

ABSTRACT

THE CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC ABOUT MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND MALCOLM X IN THE POST-REAGAN ERA

by Cedric Dewayne Burrows

This thesis explores the rhetoric about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X in the late 1980s and early 1990s, specifically looking at how King is transformed into a messiah figure while Malcolm X is transformed into a figure suitable for the hip-hop generation. Among the works included in this analysis are the young adult biographies *Martin Luther King: Civil Rights Leader* and *Malcolm X: Militant Black Leader*, Episode 4 of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*, and Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*.

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MALCOLM X IN THE POST-REAGAN ERA

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Introduction

“What was Martin Luther King known for?” asked Mrs. Robertson.

Several students quickly responded.

“He led the civil rights movement.”

“He gave the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”

“He led the March on Washington.”

“He was the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”

“Very good,” Mrs. Robertson stated. “Now, what was Malcolm X known for?”

The class immediately grew silent. The silence became so deafening that Mrs. Robertson initiated ideas to rebuild the conversation.

“Well, didn’t he participate in the Nation of Islam?” she quipped awkwardly. “Wasn’t he the one who encouraged blacks to help themselves? Didn’t he help former prisoners discipline themselves and made them wear those preppy clothes?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” responded one student.

“Didn’t he also talk about ‘by any means necessary’?” chimed in another student.

“Yes he did,” agreed Mrs. Robertson. “He wanted us to feel good about ourselves.”

That scene came out of my sixth grade classroom in Memphis, TN. The year was 1993, and the conversation arose during Black History Month. As part of our grammar lesson, we were to write a story about a famous black person. To help us with the assignment, Mrs. Robertson used Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X as examples. As a class, we recently had visited the newly opened National Civil Rights Museum, which was built on the site of King’s assassination, and we viewed Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X* as part of a field trip. Yet, even though we saw the movie, and wore the baseball caps and T-shirts bearing Malcolm X’s likeness, we could not pinpoint Malcolm X’s significance to the Civil Rights Movement. We could easily recite King’s life story and understood his role as the non-violent leader of the movement, but Malcolm X’s importance was harder to locate.

I thought about that episode ten years later after another situation involving a classroom discussion about King and Malcolm X. It was my first semester teaching college composition at Miami University. According to its statement regarding human diversity, Miami is “a

multicultural community of diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, national origins, religious and political beliefs, physical abilities, ages, genders, and sexual orientation.”¹ Because it strives to build a community of “positive engagement and mutual respect,” the university claims that it will “strive to educate each other on the existence and effects of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, religious tolerance, and other forms of invidious prejudice.”² In reading this statement at the beginning of the semester, I decided to employ those principles in the classroom. However, as the semester progressed, I soon learned that the printed word regarding diversity totally differed from the actual reality.

The reality was that only 6.7% of students represented minorities.³ This image reflected the racial makeup of my students. Save for three, all of the twenty-two students were white. While teaching the first few weeks of class, I soon realized that although my students were excellent writers, they had a difficult time developing opinions on world issues such as Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 2004 Presidential Campaign, or the Miami University campus workers’ strike that occurred during the middle of the semester. The entire course was divided into five sequences, and after realizing that the class had little exposure to certain topics, I decided to devote the third part of the sequence—Entering Public Debate—to facilitating discussions on topics articulated in Miami’s Diversity Report—race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, privilege, physical ability and sexual orientation.⁴

One of the topics that I wanted to explore was affirmative action. When I introduced the subject, I instructed my students to freely write their opinions on the topic. Hoping that we could brainstorm ideas for possible paper topics, I asked students to read their comments aloud. The responses given were evenly distributed among three categories: some said that it discriminated against whites; others were honest enough to say that they did not know enough on the issue to give an objective answer; and some students even claimed that they had never heard of affirmative action. Considering that some of them did not even know what a blue-collar or white-collar worker was, the last comment failed to surprise me.

¹ *The Miami Bulletin: Graduate Bulletin of Program Requirements and Course Descriptions 2003-2005* (Oxford, OH: Miami University, 2003), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Miami University Diversity Report 2002/03*. Revised 31 October 2003 <<http://www.miami.muohio.edu/provost/reports/diversity0203.pdf>>, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

However, the next situation I encountered surprised me significantly. Since they knew so little on the topic, I chose to find materials about the Civil Rights Movement to give them an overview that would explain how affirmative action developed in the mid-1960s. The first text they received was a speech Malcolm X delivered at the Audubon Ballroom on December 20, 1964. In the speech, Malcolm X stated the objectives for his newly created Organization of Afro-American Unity. The assignment was to read the speech and analyze the rhetoric Malcolm X employed throughout his discussion, especially his word usage, as in the following excerpt:

Everyone that you see in this part of the world got on a boat and came here voluntarily; whether they were immigrants or what have you, they came here voluntarily. So they don't have any real squawk, because they got what they were looking for. But you and I can squawk, because they got what they were looking for. But you and I can squawk because we didn't come her voluntarily. We didn't ask to come here. We were brought here forcibly, against our will, and in chains [...] At no time have they even tried to pretend that we were brought here to be citizens. Why, they don't even *pretend*.⁵

When I handed the class the speech, it was with the intention that we would read and discuss it together in class. Instead, I received silence. Like Mrs. Robertson did in my sixth grade class, I began to ask a few questions to start the conversation. Still, no one responded. Thinking that they may need more time to comprehend the text, I told them to analyze the speech for homework. I asked them to focus on Malcolm X's word choices, the intended audience, the time period, and how the speech related to affirmative action.

After I received the students' papers the next class meeting, I was thoroughly stunned. They did not analyze the speech, but gave a response to Malcolm X's comments. While some papers were the typical "racism is wrong" essay, others contained a harsher critique of the speech. One student wrote that Malcolm X was a "Communist" who "should have realized that capitalism is better than socialism because of what happened to Russia in the 1990s." (The student was responding to Malcolm X's praise of socialism over capitalism and his critique that being a capitalist is similar to being a bloodsucker.) Another student wrote that Malcolm X was an "asshole," while another person wrote that "if black people do not like this country, then they should leave it. My parents worked hard to get what they wanted. They should get off their lazy asses and do something about their situation." As for the three non-white students, they all

⁵ Breitman, George. Ed. *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove, 1990), 120.

agreed with the content in Malcolm X's speech. One student even wrote me a letter stating, "Even though you didn't think I read the speech, I did. I was just uncomfortable about discussing it with the other students." At first I was angry because I felt that he should not let others silence him. He had already told me of some the hostility he had faced since he arrived on campus. However, my anger subsided when I realized that while I only had to see these students fifty minutes for three days, he had to interact with them on a regular basis.

"Well," I reasoned, "I wanted them to respond, and I encouraged them to express their opinions, but I wasn't ready to read the essays my students wrote." For one, Malcolm X delivered the speech in 1964. What were some of the events happening in the world around that time? What about the audience who listened to Malcolm X that day? Could he have tailored the speech to fit a particular audience? These were some of the questions that I asked the class and told them to use these ideas as they were writing their analysis. Then, other thoughts began to develop. Were they actually talking about Malcolm X in their essays or were they trying to tell me something else? As a twenty-two year old black male teaching a classroom of white students who told me that their only encounters with black men were watching videos of 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg, how did my teaching Malcolm X position me as the teacher? Did they feel as if I was trying to indoctrinate them instead of giving them a sample of American history?

After reading the comments and calming down afterwards, I sought out advice. I called a friend who taught at another university. Both of us were teaching college composition for the first time, and we often exchanged teaching ideas. Like me, she was teaching at a predominately white, conservative university and had some encounters with resistant students. She recommended teaching Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" because, according to her, it was *safer* than teaching Malcolm X. Using her advice, I gave the class King's 1963 epistle. Surprisingly enough, the class liked King's letter and were eager to discuss it. They talked so much that they took up the whole fifty minutes of class. After that experience, I began to ask "Why? Why did they respond more favorably to one but not the other, even though both men were essentially saying the same thing? What was the difference between Malcolm X saying that blacks should "squawk" for their rights and King writing a paragraph long sentence explaining why blacks could not wait for their rights?

It was a question that hounded me so much that I had to ask my students. Many students responded that they knew of King through the federal holiday and his "I Have a Dream" speech.

King, for them, was equality personified. Malcolm X, however, was a person on baseball caps and T-shirts worn in the early 1990s, and the subject of a movie directed by Spike Lee. While my sixth grade class did not know the importance of Malcolm X, my composition class associated Malcolm X with violence and racism. After our discussion, I began to understand their opinions, but it left me with more unresolved questions. Hadn't the class learned of King's last years when he called for a redistribution of wealth in America? Didn't they know that Malcolm X was against the concept of whiteness and how that concept contributed to white privilege? Why hadn't they learned those elements of each figure?

In trying to answer these questions, I decided to scan a variety of anthologies and textbooks used over the last ten years, especially the ones dedicated to multicultural studies. Among the books I examined were *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, *American Voices: Culture and Community*, and a high school textbook on African-American literature. When I did find something attributed to King, it was usually his "I Have a Dream" speech or his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." When Malcolm X was even featured, the anthology usually contained one of the following chapters from his 1965 autobiography—"Nightmare" and "Saved." While I'm glad to know that there is some diversity in textbooks, I wonder why certain speeches or excerpts are included and some are not. For instance, although "I Have a Dream" and "Letter form a Birmingham Jail" are very good works, they place King in the earlier stages of his career in civil rights, the years when most of his movement was in a Southern context. Why not include an excerpt from his books *Why We Can't Wait* or *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*—pieces in which King outlines the social ills of American society and offers solutions that bear more than a passing resemblance to affirmative action programs? If publishers are to include a chapter from Malcolm X's autobiography, why not include "1965," a chapter that has Malcolm X defending his views, and has Malcolm X using a quote from King about the racial injustice in America? If we are to include diverse texts, should we also think about which texts actually fulfill these roles?

It is these experiences in my classes that led me to research this project. For my thesis, I investigated the contemporary rhetoric about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The particular time period that is my primary focus is the 1980s and early 1990s, the years of the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. I chose this era because this is the period when King's birthday became a federal holiday and when Malcolm X experienced

resurgence. Also, it was during this period when most of the first-year composition students were born. Because they learned about King through the federal holiday and Malcolm X through the Spike Lee film, these images may have influenced their opinions about civil rights and their resistance to reading texts on race.

The Reagan-Bush Years: 1981-1993

To fully understand the images of King and Malcolm X during these years, one should also know the historical backdrop of that particular time, especially the civil rights policies of both Reagan and Bush. Through a series of events during his administration, Reagan proved indifferent to racial issues and showed his conservatism in dealing with civil rights policies. When he announced his candidacy for president in 1980, he chose to do so in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town where members of the white supremacist organization the Ku Klux Klan had murdered three civil rights workers in 1964. One of the issues central to his campaign was his endorsement of states rights, a doctrine the American South argued to deny the federal government's right to enforce civil legislation during the 1960s.⁶

After his election, Reagan instituted several policies that many considered "racial blunders."⁷ When appropriating members of the Equal Opportunity Commission, Reagan's administration favored appointments of conservatives who opposed affirmative action. Reagan also hesitated renewing certain provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. While he wavered in renewing these acts, Reagan reversed an eleven-year policy by announcing that the Internal Revenue Service would no longer deny tax exemptions to educational and non-profit institutions that openly discriminated against blacks.

The blacks that were especially hit hardest by Reagan's policies were the urban poor. According to Kenneth Franklin Kurtz, although Reagan stated that he believed in civil rights and equal opportunity, his administration "reversed a generation worth of government programs aimed at helping the black urban poor" and went against the executive decisions of both Republican and Democratic presidents preceding him.⁸ As Kurtz further explains, "Even during

⁶ Carter, Stephen L. *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*. (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 154.

⁷ Kurtz, Kenneth Franklin. *The Reagan Years A to Z: An Alphabetical History of Ronald Reagan's Presidency*. (Los Angeles: Lowell House, 1996), 68

⁸ *Ibid*, 69.

the Nixon era, social programs often were extended, and federal money remained available to help maintain the urban infrastructure”.⁹

However, under Reagan, all of that changed. While in office, his budgets reduced the number of people eligible for federal programs such as food stamps, Medicaid, student loans, employment compensation, child nutrition assistance, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. In 1982, the black unemployment rate was 18.9 percent, more than twice the rate of white employment of 8.4 percent. In 1985, the black unemployment rate was 16.3 percent while employment had dropped to 6.2 percent. For the first time in history, the unemployment rate among black men sixteen through nineteen rose to more than 50 percent. Even in the 1980s, blacks still earned less than whites regardless of age, sex, occupation, or education, thereby increasing the numbers of the black underclass.¹⁰

Although blacks gave George H.W. Bush better approval ratings than Reagan, they were still not at ease with Reagan’s former vice-president. During the 1988 election, when Bush ran against Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, television ads featured the accusation that Dukakis granted a weeklong furlough to black convicted murderer Willie Horton, who then killed a Maryland man and raped his wife. Those Horton ads were featured prominently during the election, which reinforced racist assumptions of black men as rapists and criminals. Even though Bush won the election, he did so with little black support. When asked why he did not actively campaign for black voters, Bush frankly replied that he was trying to court suburban voters and middle and upper class voters living in the cities.¹¹ While in office, Bush vetoed important legislation that affected the welfare of blacks. In June 1989, he vetoed raising the minimum wage from \$3.35 to \$4.25. In 1990, Bush vetoed the Civil Rights Act, claiming the act was a “quotas bill.” After public opinion showed support for the bill, Bush accepted and signed the act in 1991.¹²

Set against this backdrop was the image reconstruction of King and Malcolm X. On November 4, 1983, Reagan signed the bill establishing the 3rd Monday of every January as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday, which began its first observance in 1986. This observation solidified King’s representation as the civil rights leader who brought an end to

⁹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁰ Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 8th ed. (New York: Knopf, 2000), 570.

¹¹ Ibid, 576.

¹² Ibid, 577.

racism in America. Also, during this time, Malcolm X became more popular among younger blacks in the inner cities of America. Affected by the policies of the Reagan-Bush years, this generation of blacks began to rediscover Malcolm X and used him to voice their frustrations on what they considered an indifferent government.

Theories

In analyzing the rhetoric about King and Malcolm X, I will employ two theoretical frameworks. The first one comes from bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*. In her chapter "Essentialism and Experience," hooks argues that by discovering the phrase "the authority of experience" in feminist writing, she found a name for something she considered important but never visible in feminist classrooms. According to hooks:

As an undergraduate in feminist classrooms where woman's experience was universalized, I knew from my experience as a black female that black women's reality was being excluded. I spoke from that knowledge. There was no body of theory to invoke that would substantiate this truth claim...Insisting on the value of my experience was crucial to gaining a hearing.¹³

However, in the next paragraph, hooks worries that scholars use the term "authority of experience" for silence and exclusion. For hooks, it is impossible to consider experience only in basing analysis or formulating theory. As hooks states:

...I am disturbed when all the courses on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently...Although I learned a great deal from the [progressive] white woman professor, I sincerely believe that I would have learned even more from a progressive black professor, because this individual would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing—that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality. To me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the "authority of experience," but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.¹⁴

In investigating King during this period, I will expand hooks's idea of the "authority of experience" and the "passion of experience" to narratives about King's life in the young adult biography *Martin Luther King: Civil Rights Leader* by Robert Jakoubek, and the Episode 9 of

¹³ hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 89-90.

¹⁴ Ibid, 90.

the 1990 documentary *Eyes on the Prize II: American at the Crossroads*. When the white author of the King biography uses the “authority of experience” in writing about King, how does he create King’s image? Also, when the black producer uses King in his documentary, how does the “privileged standpoint” and the “passion of experience” depict King?

For my analysis of Malcolm X, I will use a theory that Joseph Roach describes as “surrogation.” In his book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach explores the circum-Atlantic’s fascination with the dead and how various cultures struggle over the possession and memory of the dead. In Chapter 1, “History, Memory, and Performance,” Roach describes surrogation as the process when a community experiences “vacancies” in the “network of relations that constitute the social fabric.” When the vacancy occurs, the survivors try to find a suitable alternative. However, because the community’s memory works “selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely,” the surrogation hardly ever succeeds. Among the factors that contribute to this failure are that the intended substitute either surpasses or falls below the expectations of the community; the substitution may prove to be such a decisive choice that factions are created because the substitute creates either deep anxiety or prejudice and fear; or, the uneasiness of surrogation disturbs the complacency of the incumbents and produce a range of emotions that include “mildly incontinent sentimentalism to raging paranoia.” When these events happen, concludes Roach, improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.¹⁵ I will examine how the “improvised narratives of authenticity” and “full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin” develop in the biography *Malcolm X: Militant Black Leader* by Jack Rummel and Spike Lee’s 1992 film *Malcolm X*.

¹⁵ Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York: Columbia U P, 1996) 2-3.

Chapter One

A Dead Man's Dream: Martin Luther King's Representation as a Messiah and Prophet Figure in the Black Americans of Achievement Series and *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*

Introduction

In the late 1980s, Chelsea House Publishers introduced its Black Americans of Achievement series. Each biography in the series features forty to sixty black and white photos and usually ranges from 104-144 pages. The biographies include a bibliography about the subject, and a chronology of the subject's life and major events. The grade level is aimed towards middle and high school students who are accelerated readers. According to Herbert Kohl, the biographies are written by different authors; however, all the biographies follow the same formula: "Each book begins with some important mid- or late-life adventure of the subject, then returns to his or her birth and family history." All of the subjects in the series experienced racism but triumph in spite of racism.¹⁶

Another series produced during this time was Henry Hampton's Emmy-award winning documentary *Eyes on the Prize*. Broadcasted nationally by the Public Broadcasting Service, *Eyes on the Prize* dealt with the American Civil Rights Movement. The first installation, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, aired in January and February of 1987. The sequel, *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads (1965-1985)* was televised in 1990. Produced over twelve years by minority-owned Blackside, Inc., the documentary received over 23 awards, including two Emmys for Outstanding Documentary and Outstanding Achievement in Writing. Watched by over 22 million viewers during its broadcast, *Eyes on the Prize* featured landmark events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the 1963 March on Washington, and the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, and lesser known events like the 1965 grass-roots voter registration drive in Lowndes County, Alabama, and the late 1960s movement by black and Hispanic parents in Brooklyn to have control over their neighborhood schools.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kohl, Herbert. "Learning from Life." *Nation* 253.9 (September 23, 1991), 348.

¹⁷ Gatewood, Frances K. "Eyes on the Prize: U.S. Documentary Series." *TV Museum*. <<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/E/htmlE/eyesonthep/eyesonthep.htm>.

Both the Black Americans of Achievement series and *Eyes on the Prize* documentary were widely distributed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Advertisements for the Black Americans of Achievement series were featured in magazines, and the series was an added collection to school libraries. Also, *Eyes on the Prize* served as an educational tool for American students who had no previous knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement. Both series include Martin Luther King as an important subject. In this chapter, I will examine how Robert Jakoubek uses the authority of experience by transforming King as a messiah figure for black Americans, and how Episode 4, “The Promise Land,” in Henry Hampton’s *Eyes on the Prize II* uses the passion of experience and remembrance to construct King as a modern prophet for America. First, I will give an overview of King during the last five years of his lifetime. Then, I will describe King’s resurrection with the passage of his birthday as a paid federal holiday. Finally, the chapter will examine the depictions in the biography and documentary.

The Passion of King 1963-1968

King’s popularity peaked in 1963 during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. According to Peter Graves, it was the last event in his lifetime in which he would be widely revered.¹⁸ After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, King led his last great march through the South with the Selma to Montgomery March, an event that convinced Congress to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act. At this point, King wanted to move the Civil Rights Movement from its Southern context and spread his nonviolence protest to areas outside the South. As he began traveling to other areas of the country, however, King soon realized that although blacks were protesting, they were anything but violent.

On August 11, 1965, members of the Los Angeles Police Department arrested a young black male in the black neighborhood of Watts. As tensions mounted amid rumors of police brutality, residents began articulating their frustrations through insurrection. After five days of rebellion, 34 people were dead, 100 injured, 4,000 arrested, and property damaged was estimated at \$40 million, with most of the violence directed at white-owned businesses and property. Shocked by what he saw, King told his colleagues, “I worked to get these people the right to eat

¹⁸ *Martin Luther King: The Man and His Dream*. Narr. Peter Graves. Videocassette. (A&E Home Entertainment, 1999).

hamburgers, and now I've got to do something...to help them get the money to buy it.”¹⁹ When King delivered a speech to several hundred members of the Watts community, several people in the audience heckled him. Unnerved by the devastation in Watts, King began to embrace causes outside the civil rights movement by becoming a champion for America's poor and an outspoken critic of America's involvement in Vietnam, arguing that the money funding the war could not only help fight poverty in America, but also that a disproportionately number of soldiers killed were blacks. These experiences brought him into a radicalization that almost echoed the rhetoric of newly deceased Malcolm X: “We are not interested in being integrated into *this* value structure. Power must be relocated, a radical distribution of power must take place.”²⁰

This radical shift in philosophy made King unpopular in American society. According to Michael Eric Dyson, by 1967, King failed to make the Gallop Poll's list of ten most popular American citizens and his growing radicalism spoiled “the canonization that had begun in earnest when he won the Nobel Peace Prize.”²¹ By the time of his assassination, King not only was unpopular with white Americans, but as the Black Power mantra became more popular among younger blacks who considered King's nonviolent approach passé, King began to lose a significant segment of the black population.²²

The Resurrection

After his assassination, however, King's image began to transform again. President Lyndon B. Johnson—who suffered a strained relationship with King after King's opposition to the Vietnam War—called King an “American martyr,” and ordered the American flag flown at half-mast to mourn the loss of King. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution stating its “appreciation for the immense service and sacrifice of this dedicated American,” and eighty members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives constituted the more than 32,000 mourners attending King's funeral.²³

Four days after Dr. King's assassination, Congressman John Conyers introduced the first legislation providing for a Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday. Throughout the 1970s,

¹⁹ Garrow, David. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. (New York: Perennial, 1986) 439.

²⁰ Qtd in Frady, Marshall. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin, 2002) 192.

²¹ Dyson, Michael Eric. *I May Not Get There With You: the True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000) 303.

²² *Ibid*, 303.

²³ Cone, James H. “Demystifying Martin and Malcolm,” *Theology Today* 51.1 (April 1994), 27.

members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other supportive members of Congress pushed unsuccessfully for the passage of the holiday legislation. On January 15, 1981, five days before Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president, more than 100,000 marchers came to Washington, D.C., to lead a rally for passage of a King Holiday. However, Reagan was silent on the matter. When asked about the legislation, he deflected the question or changed the subject.²⁴ Reagan's silence may have stemmed from a statement King made about Reagan in 1967. In an uncharacteristic move of criticizing a public figure, King stated, "When a Hollywood performer, lacking distinction even as an actor, can become a leading war hawk candidate for the presidency only the irrationalities induced by a war psychosis can explain such a melancholy turn of events."²⁵ On the day of King's funeral, Reagan stated that King's death "was a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they'd break," suggesting a linkage between King's death and King's civil disobedience campaign against segregation.²⁶

Although Reagan praised King once at a reception at the White House's Rose Garden, he was still hesitant about signing King's birthday as a federal holiday. When Senator Jesse Helms questioned King's alleged ties to communism, the Reagan administration defended Helms for his sincerity. When asked of King's association with communism, Reagan quipped, "We'll find out in about thirty-five years, won't we?" referring to raw files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation that, in 1977, federal judge John Lewis Smith ordered locked and sealed for fifty years.²⁷ (Reagan later personally apologized to Coretta Scott King for his remarks.) As pressure and support began to mount, including former Dixiecrat senator Strom Thurmond's endorsement, the bill finally passed through Congress, and on November 4, 1983, Reagan signed the bill establishing the 3rd Monday of every January as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday. The establishment of the King Holiday probably had less to do with honoring the legacy of King than showing the world how America had come to grips with its own past of

²⁴ Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 8th ed. (New York: Knopf, 2000) 569.

²⁵ Qtd in Dyson, Michael Eric. *I May Not Get There With You: the True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 60.

²⁶ Dugger, Ronnie. *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 200.

²⁷ Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 8th ed. (New York: Knopf, 2000) 569; Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America during the King Years, 1954-1963*. (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 861.

bigotry and hate. After Reagan signed the bill during the signing ceremony, he stated, “As a democratic people, we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it and we should remember that if far too many countries, people like Dr. King never had the opportunity to speak out, at all.”²⁸

The radical King of the late 1960s, who, ironically, sounded much like Malcolm X, gave way to a more conservative King that mirrored Ronald Reagan’s America. As former King colleague Andrew Young observed, when Reagan and Congress created the King Holiday, “They voted for Martin’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. They didn’t vote for his anti-Vietnam speech or his challenge to Lyndon Johnson about ending poverty.”²⁹ Here is how the authority of experience comes into retelling King’s story. While narratives recall King’s career in Montgomery, his “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington, and his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, those same narratives are silent about King’s later radical years. When they recall King’s later years, it is only when King is assassinated in Memphis, TN, where he was helping striking black sanitation workers. The overall effect is that King is created into a messiah figure who was sent to help blacks fight for their rights.

The Messiah

According to Wilson Jeremiah Moses, the word “messiah” derives from the Hebrew word *mashiah*, meaning *anointed*. In the ancient Hebrew traditions, the messiah indicated “a future great deliverer” who would “come with a special mission from God,” that was typically viewed as “politically revolutionary but culturally reactionary.” When the messiah ushered in the messianic age, the “chosen people” would “revolt against their political oppressors and revitalize the conservative values advocated by the prophets.” The early Christians adopted these messianic ideas when they viewed Jesus of Nazareth as the “long-awaited” messiah (*Christos* in Greek means the anointed one.)³⁰ Also, for Christians, the messiah is usually shown as being “sallow, lacerated, crowned with thorns, and seeking suffering,” not only for himself, but his followers, who are ordered to “turn the other cheek.”³¹ The messianic image appears throughout Robert Jakoubek’s *Martin Luther King: Civil Rights Leader*. Jakoubek’s narrative

²⁸ “The Crusade for a King Holiday.” *Ebony* (Jan. 1986) 37.

²⁹ Cone, James H. “Demystifying Martin and Malcolm,” *Theology Today* 51.1 (April 1994), 32.

³⁰ Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. revised ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State U P, 1993) 4.

³¹ *Ibid*, 54.

represents many familiar narratives about King's life—that King was a leader for the civil rights of blacks. But, those same narratives never mention King's career after he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Here, the authority of experience comes in because these narratives construct King as a leader involved with only racial and not economic equality.

The image of the messiah becomes apparent in the front cover of the biography. The cover is a painting that features a contemplative King. He is dressed in a dark blue suit with his arms folded. He is looking out to another place, as if he is observing something distant from the reader. Behind King are soft pastel colors ranging from dark blue to light blue and yellow. The colors that outline King's portrait are light colors such as yellow and white, with the background giving the appearance of clouds. The cover gives the impression that King is like Christ and that he is in heaven, as if he has transcended the world that took his life and has reached another place where he is able to observe the people that he tried to help.

The photographs in the biography reinforce this idea. The photographs featuring King place him marching in the center or in front of the picture while everyone else is behind him. The marchers who are behind him are mostly blacks, giving the impression that King is the leader whose disciples are following him in protest. Also, when photographs capture King delivering a speech, he is located at the pulpit, while others are gathered around him. As he speaks, everyone else surrounds him. However, in the photographs with King and whites, King is usually the lone black person in the photo. If there are other blacks in the photo, they are placed in the background. For example, in the photograph of Lyndon B. Johnson signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, King stands directly behind Johnson amidst a crowd of whites. The other two blacks are hidden in the background of the photo. This forms the implication that King is the representative of blacks in the civil rights movement. He is the one to lead them in marches and he is the one to represent them around whites.

This representative image manifests itself in the excerpts of the speeches Jakoubek uses in the biography. When he uses a sample from King's speech, it constructs King as the messiah sent by God to deliver His message to the masses. For example, when Jakoubek describes King at the March on Washington, he portrays King as having a vision similar to St. Paul on the road to Damascus. As Jakoubek writes:

... [Asa Philip] Randolph introduced "the moral leader of the nation," and a quarter million voices hailed Martin Luther King, Jr., the last speaker of the day. "I started out reading the speech," he said later, when "just all of a sudden—the

audience was wonderful that day—and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used—I’d used it many times before, that thing about ‘I have a dream’—and I just felt I wanted to use it here.”³²

After describing the audience that would have heard King’s speech, Jakoubek provides portions of King’s speech. Because of its importance, the following excerpt is quoted at length:

I have a dream that one day on the red hill of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

He dreamed of an Alabama where “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places made plain, and the crooked places made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

He dreamed of freedom ringing from every mountaintop, even “from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.”

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics, and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”³³

These excerpts are important on several levels. First, they situate King as the fruition of the Biblical prophets dating back to The Old Testament, especially with King’s reference to his dream of valleys exalted, places flattened, mountains lowered, and places straightened, which comes directly from chapter 40, verses 5 and 6 from the Book of Isaiah. The difference between King’s words and the Book of Isaiah is that Isaiah contains the phrase “for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.”³⁴ According to Kenneth C. Davis, the book of Isaiah is important because the majority of its prophecies come to fruition with the coming of Jesus Christ. As Davis further explains, for Jews, “Isaiah spoke to his times, as well as a messianic future to

³² Jakoubek, Robert. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 96.

³³ *Ibid*, 96-97.

³⁴ Isaiah 40:5. *Holy Bible: King James Version* (Nashville: Cornerstone Bible Publishers, 1997) 529.

come. For Christians, Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus."³⁵ This is probably why King mentions what he terms "God's children"—Jews and Christians in his speech. Jakoubek makes King the messiah who has come to speak the words that were given to him by a higher order. By including King's words of having experienced a feeling that makes him change his speech, and incorporating excerpts that reference the Book of Isaiah, Jakoubek makes King the modern day messiah ordained by God to fulfill the prophecy of a more prosperous and righteous time.

Moreover, in the excerpt Jakoubek puts an emphasis on place in King's speech. Although King mentions other states like New Hampshire and Colorado, Jakoubek only includes the states Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. These states are important to note because they place King and his movement in a Southern context. In each state, Jakoubek notes how the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners and how black and white children will come together. This reinforces the belief that King's movement was primarily concentrated in the South and mostly involved integration. In featuring that portion of the speech in the narrative, Jakoubek's authority of experience builds King as the integrationist whose main target was the southern part of the country. Jakoubek fails to include the first half of King's speech, which explains how America has failed black people:

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic write the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence...they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to all heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."
[...] Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."
[...] And so we've come to cash a check...a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom...and the security of justice.³⁶

While the other portion of the speech establishes King as a prophet, this excerpt places King in the tradition of the founders of the American government. The check metaphor serves as a symbol of institutional authority. A check is usually cashed at a bank—which is a financial institution that holds financial and valuable resources. By tying black Americans' civil rights to that of an insufficient check, King reinforces the equality of the races. Blacks are the ones who

³⁵ Davis, Kenneth C. *Don't Know Much About the Bible: Everything You Need to Know About the Good Book but Never Learned*. (New York: Perennial Currents, 1999) 225.

³⁶ Carson, Clayborne and Kris Shepard, eds. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2002) 81-82.

are denied their basic rights, while the bank—i.e. white authority—is the withholder of the promised rights. However, like the prophet Isaiah, King still anticipates prosperous times.

The prosperous times appear to come closer in the chapter that describes King's last day before his death. The first chapter of the biography, entitled "April 3, 1968," paints King at the lowest point in his career. While planning his Poor People's Campaign, King goes to Memphis, Tennessee, to help striking black sanitation workers receive better wages and working conditions. On March 28, 1968, King leads a protest to city hall. During the march, violence breaks out, and King is whisked away from the march. It is the first time King leads a violent march and is criticized by everyone for creating violence, earning the moniker "Martin Loser King."³⁷ Amidst the criticism, King returns to Memphis on April 3, 1968. On that evening, King goes to Mason Temple to deliver his last speech, the speech that ends the opening chapter of the biography:

But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned with that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've look over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm so happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.³⁸

Here, King expresses sentiments that refer to Moses. Moses and King bear more than a passing resemblance. Both men came from a group that was oppressed by the dominant group. Their early life was one of privilege, and both men abandoned their life of privilege and decided to devote themselves to the liberation of their people. In Jakoubek's narrative, this scene serves as the end of King's life. After Jakoubek describes King's life, he ends the book with the last day of King's life, April 4, 1968, which also is the title of the last chapter. Jakoubek ends the story with King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and the subsequent funeral in Atlanta, Georgia.

By starting with the last day of his life, Jakoubek establishes several themes. The first is that King began the movement leading blacks, and ends his existence giving his life to the blacks he served for the last thirteen years. Jakoubek fails to acknowledge that the purpose of King's

³⁷ Jakoubek, Robert. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 17.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

speech in Memphis was not only to help the sanitation workers receive equality and fair treatment from their employers, but also to establish his agenda for his Poor People's Campaign. Before King gives his apocalyptic vision, he also explains the economic power of the disenfranchised:

It's alright to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.³⁹

This portion of King's speech represents his progress over the last four years of his life. He understands that while the laws have ended segregation and allowed suffrage to anyone regardless of color, blacks are still disenfranchised because of economics. The other theme that comes through in the book is that the movement ended with King's death. At the end of the last chapter, the narration ends with King's funeral service. It does not explain how the Poor People's Campaign continued after King's death, or how King's death impacted the civil right movement, implying that when King died, the movement he helped lead ended with him.

The Prophet

If Jakoubek's narrative fails to explain the aftermath of King's death in the civil rights movement, the documentary *Eyes on the Prize II* attempts to situate King's last year in the frame of the Civil Rights Movement's concentration on economic equality. Furthermore, while Jakoubek constructs King as a modern messiah for blacks, black executive producer Henry Hampton brings the passion of experience by constructing King as a prophet not only for blacks, but also for all of America. According to Megan McKenna, prophets differ from other people because they "suffer terribly," and cause "dissension in a society." They are adamant about exposing the truth to a society and never stop until either people change, retaliate, make a decision, or their ideas come to fruition, or "until they disappear or die." They remind people that

³⁹ Washington, James M. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speech of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 282.

their sin is the main hindrance to mankind, and they “break through our planned and smoothly functioning worlds to say that we are the problem,”—the “products of our systems.”⁴⁰

In episode 4, “The Promised Land,” Hampton constructs King as the prophet who breaks through the planned and smoothly functioning worlds that society creates. He is a prophet because he speaks out against the moral injustice of society, but he alienates everyone in society, including those who supported his cause. For example, in the beginning of the episode, King delivers a speech denouncing America’s involvement in Vietnam by arguing that those funds could be better used to help fight poverty in America. After King finishes the speech, the following video clips show several former allies (including Senator Edward Brooke, the first black elected to the Senate since Reconstruction) vehemently disagreeing with King’s views. However, as the episode continues, King still holds steadfast to his views amidst heavy criticism.

Like Jakoubek’s narrative, Hampton views King’s march in Memphis as the height of King’s unpopularity. However, while Jakoubek only uses the last part of King’s speech, Hampton incorporates other parts of the speech, the longest being the following passage:

All we say to America is be true to what you said on paper. If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they haven’t committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say we aren’t going to let any dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren’t going to let any injunction turn us around.⁴¹

It is important to note that King uses China and Russia as direct contrasts to America because of the Cold War taking place during King’s lifetime. As America tries to uphold itself as a beacon of democracy, King attempts to break through that image to illustrate the injustices that some American citizens face. Although King refers to it as “somewhere,” he is specially referring to the First Amendment of the Constitution. He transforms the privileges of those First Amendment rights as a sacred, almost divine, right of most Americans. Because those rights are so sacred, King is moved by a moral conscience to see that everyone enjoys those rights.

⁴⁰ McKenna, Megan. *Prophets: Words of Fire*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 1-2

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, perf. “The Promised Land.” *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*. Narr. Julian Bond. Exec. Prod. Henry Hampton, 1990.

The montage of King's funeral follows the same prophet motif. When King's body is carried in the wagon to his final resting place, the camera focuses directly on the mourners, a mixture of blacks, whites, famous and regular citizens. As scenes from the funeral are shown, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sings a rendition of Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." The song selection conveys the sadness and despair of the black mourners shown in the montage. Jackson sings:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.⁴²

This song was King's favorite, and he reportedly requested that the song be played at a scheduled meeting the night before his death. The lyrics resonate with the journey that King and his supporters faced and are similar to the speech that King gave the night before his killing. Dorsey's song serves as a substitute for the words of King. The prophet is now gone, but the words give inspiration to his followers and the journey to come.

The journey takes King's supporters to Washington, D.C. to continue King's plan of a Poor People's Campaign. Led by King's successor Ralph Abernathy, the marchers settle a few feet from the Washington Memorial and call the area they settle Resurrection City. After a few weeks of camping out in the area, the police come and dismantle the area. At the end of the episode, the workers disassemble the homemade tents—one of which includes a picture of King above a cross—and King's voice is heard with a final thought:

One day...we will have to stand before the gods of history...and we will talk in terms of things we've done. And it seems that I can hear the god of history saying, "That was not enough! But I was hungry...and you fed me not."⁴³

The statement that King gives is similar to that of the judgment that Jesus tells his disciples about the Day of Judgment, a day when the Son of Man will gather all nations and have one group on His left and another group on His right. The ones on His right will receive the Kingdom of

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

Heaven because they help the less fortunate of their brethren. The group on His left, however, will receive eternal fire in Hell. According to Chapter 25 in the Book of Matthew, Jesus says:

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels! For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not receive me as a guest, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” [...] “I tell you the truth, just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.” And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.⁴⁴

In both instances, King and Jesus expose the failings of those who were unwilling to help the poor. The people will have to face a being who will determine the fate of everyone and who ultimately gives the final analysis on how those people conducted their lives, bringing to mind another passage from Matthew: “So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”⁴⁵ The scenes of the destruction of Resurrection City and King’s words conclude the chapter of the episode. King’s final words offer the image of him as the prophet who is looking on the actions from another place. He is the one offering the final assessment of the events that happened. He also serves as a prophet who warns of the impending prophecy, but whose words are still ignored.

Conclusion

As the King Holiday became more popular and widespread (in 1993 and 1999, Arizona and New Hampshire became the last states to observe the holiday), the authority of experience has King’s reputation as the nonviolent civil rights hero etched into the collective memory of most Americans. Like George Washington’s cherry tree and Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, King’s “I Have a Dream” speech (or the last portion of it) freezes him in August 1963, standing before the Lincoln Memorial dreaming of racial harmony, while America forgets the radical philosophy of his later years. Not only is there a federal holiday named after King, but there are several places in America that have named streets, boulevards, and parks after King. Yet, the irony occurs when one realizes that those same streets, boulevards, and parks are typically located in predominately black, poor neighborhoods with high crime rates. In a

⁴⁴Matthew 25:41-43, 45-46 *Holy Bible: King James Version* (Nashville: Cornerstone Bible Publishers, 1997) 714

⁴⁵ Matthew 20:16 *Holy Bible: King James Version* (Nashville: Cornerstone Bible Publishers, 1997) 708

foreshadowing of King's depiction as a passive hero, Carl Wendell Himes, Jr. wrote the following poem in 1969:

Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
 build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes: They
 cannot rise
to challenge the images
 we would fashion from their lives
And besides,
It is easier to build monuments
 than to make a new world.
So, now that he is safely dead
we, with eased consciences
 will teach our children
 that he was a great man...knowing
 that the cause for which he lived
is still a cause
 and the dream for which he died
is still a dream,
a dead man's dream.⁴⁶

As the younger black generation of Reagan's America learned of King's dream, they had to realize that his dream not only was a dead man's dream but a nightmare. As these children came of age in that era, they decided to find another leader from history to articulate their frustrations. The leader not only had beliefs similar to King's, but was supposedly King's biggest "rival" in the civil rights movement—Malcolm X.

⁴⁶ Qtd in Harding, Vincent. *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996.) 45.

Chapter Two

Do the Right Thing By Any Means Necessary: The Revival of Malcolm X in the Reagan-Bush Era

Introduction

When Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, few people mourned the loss except for America's poor black neighborhoods.⁴⁷ Even then, some of those blacks refused to have anything to do with him. Several black churches refused the request to hold his funeral in their places of worship. The press was even more unfavorable in their assessment of his life. Although *Ebony* magazine remembered Malcolm X as "a young man with the bravery to tell off the white man in pure and simple language," *Time* magazine described him as an "unashamed demagogue" whose "creed was violence."⁴⁸ *The New York Times* editorialized Malcolm X's life as being "strangely and pitifully wasted," a "twisted" individual who used his talent for "evil purpose(s)."⁴⁹ In its March 5, 1965, cover story, *Life* went so far as to call the aftermath surrounding Malcolm X's death as a "vengeful gang war" and published a full-length photograph of Malcolm X moments after his assassination.⁵⁰ His eyes are eerily half open, with his chest fully exposed to reveal the bullet wounds embedded in it, giving the sense that the "fanatic" who preached a "violent" creed ultimately earned his fate.

"Our Living, Black Manhood!"

However, the dead Malcolm soon proved to be more popular than the living Malcolm. Soon after its release, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* became a bestseller. Dissatisfied with the progress of the civil rights movement and the perceived accommodationist stance by mainstream civil rights leaders, the younger generation of blacks experienced a vacancy to represent them and adopted Malcolm X as their hero. For these young blacks, Malcolm X embodied a new black man, a man who refused to assimilate into white society. As actor Ossie Davis stated in his eulogy of Malcolm X, Malcolm X was "our manhood, our living, black manhood!"⁵¹ Black Nationalist poet Amiri Baraka (who changed his name from LeRoi Jones

⁴⁷ Cone, James H. "Demystifying Martin and Malcolm," *Theology Today* 51.1 (April 1994), 27-28.

⁴⁸ "Violence Versus Non-Violence." *Ebony* (April 1965) 168; "Death and Transfiguration." *Time* (March 5, 1965), 23.

⁴⁹ "Malcolm X" Editorial. *New York Times* (Feb 22, 1965) L20.

⁵⁰ "Death of Malcolm X and the Vengeful Gang War: A Monument to Negro Upheaval." *Life* (March 5, 1965), 26.

⁵¹ Qtd in 70.

shortly after Malcolm X's death) praised Malcolm's courage in his "A Poem for Black Hearts," while the Black Panthers used Malcolm's message of self-defense to defend themselves against what they considered an oppressive system. By the early 1970s, black writer James Baldwin began writing a screenplay based on Malcolm X's life, but abandoned the project when the producer of the movie, Marvin Worth, and the film studio, Warner Brothers, wanted to emphasize the earlier part of Malcolm's life as a street hustler. Eventually, in 1972, Worth and Warner Brothers produced *Malcolm X: His Own Story As It Really Happened*, a documentary using archival footage of Malcolm X from his years as a Black Muslim until his death. (Baldwin later published his screenplay as *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on the Autobiography of Malcolm X*.) But, as the militant 1960s and equally turbulent early 1970s gave way to a quieter, calmer late 1970s, the memory of Malcolm X began to fade. When he did resurface, as in the case of the 1978 television miniseries *King*, or 1979's *Roots: The Next Generations*, he was seen as a deceitful figure, a sinister person whose aims were violence. But, save for annual celebrations in black neighborhoods like Watts or Harlem, and the bootleggers who sold Malcolm X's recorded speeches, Malcolm X drifted from mainstream America's psyche.

"We Might As Well Make It With Malcolm": The Resurgence

The tide changed during the Reagan-Bush era of the 1980s and early 1990s when urban blacks began to fully rediscover Malcolm X, especially the younger generation. Bakari Kitwana describes this young generation as the hip-hop generation. According to Kitwana, this generation includes young blacks born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties. As Kitwana explains:

...the hip-hop generation was socialized on a steady diet of American democracy and the promise of the American dream. [Hip-hop generationers] grew up with television sit-coms, film, and advertisements that portrayed [the American dream] as a reality. Lip service to equality, civil rights, freedom of movement, and integrated schools and neighborhoods created high expectations for [the hip-hop] generation—even if [this generation] didn't experience it firsthand.⁵²

Alienated by America's growing leanings toward the right, this disenfranchised group began looking with sentimentalism to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In reflecting on that

⁵² Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. (New York: BasicCivitas, 2002) 41.

era, the hip-hop generation wanted a leader whom they felt articulated their frustrations. Martin Luther King Jr., would not work because, by that time, King's message had been whitewashed and sanitized by mainstream culture. With the authority of experience creating King as a nonviolent dreamer, he would not work for those blacks who were lost in the shuffle of the post civil rights era. This group wanted a leader who was not tainted by the mainstream and who represented them in their frustration at being pushed aside in American society. As a 1992 *Newsweek* cover story on Malcolm X states, the fact that young blacks consider Malcolm X more of a hero than King is a verification of the triumphs and disappointments of King's dream. As the article explains:

King's crusade for legal equality and greater opportunity has made life better for millions of blacks, allowing them to get better jobs, move to the suburbs and enjoy many of the same comforts that white Americans do. But that exodus has had the cruel effect of making those left behind—the kind of poor urban blacks who grew up like Malcolm—even worse off...[C. Eric Lincoln states] "For many of the kids in the ghetto, we are right back where we were. The few advances that have been made have not reached them. So, if we didn't make it with King, what have we got to lose? We might as well make it with Malcolm."⁵³

Thus began the surrogation of Malcolm X. Faced with a country that continuously ignored them, and alienated by the "race leaders" who were unable to understand their conditions, this hip-hop generation looked toward Malcolm X as a symbol of manhood and blackness.⁵⁴ He filled the vacancy of this community by becoming the image of the defiant black man who uncompromisingly addressed the injustices of black America.

It was this defiant Malcolm X that gained credence with the hip-hop community and was sampled in rap music. Created in the late 1970s in the inner cities of New York City, rap music served as "a musical outlet for creative cultural energies and as a way to contest the invisibility of the ghetto in mainstream American society."⁵⁵ By the late 1980s and early 1990s, rap music became more popular in mainstream American society, and rappers such as Public Enemy began incorporating Malcolm X's speeches into their raps. For instance, it is Malcolm X's voice saying "Too black, too strong," at the beginning of Public Enemy's 1988 hit "Bring in the Noise."⁵⁶ Inspired by a famous print of Malcolm X looking out the window with a shotgun in

⁵³ "Waters, Harry F. and Vern E. Smith. "Malcolm X." *Newsweek* (November 16, 1992), 71-72.

⁵⁴ Strickland, William, et al. *Malcolm X: Make It Plain*. (New York: Penguin, 1994) 220.

⁵⁵ Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 114.

⁵⁶ "Bring the Noise." Public Enemy. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. (Def Jam, 1988).

his hand, KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions imitated the photograph on the cover of Boogie Down Productions' 1988 album *By Any Means Necessary*.

By the early 1990s, Malcolm X enjoyed a full resurgence when he became absorbed into mainstream society. Pictures and T-shirts featuring Malcolm X's likeness and baseball caps with the letter X were the fashion *du jour*, and publishers reprinted previously out-of-print books containing Malcolm X's speeches such as *Malcolm X Speaks* and *Malcolm X: The End of White World Supremacy*. Also, several publishing houses circulated young adult biographies about Malcolm X. In these narratives the full-blown myths described by Roach apply to Malcolm X. While the stories attempt to frame Malcolm X into a context relatable to the hip-hop generation, they reinforce the myth of Malcolm X as the angry black man who preaches hate against white society.

Improvised Narratives

One example of this myth is the young-adult biography *Malcolm X: Militant Black Leader* by Jack Rummel. Like Jakoubek's biography on King, *Malcolm X: Militant Black Leader* is part of the Black Americans of Achievement series. While the King biography envisions King as a messiah figure, Rummel's biography of Malcolm X attempts to establish him as an important figure in the civil rights movement whose message still resonates with the hip-hop generation. However, it still perpetrates Malcolm X as the sinister figure, the one who undermines the peaceful civil rights movement. For instance, the cover of *Malcolm X* shows him in a dark setting. While the colors of the King biography are soft, pastel colors, the colors in the Malcolm X biography are harsh and dismal. The illustration of Malcolm X gives him a reddish undertone and accentuates the harsh features of his face. The background is very shadowy with only a light red color outlining Malcolm X's face. Even the title of the biography is in red lettering. If King is made to represent Christ on the cover Jakoubek's biography, Malcolm X represents Satan on the front of Rummel's, distorting Malcolm X as the menacing individual lurking on the periphery of the civil rights movement.

The titles of both biographies situate both men into a particular space. Martin Luther King is described as a *civil rights* leader, while Malcolm X is labeled a *militant black* leader. The term civil rights produces the connotation of humanity and obtaining the basic levels of respect one person gives to another. Labeling Malcolm X as militant connects him with violence and

combativeness, and reinforces the prevalent thought of King as the peacemaker while Malcolm X is the dangerous demagogue intent of instigating violence. Also, the name Malcolm X is problematic because it freezes him in his career as the Nation of Islam spokesman. Towards the end of his life, Malcolm X adopted the Islamic name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. In keeping the name that comes from Malcolm's days in the Nation of Islam, Rummel solidifies Malcolm's image as the quarrelsome militant espousing hateful rhetoric.

The demagogic representation abounds with the photographs in the biography. Although the biography is about Malcolm X, few of the photographs in the book actually feature Malcolm X. When Malcolm X is in the photo, he is depicted as being either sinister or opportunist. For example, one photograph features Malcolm X grinning into a television camera surrounded by a mostly white press. Underneath the picture is the caption: "Malcolm X called himself 'the angriest black man in America,' yet was obviously pleased with his ability to stir up the national media. His caustic statements about the state of race relations in America made him a favorite with journalists looking for sensationalist headlines."⁵⁷ The caption intimates that Malcolm X was not really interested in helping the Civil Rights Movement but was more concerned about seeking publicity for himself. Rummel's caption indicating that Malcolm X referred to himself as "the angriest black man in America" is inaccurate because Malcolm X states in his autobiography that the press calls him "the angriest Negro in America."⁵⁸ This changes the image of Malcolm X because it suggests that the image society received of Malcolm X did not reflect the image Malcolm X created for himself. Others view him as an angry black man because the mainstream press shaped that persona even if Malcolm X did not agree with it.

Another instance of the improvised narratives occurs when Rummel describes a press conference Malcolm X gives after his travels in Africa and the Middle East. According to Rummel, one reporter asks Malcolm X about his alleged ties to the "Blood Brothers," a black vigilante organization posing as a gun club. The reporter asks if Malcolm X is "a teacher, a formentor of violence?" The following is Rummel's account of Malcolm X's response:

Malcolm X answers by pointing out what he believes are contradictions in the way the press—mainly the white press—writes about the issue of self-defense in the case of racial attacks. It is considered normal for whites to buy guns for their self-defense, he says, but when blacks take up arms to protect themselves against lynch mobs, it is viewed as a potentially dangerous situation. "I'm for justice," he

⁵⁷ Rummel, Jack. *Malcolm X: Militant Black Leader*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 13.

tells the reporters. “When the law fails to protect Negroes from whites’ attacks, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves.”⁵⁹

However, in his autobiography, Malcolm X delivers another account. While dining in Nigeria, someone asks Malcolm X about an incident in New York involving the death of a white woman in Harlem. Several young blacks attacked an elderly couple who owned a dry cleaning store in Harlem and stabbed the wife to death. According to Malcolm X, some of the perpetrators were members of the “Blood Brother” organization, which, allegedly, was affiliated with “Black Muslims” who left the Nation of Islam to join Malcolm X.⁶⁰ Malcolm X’s response was that not only was it his first time hearing of the incident, but that he “was not surprised when violence happened in any of America’s ghettos where black men had been living packed like animals and treated like lepers,” and that the media made him the scapegoat for the crimes. Not only is Rummel’s account fictitious, but it still casts Malcolm X in the violent role. In the autobiography, Malcolm responds that the violence is a result of a society that cages people and refuses to give them equality. Malcolm’s response is not a rationale for the crime, but an explanation of the atmosphere that led to such a crime to be committed. This improvised narrative still distorts Malcolm X as the “by any means necessary” figure. Even though his beliefs are more nuanced and interesting in his autobiography, Rummel still depicts Malcolm X as an example of black rage.

“I Am Malcolm X!:" The Full Blown Myths of Legitimacy

The climax of the Malcolm X’s resurgence occurred in 1991 when Spike Lee announced that he was scheduled to direct a dramatic movie based on Malcolm X’s life. Before Lee’s announcement, producer Marvin Worth (who owned the rights to material on Malcolm’s life) and Warner Brothers studio announced that Norman Jewison would direct the biopic. However, after Lee publicly made statements against Jewison, a white man, making a movie about Malcolm X, Jewison left the project and Lee became director. Backed by a \$25 million budget by Warner Brothers, Lee began directing the film with a revised script written by Lee, James Baldwin, and collaborator Arnold Pearl.

⁵⁹ Ibid 12-13.

⁶⁰ Malcolm X, with assistance from Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* 1st ed (New York: Ballantine) 400.

Soon after the announcement, Lee became involved in a swarm of controversy. In August 1991, Black Nationalist poet Amiri Baraka launched a protest against Lee's directing *Malcolm X*. Baraka, who was spokesman for the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, said that Lee was too "bourgeois" to direct a movie about Malcolm. Lee responded that when Malcolm was alive, Baraka was LeRoi Jones "running around [Greenwich] Village being a beatnik."⁶¹ Soon, the bad blood between Lee and Baraka would be the least of Lee's worries. When Lee went over the \$25 million budget, Lee turned to the media to discuss what he called the racist actions of Warner Brothers, who would not give Lee any more money to complete the film. Eventually, noted black celebrities—including Oprah Winfrey, Janet Jackson, Michael Jordan, Bill Cosby, and Prince—provided Lee with the remaining funds needed to finish *Malcolm X*.

The finished movie produced mixed results. While *Jet* described *Malcolm X* as a "historic epic" that is "the must-see movie of the season," other reviews were critical.⁶² *Time* dismissed the three hour twenty-one minute movie as an "overlong, tepid primer for black pride."⁶³ According to *The Western Report*, Spike Lee was more interested in Malcolm's "naïve early militancy than in his later, more noble, rhetoric," and that Lee "indulges in a great deal of political nonsense intended strictly for a shock value."⁶⁴ Even members of Malcolm X's family were not pleased with the movie. According to Ella Collins, Malcolm's half-sister, Spike Lee created "a classic example as symbolism without substance," whose days as a street hustler and spokesperson in the Nation of Islam are featured more prominently than his developing philosophy of anti-imperialism and Black Nationalism.⁶⁵ Considering that Lee wanted the film to be seen by young as well as older blacks (after the movie's release, Lee encouraged students to skip school to see the film), Lee creates *Malcolm X* in a context so that he can be a leader who relates to the frustrations and dissatisfaction of the hip-hop generation.

One can see this in the beginning of *Malcolm X*. The opening credit begins with a reverend talking off-camera, giving a greeting:

⁶¹ Ansen, David. "The Battle for Malcolm X." *Newsweek* (August 26, 1991), 52.

⁶² "Denzel Washington Stars as 'Malcolm X' In Spike Lee Film." *Jet* (November 30, 1992) 40.

⁶³ Corliss, Richard. "The Elevation of Malcolm X." *Time* (November 23, 1991), 64.

⁶⁴ Cosh, Colby. "A Poignant Biography is Marred by Shock-Value Politicking." *Western Report* 20.48 (1993), 40.

⁶⁵ Qtd in Collins, Rodnell P. and Peter Bailey. *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X*. (New York: Kensington, 1998)

In the name of Allah the beneficent, the merciful, all praises due to Allah, lord of all the worlds, the one god to whom praise is due forever, the one who came to us in the person of Master Fard Muhammad and raised up the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Amen.⁶⁶

After giving the greeting, the reverend introduces Malcolm X. After a moment of handclapping, the viewer hears Malcolm X's voice as rendered by Denzel Washington:

Brothers and sisters, I'm here to tell you that I charge the white man. I charge the white man with being the greatest murderer on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest kidnapper on earth...I charge the white man with being the greatest robber and enslaver on this earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest swine eater on this earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest drunk on this earth.⁶⁷

Following these list of charges and description of America's neglect of the black man, Washington concludes his speech: "We've never experienced the American dream; we've only experience the American nightmare." At the conclusion the speech, the off-camera audience becomes ecstatic and applauds while chanting, "We love Malcolm! We love Malcolm!"⁶⁸

While this off-camera scene occurs, another scene visible to the viewer takes place. The American flag is draped over the screen. As Malcolm X delivers his speech, the American flag catches on fire. As the flag burns, another scene shows the 1991 Rodney King beating. These two scenes alternate with each other until the last scene ends with the American flag burning into an X.

This scene sets the opening tone of the movie. Having the American flag burning into an X represents the fact that Malcolm X is a product of America. Moreover, by allowing Malcolm X, a 1960s American icon, speak while white cops beat Rodney King, the opening scene links Malcolm X to the plight of Rodney King and shows that nothing has improved for blacks since the 1960s. America still oppresses blacks, therefore giving credence to the words Malcolm advocates in the beginning of the film while also placing Malcolm in a context that relates to the hip-hop generation. But, in critiquing the piece, one has to look at the scene from a historical angle. In the reverend's greeting, he mentions Wallace Fard, the founder of the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam during Malcolm's tenure with the sect.

⁶⁶ *Malcolm X*. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington. Videocassette. Warner Bros, 1992.

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

This is important to note because it means that if Malcolm said those words, he was still a member of the Nation of Islam, therefore giving a better context in analyzing the opening speech. The problem is that the speech Washington gives in the opening scene is probably not Malcolm's words. Compare that speech with a description historian C. Eric Lincoln gives in his landmark 1961 work, *The Black Muslims in America*:

A slightly-built, light-skinned Negro paused casually before twelve grave-faced Negro men and women sitting in a jury box at Boston's John Hancock Hall [...] the young Bostonian delivered his indictment against the white man on behalf of the Black Nation of Islam:

"I charge the white man with being the greatest liar on earth! I charge the white man with being the greatest drunkard on earth....I charge the white man with being the greatest gambler on earth. I charge the white man, ladies and gentleman of the jury, with being the greatest peace-breaker on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest adulterer on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest robber on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest deceiver on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest trouble-maker on earth. So, therefore, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I ask you, bring back a verdict of guilty as charged!"⁶⁹

The speech comes from an unpublished transcript of the television documentary, "The Hate That Hate Produced," which aired July 10, 1959. The "slightly-built, light-skinned Negro" that Lincoln describes is former calypso singer Louis X (now Louis Farrakhan), and the indictment comes from Farrakhan's 1959 play *The Trial*, a propaganda piece designed to make the white man pay against humanity. These words are also the same words that began the 1970s documentary film, *Malcolm X: His Own Story as It Happened*, the same film that Marvin Worth produced. However, in the opening scene of that film, instead of Malcolm X listing the charges against the white man, it is Farrakhan listing the injustices. Moreover, Farrakhan's injustices are more moral actions, while the adjectives described in Lee's version refers to political crimes against humanity. In doing this, Lee ties Malcolm with the contemporary version of the Nation of Islam even though the Nation of Islam that Malcolm joined no longer exists.

After Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, Muhammad's son Warrith Muhammad assumed control of the Nation. He instituted several changes in the Nation, which included allowing white members into the Nation and adopting orthodox Islamic teachings. After Muhammad implemented these changes, several splinter groups developed, the largest being

⁶⁹ Lincoln, C. Eric. *The Black Muslims in America*. Revised ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 3.

Farrakhan's sect. Although small in number in the initial years, Farrakhan's Nation of Islam began to grow substantially in the 1980s and Farrakhan became a prominent figure in the 1980s and early 1990s, especially after his 1995 Million Man March. Farrakhan also became more popular among the hip-hop generation. Just as Public Enemy incorporated Malcolm X in their lyrics, the rap group listed Farrakhan as one of their important leaders. Therefore, by allowing Malcolm X to utter Farrakhan's words in the film, Lee not only ties Malcolm to Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, but also makes Malcolm more appealing to the hip hop community.

This is shown in later scenes when Lee juxtaposes the ideas of Malcolm and Martin Luther King. For instance, one scene has Malcolm X giving a speech to Black Muslims in what appears to be a convention hall. As the opening scene of the film, Malcolm gives a speech attacking white supremacy:

The black people in this country have been the victims of violence at the hands of the white man for 400 years, 400 years, 400 years and we thought that by following those ignorant Negro preachers, we have thought it was God-like to turn the other cheek to the brute that was brutalizing us.⁷⁰

After giving more examples of the white man's brutality, Malcolm discusses in length the black people who he feels are holding other blacks down:

And just as that old Uncle Tom back during slavery used to keep the Negroes from resisting the bloodhounds or resisting the Ku Klux Klan by telling them to love our enemy or pray for those who use them as spitefully. You got these chicken-peckin' Uncle Tom so-called Negroes of leaders today. You got these Uncle Tom Negro leaders today that are telling us that we need to pray for our enemies. We ought to love our enemies. We ought to integrate with an enemy who bombs us, who kills us, who rapes our women and children. No! No! No! That's not intelligent.⁷¹

While Malcolm delivers this speech, another scene shows Malcolm sitting on an arm of a couch. He intently watches black and white footage of actual clips from the Civil Rights Movement. The clips featured the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, integration campaign; the 1965 Selma voting rights campaign; and the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. They show blacks bitten by police dogs, doused by water hoses, and being beaten by white police officers. As Malcolm discusses the "Uncle Tom" Negroes, the camera switches to NAACP chief Roy Wilkins at the 1963 March on Washington. The next scene switches to Martin Luther King, Jr., telling marchers that their

⁷⁰ *Malcolm X*. Dir Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington. Videocassette. Warner Bros., 1992.

⁷¹ *Ibid*

campaign is a nonviolent one and that if anyone believes in violence, then they should not march. Every time Malcolm mentions the “Uncle Toms,” footage of King is frequently shown on camera.

Again, Lee takes historical liberties with this scene. Before the scene in which Malcolm gives the speech, the viewer sees Malcolm X’s wife Betty (played by Angela Bassett) reading aloud a letter she writes to Malcolm. She states that their newborn daughter, Attallah, is fine. Considering that Attallah, Malcolm’s first born daughter, was born in 1958, and that the scene in which Elijah Muhammad suspends Malcolm for the Nation of Islam comes later in the film, it is safe to assume that the scene of Malcolm giving the speech is around the late 1950s or early 1960s. In either case, Lee’s juxtaposition of Malcolm with King reinforces the public’s idea of Malcolm serving as foil for King. In having this contrast, Lee fails to place Malcolm and King in their proper context. At that time in history, King’s movement was mainly Southern and his goal was to end *de jure* segregation in the South. Malcolm, on the other hand, had a largely Northern, urban audience that was mainly concerned with black self-reliance and ending the *de facto* segregation of the North. Also, in showing footage of King in Selma, AL, Lee forgets that Malcolm came to Selma before his assassination and spoke about the fine work that King was doing for blacks in Selma. In a speech Malcolm gave while King was in prison, Malcolm said:

...I think these people in this part of the world would do well to listen to Dr. Martin Luther King and give him what he’s asking for and give it to him fast before some other factions come along and try to do it another way. What he’s asking for is right...that’s the ballot...and if he can’t get it then it’s going to be gotten, one way or the other.⁷²

Here, Malcolm X tries to work with King and his Southern movement. When the real Malcolm X gives this speech, the camera focuses squarely on his face. As he talks, he speaks in a very slow, even tone. He appears to be thinking about what he is about to say next. As the camera widens, there appears to be very few body gestures. His manner is very engaging and his voice is almost conversational. This serves as a direct opposite to the Malcolm portrayed by Denzel Washington. Throughout the film, when Washington gives a speech, his voice is forceful as he brandishes his arms and index finger to the audience, who come across as bad children being scolded by an angry parent. In these scenes, Lee gives the impression that King’s philosophy is

⁷² Malcolm X, perf. “The Time Has Come (1964-1966).” *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads*. Dir. Henry Hampton. Narr. Julian Bond. Videocassette. Blackside/PBS Video, 1993.

outdated and, like the Rodney King video shown at the beginning of the film, the turn-the-other cheek philosophy does not work and that Malcolm X's philosophy is better because he encourages self-respect and defiance. The juxtaposition implies that had King's philosophy worked in the 1960s, there would not have been a situation like Rodney King's in 1992, giving further credence to the implication that since King's vision was unfulfilled, the next generation should cast their lot with Malcolm X's beliefs.

While the opening sequence tries to set the tone of the movie by providing a context relatable to a younger generation of blacks, the ending tries to explain the significance of Malcolm in contemporary times. After the assassination scene, an off-camera Ossie Davis reads the eulogy he gave at Malcolm X's funeral. The reading of the eulogy also serves to place Malcolm X as an important figure in contemporary times. As Davis reads:

There are those who still consider it their duty, as friends of the Negro people, to tell us to *revile* him, to flee, even from the presence of his memory, to save ourselves by writing him out of the history of our turbulent times. And we will smile. They will say that he is of hate, a fanatic, a racist who can only bring evil to the cause for which you struggle. And we will answer and say unto them, "Did you ever talk to Brother Malcolm? Did you ever touch him or have him smile at you? Did you ever really listen to him? Was he ever himself associated with violence or any public disturbance?" For if you did, you would know him and if you knew him, you would know why we must honor him. Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood. This was his meaning to his people. And in knowing him, we honor the best in ourselves.⁷³

While Davis reads this part of the eulogy, a montage of photographs featuring different images of Malcolm X and other scenes of the modern civil rights movement appear on screen. After Davis suggests that Malcolm's departure should bring everyone together, he concludes the eulogy:

Consigning these mortal remains to earth, the common mother of all, secure in the knowledge that what we place in the ground is no more now a man, but a seed, which, after the winter of our discontent, will come forth again to meet us, and we shall know him then...for what he was and what he is. A prince. Our own black shining prince...who didn't hesitate to die...because...he loved us so.⁷⁴

The seed Davis refers to could imply the resurgence of Malcolm X and his ideas in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this section of Davis's eulogy, Lee features a scene of black South

⁷³ *Malcolm X*. Dir Spike Lee. Videocassette. Warner Bros., 1992.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

Africans carrying Malcolm X posters. At the conclusion of the eulogy, Lee returns to Harlem where a crowd wears T-shirts and holds poster bearing Malcolm X images and shouts Malcolm's name.

The next scene jumps to black schoolchildren in Harlem who stand up screaming, "I am Malcolm X!" This continues until the schoolchildren are now South Africans and Nelson Mandela stands in front of the classroom. Here, Mandela gives a little speech concerning Malcolm:

As Brother Malcolm said, "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being to be given the rights of a human being to be respected as a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day which we intended to bring into existence..."⁷⁵

The next clip shows the actual Malcolm X completing the sentence with the famous phrase, "by any means necessary." For a film that is already long in length, the ending scene with Mandela seems unnecessary. As Michael Eric Dyson notes, the final scene comes off as "needlessly contrived and facile," but it raises the issue of how to connect Malcolm X to contemporary black youth.⁷⁶ Having old photos of Malcolm X shown while Davis gives the eulogy attempts to prove why Malcolm X is still important to black youth. He was not the demonized individual that the media made him out to be. Instead, he was a freedom fighter dedicated to the cause of his people.

It is also interesting that instead of having the real Malcolm X give the whole statement at the end of the film, Lee assigns that role to Mandela. During the early 1990s, there were T-shirts that stated, "Martin, Malcolm, and Mandela: the Struggle Continues." In having Mandela recite Malcolm's speech, Lee has Mandela serve as a stand-in for Malcolm, linking Mandela as an heir to the struggle of King and Malcolm. By this time, Mandela had been released from prison and was leading the cause to dismantle South Africa's apartheid system, a cause that grew to be so popular that several companies boycotted South Africa in the early 1990s. Mandela spent almost thirty years jailed in South Africa. Had Malcolm X or King lived, they would have been Mandela's contemporaries. However, because both men were dead, Mandela would have to lead the struggle and would serve as a representative of what King and Malcolm would have been in their later years. Mandela, King, and Malcolm were similar because all three were never quite

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford, 1997) 142.

popular in their younger (i.e. more active) years. With King and Malcolm gone, however, Mandela is now the elder statesman. He does not appear militant as he once did, and is now a more relaxed, and acceptable, figure.

Conclusion

Now, fourteen years have passed since the release of Spike Lee's epic and the Malcolm X renaissance of the early 1990s. Although history textbooks include him in the discourse of the civil rights movement, and even though books containing his speeches are still in print, one seldom, if ever, sees a hat or shirt emblazoned with the X or Malcolm X's likeness. Many factors could have contributed to Malcolm's fading from America's collective memory. Several factors could have contributed to the demise. When Bill Clinton came into office in 1993, blacks finally felt they had a friend in the White House. As Clinton appointed record numbers of blacks to his Cabinet and federal positions, poured money into inner city neighborhoods, and started a dialogue on race relations in America, he quickly earned the moniker "the first black president of the United States."⁷⁷ Or, as rap music became less about fighting the power and more about bling bling while driving a Bentley, Hummer, or Escalade, there was no need for Malcolm's call for economic autonomy. While earlier rap artists looked towards Malcolm for inspiration, other rappers now looked to characters like Tony Montana from *Scarface*, Don Corleone from *The Godfather*, or the pimps and hustlers from the black exploitation movies of the 1970s. Or, Malcolm became so many things to so many people, including the Republicans and Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, who used Malcolm's rhetoric of self-help to end affirmative action programs and welfare reform.⁷⁸ When Spike Lee advertised his film in *The New York Times*, it featured the following words listed in the center of the page: "Scholar, Convict, Leader, Disciple, Hipster, Father, Hustler, Minister, Black Man, Every Man."⁷⁹ Along with those words, a huge X covers the entire page. In mathematics, the letter X represents the unknown. Perhaps, after all these years, no matter how much has been said or debated about Malcolm X, he is still an unknown, a *tabula rasa* whose ideas were changing so constantly and so rapidly that no one can ever truly define Malcolm X, especially in a biography or Hollywood motion picture. Chances are that with the war in Iraq, the recession, and the conservative policies of another

⁷⁷ Wickham, Dewayne. *Bill Clinton and Black America*. (New York: Ballantine, 2002) 19.

⁷⁸ Cone, James H. "Demystifying Martin and Malcolm," *Theology Today* 51.1 (April 1994) 33.

⁷⁹ "Malcolm X." Advertisement. *New York Times* (November 15, 1992) H12-13.

Bush, the next generation will revive another individual long forgotten, and show the nation, once again, that they will do the right thing by any means necessary.

Conclusion

After becoming aware of my students' attitude toward Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, I decided to teach these figures differently the next semester. In the spring of 2004, I taught the second part of college composition, ENG 112—Composition and Literature. ENG 112 usually revolves around a particular theme, and I chose the Individual in Society. In choosing that theme, I wanted to use texts in which the characters in the stories used language and literacy to either help them understand their position in society or to rebel against the preconceived notions that society places upon them. Among the stories we read were Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The fourth sequence of the class concerned metaphor, and I thought using King and Malcolm X would serve as a nice example of metaphors in public speech.

This time I left no stone unturned. In the first five minutes of class, I put a writing prompt on the chalkboard with the question, "What do you know about the following people or event: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or the Civil Rights Movement?" I allowed them to write for ten minutes so that I could brace myself for the possible comments that were to come. But, compared to last semester, the remarks were not so bad. One person said that King was killed because a bomb exploded in his house. Others said they knew him from the "I Have a Dream" speech. As for Malcolm X, some students voiced that Malcolm X scared them because he talked about violence. Concerning the Civil Rights Movement, they did not have too much knowledge about the subject save for what they knew about King. However, some students expressed that it gave people rights and that they could not understand the need for affirmative action, a topic that they continually brought up in the class conversation.

After everyone gave their thoughts about the subject, I handed the students King's "I Have a Dream" speech. As they began to read the speech, I played a videotape of King delivering the speech. After reading the speech and listening to King, some students had questions about why the speech they were given contained portions that were either omitted or reworded. King said a lot in the speech, they reasoned, but there were some portions that were either left out or changed in the printed text. We opened the discussion to ask how this change would affect the way people understood King's speech. After brainstorming a few ideas, we moved to Malcolm X. The first video I showed had Malcolm X giving a speech in front of a black audience. His voice is strong and his tone fierce. In his speech, Malcolm X used the

“house Negro/field Negro” analogy, which he frequently used to describe blacks who were subservient to white society and those blacks who took a stand protesting white authority. The second video I showed them had Malcolm X giving a speech in front of a white audience at Oxford University in England. His mood is subdued and he displayed few hand gestures. Instead of using the “house Negro/field Negro” example, he begins with a description of Shakespeare and Hamlet. “To be or not to be” he quoted from the famous play. After watching the video clips, some of the students were interested that Malcolm X used totally different examples when he addressed a particular audience. From those clips, we began a discussion about language and how people use language so that it caters to a particular audience. Soon, I had students making comments on how King and Malcolm X’s speeches were similar, but their rhetoric changes to fit a particular group. This led us into a deeper conversation about race and civil rights in America. I even had one ask, “Why didn’t I learn this before? When I learned of the Civil Rights Movement, it was always shown as something that happened in the South and was about segregation. I didn’t think racism was something that we still needed to discuss.”

In conclusion, a year has gone since my first experience in teaching college composition, and I have had some time to reflect. During the time I taught, I faulted my students for being ignorant about the state of race relations in America. Then, I experienced an epiphany. Even though I was only four or five years older than my students, we shared very different backgrounds. I grew up in an area of the South known as the Mississippi Delta, a region known for its racism. Even though the area has its share of black officials, race continues to permeate everyone’s daily existence. For instance, even though there is a museum dedicated to the civil rights struggle, only a few blocks away there is a park and statue named after the founder of the Ku Klux Klan. While I remember the excitement when Memphis elected its first black mayor, I still recall the disgust when Mississippi voted to keep the Confederate flag incorporated in its state flag. For me, race was a topic that could not be ignored.

My students, however, had another experience. Most of them grew up in the Midwest where they knew few, if any, people of color. By the time they reached school age, Martin Luther King was a holiday that honored the end to racism. The complexities of affirmative action were usually reduced to a fifteen-minute segment on the news and usually involved a white person who felt they were discriminated against because they were not in the minority. After all, my students reasoned, this is a time of political correctness and multiculturalism, a

period in American history when people do not harbor racist thinking and there are a few minorities represented in school curricula. When those minorities appear, they talk of an era that appears long gone, reinforcing to students that America has overcome its racist past. If so-called marginalized texts are integrated in textbooks, we ought to embrace works that tell the whole story and not just to make us feel better. Even though our encounters with these works may seem painful, they should be used so that we can dismantle all the illusions that we create for ourselves.

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