

CAST

Malcolm X (Denzel Washington)
Betty Shabazz (Angela Bassett)



Malcolm, 1940s

Malcolm's Memory of His Father

My father was a big, six-foot-four, very black man. He had only one eye. How he had lost the other one I have never known. He was from Reynolds, Georgia, where he had left school after the third or maybe fourth grade. . . . One of the reasons I've always felt that my father favored me was that to the best of my remembrance, it was only me that he sometimes took with him to the Garvey U.N.I.A. meetings which he held quietly in people's homes. . . . I noticed how differently they all acted, although sometimes they were the same people who jumped and shouted in church. But in these meetings both they and my father were more intense, more intelligent and down to earth. It made me feel the same way. . . . I remember how the meetings always closed with my father saying, several times, and the people chanting after him, "Up, you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will!"

From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

MALCOLM X

Clayborne Carson

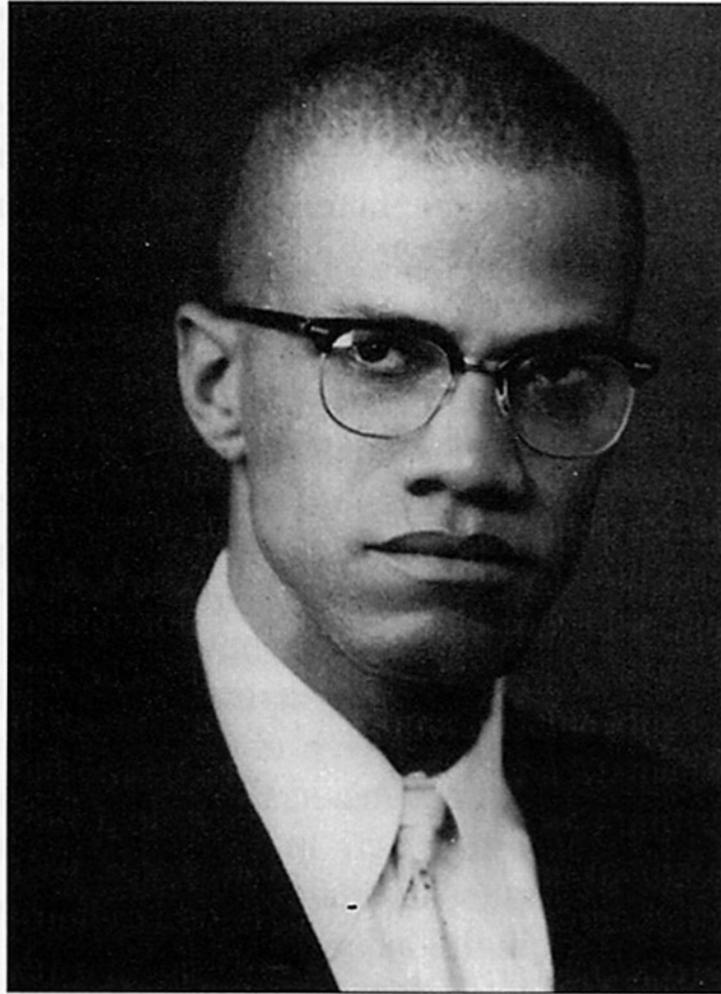
NEAR THE BEGINNING OF SPIKE LEE'S cinema biography, Malcolm X's father dies. As idealized in the film, Earl Little is a race leader, willing to brave white opposition to promote Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. The film's flashbacks and narration by the Malcolm character leave no doubt that white racists murdered Little.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, written with Alex Haley's assistance and published posthumously, paints a far less idealized portrait of Little. As remembered by his son, Little was an abusive husband and father who "savagely" beat his children, except for Malcolm. "I actually believe that as anti-white as my father was," Malcolm recalled, "he was subconsciously so afflicted with the white man's brainwashing of Negroes that he inclined to favor the light one." Only six at the time of his father's death in 1931, Malcolm remembered only "a vague commotion, the house filled up with people crying, saying bitterly that the white Black Legion had finally gotten him." Although the actual circumstances of Little's death remain ambiguous—contemporary police reports dismissed it as an accident, his insurance company suspected suicide—the *Autobiography* and the film have transformed an obscure event into a crucial part of a historical legend that blends personal memory with racial myth.

The film conveys neither the complexity nor the self-critical aspects of the *Autobiography*, which told Malcolm's story from the perspective of his final year. Throughout its more than three hours, Lee's film is resolutely respectful, glamorizing the truculence of Malcolm's Detroit Red period and the dogmatism of some of his speeches as a Muslim minister. As source documents, Lee used Malcolm's memoirs and public statements rather than the testimony of those who knew him. The resulting film is iconolatry rather than iconoclasm.

As a historian, I do not find it useful to quibble about inaccuracies, simplifications, invented characters, imagined dialogue, anachronisms, and various other improbabilities. To complain that Denzel Washington is not Malcolm X is to miss the point of the film and the book, which communicate a constructed image to a far larger audience than Malcolm ever reached during his lifetime. It is far more important to note the film's more serious limitations, particularly its failure to give adequate attention to Malcolm's evolving political ideas and activities during the last year of his life. Although these inadequacies derive from the *Autobiography*, which also focused on Malcolm's years as a petty criminal and then as a minister of the Nation of Islam, Lee further downplays those elements of Malcolm's narrative that indicated his capacity for rigorous self-criticism.

HISTORY



After his father's death in 1931, Malcolm watched his family fall apart. The strain of feeding and caring for seven children proved too much for Louise Little. Although she resisted as best she could pressure from social workers to place her children in foster homes, her psychological decline finally forced her admission to the Kalamazoo State Mental Hospital in December 1938.

At the time his mother was committed, Malcolm was living in a white juvenile home. When his half-sister Ella came to visit from Boston, where she lived, Malcolm thought she was "the first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life." In 1940, when he was fifteen, Malcolm made his first trip to Boston. On his return to Michigan, he noticed and became annoyed by treatment he had previously shrugged off: "Where 'nigger' had slipped off my back before, wherever I heard it now, I stopped and looked at whoever said it. And they looked surprised that I did."

HOLLYWOOD



Denzel Washington

The transformation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* into Spike Lee's film took almost a quarter of a century. Some admirers of Malcolm argued that only a black writer and director could do justice to his story. James Baldwin, the most prominent African-American writer of the period, prepared the initial script, but his screenplay—later published as *One Day, When I Was Lost* (1972)—included a vast number of flashbacks and historical scenes that would have been prohibitively expensive to film. During the early 1970s, a white screenwriter, Arnold Perl, wrote another script, but the project lost favor in Hollywood as the nation's interest in black militancy waned. More than a decade later, Warner Brothers finally agreed to finance the film, and Lee was chosen to direct. (The announcement was made after Lee had publicly insisted that a black director should make *Malcolm X*.)



Elijah Muhammad

The Nation of Islam

Mecca-born silk peddler Wallace D. Fard emigrated to the United States sometime around 1930; a year later, he founded the Nation of Islam in Detroit. Fard taught his followers that blacks were members of a superior race descended from Muslims of Afro-Asia. He claimed that he was a messenger sent by Allah to save his lost people from the "white devils" who were making their lives miserable. Fard insisted that Christianity was a false religion used by whites to enslave blacks.

By 1934, the Black Muslim movement had grown to about eight thousand members. That year, Fard disappeared mysteriously and was succeeded by Elijah Poole, the thirty-seven-year-old son of a Baptist preacher. Poole had moved north from Georgia in 1923 and was living on relief in Detroit when he first met Fard. After becoming Fard's assistant minister, Poole took the name Elijah Muhammad. When he succeeded Fard, Muhammad added the title "Messenger of Allah to the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America."

Because of dissent within the Detroit temple, Muhammad soon moved to Chicago, where he established Temple No. 2 and spread Fard's message that, in order to overcome racial discrimination, blacks must become independent of their white "slave masters." During World War II, Muhammad counseled his followers to refuse to fight for the United States. He was convicted of encouraging resistance to the draft and served three and a half years in prison. After his release in 1946, Muhammad began an intensive recruitment drive, especially in prisons, where the Black Muslim message of racial pride and economic independence had particular appeal. Several of Malcolm's siblings converted to the Nation of Islam during this period, and Malcolm was himself introduced to the faith while in prison by his brother Reginald. "The hardest test I ever faced in my life was praying," Malcolm later said. "You understand. My comprehending, my believing the teachings of Mr. Muhammad had only required my mind's saying to me, 'That's right!' or 'I never thought of that.' But bending my knees to pray—that act—well, that took me a week."

The film's most engaging scenes depict Malcolm's life as a hustler and later his speechmaking on behalf of the Nation of Islam. It largely ignores his activities outside the Nation. Instead of clarifying his mature political perspective, the film emphasizes his earlier cynicism, racial pessimism, and uncritical acceptance of Elijah Muhammad's teachings. The film treats Malcolm X's break with Muhammad as a son's disillusionment with a morally flawed surrogate father, but Malcolm left the Nation for political as well as personal reasons. The *Autobiography* makes it clear that before he learned of Muhammad's marital infidelities, Malcolm had already become dissatisfied with his leader's policy of nonengagement, which not only prevented members of the group from participating in civil rights protests but even forbade voting. Malcolm's sardonic verbal attacks on national black leaders—excerpts from which enliven the film—were harshly critical, but Malcolm's ties with militant civil rights activists actually became increasingly close late in his life.

As the southern black civil rights movement grew in scale during 1963, Malcolm recognized that the nonengagement policy was hurting his recruitment efforts in black communities. In the *Autobiography*, Malcolm admits his disappointment in the failure of the Nation of Islam to become involved in the expanding freedom struggle. "I felt that, wherever black people committed themselves, the Little Rocks and the Birmingham and other places, militantly disciplined Muslims should also be there—for all the world to see, and respect, and discuss. It could be heard

“My first impression was how could a Black man talk about the government, white people, and act so bold, and not be shot at?”

Muhammad Ali

increasingly in the Negro communities: 'Those Muslims *talk* tough, but they never *do* anything, unless somebody bothers Muslims.'"

This telling criticism of the Nation of Islam's stance regarding political action appears in the film, but Lee's misleading handling of it reflects his unwillingness to examine critically Malcolm's black nationalist rhetoric as a Muslim minister. In the film, the criticism precedes the only scene in which Malcolm and his fellow Muslims actually stand up to white authorities. Malcolm is shown demanding and getting hospital treatment for a member of the Nation, Brother Johnson (Johnson Hinton), who was beaten by New York City police in 1957. Although the incident confirms the notion that the Nation of Islam did not engage in militant action unless its members were threatened, Lee stages the event to suggest that the Nation was far more willing to challenge white authority than it was.

Malcolm initially defended Elijah Muhammad's nonengagement policy and fiercely attacked Martin Luther King, Jr.'s strategy of nonviolent resistance, but he later recognized that the Nation offered no real alternative to black activists who were facing vicious white racists in the South. It was easier to talk about armed self-defense in New York than to face Bull Connor's police dogs in Birmingham. Indeed, even though the film ignores this fact, Malcolm knew that the Nation of Islam was not above making deals with white people when such deals served its leaders' interests. Near the end of his life, Malcolm admitted that, even while criticizing civil rights activists for working with white liberals, he once, on Elijah Muhammad's orders, negotiated a mutual noninterference agreement with Ku Klux Klan leaders in Atlanta. Like Marcus Garvey's in the 1920s, Muhammad's insistence that all whites were devils made it possible for him to justify dealing with the worst of them.

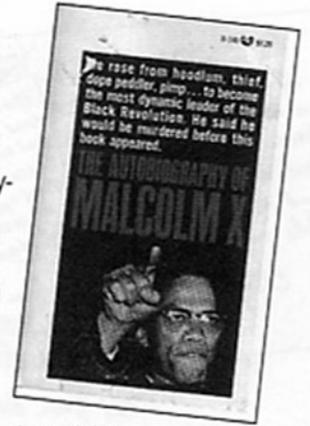
Although the film depicts Malcolm's period of independence from the Nation mainly through scenes of foreboding, such as repeated threatening telephone calls, his final months consisted of much more than waiting for martyrdom. Among the many important episodes of Malcolm's last year that the film mentions only in passing, if at all, are:

- his brief meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr., at the U.S. Capitol;
- his crucial "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech delivered at a symposium sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality;
- his attendance at a meeting of the Organization of African Unity and subsequent talks with leaders of Egypt, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, and Uganda;
- his day-long October 1964 meeting in Nairobi with leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the resulting cooperation between SNCC and Malcolm's newly formed Organization of Afro-American Unity;
- the December 1964 appearance of Fannie Lou Hamer and other Mississippi civil rights activists as Malcolm's honored guests at an OAAU meeting in Harlem.

The film shows Malcolm watching televised scenes of black protest activities (including some that occurred after his death!) but remarkably does not mention his February 1965 trip to Selma, Alabama, where he addressed young protesters and expressed support for the voting rights struggle. While in Selma, he met with Coretta Scott King, whose husband was then in jail. Malcolm affirmed his desire to assist King's voting rights efforts, explaining that if whites knew that Malcolm was the alternative, "It might be easier for them to accept Martin's proposals." Malcolm's increasing political involvement was further indicated in the weeks

Writing the Autobiography

Alex Haley first began writing during his twenty-year tour of duty in the U.S. Coast Guard (1939–59)—to hold off the boredom of long voyages, he said. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), based on his extensive interviews with Malcolm, was Haley's first major work:



One night, Malcolm X arrived nearly out on his feet from fatigue. For two hours, he paced the floor delivering a tirade against Negro leaders who were attacking Elijah Muhammad and himself. I don't know what gave me the inspiration to say once he paused for breath, "I wonder if you'd tell me something about your mother?"

Abruptly he quit pacing, and the look he shot at me made me sense that somehow the chance question had hit him. When I look back at it now, I believe I must have caught him so physically weak that his defenses were vulnerable.

Slowly, Malcolm began to talk, now walking in a tight circle. "She was always standing over the stove, trying to stretch whatever we had to eat. We stayed so hungry that we were dizzy. I remember the color of dresses she used to wear—they were a kind of faded-out gray. . . ." And he kept on talking until dawn, so tired that the big feet would often stumble in their pacing. . . . After that night he never again hesitated to tell me even the most intimate details of his personal life, over the next two years.



Malcolm sends "greetings from Kenya."

Abroad in 1964

During the last year of his life, Malcolm X made two trips to the Middle East and Africa. In the aftermath of his split from the Nation of Islam, he sought to build a new spiritual and political base from which to lead his followers. His first trip, in April 1964, began with the *hajj*, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. In Mecca, Malcolm experienced a revolution in his system of beliefs: Witnessing men of all colors—brown, yellow, red, black, and white—worshiping together as brothers made him realize that not all whites were devils. Accepting that American racism was not a function of whiteness per se, Malcolm began to consider the possibility of a reconciliation between the races in the United States.

On the other hand, Malcolm was not quite ready to forgive white America. In fact, one purpose of his trips was to encourage the newly independent nations of Africa to push for UN condemnation of the United States for human rights abuses against its black citizens. Malcolm's internationalist, pan-African speeches were well received, and during the August 1964 meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Cairo, Malcolm was embraced as a legitimate ambassador of black America.

After visiting a number of heads of state—including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Alhaji Isa Wali of Nigeria, and Prince Faysal of Saudi Arabia—Malcolm returned to the United States, bringing with him a new Islamic name to match his new beliefs: He would be El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

before his assassination by the telegram he sent to the head of the American Nazi party: "I am no longer held in check from fighting white supremacists by Elijah Muhammad's separationist Black Muslim Movement, and if your present racist agitation of our people there in Alabama causes physical harm to Reverend King or any other Black Americans . . . you and your KKK friends will be met with maximum physical retaliation."

Malcolm's political militancy led to increasing governmental repression and escalating threats from members of the Nation of Islam. Lee's handling of the assassination reflects his overall failure to indicate why Malcolm's independent political course caused him to attract such deadly enemies. The film shows various members of the Nation of Islam preparing to kill Malcolm, while also hinting that white operatives were involved. Malcolm is shown being followed, presumably by CIA agents, while on his trip to Mecca and Africa. We see a bug in Malcolm's New York City hotel room. When Malcolm and his wife, Betty, discuss the many threats they have received, Malcolm speculates, "The more I keep thinking about the things that have been happening lately, I'm not at all sure it's solely the Muslims. I trained them, I know what they can and cannot do, and they can't do some of the stuff that's recently been going on."

"I remember Malcolm literally crying out one night. He said, 'I'm trying to turn the corner, but they won't let me.'"

Alex Haley

It is hardly revelatory for the film to suggest that the FBI and the CIA saw Malcolm as a threat, but speculation about government-sponsored conspiracy obscures the extent to which Malcolm's death resulted from a mentality that allowed some black people to define others as race traitors. Malcolm was a source as well as a victim of the Nation of Islam's often vicious rhetorical militancy. His former protégé, Louis X (later Farrakhan), declared in late 1964 that Malcolm was a Judas "worthy of death." Such self-righteous vilification created a climate that made Malcolm's death inevitable. Despite its reputation as an antiwhite group, the Nation of Islam directed nearly all of its violence against black people, particularly defectors. Malcolm's death was a precursor of the kind of internecine warfare that weakened the Black Power movement and increased its vulnerability to outside attack. Although Malcolm ultimately struggled to find "a common solution to a common problem," the film does not show him working in concert with other black political groups.

In the film, Malcolm never completely leaves behind the smug self-righteousness of his years as a hustler and proselytizer. As a result, many young viewers may prefer to emulate the self-destructive rebelliousness of Malcolm's youth or the racist demagoguery of his years in the Nation of Islam rather than his mature statesmanship. Some may even mistake Farrakhan as Malcolm's modern-day counterpart.

Spike Lee frames Malcolm's life story with contemporary scenes: opening footage of Los Angeles police beating Rodney King and an epilogue showing Nelson Mandela, in front of a classroom filled with South African children, affirming Malcolm's call for liberation "by any means necessary." This iconic mixture gives his film a greater sense of political importance than it would otherwise have had, but its political message is nevertheless ambiguous. Lee's strongest images suggest the immutability of white racism (King's beating) rather than possibility of overcoming it (Mandela). His film's Malcolm ends his life resigned to his fate rather than displaying confidence in his hard-won political understanding. The film's Malcolm becomes, like the filmmaker himself, a social critic rather than a political insurgent. Malcolm helped to create his own myth during a period when fundamental political change seemed feasible. Spike Lee has revised Malcolm's myth for a time when political cynicism prevails. *Malcolm X* thus reflects the current tendency in African-American life to supplant politics with attitude—that is, to express diffuse racial resentment rather than to engage in collective action to achieve racial advancement.

Background Reading

Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (Carroll & Graf, 1991)

Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Grove, 1965)

1992/USA/Color

DIRECTOR: Spike Lee; **PRODUCER:** Marvin Worth, Spike Lee; **SCREENPLAY:** Arnold Perl, Spike Lee; **STUDIO:** Warner; **VIDEO:** Warner; **RUNNING TIME:** 201 min.

Later...

In the years since Malcolm X's assassination, his legacy has been pitted against that of Martin Luther King, Jr.—the black nationalist versus the integrationist, the proponent of liberation "by any means necessary" versus the advocate of Gandhian nonviolence. Contemporary followers have tended to divide themselves into mutually exclusive competing groups, inheriting either Malcolm's ideological legacy or Martin's—but never both. Devotees of Malcolm's rhetoric often ignore his own retrospective criticisms of his Nation of Islam demagoguery. Similarly, Martin's disciples often overstate the extent to which he controlled the mass struggles that brought him to public attention.

Not surprisingly, Malcolm's legacy has been affirmed most strongly by African Americans who share his cynicism about the future of black-white relations in the United States. During the 1970s and 1980s, black nationalists and rap artists injected Malcolm's name and image into African-American youth culture, preparing the way for Spike Lee's film. Despite the commercialization of "X" caps and other memorabilia, Malcolm remains a provocative icon.

In contrast to the grass-roots celebrations of Malcolm, Martin's legacy has been sustained by African Americans who continue to believe in the American dream. Since 1986, the federal government has given its stolid imprimatur to an official celebration of Martin's birth. Once a controversial protest leader, Martin has become the innocuous black equivalent of Washington and Lincoln.

In recent years, some African-American leaders and intellectuals have recognized that the two leaders were multifaceted, that they failed to achieve many of their objectives, and that they offered complementary rather than conflicting advice regarding problems that still confront African Americans. Three decades after Malcolm's death, his call for strong, militant, black-controlled institutions has been only partly realized, while the decline of the black family and the black community has left black Americans less able to achieve Martin's dream of racial equality. Within this context, Malcolm's tactical disagreements with Martin have come to mean little; it is their mutual commitment to politically effective black action that merits attention.