity that can be interpreted as authoritative expressions of black agency. In short, the film is really an example of how to demonstrate black masculine identity rather than homage to the contributions of Malcolm X.

Four scenes in the film illustrate this point. The first was taken from Malcolm’s time as a young hustler or numbers runner in Harlem. The second portrays Malcolm as the NOI minister of Temple # 7 in Harlem, New York. The final two scenes detail the short courtship and marriage of Betty and Malcolm Shabazz – Malcolm’s first introduction to Betty and the later, the couple on a date. The analysis contained in the next sections demonstrates the image of Malcolm X as Spike Lee, and to some degree Baldwin and Perl, envisioned it.

### **West Indian Archie:**

In this scene, Lee decides to place Malcolm, played by Denzel Washington, in Harlem after Joe Louis wins his fight with the Conn. After participating in a celebration for Joe Louis, Malcolm goes to Small’s Paradise, a famous jazz club in Harlem. To impress upon the audience that Malcolm is unfamiliar with his new surroundings, Lee has the wide-eyed Malcolm walk down a Harlem street to Small’s Paradise. As Malcolm walks, he is propositioned by petty hustlers, one in the form of a watch salesman and the other a sex worker. Once Malcolm, wearing a showy red and black zoot suit, enters the bar, all of the patrons begin to stare at him. The audience, immediately alerted to the difference in attire from the patrons and Malcolm, has been signaled that something is

about to occur. Moving further into the bar, Malcolm collides with a man at the bar. The man clearing viewing this as an opportunity to challenge Malcolm suggests that Malcolm was in his way and snaps the lapel on Malcolm's suit. The man begins to insult what he perceives are Malcolm's country ways. To press matters further, the man prevents Malcolm from walking away, by taking Malcolm's hat and asking him "what's he going to do... go home to your mama?" In response to the man's threat, Malcolm picks up an empty liquor bottle and smashes it against the man's head, retorting, "...don't you ever in your life say anything against my mother!" In the *mêlée*, a young woman who had been splattered with liquor from the smashed bottle picks up Malcolm's hat. Without missing a beat, Malcolm takes his hat from the waitress, wipes her face and then purchases a drink. A man, West Indian Archie, who had witnessed the entire scene and, impressed by what he has seen, buys Malcolm Little a drink. After pumping the bartender for information on West Indian Archie, Malcolm is summoned over to the table where Archie and his fellow compatriots, Sammy and Cadillac dine. West Indian Archie tells him to "come closer, I'm not fixing to bite you." In the ensuing dialogue, Malcolm introduces himself as Red and lets West Indian Archie know, "...I ain't no punk." In the ensuing dialogue, it is made evident that West Indian Archie is also an authoritative figure, commanding the respect of many, not only because of his apparent criminal activity (the bartender tells Malcolm that West Indian Archie does "a little of this and a little of that"), but also his intelligence (his ability to remember "policy" numbers and to recall them in combination and sequential order without ever writing them down).

During the exchange, the camera is tight on both West Indian Archie and Malcolm. The camera only frames Cadillac and Sammy when they speak, usually in

response to a comment from West Indian Archie or Malcolm. As West Indian Archie and Malcolm talk, the camera pans between the two men, making the space between the two men seem relatively small, as if they were in a boxing ring or an enclosed space. Indeed, the feeling one gets from watching the scene is that of a sparring match between two capable adversaries. The challenge from West Indian Archie is different from the challenge given by the nameless man. It is clear that West Indian Archie is interrogating Malcolm to discover if he is prepared to be a member of his clique. Malcolm, all too familiar with the scenario, is more than capable of running with West Indian Archie; he deceives West Indian Archie into believing that he has heard of him in Boston and that he is far more “hip” than his clothes make him seem.

According to Lee, after demolishing a glass bottle over the head of his antagonist, Malcolm is welcomed into the world of hustling by West Indian Archie, who becomes Malcolm’s first surrogate father. This is the man who will change Malcolm’s outward appearance, start his numbers-running career, and give him his first gun. However, according to Malcolm X, the events were a bit different:

It was at this time that I changed from my old numbers man, the one I’d used since I first worked in Small’s Paradise. He hated to lose a heavy player, but he readily understood why I would now want to play with a runner of my own outfit. That was how I began placing my bets with West Indian Archie. I’ve mentioned him before – one of Harlem’s really *bad* Negroes; one of those former Dutch Schultz strong-arm men around Harlem. ... West Indian Archie had the kind of photographic memory that put him among the elite numbers runners. He never wrote down your number; even in the case of combination plays, he would just nod. ... Anyway it was status just to be known as a client of West Indian Archie’s because he handled only sizeable bettors. He also required integrity and sound credit: it wasn’t necessary that you pay as you played; you could pay West Indian Archie by the week.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 119-120.

As the quote demonstrates, Malcolm had already been a participant in criminal activity, prior to meeting West Indian Archie. Lee's point in creating this story was to establish Malcolm as a man that was close to the edge and ready to press back at anyone who would challenge his masculine authority. Lee wanted to present an image of Malcolm that black men seeing the film in 1992 could relate too. He also wanted to depict black masculinity as constantly being easily swayed toward violence and difficultly maintained good behavior. In other words, Lee's Malcolm, who demonstrates his masculinity by acting violently and participating in criminal activity, has been pressed into this lifestyle by the racism he faces on the job, which both Malcolm and Lee describe as blatantly discriminatory, and an acknowledgement that the only men who experience true freedom are gangsters or athletes, in this case a boxer Joe Louis.

By conflating the issue of black masculinity, Lee sets-up a destructive paradigm; one that can only see black masculinity as reactive to racism or expressive only in terms of violent actions. In his portrayal of Malcolm's image, Malcolm can only claim authority when he is violent or, as we shall see in the next selection, when he threatens violence against white men.

### **Turnout for Brother Johnson:**

In the Malcolm's autobiography, he described the Johnson Hinton case,

Two white policemen, breaking up a street scuffle between some Negroes, ordered other Negro passers-by to "Move on!" Of these bystanders, two happened to be Muslim brother Johnson Hinton and another of brother of Temple Seven. They didn't scatter and run the way the white cops wanted. Brother Hinton was attacked with nightsticks. His scalp was split open, and a police car came and he was taken to a nearby precinct.

... The second brother telephoned our restaurant. And with some telephone calls, in less than half an hour about fifty of Temple Seven's men of the Fruit of Islam were standing in ranks-formation outside the police precinct house. Other Negroes curious, came running, and gathered in excitement behind the Muslims. The police, coming to the station house front door, and looking out of the windows, couldn't believe what they saw. I went in, as the minister of Temple Seven, and demanded to see our brother. The police first said he wasn't there. Then they admitted he was, but said I couldn't see him. I said that until he was seen, and we were sure he received proper medical attention, the Muslims would remain where they were. ...When I saw our Brother Hinton, it was all I could do to contain myself. He was only semi-conscious. Blood had bathed his head and face and shoulders. ...When it(ambulance) came and Brother Hinton was taken to Harlem Hospital, we Muslims followed...Negroes who never has seen anything like this were coming out of stores and restaurants and bars and enlarging the crowd following us.

...A high police official came up to me, saying "Get those people out of there." I told him that our brothers were standing peacefully, disciplined perfectly, and harming no one. He told me those others, behind them, weren't disciplined. I politely told him those others were his problem. When doctors assured us that Brother Hinton was receiving the best of care, I gave the order and the Muslims slipped away. The other Negroes' mood was ugly, but they dispersed also, when we left.<sup>287</sup>

In Lee's rendition, one of the officials from Temple Seven interrupts Betty and Malcolm's date to tell him of the incident. Malcolm then proceeds to the location of the incident and is told by witnesses the events that occurred before he arrived.

Witness 1: there was a scuffle

Witness 2: The brother was just watching

Witness 1: And the cop came along and said "move on!" (he says this while imitating someone being hit)

Witness 2: the brother didn't move quick enough for the ofay

Witness 1: I mean "crack;" the brother starts bleeding like a stuck hog

Witness 3: So what you gonna do? He'll rap a little, he's a Muslim. But you ain't gonna do nothing but make a speech.

Witness 4: Muslims talk a good game but they never do nothing, unless

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid, 238-239.

somebody bothers Muslims...

The camera pans from the forth witness, to the first witness and then to Malcolm.

In the next scene, Malcolm arrives at the station where Johnson Hinton is being held. Malcolm threatens the police desk sergeant and another plain clothed officer with what will presumably turn into a riot if he is not allowed to see Hinton. Hinton, locked in some kind of basement solitary confinement has suffered a head injury. Malcolm tells the officers to summon an ambulance. Outside, another officer tells Malcolm "alright break it up, you got what you wanted." In response to the sergeant's request, Malcolm tells the officer, "No, I'm not satisfied; to the hospital." As the Muslims walk to the hospital, crowds begin to follow them. Clearly, the leader of the protest, Malcolm walks at the head of the FOI and the crowd. The FOI establish a human barrier in front of the hospital with the crowd behind them. The precinct captain, played by Peter Boyle, arrives at the hospital. After a visual examination, the police captain and Malcolm begin an exchange that will alert the viewing audience as to why Lee believed Malcolm was worthy of commemoration;

Captain: All right, that's enough; I want these people moved outta of here.

Malcolm: The fruit of Islam are disciplined men. They haven't broken any laws ...yet.

Captain: What about them (motioning to the crowd)?

Malcolm: That's your headache, captain. If Brother Johnson dies, I pity you.

Doctor?

Doctor: He'll live. He's getting the best care we can give him.

Malcolm: Thank you.



Doctor: Certainly.

Captain: (appearing very nervous) Okay, now let's disperse this mob!

Following this exchange, Malcolm, stares at the captain in a serious manner.

Without provocation or reason, Malcolm smiles eerily. Malcolm turns toward the crowd, smile fading, and then raises his hand, palm facing outward and then motions for the FOI to move out by configuring his fingers into the shape of a gun. The camera pans up to show the military precision of the FOI's movement. The camera splits the frame to capture the gun-like hand formation of Malcolm X; the picture in the frame is Malcolm's hand making the shape of gun. As Malcolm and the crowd disperse, the police captain notes, "that's too much power for one man to have." Once again, Lee attaches the image of Malcolm with violence

In the film version of the Johnson Hinton case, the central part of the scene is the display of masculine authority by Malcolm X. The way Malcolm commands the FOI, and the subsequent dispersal of the FOI and the crowd, are for the benefit of the viewing audience. The audience should recognize and believe that X was, in the words of Ossie Davis, a real man. Lee has Malcolm prove his masculinity through explicit violence, as Detroit Red, or through thinly veiled responses tainted with the threat of violence, as in the case of his interaction with the New York police. Lee's image of Malcolm X was a one-dimensional characterization of black masculinity mostly displayed through his ability to demonstrate an overreaction to those people (man in bar, NY Police department, and Betty Shabazz) who threatened his authority. In every case where his ability to exhibit any form of agency was threatened, Lee's Malcolm reinforced his authority by either being violent or hinting at potential violence. For Lee, masculinity is

the action of a lone man reacting to the imposition of other men's authority, perceived or real, on his life.

### **Possibility of Betrayal**

Of the three women, Laura, Betty Shabazz, and Sophia, Lee highlights in the film, only Betty Shabazz received poignant treatment. Never focusing on any of the women with any in-depth examination, Lee sparingly established Shabazz as a woman of the NOI with interests that included more than just Malcolm. In the film, Betty was introduced as a sister who taught hygiene and etiquette classes to Muslim women. After displaying a brief courtship between the two that was reminiscent of their actual experience, Lee had Malcolm propose to Betty while he was away on business. Once wed to Malcolm, Shabazz fades into the background only to reappear to be the person who told X of Elijah Muhammad's infidelities.

In the film, after the couple discussed the possibility of Elijah Muhammad's illegitimate children, the couple proceeded to have what the film categorized as their first fight after almost five years of marriage. The notion of this being the couples' first argument is less plausible with the film's decision to keep the children sleeping; given the level of screaming in the house, it is unlikely that children who heard this would remain sleeping, unless they had prior experience with this kind of behavior, making it unrealistic as their first fight. Lee's conjuncture is also inconsistent with the violent man theme – unless Lee wants to suggest Malcolm would have been gentler with women. In this scene, Betty Shabazz warns her husband of the illicit sexual behavior of Elijah Muhammad, which garners national attention, and the lack of monetary compensation, in spite of rumors to the contrary, for Malcolm's ministering in the NOI. Lee uses the

character of Betty Shabazz to confront some of the other rumors of the NOI, particularly the financial success of some of Elijah Muhammad's family members and the Chicago elite. In fact, it was not Betty who urged Malcolm to see the truth, but Elijah's own son, Imam Warith Deen Muhammad (Wallace Muhammad), who told Malcolm the truth about his fathers' infractions (sexual and financial), after years of rumors suggesting such circulated about the NOI.<sup>288</sup> As a cinematic device to further the narrative, Lee's choice of Betty Shabazz as the teller of Muhammad's deeds was very problematic. Instead of furthering the narrative, this opportunity seemed to comment, in a fractured manner, on the relationship of Betty and Malcolm Shabazz. The device does not really gel until the viewing audience witnesses Malcolm visiting the house of two of the women Elijah impregnated.

This scene, more than any other, broached the subject of Malcolm's notorious chauvinism. The relationship between X and Shabazz was complex. At once Malcolm could call Betty "Apple Brown Betty," "Brown Sugar," or her favorite pet name "Girl."<sup>289</sup> Yet, X could be suspicious women's power to make men weak. Even Betty knew that, "Malcolm was a still a little apprehensive about marriage."<sup>290</sup> As Russell Rickford notes, Malcolm's refusal to let Betty work outside of the marriage was a source of constant contention in the marriage.<sup>291</sup> James Cone asserted that both King and X were products of their times, both having lived and died before the women's liberation movement. Unlike Cone, Lee did not contextualize the relationship between Betty and

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<sup>288</sup> Malcolm X, "Taken from notes on a conversation or meeting between Wallace D. Muhammad and Malcolm X Shabazz," *The Malcolm X Collection: Papers, 1948-1965*, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Library, New York, New York.

<sup>289</sup> Russell J. Rickford, *Betty Shabazz: A Remarkable Story of Survival and Faith Before and After Malcolm X*, (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2003), 84.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

Malcolm. In order to claim his black male authority, Lee has Malcolm X denying any agency to his wife, going so far as to tell her not raise her voice in his house. Although there was no evidence to suggest that X ever physically harmed Betty, the proximity and body language of the actors during the argument suggest some kind of physical abuse waiting to happen. Throughout the film, and this scene in particular, Lee demonstrates a misogynistic view of women and marriage that has “either couples fucking or fighting”<sup>292</sup> as bell hooks has noted. Thus, aiding to the debate among feminist scholars concerning Lee’s lack of three-dimensional female characters in his films.

Devoid of romance, the couple rarely exchange loving embraces infrequently and kiss only twice in the entire film. Indeed, in his portrayal of Malcolm X, Denzel Washington rarely laughs or has any range of emotionality. This was opposite to the personal accounts of Malcolm X, who was described as a funny, moody, and charming. If Washington were to display some of these characteristics, it would take away from the idea of masculinity that Lee has suggested, the lone figure withstanding it all.

## **Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X***

### **Making X:**

After years of trying to produce a film on Malcolm X, Marvin Worth was finally given the “green light” from Warner Brothers. By the time the film was to be made, Spike Lee, a black filmmaker had already graduated from NYU film school and had gained critical success with *She’s Gotta Have It* and *Do the Right Thing*. According to

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<sup>292</sup> bell hooks, “Male Heroes and Female Sex Objects: Sexism in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1993),” *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl ed., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 557.

Lee, from the onset Worth wanted him to direct the film.<sup>293</sup> From Lee's perspective, the failure of a letter to reach him was the only reason Worth attached Norman Jewison, the director of *A Soldier's Story* and *The Hurricane*, to the project.<sup>294</sup> Yet, when Lee heard that Worth had contracted a white director to make the film, he went to Warner Brothers and suggested that they reconsider. According to Lee, it "disturbed him greatly and he felt that it was wrong ... blacks have to control these films."<sup>295</sup> Lee claimed that directing a film on the life of Malcolm X had been his inspiration for going to film school.<sup>296</sup> The imposition of a white director on a film that Lee believed he was born to direct was more than disturbing to him. Although Warner Brothers accused Lee of starting a letter-writing campaign against Jewison as director of the film, he was finally named director of the project.

The idea that white people cannot be trusted with the image of black heroes such as Malcolm X is not new or surprising. Lee's accusation that these kinds of films need to be in the hands of people of color, has been expressed by other blacks including August Wilson, Julie Dash, and Charles Burnett. The difference was that Lee actually used his success to publicize the inequality of selecting a white director when a cadre of capable black directors was available.

One of the most successful black Hollywood directors, Spike Lee has taken the challenge of creating black images to heart. Most of his films contain black protagonists who have crashed into the dominant narratives' limited version of blackness and must

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<sup>293</sup> Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X*, with Ralph Wiley, Introduction by Terry McMillan, (New York: Hyperion 1992), 9.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*, 9-10.

<sup>295</sup> Bob Bernotas, *Spike Lee: Filmmaker*, (Hillside, New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1993), 82.

<sup>296</sup> Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X*, with Ralph Wiley, Introduction by Terry McMillan, (New York: Hyperion 1992), 2.

find ways to create new spaces for their expressions of black culture. With the success of independent films during the late eighties and nineties, Hollywood began to acquire small independent companies making it even more difficult for an independent film to be produced and distributed without some Hollywood connection.<sup>297</sup> As Gilroy asserts,

The old American-centred specifications of black life as abjection, though tied to immiseration of so many people, are incompatible with the new currency of black culture as commodity and cipher of vitality, fitness, and health in a weightless global market that relies more than ever on blacks to supply some of its most alluring 'software.'<sup>298</sup>

As director Kathleen Collins Prettyman (*Losing Ground* and *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Molloy*) attested to, the audience of black filmmakers is part of the creative process.

My private audience is Black people. I don't write for anybody else. But I don't write for them in a political sense, I write for them out of my image memory because my image memory is full of Black people. I write for my aunts, my cousins.<sup>299</sup>

The failure of Collins Prettyman to couch her filmmaking in political terms does not allow her to escape the political nature of her statement. To write exclusively for and to black people is an extremely political activity. Particularly, in light of her status as an independent filmmaker, there is no other possible way for her statements to be construed especially given the agency afforded her by making her personal preferences works of art to be viewed by the public. Giroux commenting on the applications of Stuart Hall's work summarize this point best,

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<sup>297</sup> Fox, Warner Brothers and Miramax acquired or developed independent film distribution wings during this period.

<sup>298</sup> Paul Gilroy, "The Sugar You Stir...", *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie ed., (London: Verso, 2000), 126.

<sup>299</sup> David Nichols. "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation with Kathleen Prettyman Collins," *Black Film Review* 5, no.1 (1988/89): 13.

...cultural workers deepen the meaning of the political by producing pedagogical practices that engage and challenge those representational strategies, material machineries and technologies of power that condition and are conditioned by the indeterminate play of power, conflict, and oppression within society. Culture is the social field where power repeatedly mutates; identities are constantly in transit; and agency is often located where it is least acknowledged.<sup>300</sup>

Similar to Collins Prettyman, Lee creates films for black audiences that are driven primarily to express black culture and deal with black issues primarily using black actors.

In the past, Lee has stated,

It comes down to this: black people were stripped of our identities when we were brought here, and it's been a quest since then to define who we are.<sup>301</sup>

I think black people have to be in control of their own image because film is a powerful medium. We can't just sit back and let other people define our existence.<sup>302</sup>

In 1992, Spike Lee attempted to display a black nationalist image of Malcolm X. From the start of the film, Lee had decided to create an image of Malcolm X informed by black culture but loaded with the images Lee believed that best represented Malcolm X. Notwithstanding the controversy about his appointment as director of the film, Lee continued to attract negative attention while filming *X*. The relationship between Lee and Warner Brothers quickly deteriorated. Lee and others,

... originally submitted a budget for Malcolm X at \$38 million. The people at Warner Brothers, Terry Semel, the president and CEO, and Bob Daly, the chairman and CEO (two CEOs, don't ask me), immediately said, "You're crazy." They told us to come back again with another budget, and they also told us they weren't going to spend a red cent over \$18 million themselves. They wanted the total cost of the film to be \$20 million, at first, and I just remembering thinking, "This film is going to cost way more than any \$20 million to do it right. And I

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<sup>300</sup> Henry Giroux, "Public Pedagogy as Cultural Politics," in *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie ed., (London: Verso, 2000), 41.

<sup>301</sup> Brainy Quotes, Spike Lee, [quotations on-line]; available from [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/spike\\_lee\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/spike_lee_2.html); Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>302</sup> ThinkExist, Spike Lee, [quotations on-line]; available from [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/spike\\_lee/2.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/spike_lee/2.html); Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

ain't doing it wrong." I was ready to get up then. I would get back to them on budget later.<sup>303</sup>

As he approached the limit of his funding, Warner Brothers called the film's insurance company, Completion Bond Company, to let them know that they would not be extending funding. Completion, which had already extended millions, fired the editors and decided that editing would be shut down. Lee, forced to make a decision about finishing the film:

I had to get on the phone because we still work to do and it will cost money. The bond company has bailed out on me. They let my editors go. Warner Brothers *been* bailed out of here a long time ago. ...I called Bill Cosby on Monday, Oprah Winfrey on Tuesday, and Magic Johnson this morning. I saw Rocket Ismail at the basketball game and hit on him. I've got to call Reginald Lewis, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson. ...

I took a page out of the MALCOLM MANUAL. I know BLACK folks with money. I would appeal directly to their BLACKNESS, to their sense of knowing how important this film is. How important Malcolm X is to us. How important it is that this film succeed. I got down and came up with a list of all the people I knew I should contact. ...I knew what had to be done it was still nonetheless a hard thing to ask people for money, especially, the type of money I was asking for. When I approached everyone I told them it wasn't to be considered a loan, nor an investment, this was a gift. ...What's great is that folks responded. ...Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson, Prince, Magic Johnson, Tracy Chapman, and Peggy Cooper-Cafritz didn't have to give me shit, not a red cent but they chose to. ...These folks saved *Malcolm X*. It was their money that kept us to continue to work on the film. Before things were finally worked out between Warner Brothers and the Completion Bond Co. two month elapsed. ...For two whole months, we were alone, stranded, cut-off, no funding, no money, and it was prominent African-Americans that financed this film.<sup>304</sup>

Articulating his suspicions about the financing battle that took place between Spike Lee and Warner Brothers, Ernest Dickerson, cinematographer of *X* and director of *Juice* stated,

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<sup>303</sup> Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X*, with Ralph Wiley, Introduction by Terry McMillan, (New York: Hyperion 1992), 23.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid*, 138; 165-166.



There's a part of me, a very distrustful part of me, that thinks that they wanted Spike to say he couldn't do it for that amount of money, so they could give the project back to Norman Jewison ...for about \$40-45 million. I bet if Norman Jewison was going to do the movie, he would have gotten \$ 40 million right off the bat.<sup>305</sup>

Although Dickerson's assumption is debatable, his point is well made; Lee's drama with Warner Brothers is well documented and to a certain extent, has made Lee's image as a director with mounds of support. Acquiring the funds to complete his project on his own has put Lee in a category all his own. Though he remains a black director in Hollywood, he is not treated or received in the same way as other black directors. Lee's reputation may be marred by his propensity for the dramatic, but in the same instance, Lee has become his own brand, a brand that is recognized and respected throughout Hollywood.

By naming and bringing attention to the lack of representation and representatives, filmmakers posit themselves as cultural workers who are trailblazers in their field, who, in the same space, occupy positions that are expendable forcing them to remain amendable to the request of mainstream producers and distributors. His status as a newly successful Hollywood director made Lee an acceptable black person who could assume the position of director and deliver a film that mirrored the desires of the black community to see representations of themselves on film and mirror the desires of Warner Brothers and Worth. Lee's own standing as a black hero that had been accepted by Hollywood made him a candidate for a posture of resistance when it came to the image of Malcolm X. Lee would be in charge of keeping Malcolm X a black male figure of authority and authenticity. Yet, Lee's representation of Malcolm X received mixed

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<sup>305</sup> Christopher John Farley, "Black is Bankable// Filmmakers Aim Beyond Urban Streets // New Push for Parity in Hollywood" *USA Today*, January 24, 1992, 1(D).

responses. Some believed that Lee had managed to fall into the pitfalls that Baldwin vowed to avoid. Others believed that Lee had created a static version of Malcolm X that represented segments of his life as opposed to a fluid construction of Malcolm and his transformative spirit.

The superstructure's ability to co-opt the representation of the resisters/pride-producers, forces those blacks who have successfully navigated the terrain of the dominant society to respond in complex ways to attempts to display simplistic representations of black people, particularly blacks who are revered by the black community. Spike Lee's representation of the image of Malcolm X failed to complicate or address dominant society notions about X, black men, or black life in general. Lee has consistently posited himself as a black director who makes black films, failed to respond in a manner that would introduce the complexities of Malcolm to a new generation of blacks or members of the dominant society who would see his film. Lee's construction of Malcolm represented him as a violent, authoritarian, whose best skill was demonstrating black authority through subjugation of women or the dismissal of white people and their culture. Lee's response (his particular production of the image of Malcolm X) contained an authoritative demonstration of black masculinity that grounded black culture as a viable experience of humanity, worthy of respect through violence, intimidation, or trickery.

### **Additional Controversy**

Some of the controversy that surrounded Lee during the production and release of his film was surprising. Lee's films had earned him notoriety for their subject content. *She's Gotta Have It* concerned women and sex, *School Daze* told of black colleges and

Greek life, and *Do the Right Thing* examined racism among close associates, but he had yet to attract the dissention that followed the filming and distribution of *Malcolm X*.

Some of the contention was due to Lee's own maneuvering of Malcolm's image. Fearful of having a white man direct the epic, Lee pulled rank at Warner Brothers and persuaded Warner Brothers and Marvin Worth to reconsider using Norman Jewison to complete the project.<sup>306</sup> Also contentious to some, was Lee's portrayal of Malcolm. Attallah Shabazz contends,

“The movie *Malcolm X* ..., shows him learning how to read the dictionary as if he didn't know how. The truth is, it had been a while since he'd read anything. But after being reacquainted with books, he proceeded to out-read the library stock. I've seen letters that my father wrote from prison in his early twenties, eagerly looking for the third volume of a text, or wanting help to track down out-of-print books, or even suggesting books to his friends and family on the outside.<sup>307</sup>

Still, others like Dyson would like to know why Lee did not supplant the autobiography with other data that could have enriched the film, such as the relationship that Malcolm had with his wife Betty Shabazz. In response to criticisms from Shabazz and others, Lee stated,

All I can say is: I am the director, I rewrote the script by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl, and I will take full responsibility...This is the Malcolm that I see...Whose Malcolm is it anyway? ... Malcolm belongs to everyone. I reserve my right as an artist to pursue my own vision of the man.<sup>308</sup>

Most cultural critics will agree that directors have license to create and present images as they were envisioned in the director's mind, but Lee's statement becomes suspicious in light of his actions to make sure that he was the director of the epic. If Malcolm truly

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<sup>306</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 130.

<sup>307</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999), xv.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

belonged to everyone, as Lee contended, Norman Jewison, an established director of films with black subject matter would have caused no alarm. Indeed, Lee's image of Malcolm was a very particular vision of black masculinity that would not be properly represented by anyone other than a black man. Lee also understood that in the Hollywood system, he had proven himself as a moneymaker. In droves, black and white people had gone to see his films. Both *Do the Right Thing* and *She's Gotta to Have It* made profits in excess of their production cost, with *She's Gotta To Have It* making \$8 million dollars after tallying all box-office receipts.<sup>309</sup>

Malcolm X was a cultural event. Lee, who often urged audiences to see his films on the two days of release, did the same this time. Yet according to Lee, his statements were misconstrued. In an interview with Jim Emerson, of the *Orange County Register*, Lee stated, "I never told black kids to drop out of school and play hooky (when *Malcolm X* comes out). At the Black Journalists Convention I said it would be great if African-Americans could rally around this film, take the day off work, take their children out of school and go see the film as a family."<sup>310</sup> Though Lee defended himself about statements he made, he could not rally against the disapproving comments from black leaders who did not believe that Malcolm's image should be used to market the film or clothing. Lee's right to interpret Malcolm in any fashion was not supported, as clearly evidenced by his conversation with Benjamin Karim, one of Malcolm's former associates. Karim told Lee,

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<sup>309</sup> William Grant, "Reflecting the Times: Do the Right Thing Revisited," *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*, A Cambridge Film Handbook Series, Mark A. Reid ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>310</sup> Jim Emerson, "Interview, Spike speaks. The director discusses 'Malcolm X,' US History and his media Image," *The Orange County Register*, 19 November 1992.

...listen, Spike, don't have Malcolm shown doing drugs or running around with white women. For your sake, whatever you do, don't do that.<sup>311</sup>

Lee responded to the warning from Karim by writing,

I didn't say anything. I knew all that was in our script. And I knew some people would have problems with it.<sup>312</sup>

Unmoved by the community's preoccupation with avoiding an image of Malcolm that was unfavorable, Lee went on to create a film that contained these images. Furthermore, Lee went on to develop paraphernalia that would create publicity and more profits for the film. Without apprehension, Lee marketed his image of Malcolm X regardless of the existence of contrary images of Malcolm X or the reaction from the people who created and perpetuated other images.

“The vibrant, pop-culture marketing of the film gave people permission to claim and learn about Malcolm in a forum that was not threatening. ...America now provided a healthier, safer atmosphere to do so.”<sup>313</sup> This environment, of course, was the market place. The resurgence of X paraphernalia was started by Lee as a way to market his film. Yet, as Dyson contends, his “method of promotion appeared to some a bourgeois exploitation of black nationalist politics severed from a real commitment to the working-class and poor constituency Malcolm loved.”<sup>314</sup> Spike Lee's authorization of marketing paraphernalia sold in Federated Department stores, Macys and Bloomingdales, added to the characterization of Lee as someone only interested in profits. However, the situation for black directors in and out of Hollywood is difficult. Lee is unambiguous in his desire

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<sup>311</sup> Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of Making Malcolm X*, with Ralph Wiley, Introduction by Terry McMillan, (New York: Hyperion 1992), 38.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid, p.39

<sup>313</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley, foreword by Attallah Shabazz, introduction by M. S. Handler, epilogue by Alex Haley, afterword by Ossie Davis (New York: Ballantine, 1999) , xv.

<sup>314</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 131.

to be a notable Hollywood director. Commenting on the situation in Hollywood, director Julie Dash stated, “the situation in film – what determines what gets seen – is sad, and frightening. It is not, and never has been about creativity ... It’s about business. It’s about making money.”<sup>315</sup> Houston Baker has surmised, “and in the manner of a true postmodern, Lee understands that his job is to get ‘paid in full’ so that he can continue producing films of Black cultural resistance.”<sup>316</sup> In addition to recognizing that his image of Malcolm X would be controversial, Lee also understood that his marketing of the project would be as, if not more, controversial.

## **The Commodification of Malcolm X**

Following Arjun Appadurai’s<sup>317</sup> thinking about commodification, the commodification of the image of Malcolm X began prior to 1992, the release date of Spike Lee’s film. The belief that this production first began in the 1990s is incorrect. The production of cultural products containing the image of Malcolm X had been merchandised and available since the time of X’s assassination. The assassination of Malcolm X shook the New York community and other communities across the world. The devastation that was felt by people in New York and other areas was eventually channeled into ways of remembering X. Different products and rituals became available as a way to celebrate the man and his ideas. The NOI had initially been the facilitator of certain products. At first, as a mechanism to discredit Malcolm and then to evade blame

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<sup>315</sup> Patricia Smith, “A Daughter’s Tale: Julie Dash Finally Gets to Tell Her Story of Gullah Life,” *Boston Globe*, 15 March 1992.

<sup>316</sup> Houston A. Baker, “Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture,” *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara ed., (New York: Routledge, 1993), 175.

<sup>317</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

for the assassination, the organization began to provide recorded speeches from X's days as a minister in the NOI. In addition to speeches, other items such as clothing, posters, and literature became and were available in urban centers such as Harlem, New York, Detroit, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois where X was popular.

Although the commodification of Malcolm's image took place within the community that X was himself a member, after his assassination, X became exchangeable for a particular kind of black male identity. This is an example of "transfer value" in which a product is infused with a specific meaning so tightly that they are seen as the same thing.<sup>318</sup> In the 1970s, the changing of street names, the creation of Malcolm X University, and ritualized celebrations for the slain hero began. Also in this period, former allies of Malcolm X redirected their efforts of black liberation to black heroization. Pilgrimages were established to the Westchester County, in New York State, to visit the X's grave as well as an effort to continue the OAAU and the Moslem Mosque, Inc. Both organizations were eventually disbanded. Support for a federal or state sanctioned Malcolm X holiday began to gain ground during this period. It was also in this period that the initial paraphernalia of X caps and t-shirts worn by people with similar political beliefs, regardless of color or race, started.

The most serious opponent of Lee's marketing plan was Amiri Baraka, who disapproved of Lee's X-wear, which included caps, t-shirts, and jackets sold at Lee's store, Bloomingdales, and Macy's outlets.<sup>319</sup> Lee was not the only one capitalizing on Malcolm's image. After Lee announced his connection to the project, and began

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<sup>318</sup> Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning and Brand Management*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>319</sup> "The Selling of Malcolm X: Spike Lee's Movie and the Battle Over a Cultural Legacy." *New York Newsday*, 25 October 1992.

implementing his marketing plan, other vendors began to sell shirts, baseball caps, jerseys, mugs, calendars, tapes of Malcolm's speeches at NOI functions, even potato chips, for an estimated total of \$100 million in profits. Betty Shabazz was forced to secure a licensing deal with Curtis Management, the Indianapolis-based licensing company.<sup>320</sup> The company typically received somewhere between five to fifteen percent of merchandizing contract sales and was estimated to have received at least five percent for Malcolm's image.<sup>321</sup> Baraka, furious with the marketing of the image of Malcolm X said that people who "rejected Malcolm when he was alive are pimping him off now."<sup>322</sup> It bothered him that Malcolm was in "Bloomingdale's boutique."<sup>323</sup> Baraka was not the only one troubled by this wonton display of "X." Hazel Carby, noted scholar, lamented on the image of Malcolm X being used for consumption, not for social change.

Commenting on the plethora of "X" around the country Barboza wrote,

It has become fashionably anti-fashionable and like, rap music, democratized. No longer exclusively 'a black thing' even whites, the 'blue-eyed devils' Malcolm once excoriated, wear X caps, as if they're fans of the same unidentifiable team, members of some secret sect."<sup>324</sup>

The importance of the frustration of Baraka, Carby, Dyson, and others is significant. As Malcolm moved into the realm of public-speak fashion, it became more difficult to maintain a political image of Malcolm X. The difficulty facing black militants or political activists was how to keep Malcolm's image attached to a significant, political face. This became challenging when Spike Lee encouraged people from divergent political associations to feel that Malcolm belonged to them too.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid

<sup>321</sup> Ibid

<sup>322</sup> Ibid

<sup>323</sup> "The Selling of Malcolm X: Spike Lee's Movie and the Battle Over a Cultural Legacy." *New York Newsday*, 25 October 1992.

<sup>324</sup> Steven Barboza. "Robbing Malcolm's 'X' of its meaning" *USA Today*, September 15, 1992.



Lee's status as a participant in black middle class consciousness and culture was difficult for some to handle in connection to the political image of Malcolm X. The remarks made by Amiri Baraka illustrate this point.

Spike Lee expresses for me a recognizable type and trend in American society. He is the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black petit bourgeois professional. Broadened, he is an American trend. Emerging as an indication of social and class motion, his development is expressed as a political economy, culture, and history.<sup>325</sup>

For Baraka and Angela Davis, Lee symbolized the growing trend in American society to commemorate the actions of former activists with items that created profits for a small minority in the black community. In addition to the problematic commodification of cultural expressions, these monies never seemed to support programs that included political agendas that favored blacks or poor people – the main goal of many activists during the 1960s and 1970s.

As production for the film progressed, Baraka organized the protest against Lee. To add insult to injury Baraka publicly aired his disagreements with Lee when he began marketing X memorabilia in Federated Department stores.<sup>326</sup> Baraka's examination of Lee's behavior focused on Lee's lack of political understanding concerning complex analysis of race and class. Given this absence, Baraka wondered how Lee could present an image of a man who based his life's work on these very issues. As Lee failed to complicate the image of Malcolm X, Baraka's protest of Lee's film continued. According to Baraka,

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<sup>325</sup> <sup>325</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Spike Lee at the Movies," *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara ed., (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

<sup>326</sup> Paper by author.

...Spike has never offered any new registrations or heightened understanding. It is all a simple acknowledgement of common popular reference, sometimes without the slightest penetration of class disposition it reinforces.<sup>327</sup>

The acknowledgement of the growing popularity of the image of Malcolm X divorced from any analytical discussions aided in the development of Malcolm X as an American icon. Although, Spike Lee was not the only impetus for Malcolm's iconization, he certainly helped promote an image of Malcolm X that became popular with rebellion as opposed to revolution. The process of Malcolm's image transformation from revolutionary figure to rebellious American individualist was finalized in 1999 with the Malcolm X Commemorative Stamp.

### **US Postage Stamp**

One of the ways we have a Malcolm X stamp in America is through the transformation of Malcolm's image from a black nationalist to American intellectual. Prior to the de-politicization of Malcolm X's image, Malcolm was connected to a revolutionary movement to access and acquire human rights for black Americans. Moreover, X was attached to a cultural movement to incorporate Pan-Africanist ideology into the concept of black identity. The transition of Malcolm's image necessitated a separation from Malcolm's political behavior to one of Malcolm's intellectual behavior. As a result, during the 1990s, Malcolm's intellectual fervor was emphasized over his human rights campaign and Pan-Africanist beliefs. Thus, the accentuation of the content of his speeches was curtailed in favor of highlighting his oratorical style and articulation. This process was illustrated successfully in the creation of the Malcolm X United States Postal stamp.

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<sup>327</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Spike Lee at the Movies," *Black American Cinema*, Manthia Diawara ed., (New York: Routledge, 1993), 153.

All postage stamps have an established selection process. According to the United States Postal Service website,

Almost all subjects chosen to appear on U.S. stamps and postal stationery are suggested by the public. Each year, Americans submit proposals to the Postal Service on literally thousands of different topics. Every stamp suggestion is considered, regardless of who makes it or how it is presented.<sup>328</sup>

In addition to the suggestions given by the public, there is a board that works on the selection of stamps before any other postal group.

Established in 1957, the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee (CSAC) provides the Postal Service with a "breadth of judgment and depth of experience in various areas that influence subject matter, character and beauty of postage stamps." The Committee is composed of a maximum of 15 members whose backgrounds reflect a wide range of educational, artistic, historical and professional expertise. The committee meets four times yearly in Washington, D.C. and the members also review and provide guidance on artwork and designs for stamp subjects that are scheduled to be issued.<sup>329</sup>

Some of the criteria for subject selection are:

No living person shall be honored by portrayal on U.S. postage. ...No postal item will be issued sooner than ten years after the individual's death. Only events, persons, and themes of widespread national appeal and significance will be considered for commemoration and Stamps or stationery items shall not be issued to honor religious institutions or individuals whose principal achievements are associated with religious undertakings or beliefs.<sup>330</sup>

It is evident, noting some of the criteria for stamp commemoration, why Malcolm X was not issued a stamp before 1999. Malcolm's religious affiliation and lack of widespread national appeal during the 1970s and 1980s made his acquisition of a US postal stamp unlikely. Undoubtedly, it was surprising to black nationalists that Malcolm's image was put on a stamp. Although Lee's film performed some separation of Malcolm's image

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<sup>328</sup>United States Postal Service, "Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee" 4 June 2010. [postal website online]; available from <http://www.usps.com/communications/organization/csac.htm> ; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid

<sup>330</sup> Ibid

from his religious affiliation, Malcolm frequently mentioned Allah as working through Mohammed or Elijah Muhammad in his work. In addition, Malcolm's national appeal happened in the 1990s, not during the time-period where he actively cultivated his image. Clearly, the decision to create a stamp to commemorate Malcolm X was an invention of people who had accepted the recently constructed image of Malcolm X.

## **The Angry Black Man**

In the stamp selection process, after the committee for production selects an image to commemorate, the actual production of the stamp goes to the Stamp Development Office of the United States Postal Service (SDOUSPS). Terry McCaffrey, the manager of the Stamp Development office explained the process further:

There are six art directors under contract for the Stamp Development Committee. One of them begin[s] development of [a] design based on information of the

committee and others. Sometimes, [the] art directors design[s] the stamp themselves. Once the design is done, it is given back to the stamp director [who] scans it into his computer, affixes the type and perforations to make it look like a stamp, and then it is brought to the next meeting [of the Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee] and shown in the subcommittee for design. This is made up of six design professionals, they review each piece of art and make comments on it - adjusting color or the art isn't good enough or we want to try something different or whatever - and then it is taken back for those changes and then it is brought back three months later and tried again and eventually it works. So, it takes on average a year to a year and a half to do a stamp because they [CSAC] only meet every three months.<sup>331</sup>

When asked how this process went for the design of the Malcolm X stamp, McCaffrey responded by saying,

Well ...we are doing more photography on stamps, because he is such a contemporary figure we felt that a photographic approach was best, we had a research team which is a firm in Bethesda that's under contract to the post service,

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<sup>331</sup> Terry McCaffrey, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, MD., 18 December 2003.

their name is Photo Assist [Inc.] and they researched Malcolm X's subject and came back with a wider range, array of photographs to work from and the designer narrowed it down to ...two or three different photographs that he felt worked well as a stamp. There are merits from all three for the various photos that were represented they all would have worked from one degree or another but it did take long for the subcommittee to reach agreement...

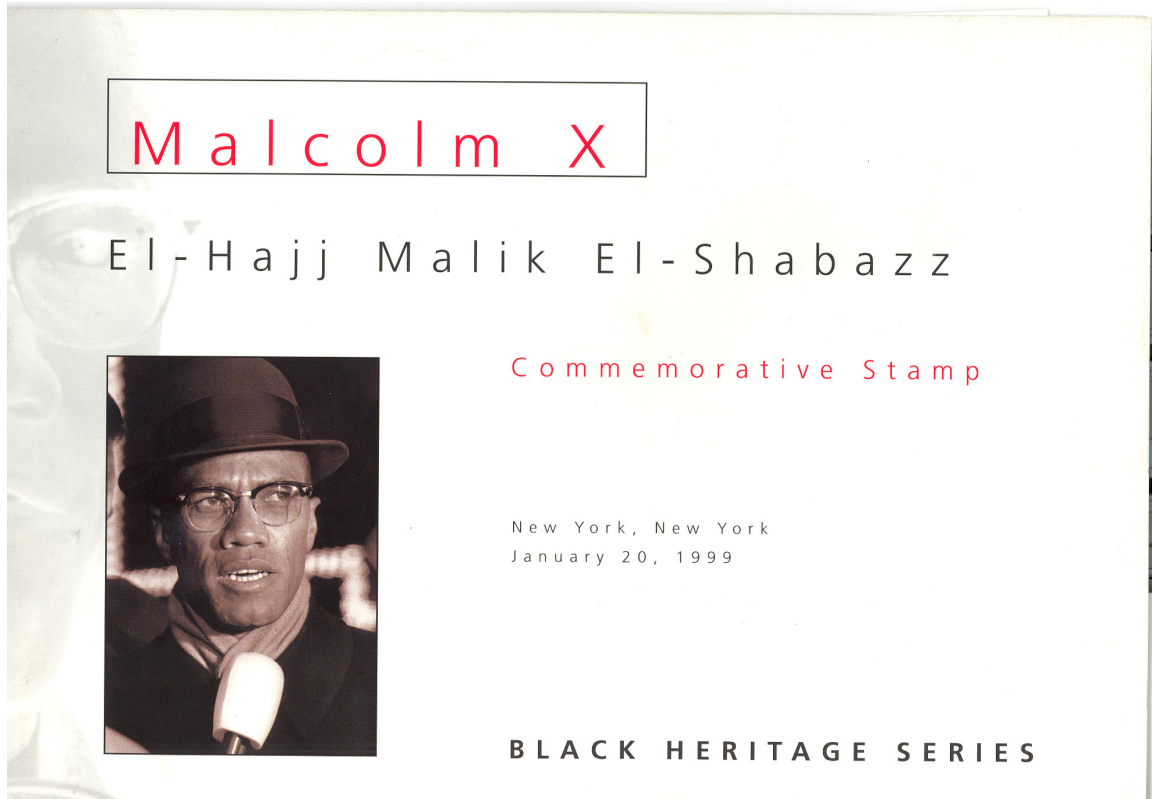
... I vividly remember the subject selection, well actually the photo selection...going through the different photos and trying to find a photo that worked well as a stamp. It is such a small scale, which is always difficult to do and one that portrayed him the way we wanted to see him. There were a number of photos where he looked *very angry*. We did not want to do that because people do not want to put stamps on their envelopes of somebody looking angry, so we had to find photos that had some depth to it and was a good quality photo, not a candid photograph. So it was a long process trying to find the right photo but I think we did find one ... but it did take long for the subcommittee to reach agreement that the one we chose was the best.<sup>332</sup>

It is crucial to underscore the idea of the image of Malcolm X as an angry person. The process of transitioning Malcolm from a marginalized culture to the mainstream or popular culture involved essentially separating him from his message or de-politicizing him. In other words, Malcolm's political behavior that labeled him as an "angry black man," (a title which he embraced and used) would have to be downplayed if he were to transition into an American icon. In order for X's image were to reach a wider audience, Malcolm could not be known as a black supremacist or black nationalist. Presenting an image of Malcolm X that supported a political message of revolution, one that would reconnect him to his political ideology, would prevent the majority of Americans from accessing Malcolm X as simply an American icon as opposed to a black revolutionary Malcolm X. Thus, to legitimate an image of Malcolm X as an American icon implied death to the image of Malcolm X as an angry black man. Although, Governor S. David Fineman of the U.S. Postal Service referred to Malcolm X as "a modern-day

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid

revolutionary who openly fought for the end of oppression and injustice,”<sup>333</sup> anyone without some historical knowledge on Malcolm X’s background would have been hard pressed to find a verification for this tribute in the post office’s program. In fact, the postal program, shown below, stated that Malcolm “disavowed his earlier separatist preachings in favor of a more international, integrationist approach.” (See image below)



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<sup>333</sup> Jean Lewis, “U.S. Postal Service Issues Malcolm X Commemorative Stamp,” *Reflections Newsletter*, Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections 5, no. 2 (31 March 1999), 5.

## Malcolm X

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

Over the second half of the 20th century, few individuals have had a greater impact on the cultural consciousness and social progress of African Americans than Malcolm X. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, his radical views sharpened the debate about America's racial inequities and strategies for social change.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, was six feet, four inches tall, and he possessed a charismatic presence and oratorical style, a brilliant mind, and a personal fearlessness. He encouraged black Americans to find pride and unity in their African roots. Many important changes in our culture, from the introduction of African-American Studies departments to popular sayings such as "Black is beautiful," can be traced back to his philosophies.

Following the murder of his father, the emotional breakdown of his mother, and an inattentive foster care system, Malcolm took on a life of crime. Before reaching the age of 21, he was imprisoned. While in prison, he was introduced to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, upon which time he became a Black Muslim and joined the Nation of Islam.

By 1959, Malcolm was the most visible spokesperson for the NOI and a national figure in the civil rights debate. Now named Malcolm X, to symbolize the unknown African ancestral name, he gave speeches calling for black identity and cultural accountability and challenging what he saw as the naive philosophy of the civil rights movement.

In 1963, conflict with the NOI led to his break from the group. He traveled widely throughout Europe, Africa, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East. He was

dramatically affected by the racial inclusiveness he saw in Mecca. He changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and returned to America, disavowing his earlier separatist preachings in favor of a more international, integrationist approach.

Ultimately, Malcolm supported the work of the civil rights movement and continued to advocate the ideas of personal integrity and racial pride. Tragically, he was assassinated on February 21, 1965, while delivering a speech in Harlem.

Though he has been dead over three decades, Malcolm's ideas—and the legend of the man—continue to inspire Americans today. The U.S. Postal Service honors his legacy with this commemorative stamp, the twenty-second in the Black Heritage series. It was designed by Richard Sheaff of Scottsdale, Arizona.

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According to the Malcolm X Commemoration Committee's Communication Officer, Zayid Muhammad,

In our position then the government, with this stamp, is continuing its efforts to distort and co-op Malcolm's legacy in death the way they absolutely could not do so in life...by implicitly asserting that he became an 'American integrationist Civil Rights leader,' and that he was not the fearless, uncompromising revolutionary that we know he was.<sup>335</sup>

Although Malcolm noted his broadening perspective on race relations in the United States in various speeches and interviews, he rarely talked about integration in terms that Roy Wilkins, a more mainstream American civil rights leader, would recognize and applaud. Specifically, Malcolm X stated,

<sup>334</sup> U.S. Postal Service, *Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Commemorative Stamp*, Cover photos: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, Stamp Design: Richard Sheaff, Layout and Design: Pat Marshall Design, Inc., 1998

<sup>335</sup> Zayid Muhammad, "Has the Postal Service Stamped and Sealed the Co-opting of the Revolutionary Legacy of Malcolm X?" *Reflections Newsletter*, Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections 5, no. 2 (31 March 1999), 9.

...I believe that fighting against those who fight against us is the best course of action in any situation. Not fighting anybody, but fighting against anybody who fights us.<sup>336</sup>

Malcolm spoke in terms of coalition building rather than of integration.

And in my opinion the young generation of whites, blacks, browns, whatever else there is, you're living at a time of extremism, a time of revolution, a time where's there's to be a change. People in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change and a better world has to be built, and the only way it's going to be built is with extreme methods. I for one will join with anyone, I don't care what color you are, as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth.<sup>337</sup>

It would be difficult to believe the program of the US postal service given the actual words of Malcolm X, especially in light of his adversity toward interracial relationships.

## The Photo

In their press release about the stamp, it was said that the photograph used was taken in New York City on May 21, 1964, the first appearance of Malcolm after his “historic and broadening trip to the Moslem holy city of Mecca.”<sup>338</sup> In fact, according to Paul Lee, the historian on *Malcolm X*, the stamp photo was “taken during an interview in a Cairo, Egypt hotel lobby on July 14, 1964.”<sup>339</sup> Of course, the misdate might have been a mistake, but I suggest that it was important for the US Post Office to place the photo, and by extension the image of Malcolm X, in Malcolm's age of enlightenment. If the photo could be attached to one of the most significant moments of transformation in the life of Malcolm X, it would authenticate the representation of Malcolm X as an American icon.

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<sup>336</sup> Malcolm X, HARYOU-ACT Forum, New York 12 December 1964, *By Any Means Necessary* ed. George Brietman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 180.

<sup>337</sup> Malcolm X, Oxford Union Society debate, 3 December 1964, *By Any Means Necessary* ed. George Brietman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 182.

<sup>338</sup> United States Postal Service, USPS Postal News, Press Release, 20 January 1999.

<sup>339</sup> Paul Lee, “Debate Escalates over Malcolm X Stamp.” *The Michigan Citizen* 31 January – 6 February 1999.



Other photos of Malcolm would have been just as non-threatening as the Cairo/New York picture, but these photos would not have carried the intended meaning of the New York press conference photo. Robert L. Haggins, Malcolm's personal photographer, believed that "Malcolm would have rejected the photograph used on the postage stamp."<sup>340</sup> According to Manuel Gilyard, president of the New York chapter of the Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections (ESPER), Haggins believed that the picture used for the "poster issued by the postal [service] should have been the one used for the stamp."<sup>341</sup> The photo (displayed below) showed a smiling Malcolm, in a non-candid photograph, one of the criteria for a stamp.



<sup>342</sup>

Furthermore, of the many photos taken during Malcolm's life, few were of his "hajj reawakening period," which might have created an issue for the post office desperately trying to demonstrate a linkage to a dynamic moment of history. More so, using one of these other photos might have decreased the momentum pushing Malcolm toward the designation of an American intellectual image. Comments by Postal Service Governor S. David Fineman's refer to Malcolm as "a visionary, a man who dreamed of a better world and dared to do something about it."<sup>343</sup> Yet, Fineman does not mention the methods Malcolm adopted to bring about revolutionary change; particularly his campaign

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<sup>340</sup> Manuel Gilyard, "Robert L. Haggins – Personal Photographer to Malcolm X," *Reflections Newsletter*, Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections 5, no. 2 (31 March 1999), 8

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>342</sup> Malcolm X-org. "Multimedia" available from [http://www.malcolm-x.org/media/pic\\_07.htm](http://www.malcolm-x.org/media/pic_07.htm); Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>343</sup> USPS Postal News, Press Release 20 January 1999

to bring the United States in front of the United Nations to stand trial for its inhuman treatment of black people by courting the favor of newly independent African nations during the Cold War.

To imply the USPS did not take into account the previous images of Malcolm X would be incorrect. According to McCaffrey,

... the postal service was not apprehensive but they were concerned about the issuance of the Malcolm X stamp ... what the reaction would be with the American public and they debated it within the committee for a while and it was discussed with the postmaster general and everyone felt ... he certainly was worthy of a stamp even though he is controversial ... and we decided let's go ahead with it. Let's see what happens.<sup>344</sup>

The notion that Malcolm's controversial legacy might affect the reception of the stamp certainly implied that the Post Office knew and wanted to detract from the prevailing image of Malcolm X. Thus, it becomes all the more plausible to believe that the US Post Office actively participated in creating a new image of Malcolm based primarily in the perception of X as an American icon.

### **Reaction to the Stamp**

McCaffrey and others, state that the Shabazz family, first Dr. Betty and later Attallah, Malcolm's eldest daughter, were in accordance with the image on the stamp. Attallah Shabazz was quoted as telling an *Amsterdam News* reporter, that the stamp "shows how Malcolm appeared to most Americans."<sup>345</sup> The accuracy of Shabazz's statement gave insight to the minor uproar that followed the images used by USPS. Many who disliked the stamp, like Paul Lee, alluded that the stamp was an attempt "to

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<sup>344</sup> Terry McCaffrey, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, MD., 18 December 2003.

<sup>345</sup> Paul Lee, "Debate Escalates over Malcolm X Stamp." *The Michigan Citizen*, 31 January – 6 February 1999.

bring Malcolm 'in' ... a cultural symbol, a conferring of status, a mark of acceptance."<sup>346</sup>

Many of the opponents of the stamp were black nationalists who were appalled by the same co-option that the film produced.

Indeed, many of them, like Yemi Toure, claimed that, "Malcolm's on a Stamp and We Got Licked." Like Akilah Monifah, they struggled to remind the American public of Malcolm's activities and words during the final moments of his life. But the struggle was in vain, for as Mr. McCaffrey stated,

We expected more criticism from the public but we never really received it um those few letters we received were which were you expect that sort of thing. When we did the Malcolm X stamp we assumed that there would be criticism, but we were surprised at how little criticism there was, were pleasantly surprised at that.<sup>347</sup>

When asked if he and other members of the committee were surprised that the groups that rejected Malcolm during his lifetime, including B'nai b'rith and other Jewish organizations, supported the stamp his reaction was similar;

We were a little bit surprised by that, we weren't sure who was going to support it but we surprised by the array of people that did support it. That's always a pleasant surprise for us.<sup>348</sup>

The real surprise was reserved for those black nationalists who were displeased at the issuance of the Malcolm X stamp. The stamp sold out of its 100 million copies, more than twice the number for the last black heritage stamp,<sup>349</sup> without major infraction from any Americans, white or black.

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<sup>346</sup> Yemi Toure, "Malcolm's on a stamp and we got Licked." *Final Call* :Perspective 1999 [magazine on-line]; available from <http://www.finalcall.com/perspectives/malcolmx3-2-99.htm>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

<sup>347</sup> Terry McCaffrey, interview by author, phone interview, College Park, MD., 18 December 2003.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid

<sup>349</sup> Akilah Monifa, "Malcolm X stamp is Surprising." The Progressive Media Project January 1999, [article on-line]; available from <http://yu.ac.kr/~bwlee/esc/malcolm.htm>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

## Honoring Malcolm's Image

In an article by Felicia Lee, several scholars were asked to give their impressions of the political legacy of Malcolm X. Their responses ranged from “complex and disturbing” to “taught black people to think of themselves as an African people.”<sup>350</sup> During the 1990s, the image of Malcolm X underwent its most drastic transformation, the iconization of Malcolm X. No longer solely planted within the black community, the image of Malcolm X became the image of an American hero, an image that would go into the twenty-first century as a symbol of American transformation and opportunity.

With his movie *Malcolm X*, Lee rekindled a mass-marketed notorious, revival in Malcolm X. Lee's ability to generate controversy recollected some of the fame Malcolm himself generated during his lifetime. The phenomenon of the X-memorabilia took over the country for short period in the 1990s, and assured that Malcolm X's image would survive and thrive outside of the black community. Although there were other films and paraphernalia that occurred during the decade, these two events, the production and release of X and the production and release of the United States Postal stamp, provided evidence of the changed meaning of Malcolm X's image. The film reintroduced Malcolm X back into mainstream popular culture. After X's image resurged in the black community, capitalizing on the ability of Malcolm X's image to capture the zeitgeist of the period, Spike Lee further promoted his film with memorabilia only available at his store or in Federated Department Stores, such as Macy's or Bloomingdales. The second item projected Malcolm into the annals of American folklore and substantiated his legacy

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<sup>350</sup> Felicia Lee, “Malcolm X, in the Eyes of Different Beholders,” New York Times November 1, 1992.

as an American icon. It also added significant fodder to the perception of Malcolm X as a rebel and American intellectual.

As Paul Shackel suggests,

Memory can be about (1) forgetting about or excluding an alternative past, (2) creating and reinforcing patriotism, and/or (3) developing a sense of nostalgia to legitimize a particular heritage. These categories serve as an organizational point to see the relationship between power and the construction of public memory. They allow us to see that objects and landscapes that historical archaeologists and public historians often view have different meanings to different people and groups at different times. These categories are not mutually exclusive. The public memory associated with highly visible objects is always being constructed, changed, and challenged, and at all times power and the challenge to power are situational.<sup>351</sup>

Indeed, the construction of Malcolm X's image exemplifies the construction of public memory debates. The process of commemorating Malcolm X led to the incorporation of Malcolm X into popular culture that allowed various types of Americans to become familiar with the image regardless of their knowledge or connection to the deeds of Malcolm X. The circulation of the image in popular culture led to a re-examination of Malcolm X by leading scholars of the black American experience in the United States, such as Manning Marable. As Malcolm's image surpassed the intellectual community's ability to produce information on the activist, the public examination of Malcolm X led to the reformulation of his image as a black hero. Malcolm X became an American icon that moved unfettered through different sectors of America due in large part to his depoliticizing. His depoliticizing allowed a larger portion of American society to recognize and use his image in a myriad of ways, including as a commodity on an envelope. Thus, Malcolm entered the twenty-first century as a confirmed American icon.

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<sup>351</sup> Paul A. Shackel, "Public Memory and the Search for Power in American Historical Archaeology American Anthropologist," *New Series* 103, no. 3 (September 2001), 657.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Legacy of Malcolm X**

### **Introduction**

My introduction to Malcolm X took place many years ago. As a New Yorker, it was highly improbable that I would not know who Malcolm X was, but my official introduction to the image of Malcolm X came with two very different events. During the early 1990s, shortly before and after the release of Spike Lee's film, the image of Malcolm X flooded the streets of New York City. It was cool to be seen with some item that either could be referenced to X or had any one of his images upon it. Since I had always been a fan of t-shirts with words or captions, one of my friends gave me a Malcolm X t-shirt for my birthday. I was a little perplexed by the gesture. I wondered if I had indicated unconsciously that I was 'pro-black' or 'militant.' In fact, after my friend explained that, the shirt was the height of coolness at the time and that was the reason she had given it to me; I wore it proudly. Years later, as a university undergraduate, I again encountered Malcolm X. It was through the work of two professors, Mark Chapman and Irma Watkins-Owens, which led me to discover the legacy of Malcolm X. Now politically more aware, I learned of Malcolm's political ideologies and had an epiphany that Malcolm X merged the issues of greatest concern to me – social justice and interrogation of what it meant to be black. To me Malcolm X represented my commitment to social justice and my commitment to a unified, though divergent, black identity. As I pursued graduate study, it was clear that my dissertation would be on the person who had had the greatest influence over my political worldview. Brought back to the early 1990s by the undertaken of the dissertation, I wanted to know how a man who

died eleven years before I was born continued to maintain relevancy to a group of people; many of whom had never met or interacted with him personally?

## **Black People and their Images**

For black Americans in the twenty-first century, the task of reconciling American pathos concerning the position and treatment of black Americans with what Michael Eric Dyson refers to as the commodification of black bodies, skin, music, and skills takes place most publicly on the terrain of culture.<sup>352</sup> Cultural representations, “in the expressive arts and popular culture”<sup>353</sup> as Herman Gray assessed, “while occasionally myopic and exclusive, are also crucial political moves against racism and white supremacy, sexism, and class inequality.”<sup>354</sup> Thus, the struggle to retain cultural figures that reinforce societal acceptance of blacks as Americans, consistent with the ideals of American identity, that also contain positive representations of blackness,<sup>355</sup> become critical pieces in the realities of black people’s experiences in American society. According to Nikhil Pal Singh, “despite a decline in biological arguments for black inferiority, the belief that blacks are culturally deficient – less intelligent, less industrious, and less patriotic than whites – remains widespread.”<sup>356</sup> Malcolm’s images are used to represent ways that blacks have moved beyond categorizations of inferiority. In other

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<sup>352</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 53.

<sup>353</sup> Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representations*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 121.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>355</sup> Here I refer to Dyson discussion of the desire to rid the nation of the negativity associated with blackness: To get beyond race, to transcend it, really expresses the national need to get beyond blackness per se. Blackness per se has been so completely identified with negative attributes - limited, narrow, particular - that we can rarely imagine it representing a universal ideal ... But Jordan is admired precisely because his blackness is never an issue; it is never referenced in a way to threaten the dominant society. ...As long as blackness is not an issue, that is, as long as it doesn't make a difference, as long as it's suppressed, contained, or controlled, it's alright. “Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 157.”

<sup>356</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

words, despite recent developments in the perception of black people, and by extension blackness, blacks are still perceived through the lenses of cultural representations offered by the media. However, as blacks continue to make up a minority of the population and concentrate those numbers in cities, while being represented in the media, popular or otherwise, in numbers larger than in the population, the majority of Americans will use the media to inform their perceptions of black Americans.<sup>357</sup> These representations are necessarily crucial points of debate among divergent members of the black community. A portion of the debate pertains to the black cultural producers and the nature of their cultural products. Indeed, the cultural producers of black images' development of black cultural products are the central discussion of blacks and the society in which they live. The struggle to retain Malcolm X as a black hero (black nationalist, politically active in the campaign for equality, and active in the formation and connection of pride in African origins) versus an American icon (rebellious, American individualist, fashion icon) is a prime example of the ongoing debate between black people and American society.

The process of commemoration that took place in the 1990s involved many academics, including Manning Marable, Abdul Alkimat, Michael Eric Dyson, and Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo. Their politics included bring Malcolm X into the academy and exposing a larger number of students to a more balanced representation of the political image of Malcolm X a significant departure from the commodified and film version of Malcolm during the 1990s. Furthermore, these academics grounded Malcolm X and his contemporaries in the larger civil rights movement. They gave perspective to the work of Malcolm X and contextualized his legacy for students who only knew of the 1960s and

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<sup>357</sup> Screen Actors Guild, Diversity Report. [www.sag.org](http://www.sag.org)



1970s through mediated representations of material culture, such as photographs of Angela Davis's afro, Black Power fist, and black leather jackets and berets.

The debate surrounding the image of Malcolm X, in the twenty-first century, coalesced in the processes of commemoration, a process in which the rituals become meaningful but have the potential to be non-provocative. Within the black community there are usually two days that have been adopted to celebrate the slain leader – May 19 (his birthday) and February 21 (the day of his assassination). Within the larger community of Americans, there are no specific days that are used to celebrate the legacy of Malcolm X. Some cities like Detroit, Washington, DC, and New York have supported events on either the birth or the assassination date of Malcolm X typically in conjunction with black organizations that have Malcolm X commemoration events. Similarly, some news outlets, like *Pacifica Radio*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Tribune*, and *The New York Times* either present information from their own reporters or use black cultural producers to comment on the legacy of Malcolm X.

### **Implications and Meanings for the Commemoration of Malcolm X**

Between the discussions of scholars, cultural producers, and adherents of popular culture, we find a Malcolm X that is alternately part man, part myth, imperfect and perfect all at once. X himself was multi-layered and contradictory about American society, race relations, and methods to end the oppression of black people. Hence, black audiences could then pick-and-choose parts of Malcolm X that suited them best. The airing of *The Hate That Hate Produced* catapulted Malcolm X to national visibility within popular culture. Consequently, reporters, black and white, often interviewed Malcolm X. Malcolm cultivated these relationships going so far as to develop a working

relationship with James Hicks of the *Amsterdam News*. X was also introduced to the co-author of his autobiography, Alex Haley, through the interview process. One media format opened avenues for other platforms. Whereas television provided fodder for the black supremacist image of Malcolm X, and did not provide him much latitude for development of his own image, the autobiography allowed Malcolm to influence directly the dominant society's perception of who he was in a far-reaching fashion.

As X became a sought-after, cultural critic fascination with his private life and philosophy led to interest in his publishing autobiography. Initially, conceived of as a memoir that would lead to additional members in the NOI, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* became a literary journey into the life of one of the most charismatic speakers of the twentieth century. The journey away from Elijah Muhammad led Malcolm X to develop and use other images that allowed him to be a radical cultural critic that spoke primarily to black people, but also spoke to the possibility and necessity of coalition building among different groups of Americans. With the posthumous publication of *The Autobiography*, the image of Malcolm X produced by Haley and Malcolm contained many familiar literary tropes that began the process of the transformation of the image of Malcolm X. Members of the larger society were able to recognize in Malcolm an American experience of black manhood that could be attached to the ills and triumphs of American society. As *The Autobiography* circulated throughout the American culture, the commercialization of *The Autobiography* continued to fuel more interest in Malcolm X.

For many of X's followers, including the Black Panther Party, the Us Organization, Kwame Toure, and Ossie Davis, Malcolm reconceptualized what it meant

to be a fully realized black man in America. Saldana-Portillo deconstructs Malcolm's expression of black masculinity:

...[the] performance of this subjectivity, full masculinity necessarily appears as hyper-masculinity, precisely because it is performed by a black man, an inappropriate subject. Malcolm X is at times indeed perceived as caricature. At the same time, when Malcolm X brings discipline to bear on this "hyper-masculinity," when he successfully usurps the disciplining function of the white state, he destroys for the white community the boundary between the white, Christian subject and the black, Muslim other... Malcolm X, as inappropriate subject, lays claim to the inner world of the (white) tropic American subject, thereby erasing that tenuous border. Thus he threatens the social regulation of the segregated U.S. of the 1950s and 1960s, not by armed insurrection, nor even by the peaceful means of non-violence, but simply by the enactment of a disciplined American masculinity, which lends him the appearance of being. This performance is a parody, a mockery, not because Malcolm X is parodic, but because Malcolm X in his recuperation of full masculinity as tropic American subject reveals to white men that they lack an original claim to this masculinity, this "internal core." Malcolm X reveals that there is no (white) essence to this tropic American subjectivity, because this subjectivity is a fabrication he can successfully represent. Therein lies the violation, the "violence" of Malcolm X, a gentle man who was never personally associated with physical violence... all he had on him by way of defense was a pen that sprayed mace... not only does Malcolm believe in the "authenticity" of his manhood, he also, or rather simultaneously, understands how threatening this manhood as a mode of belief is to whites and how enabling it is, by the same token, to blacks.<sup>358</sup>

Beginning with *The Hate That Hate Produced*, Malcolm X actively used his public persona to advance his teachings on race relations and his political philosophies on the solutions to black human rights attainment in the United States. First he historicized an African past, giving people of African descent a history to be proud of and he created an Afro-American identity that was grounded in an African past, an Afro-American present that had not only resisted slavery, but steadily made contributions to American society, even if white people would not readily acknowledge them. Secondly, he rejected the idea of integration based on the greatness of people of African descent. To integrate was to

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<sup>358</sup> Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "Consuming Malcolm X: Prophecy and Performative Masculinity," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, (Spring 97) Vol. 30, Issue 3, 304-305.

erase the connection to that great African past and the present fortitude developed throughout the history of Africans in America. To move away from a black community was to give away solidarity, which contained the only power base for blacks in America.

Based on his dismissal of the national trajectory of the civil rights movement, many of his adherents believed that X predicted the failure of civil rights legislation to change the majority of black Americans' everyday life. Accordingly, X would have moved to the forefront of the movement and even reconciled with major civil rights advocates, particularly since the Black Power Movement incorporated his concepts/ideologies and X continued to make advancements to the major civil rights leaders of his time. After his assassination, people in and outside the Black Power Movement continued to recognize him long after his contributions had been folded into the current flow of the Black Power Movement. Converting his image into the ideal representation of black male identity, the perception of Malcolm X's behavior became the image of the actions of a black man.

The resurgence of Malcolm X's image in the 1980s propelled Malcolm's entry into the dominant popular culture narrative and harkened the emergence of discussions over the representation of black masculinity in the post-civil rights era. Presented as a fashion icon and a true black man, X's image was then ushered into American society, as a marker of the kind of black man to represent what a black men should be, an American success despite racism and lack of opportunity. Toward the end of the twentieth century, images of Malcolm could be seen on album covers, clothing, jewelry, and even on a United States postal stamp. The commercialization of X's image reached its zenith. The proliferation of X's image created a frenzy in the marketplace during the 1990s. X's

image took on several different and sometimes differing meaning. X's image could be used to support black supremacist ideology, black nationalism, conscious rap music and even Gangsta rap. Malcolm had become an American icon outside of the black community.

During the 1990s, the image of Malcolm X was visible in American society in ways it had not been since the early 1960s. For multiple Americans, the image of Malcolm X spoke to a legacy of protest. X's transformation as an American individualist contained most notably in his autobiography, made him a fighter of injustice and a champion of justice/freedom, not a black nationalist or a socialist. Malcolm envisioned the ideals of American individuality and transformation. Thus, his image was used to demonstrate a belief in the principles of the American character – the ability to adapt to a new frontier- physical or mental. This image positioned Malcolm X in the long tradition of American individualists who fought against the “wrongs” in mainstream society. Their protests are incorporated eventually into mainstream ideology and they are iconized for their forward thinking in an area that does not really change the fabric of American society. Groups that opposed his views while he was alive did not challenge his authenticity as an American icon. In fact, his image and its authenticity was broadened by his re-insertion into the curriculum of universities and his image on a stamp issued by the United States Postal service in 1999. Malcolm's image had shifted that of black hero to that of American icon. As the proliferation of X's image continue to saturate the market, American popular culture seemed to welcome the transformation of Malcolm X from the angry black man to American icon.

Both blacks and mainstream viewers understand the message conveyed when black images are taken from black culture and shown as signs or symbols of American society. Having conducted research using primary sources, like the newspapers of the time, I am seized by the negative characterization of Malcolm X during the early 1960s. This all but disappears when X becomes an item in the fashion industry during the early 1990s. The silence becomes louder, so to speak, when the press release for the U.S. postal stamp was announced.

As a historical figure, Malcolm is subject to the same transformation as other figures in history. Manning Marable notes, “it is relatively rare when a historical figure becomes far more powerful and influential decades after his death than he was in life.”<sup>359</sup> The desire of marginalized cultures to retain the rights of ownership over members of their community, speaks volumes about the position of marginalized people in American society. Would maintaining a black nationalist Malcolm X be as important if positions of marginalized groups had improved significantly since his death? How crucial is it to maintain control over marginalized images in the media?

## **Commodification through Popular Culture**

Traditionally in the United States, people of color are often displaced in the hierarchical configuration of society. Occupying positions of marginality in reference to their race and sometimes class, people of color in general and blacks specifically exhibit agency through their cultural productions. These cultural productions are often then adapted, in some form or another, by the mainstream. According to Katherine Toland Frith, “increasingly it has been noted that popular culture is an entry point into social

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<sup>359</sup> Manning Marable, “Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Malcolm X,” *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy* 8, no. 8 (Summer 2002) : 118.

education, that as a people we begin to learn early and well from mass media. Even before they can read, children are familiar with the concepts of brand, consumerism, and choice in the market place.”<sup>360</sup> Thus, consumption can be used for sending social messages as well as receiving them.<sup>361</sup> According to Chantal Mouffe,

Western society has been transformed into a big marketplace where all the products of human labor have become commodities, where more and more needs must go through the market to be satisfied. Such a “commodification of social life” has destroyed a series of previous social relations and replaced them with commodity relations.<sup>362</sup>

Thus, a consumer can purchase an item and have this item confer not only social status, but also feelings like security, happiness, pride, comfort, and indifference. Furthermore, consumer purchases can also help viewers read the consumer as successful, safe, politically conscious, educated, and youthful. Thus, purchases with racialized images usually connote an affiliation, solidarity, or knowledge of the group or individual the image comes from. Signs or symbols are rarely transported from one culture to another without some kind of interpretation. In a capitalistic society, the struggle over meaning is usually a struggle to create and maintain a hegemonic knowledge. Again Mouffe states,

However, hegemony is never established conclusively. A constant struggle must create the conditions necessary to validate capital and its accumulation. This implies a set of practices that are not merely economic but political and cultural as well. Thus, the development of capitalism is subject to an incessant political struggle, periodically modifying those social forms through which social relations of production are assured their centrality.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Katherine Toland Frith, *Undressing the Ad: Reading Culture in Advertising*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 20.

<sup>361</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>362</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 92.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

Thus, the hegemonic ideas that once kept X outside of the dominant political motivations incorporated him. Once considered a racist, demagogue under the influence of a hate-filled man, Malcolm X is now a champion for human rights and freedoms. With adaptation or popularity comes transformation or, in the case of Malcolm X, separation from the initial group and/or message. Thus, the de-politicizing of Malcolm X took form shortly after his assassination. Hence, wearing a shirt with an X or the face of Malcolm X can convey solidarity to the man, his ideas, or a lofty concept of freedom and democracy. All of which are permissible in the current hegemonic ideology; making the concepts of revolution and democracy difficult to surmise in American society.

As I have demonstrated, in the cultural tug of war between black iconization of X and mainstream iconization it does matter where the image comes from. The interpretation of the author or architect will determine what's visible but not how it is seen. The reader must gather meaning from the lot of information given by the author or architect. Thus, it is very important to know if the image of Malcolm X seen is from the perspective of the mainstream – de-politicized, all-inclusive – or from the perspective of a black nationalist – which can mean an image of Malcolm as a black activist or angry black man. From 1959, until his death, X and the media orchestrated a difficult tango where each went back and forth jockeying for authority concerning the image of X. Recognizing and seizing the opportunity, X used his fame to promote his religious and national politics. One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that X was the first to construct a public image of himself that he used to politicize the civil rights movement and force the state and federal officials into action. I do not believe there is an objective image of X. Every image of X is a sign that speaks volumes about Malcolm X, the



wearer, the reader, the author, the architect, the film director, etc. As de-politicized and casual as recent images of X try to be, it is highly unlikely that they can truly be seen that way since these are photos and other images taken from the period in which X was most popular and politically active.

## **Commemorating Malcolm X**

In the United States, a number of states and cities that have commemorated the legacy of Malcolm X by renaming streets or buildings in his honor. In Washington, DC, Meridian Hill Park is unofficially known as Malcolm X Park. Detroit, Michigan and Chicago, Illinois have named education facilities in honor of Malcolm X, including a college. In Omaha, Nebraska, the birthplace of Malcolm X, the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation, “own[s] 10 acres of land including the former home site of Malcolm X,”<sup>364</sup> and have community programs that replicate the teachings of Malcolm X through community building and organizing. In New York City, Lenox Avenue, which runs through Harlem, has been renamed Malcolm X Avenue. There have also been separate attempts to create a museum in honor of Malcolm X. The only construction that has surfaced is the MBSMEC. In addition to the renaming of a major thoroughfare where Malcolm himself worked, New York City, through the office of the Manhattan Borough President, has given a little more than a half a million dollars to the operation and further construction of the Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center, Inc. (MBSMEC). The building kept 40 percent of the former Audubon Ballroom auditorium where the Malcolm X was assassinated. The space, formerly owned by Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, was converted into the MBSMEC after Dr. Betty Shabazz

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<sup>364</sup> Malcolm X Foundation, “Welcome Page,” [foundation page on-line]; available from <http://www.malcolmxfoundation.org/MXMF/Welcome.html>; Internet; accessed 5 August 2010.

organized to have the building turned into “an institution that would permit the courageous work of her late husband, El Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm’s taken name after his hajj to Mecca) – Malcolm X to continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>365</sup> Lastly, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, part of the New York Public Libraries, holds an event or program to commemorate the life of Malcolm X every year on both the anniversary of X’s birth and death.

Shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X, divergent groups of people and organizations created or continued events in honor of Malcolm X’s legacy. The members of these groups celebrate the legacy of Malcolm X by creating events that will bring together diverse segments of the black community in spaces that recall the legacy of Malcolm X. During these events the surviving members of Malcolm X’s family connect or re-connect with former associates of Malcolm X or different members of American society that have an affinity for either the life of Malcolm or his political philosophy. Some of the organizations include former associates, academics, or people that knew Malcolm X personally or have come to know the leader through their activity in the commemoration process. At least, three organizations currently participate in the circulation of Malcolm X’s image. Some have members who once worked together under Malcolm X but for reason not fully know no longer maintain their former relationships to the degree they once did. This separation of group work and objectives allows for the variations on the image and legacy of Malcolm X.

Of the organizations that commemorated the legacy of Malcolm X on May 19, 2006, three organizations held events in the New York City area to honor the legacy of

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<sup>365</sup> The Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Education Center, “Living Legacy Contribution Pamphlet,” 19 May 2006, New York, New York.

Malcolm X and celebrate what would have been his eighty-first birthday. One group, the Malcolm X Commemoration Committee (MXCC), participated in all three events; as their guest (and affiliate of the organization), I was able to participate and observe in the events of that day. What follows is a brief examination of my attendance to the events, which encompassed the entire day.

### **Malcolm X Commemoration Committee (MXCC)**

The MXCC has conducted events in honor of X for a number of years. Formed in 1992 “by a small group of former members of the two organizations founded by Malcolm X, after his expulsion from the Nation of Islam in 1964, the Organization of Afro-American Unity and the Muslim Mosque, Inc.,”<sup>366</sup> the group conducts two major events every year, the annual bus ride to the gravesite of Malcolm and Betty Shabazz and a dinner for the families of political prisoners. The group is currently based in Harlem, New York and maintains a monthly meeting with participants traveling from other cities such as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Detroit, Michigan. According to information provided by the organization,

The MXCC is committed to revealing to the legions of Black people who have no direct knowledge of Malcolm, the true legacy of this great warrior who, at the time of his death, was rapidly emerging as the leader of the Black Liberation struggle for land, independence and reparations here in the united states of America, with a clear Pan-Africanist commitment.<sup>367</sup>

The event that receives the most participation and publicity is the pilgrimage to the gravesite of Malcolm and Betty Shabazz.

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<sup>366</sup>Malcolm X Commemoration Committee, “Keep Brother Malcolm’s Legacy Alive!” [Pamphlet] 19 May 2006, New York, New York.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

The “pilgrimage,” the name for the trip to the gravesite, consists of a ceremony where the graves of Betty and Malcolm Shabazz are blessed.

Pilgrimage: Bus loading to Ferncliff Cemetery





Grave of Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz.

Pilgrimage Ritual Set-up



Pilgrimage ritual at gravesite.

In 1997, Betty Shabazz asleep in her a Yonkers, New York apartment was awoken by a fire. In her desire to save her grandson, who had set the fire and departed the residence, she searched for the child and suffered massive damage to her lungs. She was also severely burned. Shabazz died after a three weeks at Jacobi Hospital's burn unit, located in the Bronx and one of the best in New York City, Betty Shabazz died. "The pilgrimage and gravesite caravan was conceived and initiated by the powerful, pioneering Black nationalist entrepreneur (she owned many properties and had other business ventures) and leader, Ella Little-Collins, Malcolm's underappreciated big sister."<sup>368</sup> Collins had wanted to be in charge of Malcolm's legacy. Busses, rented by the MXCC, were stationed and loaded at the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. State Office Building located at 163 West 125<sup>th</sup> street. The busses are driven to Ferncliff Cemetary, located in Westchester County, New York. The first portion of the ceremony involved a blessing by white-clothed Moslem men and African drumming. After the blessing by the Moslem brothers, the larger group was allowed to approach the graves. The second portion of the ceremony consisted of words by James Small, former bodyguard of Betty Shabazz, and more blessings by the Moslems. For the final portion of the ceremony, other members of the group were allowed to take pictures or offer small tokens at the gravesite. Participants then gathered to return to the city after brief socializing at the gravesite. Once back in the city, members either depart or partake in lunch at one of the open facilities.<sup>369</sup>

Those participants of the event varied. I met local professors from the City College of New York at the event, including Leonard Jefferies. Old acquaintances and

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<sup>368</sup> Malcolm X Commemoration Committee, Press Release, 19 May 2006, New York, New York.

people who had seen Malcolm X speak also went on the pilgrimage. One participant who had been touched by the life of Malcolm X rushed from a nightshift at Harlem Hospital in New York City to the event without returning home to change or eat. According to the participant, honoring the legacy of X in this way was part of her yearly ritual to remember the sacrifices of the slain leader.

## **The Malcolm X Museum Project**

In addition to co-sponsoring 2005 third annual Symposium on Institutional Building in Harlem Conference on “The Malcolm X Legacy: A Global Perspective,” the MXMP, conducts seminars for middle and high school students on the life of Malcolm X.<sup>370</sup> On May 19, 2006, the organization co-sponsored a speaker series with the Schomburg Library. Chartered by the Board of Regents of the New York State Education Department, the group was initially established in 1997, “by a group of African American Activists committed to bringing to life an idea that Dr. Betty Shabazz ...had conceived of in the early 1990s.”<sup>371</sup> Although the group committed to bring the idea of Dr. Shabazz, the group has no visible connection with the MBSMEC. In fact the group held their event at the Schomburg at the same time of the MBSMEC opening ceremony. Currently, the group merchandises products, t-shirts and VHS tapes of past events, to support their activities.

## **Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center**

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<sup>370</sup> Malcolm X Museum , Malcolm X Museum Newsletter 4, no.1, (Fall/Winter) 2005 New York, New York.

<sup>371</sup> Malcolm X Museum, Malcolm X Museum Contribution Pamphlet, 19 May 2006, New York, New York.



The concluding event of the evening of May 19, 2006 was the public opening of the MBSMEC. The event was by invitation only, and had a light hors d'oeuvre and cocktail service, followed by a screening of the film, *Malcolm's Echo*, by Dami Akinnusi. The film had interviews from people who knew Malcolm and detailed the legacy of Malcolm X in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The event displayed the museum to a select group of visitors for the first time. The museum contains two artists' rendition of Malcolm X, including a 6'4 sculpture of Malcolm X and a mural wall of the life and influence of Malcolm X. The mural, *Homage to Malcolm X*, was designed and implemented by Daniel Galvez and Daniel Fontes. The statue was the efforts of the artist, Gabrielle Koran, to represent Malcolm X in a manner most people would remember him. She worked with a live model, which had Malcolm X's proportions, did research, and looked at footage to create the statue.<sup>372</sup> In addition to the works of art by Koran and Galvez/Fontes, the museum also commissioned the etching and lettering skills of artist Colin Chase. The event was attended by members of the Malcolm X family and included a program of prayer, welcome, drum performance, panel discussion, and a check presentations made by the Borough of Manhattan President, Scott Stringer and JP Morgan Chase Bank Foundation.<sup>373</sup> At the end of the event, participants were treated to a goody bag that contained a complementary music disc, a t-shirt, and post cards from the center. The celebration and good bag indicated the commodification of Malcolm X.

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<sup>372</sup> Gabrielle Koran , Malcolm X Commemoration Committee Newsletter.

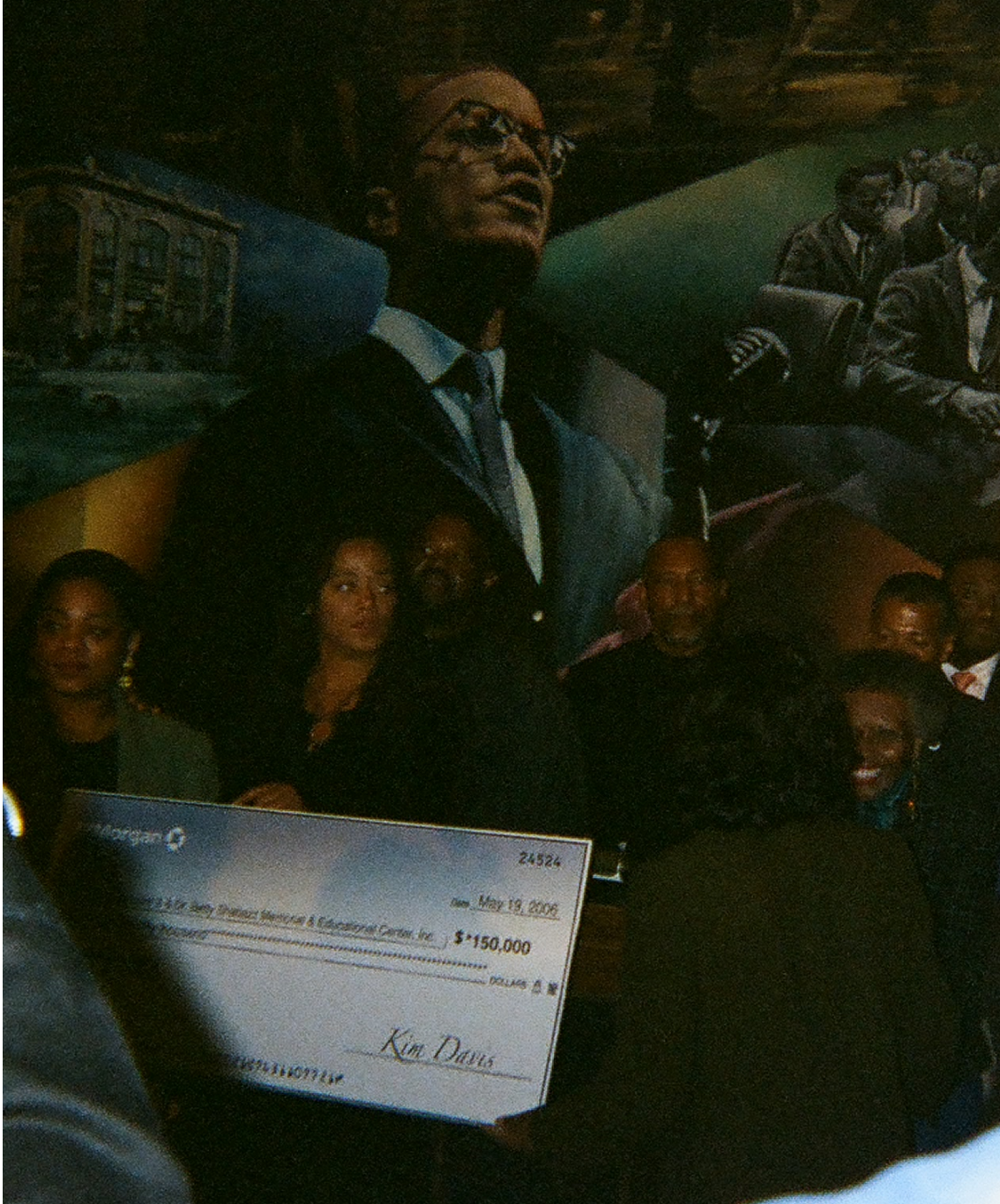
<sup>373</sup> "Program Materials," [Pamphlet], 19 May 2006, The Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center, Inc., New York, New York.



Shabazz Family members: Ilyasah Shabazz (far left). Qubilah Shabazz (middle). Malaak Shabazz (far end).



Check Presentation - The Office the Manhattan Borough President.



Check Presentation - Chase Manhattan Bank



Malcolm X Statue, G. Koran

The 2006 commemoration of X's birthday saw three events conducted with little cross-population. Key figures in academia were invited to all three events, and some members of the MXCC were invited to the former Audubon Ballroom for the celebration to announce the creation of the MBSMEC. Those participants, who were invited to the

MBSMEC event and interested in the event held at the Schomburg Library by the MXMP, were forced to choose one event over the other. Similarly, there seemed to be a hierarchy of events and people. It was evident that there was some tension between the family members that lived in New York and the MXCC. The invitation to the opening events seemed to be a way of repairing the relationship.

The struggle for the legacy of Malcolm X continues through separate channels. Commemoration plays a large role the process. Although these groups have similar objectives, cross communication seems sparse at best. The involvement of the remaining family members also seems to be elusive. Events are conducted with little solidarity between respective organizations, and those with more funding or support receive more press coverage. Although communication between the family members and other organizations has improved, it would seem that the struggle to collectively commemorate the legacy of Malcolm X will continue to differ depending on the members of the group commemorating him. Because Malcolm's image has been split into at least four different trajectories, it is not surprising that these struggles exist. Yet, the lack of acknowledgement forces groups who may have some commonalities to have poor availability and connection to each other. In addition, lack of communication has led to the exclusion of figures that may be useful in commemoration events. Still, acknowledgement of the different legacies might lead to cross-population and a reservoir of information for those involved in the process; thus fostering a community building affair that Malcolm X championed during his last days.

## **Conclusion – The Image Transformation of Malcolm X**

This dissertation examined and analyzed the transformation of Malcolm X's image from the representation during his lifetime as the "Angriest Black Man in America," by the mainstream media to the less incendiary vision of an intellectual, political American leader by the 1990s. Seen as the quintessential black man, contemporaries such as Ossie Davis, X's image has been appropriated to represent several facets of black male identity to different Americans through signs used to represent a holistic American identity, rendering his image consumable to a variety of groups within the United States. I have argued that the image transformation of X is significant because it answers key questions about black political identity in an increasingly mediated world. As African Americans continue to gain prominence in the political life of American society, it becomes necessary to reconfigure popular images into a reconciliatory narrative of a society that has made peace with its past and strives toward a more egalitarian future. In the past, this has been done by co-opting the image of an African American whose actions and personal history resonated or neatly matched with American identity at-large: for example, consider the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the great reconciler and the rarely ever mentioned actions he took during the Poor People's Movement or the Vietnam War.

Fueled by the economic and racial crises of the 1970s continuing throughout the 1980s, the divide between people of color and the mainstream expanded to include representations of cultural heroes. Thus, the resurgence in the popularity of Malcolm X during the 1990s was a direct result of the lack of images, mediated or otherwise, that spoke to black Americans in the latter twentieth century. Popular culture was used as the

vehicle to re-establish key components to the identification of an American—including incorporating black American cultural representations that had gained prominence to a large segment of youth culture across races. Unlike the history of the image of King (King's family kept strong control over his image), X's image was contested when appropriated by the mainstream, with several varied and at times conflicting meanings. The battle for control over the representations of his image and its meanings can be construed as the struggle to retain a black champion and create an American icon, exposing a real drama in American society—the sacrifice of one image for the salvation of another.

Various people have created and produced cultural products that contain the image of X. X himself began the initial proliferation of his image with the writing and subsequent publication of his autobiography. Although Alex Haley had a part in the construction of the autobiography, it is clear that Malcolm wanted to produce an image of himself that dealt with the many transformations that his life had taken as well as offer an explanation for his public identity. Thus, after his death in 1965, there is an effort to claim Malcolm, inherit his (perceived) legacy, and repackage this image to different audiences, most of whom had not had contact with the late civil rights leader. Hence, the beginning of the multiplication of the signs of Malcolm X began shortly after his death, not during the 1990s.

I argue that there are four major signs that emerge after the assassination of X: the black hero/martyr, the American individualist, the shining black prince/real or ideal black man, and finally the iconization of the image. In addition to the multiplication of signs that occurred after his death in 1965, each new sign took on greater significance than its



predecessor, making the signs after 1965 more popular and more widely accepted than the signs prior to X's death. Consequently, after the distribution of Spike Lee's film, *X*, the battle that ensued between Amiri Baraka and Lee was over the particular kind of image of Malcolm X that Lee seemed to be extolling. Steeped in a popular culture, consumerist mentality, it seemed like Lee's Malcolm would sell any product that had enough space for a printed 'X' or photo, a thought that frightened those activists and scholars whose connection to Malcolm was contained in another, more selfless image. As the more politically radical image of Malcolm gave way to a more commercialized image of Malcolm X, X gained popularity within the mainstream; allowing the signs of X to become more varied – an A and E biography special, X medallions, and finally a Malcolm X stamp – and accepted by a majority of the American population, giving the image of Malcolm the ability to translate black male identity across the racial and the political divide.

Although different images of Malcolm X try to insist that Malcolm was singular man interpreting the times as he saw, the first chapter details the true nature of the political legacy that Malcolm X left behind. Through Malcolm's lived experiences, he developed an understanding of race relations in the twentieth century. In his experience a student, while incarcerated for nearly ten years, Malcolm read and learned from texts that had pondered the race question before he had. Coming out of the intellectual tradition of Booker T. Washington, WEB Dubois, and Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X forged a philosophy based on the ideas of cultivating and using the strengths of blacks to build

what Dubois called a “self-conscious manhood,” one that would allow blacks to be American and African.<sup>374</sup>

Following his separation from the NOI, Malcolm X began to cultivate an image of himself as a black nationalist and a Pan-Africanist, using his African connections to develop a political ideology of resistance to oppression, white supremacy could only be defeated with coalitions of oppressed people worldwide in defiance. After two tours of Africa and travel in Europe, Malcolm X continued to seek newly independent African nations that would support a United Nations charge against the United States for crimes against humanities. He was shot down during the most strategic point in his opposition to white supremacy. Adherents to X’s political philosophy continued the transformation and began to move the black nationalist and pan-Africanist image of Malcolm X into new images that would push the image of Malcolm X forward into the twentieth century.

As Yousman notes, “Malcolm X’s meaning is being constantly constructed, torn-down, and reconstructed by his writers and readers. Thus seeking to find definitive meaning in Malcolm X is simply not possible.”<sup>375</sup> The implications of the shifting image of Malcolm X are vast. In some instances, Malcolm X’s image could be used to support American ideas of protest and transformation. At other times, the image may be positioned to represent ideas present in a black nationalist perspective.

The change over time of public figures allows scholars to chart their significance not only during their lifetime but also during the figures’ deaths. It is important to note that historical figures do not stay the same – nor would we want them to. In the case of

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<sup>374</sup> WEB Dubois. “*The Souls of Black Folks*” in *Three Negro Classics*. Introduction by John Hope Franklin. New York: Avon Books, 1965. p.215

<sup>375</sup> Bill Yousman, “Who Owns Identity? Malcolm X, Representation, and the Struggle Over Meaning,” *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 16.

Malcolm, it becomes imperative that new scholars and young people are allowed to examine Malcolm for themselves. The importance of the image of Malcolm X translates across the world. Further study might attempt to locate whether a similar transformation of American icons takes place outside of the country, as symbols of Malcolm X are visible in meeting places in Bristol, England and scholarly work is underway in Italy.

It is clear that the image of X does not exist in a vacuum. Since the time of his assassination, the image of Malcolm X has undergone a major reconstruction. Left in the hands of his immediate family (his widow Betty Shabazz, his six daughters, sisters and brothers, and their immediate family), his colleagues (members of the Organization of Afro American Unity, Muslim Mosque Inc., the Nation of Islam, and civil rights leaders), contemporaries and friends (Ossie Davis, Charlie Rangel, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Herman Ferguson, Rev. Albert Cleage, James Small, Peter Goldman, Jamal Hakim, Benjamin Karim, Louis Lomax, Alex Haley, and C. Eric Lincoln), the image of X has been invented and reinvented, negotiated and renegotiated through the people he knew and did not know. Although X did not command the recognition or the accolades of Martin Luther King, Jr., he captured the minds and hearts of many persons or audiences that were fortunate enough to be in his presence during the time he realized his life's work was to reconstitute self-love in people of color and an appreciation for the contributions of people of color within the history of the dominant society. To this end, it can be said that X's image was pre-formulated by the man himself and then reconstituted to make him acceptable to a broader range of black people, since X was relatively marginalized throughout his time in the civil rights movement. Beyond the control of his family, friends, and colleagues, not only did X's image lend itself to circulation within

the black community, it was also readily convertible to a broader dominant, American population.

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