The Iconic Malcolm: The 1990s Polarization of the Mediated Images of Malcolm X

LISA M. GILL

Shortly after the assassination and burial of Malcolm X (MX) in February 1965, Ossie Davis felt driven to defend his decision to deliver MX's funeral eulogy. His response, published in *Negro Digest* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, deflected censure of MX's ideology by identifying his importance to blacks as more cultural than political:

> At the same time—and this is important—most all of them took special pains to disagree with much or all of what Malcolm said and what he stood for. That is, with one singing exception, they all, every last, black, glory-hugging one of them, knew that Malcolm—whatever else he was or was not—Malcolm was a man! White folks do not need anybody to remind them that they are men. We do! This was his one incontrovertible benefit to his people. (Davis 64)

Speaking directly to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) leaders that had either denounced or distanced themselves from MX, Davis condenses the value of MX to his ability to represent manhood to blacks—no matter their political inclinations. More importantly than MX's ability to represent a specific black manhood is the acceptance that MX gains for his stance as a black man from those within the CRM. As witnessed by his skills as a prominent intellectual, speaker and debater, very few CRM leaders wanted to confront MX publicly. However, the topics that MX discussed and taught were clearly not in alignment with the popular wing of the CRM movement. Thus, making his representation of manhood, in the eyes of many late 1950s, early 1960s activists, problematic.

That Davis explicitly disengages from the discourse of MX's manhood—a revolutionary leader who continued to reject white culture and institutions as consistently, inherently violent toward blacks—is portrayed as less important than a MX who represents black masculinity. Davis constructs MX as the perfect

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 8, No. 2
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representation of black American manhood enshrined as such in the minds of people for whom he advocated. At the same time, he downplays MX's ideology and ideas from the physical body he eulogized. This separation was to last in popular culture until the 1990s, a decade in which MX's political thought complicated this simple construction.

For Davis and many others in 1965, this icon of masculinity was the true legacy of MX. MX's portrait of black masculinity was clear—his aggressive confrontations (of police, leaders in the CRM and the press), public displays of anger, vocalization of his suspicion of whites and blacks who worked with them, manner of dress, code switching (depending on his audience), charm, charisma, visualization of a family man, minister, and intellectual prowess. Before black men donned signs in protest that announced their manhood, MX had given them the road map demonstrating how it should be done.

For the generation of blacks who would inherit this legacy in the 1970s and 1980s, MX's manhood was proof positive that he deserved emulation. His mediated image as the archetypal black man found its way into rap songs, videos, and films of the late 1980s and 1990s. Three images in particular were prominent in this era: the photographs of MX with his right hand, index finger pointed in the air, closed mouth, biting into his lower lip, displaying some of his teeth; finger(s) pointed to his temple or ear, mouth closed or open; and the most famous, shotgun in hand, while he looks out the curtained window after the bombing of his Queens, New York home. These images and others was commodified into material culture in numerous ways: MX as masculine hero was imprinted on t-shirts, medallions, earrings, and jackets, and could be seen all over the bodies of young black men and women.

MX's image, especially when worn on young, black bodies, signified the zeitgeist of the early 1990s. But that decade saw a crucial change in MX's reputation and cultural significance. Whereas Davis had defended his eulogy by eschewing MX's politics in favor of a "shining black prince" (a phrase he wielded during his eulogy), the growing importance of MX as the iconic black male led directly to MX's ideas coming back into play. No longer seen as the ostracized leader of a religious sect or as the foil of the proper leaders of the CRM, MX was slowly transformed into a forward thinking, prophetic man who saw the faults in the CRM and dared to offer an alternative approach, a leader who could have created a different path had he not been martyred.

By the late 1990s, the heroic image of MX, that of the "shining black prince" and its attendant un-ironic celebration of monarchy over democracy, came into a sharp competition with more nuanced, historically accurate versions of MX as a black nationalist leader. These dueling representations continued through the late 1990s culminating with the January 1999 presentation of a MX stamp, part of the Black Heritage series created by the United States Postal Service.

This article traces the path in the 1990s from the eulogized black man, a prince among men, an image shorn of MX's political thought, to a more complex view of the historical man. Two portrayals are of particular importance in an examination of MX in 1990s popular culture: Spike Lee's portrayal of the black prince at the beginning of the decade and the United States Postal Service's issue of a MX stamp at the end of the decade. In the USPS's struggles to negotiate between a challenging deified male, acceptable to American culture at large, and an angry, anti-white revolutionary, the complex heritage of Davis's eulogy is laid bare: The USPS stamp could neither portray a prince nor a revolutionary. Their choice of image amounted to a third transformation of MX acceptable to middle America. That third MX was shorn both of black princehood and revolutionary ideas: in domesticating MX, it emasculated him as well.

Although Davis's image of MX as the heroic black prince held general sway in the thirty years following MX's death, contesting images were presented. The first MX stamp was actually produced in Iran in 1984. This stamp honored MX on the "Universal Day of Struggle Against Race Discrimination." Articles and books from an international perspective described MX as a Pan-Africanist and international activist. Theologian James Cone constructed an image of Malcolm as one in line with the direction the movement was heading including a direction that would align MX and Martin Luther King, Jr., by the time of the formers' assassination. According to DeCaro, "religious issues were above all those that pertained to the lives and struggles of his people living on this side of paradise" (270). Gambino, on the other hand, saw MX primarily as a laborer empowered to see the disparities between the conditions of laborers within the prison industrial complex, the post-WWII boom of the 1950s, and finally as the minister and builder of the Nation of Islam (NOI) congregations. MX appeared within these different spaces primarily as a laborer. Gambino believed Malcolm recognized his inability to conform to the status quo of American society which propelled his journey as an opponent of imperialism inside and outside the United States. MX thus became the interloper who offered insight through his criticisms of American society.

However, although varying images were vigorously contested, the most potent image of MX in the 1990s was that of an “authentic” black man, an image that stemmed from Davis but was also polished by film narratives of successful black men, including Lee’s image of MX. The reintroduction of black filmmakers in the mid-to-late 1980s, who produced films outside of the Hollywood system and then received distribution from Hollywood, created a renewed interest in black filmmakers, their cultural products, and their viewing audiences. These directors, principally black men, brought the black male as subject and agent into films of the early 1990s. In films like *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), black directors’ interpretation of the narrative usually included a black male protagonist who exhibited a strong sense of black manhood, or definitions thereof, that demanded recognition, despite the controversial methods of acquisition. These images and narratives recalled the process MX had used to cull respect from those most reluctant to give it. Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the Hughes Brothers with their films *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society* (1993), respectively, all used this formula to establish dominant black male narratives of authenticity.

By the beginning of the 1990s, the image of MX was that of an “authentic” black man, stemming directly from Davis’s “shining black prince.” Expressed primarily through rap music and urban black youth, this imagery included a few slight references to the political activities of MX but focused primarily on his stance as a black male. Black cultural producers of the 1990s positioned the image of MX in mainstream media to demonstrate black manhood and racial pride. This representation disconnected MX from his political and religious ideologies, which were circulating primarily within the black community in urban centers, black political mindsets, and academic groups. Concurrently, the mediated image of MX was removed from the possession of black people and placed in the lexicon of American heroes. Divorced from his ideas, MX was easily identifiable as a typically American rebellious anti-hero of the tumultuous 1960s. This process achieved for MX something he did not achieve in life—iconization. Without it, MX would have remained in the canon of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) but not in the globally recognized canon of American icons.

Throughout the 1990s, the mediated image of MX could be found on film, clothing, jewelry, labels for food, books, comic books, articles, music, posters, paintings, stamps, and accessories. Created by a myriad of people, many of these images entered the domain of popular culture as references to MX’s perceived

legacy. Images such as the bolded letter "X" could be found on earrings, t-shirts, or on a bag of potato chips. Most of these items contained very little reference to the political activism of MX or to his contribution to the CRM of the 1960s. In an article discussing the education and propaganda of the Black Power Movement, Angela Davis notes:

> The unprecedented contemporary circulation of photographic and filmic images of African Americans has multiple and contradictory implications. On the one hand, it holds the promise of visual memory of older and departed generations, of both well-known figures and people who may not have achieved public prominence. However, there is also the danger that this historical memory may become ahistorical and apolitical. (Davis 38)

Addressing the controversy that had embroiled her image when Vibe Magazine decided to model the Black Power Movement through clothing and hairstyles, Davis clearly annunciated the issue at hand in the treatment of black icons of begone eras. Similar to Davis in this photoshoot, the ahistorical treatment of MX led to a political vacuum surrounding his image. Each representation had the potential to be used as a rejection of white societal norms, symbolized most clearly by the wearing of an "X" on the body of the adherent, serving as an affront to white society and "sell-out" black leaders. But for the most part, MX was merely viewed as an iconic rebel used to fight against the "establishment."

From 1992 through the end of 1993, the mediated image reached its zenith as a representation of MX as a rebellious, typically American outlaw. The X fashion phenomenon broke boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. X jackets were available in high-end stores like Bloomingdales, while in urban spaces, medallions, earrings and other items could be purchased at various open-street markets. Throughout New York, t-shirts and caps adored the bodies and heads of those clued into the popularity of the bold letters. Divorced, at times, from any pictorial representation, the image of the "X" reminded all Americans how cool it was to be a rebel without any connection to a movement, political agenda, or group.

Since the interest from academics, followers, and scholarly admirers had never waned, new information did concurrently celebrate MX's insight into the nature of civil rights in the context of world revolutions taking place across the globe. This information actually helped expand and re-configure his image into an iconic American hero. He became seen as a freedom fighter and an inspiration to all Americans. As the mediated image of MX gravitated toward the lexicon that

surrounds American great men icons, the de-politicization of X's image became ever more apparent.

Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992) was crucial to this process. Discussion of a film based on *The Autobiography* began shortly after the publishing of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965. According to Rodnell Collins, MX's nephew, the first attempt to produce a film on MX came from Louis Lomax (201). Lomax's book, under contract with Twentieth Century Fox, was slated for production, but the project was put on hold in 1968 because of the death of Lomax and the mood of the country (Collins 202). Marvin Worth, who was connected to the project at Twentieth Century Fox, left and became a producer at Warner Brothers.

Taking the film rights with him, Worth moved to secure a script for the film. Rodnell Collins notes that the:

> next major effort to do a film on Uncle Malcolm involved Ma (Ella Collins), James Baldwin, and Marvin Worth in the late 1960s and early 1970s…Others involved with the project were Art Aveilhe, of J.B. Lippincott Company, a book publisher; Bruce Perry of the Socialist Press Media; Arnold Perl, Baldwin's business partner; and a relative of a prominent banker…Baldwin would write the screenplay…(Ella Collins and Baldwin) envisioned a film that would focus on him (Malcolm) as a black nationalist, as a man serious about his Islamic religious beliefs, as a man with prophetic visions about race relations…That was not the film envisioned by Marvin Worth and Warner Bros. (203-4)

Though the script was to be written by Baldwin, he dropped out of the project after Warner Brothers demanded changes that he could not agree with. In a 1976 interview with Jewell Handy Gresham, Baldwin states:

> To put it brutally, if I had agreed with Hollywood, I would have been allowing myself to create an image of Malcolm that would have satisfied them and infuriated you, broken your hearts. At one point, I saw a memo that said, among other things, the author had to avoid giving any political implications to Malcolm's trip to Mecca. Now, how can you write about Malcolm X without writing about his trip to Mecca and its political implications? It's not surprising…Hollywood's fantasy is designed to prove to you that this poor, doomed nitwit deserves his fate. (Boyd 83)

Worth's film project went forward using the screenplay partly scripted by Baldwin. After years of trying to produce a film on MX, Marvin Worth was finally given

approval by Warner Brothers. By that time, Spike Lee had graduated from NYU film school and gained critical success with *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989). According to Lee, from the onset Worth wanted him to direct the film (Lee et al 9). From Lee's perspective, the failure of a letter to reach him was the only reason Worth attached Norman Jewison, the director of *A Soldier's Story* (1984) and *The Hurricane* (1999), to the project (Lee et al 9-10). When Lee heard that Worth had contracted a white director to make the film, he went to Warner Brothers and suggested that they reconsider. According to Lee, it "disturbed him greatly and he felt that it was wrong…blacks have to control these films" (Bernotas 82). Lee claimed that directing a film on the life of MX had been his inspiration for going to film school (Lee et al 2). Although Warner Brothers accused Lee of starting a letter-writing campaign against Jewison, Lee was finally named director of the project.

Lee's status as a newly successful director made him acceptable to Hollywood as a black person who could assume the position of director and deliver a film that mirrored the desires of the black community to see representations of themselves on film. Lee's own standing as a black hero made him a candidate for a posture of resistance when it came to the position of director. Lee would oversee keeping MX a black male figure of authority and authenticity.

From the start, Lee had decided to create an image of MX informed by history but loaded with the images Lee believed best represented MX. The relationship between Lee and Warner Brothers quickly deteriorated. Lee and others originally submitted a budget for *Malcolm X* at $38 million.

> The people at Warner Brothers, Terry Semel, the president and CEO, and Bob Daly, the chairman and CEO (two CEOs, don't ask me), immediately said, "You're crazy." They told us to come back again with another budget, and they also told us they weren't going to spend a red cent over $18 million themselves. They wanted the total cost of the film to be $20 million, at first, and I just remembering thinking, "This film is going to cost way more than any $20 million to do it right. And I ain't doing it wrong." I was ready to get up then. I would get back to them on budget later. (Lee et al 23)

As he approached the limit of his funding, Warner Brothers called the film's insurance company, Completion Bond, to let them know that they would not be extending funding. Completion Bond, which had already extended millions, fired the editors and decided that editing would be shut down. Lee, forced to make a decision about finishing the film, decided to act.

> I had to get on the phone because we still have work to do, and it will cost money. The bond company has bailed out on me. They let my editors go. Warner Brothers *been* bailed out of here a long time ago…I called Bill Cosby on Monday, Oprah Winfrey on Tuesday, and Magic Johnson this morning. I saw Rocket Ismail at the basketball game and hit on him. I've got to call Reginald Lewis, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson. I prayed on it, then drew on Malcolm X for inspiration. I had been studying him for two years doing this film. Malcolm always talked about, DO FOR SELF… I took a page out of the MALCOLM MANUAL. I know BLACK folks with money. I would appeal directly to their BLACKNESS, to their sense of knowing how important this film is. How important Malcolm X is to us. How important it is that this film succeed… I don't and I'm not waiting on white folks. If you know only one thing about Malcolm, that should be it. (Lee et al 138; 165; 166)

Lee's next controversy in conjunction with the film was his use of Baldwin's script (Buhle 119). Buhle describes Lee's contribution to the original script written by James Baldwin and Arnold Perl to be "less than half," excluding his directorial contribution and the ending (119). Lee does not deny using the script. According to Lee, it was the best script that he had been given, and he did not want to start writing a new one (Lee et al 27). Baldwin would have disagreed. If the project needed a black director, why did it not need a black script writer? Why did Lee fail to either address Baldwin's concerns or hire another writer to review the script?

From Lee's point of view, he had researched the film for two years and had interviewed many people connected to MX. He failed to provide additional review of the script or a new screenwriter because popular culture had already given him the image of Malcolm that he intended to portray: the authentic black hero, the archetype of black masculinity. Worth, Warner Brothers, and Lee all agreed on that point. Lee's MX would be a hero who had fought for liberty and happiness—core American values. This MX fought for America as much or even more than for the black community.

Visually stunning, the film contains scenes taken directly from MX's autobiography and those created by Lee. The film moves through MX's life from the retelling of his father's death at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan to the day he was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom. The film opens in the same manner as a typical NOI meeting during MX's tenure. The speaker, who is never identified, recites the NOI creed and then asks the audience to welcome Brother Malcolm to

the stage. Following a round of applause, beginning with the crash of cymbals, we hear MX (Denzel Washington) and see an outstretched flag on the screen as the credits continue to roll. Washington begins speaking to the invisible audience who have been waiting to hear MX. As he begins, the flag is replaced by the video of the 1991 Rodney King Beating on California State Route 210.

Chronicling the atrocities that the white man has committed globally, MX (Washington) lists various charges. Concluding that the white man has been the harbinger of war and destruction, MX (Washington) excoriates the savagery of the white man, while the video of King exchanges the frame, continuously, with the American flag. As the brutality of the beating accelerates, MX (Washington) charges the white man as the most harmful being on the face of the earth. Elevating his "voice" at the naming of each harmful act, MX (Washington) continues to charge the white man as we see King on the ground being pummeled by four or five Los Angeles Police Department officers. Another clash of cymbals brings the American flag back to the screen.

MX (Washington) tells the invisible audience that they are victims of America rather than its citizens, simultaneously the camera closes in on King on the ground, barely moving, still being beaten by the LAPD. Ominously, we flashback to the flag that is shrouded in black smoke and burning around the edges. As the flames begin to spread, the viewing audience returns to the gruesome beating of King as MX's (Washington's) voice exclaims that black Americans continue to be the victims of America. The burning flag replaces King's unconscious body as it is repeatedly beaten while MX (Washington) repeats that democracy has never been offered to blacks on the cotton fields, northern urban centers, or any other places in America. As the cymbals crash for the final time, the flag burns into the shape of the letter "X." As we return again to King being brutalized, MX (Washington) declares that the "American dream has eluded us, leaving us only with the American nightmare." The camera flashes back to the charred, yet in-tact, American flag in the shape of an "X," as the invisible audience shouts and applauds, "We love Malcolm X." The symbolism attached to American values overtakes the emphasis on MX himself.

The film ends with a montage that begins with Ossie Davis' oration of his eulogy. As Davis delivers his eulogy, the scene is spliced with video footage and photos of the real MX, present day Harlem and Soweto (1992 respectively). At the end of Davis' speech, the camera cuts to a classroom in Harlem where the actress Mary Alice tells a classroom full of black children about the birthday of MX and

eventually how each student should be like MX. Some students then proclaim that they are MX. The film then goes to Soweto where Nelson Mandela recites a quote from MX describing the need to have his masculinity and humanity recognized to another group of students. Once again, the students in the classroom proclaim that they are MX, as the film ends with a large "X" and Aretha Franklin singing the gospel song, "Someday We'll All Be Free."

Lee ended the film in a manner similarly to how he began it. The connection between the image of black male identity and the life of MX is so tightly tied that one need only proclaim to be MX to assume his heroics. For Lee, MX is a black man whose greatest contribution was his exhibition of American black male identity. The two final scenes are Lee's attempt to give the impression that any black person can prove their agency through incorporating characteristics that have traditionally been defined as masculine. In the same way that Lee used his X baseball caps to promote his film, the mediated image of MX becomes a commodity that can be attached to a commodified body to display authentic black masculine identity that can be interpreted as authoritative expressions of black agency. In short, the film is really an example of how to demonstrate black masculine identity rather than a homage to the contributions of MX. MX's own ideology is lost in references to America and American history. "The vibrant, pop-culture marketing of the film gave people permission to claim and learn about Malcolm in a forum that was not threatening…America now provided a healthier, safer atmosphere to do so" (X xv). This environment, of course, was the market place.

Spike Lee authorized marketing paraphernalia to be sold in Macy's and Bloomingdale's. Houston Baker surmises, "in the manner of a true postmodern, Lee understands that his job is to get 'paid in full' so that he can continue producing films of Black cultural resistance" (Baker 173). One of the more controversial aspects of Lee's production was this commodification of items connected to MX. Lee had previously generated attention through this method for other films but these films did not have living heirs. MX's widow had not copyrighted her husband's image or images connected to him prior to the release of Lee's film. Aware of this, Lee advanced his marketing campaign without offering compensation to Shabazz. Because Lee stood to profit when legally entitled others did not, Lee's actions were viewed as predatory and highly controversial. Eventually, Lee was forced to share the profits from his X Jackets, caps and t-shirts with Shabazz (cmgworldwide.com).

After Lee announced his connection to the project and began implementing his marketing plan, other vendors began to sell shirts, baseball caps, jerseys, mugs,

calendars, and tapes of Malcolm's speeches at NOI functions for an estimated total of $100 million in profits. Betty Shabazz was finally forced to secure a licensing deal with Curtis Management, the Indianapolis-based licensing company (Rivera). The company typically received somewhere between five to fifteen percent of merchandizing contract sales and was estimated to have received at least five percent for Malcolm's image (Rivera). Commenting on the plethora of X's around the country Barboza wrote in 1992, "it has become fashionably anti-fashionable and like, rap music, democratized. No longer exclusively 'a black thing' even whites, the 'blue-eyed devils' Malcolm once excoriated, wear X caps, as if they're fans of the same unidentifiable team, members of some secret sect" (Barboza). As Malcolm moved into the realm of public-speak fashion, it became even more difficult to maintain a political image of MX. Spike Lee encouraged people from divergent political associations to feel that MX belonged to them too.

Although Spike Lee was not the only impetus for Malcolm's iconization, he certainly helped promote a mediated image of MX that became synonymous with rebelliousness as opposed to revolution. The process of MX's image transformation from revolutionary figure to rebellious American individualist was finalized in 1999 with the MX Commemorative Stamp. The decision to create a stamp to commemorate MX arose because of the influence of Lee's film and the production machine that it sparked. This newly constructed de-politicized, ahistorical mediated image reconfigured MX as a national hero, an American individualist, divorced from his time, ideas, or beliefs. This paved the way for the USPS stamp. Comments by Postal Service Governor S. David Fineman refer to Malcolm as "a visionary, a man who dreamed of a better world and dared to do something about it" (USPS).

Seven years after the release of Lee's film, the image of MX most associated with MX's American iconization is the USPS stamp issued on January 20, 1999. Created and distributed sixteen years after the first MX stamp, the United States stamp was part of the Black Heritage Series, established in 1978 after a request to the USPS by the founding member of the Black American Heritage Foundation to include black images in the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration (American Philatelic Society) and went on to sell-out of its initial printing of 100 million copies (Postal Bulletin 21988). Both images stand as bookends on the spectrum of the image production of MX during the period of heightened interest by a majority of Americans.

In the stamp selection process, after the committee for production selects an image to commemorate, the actual production of the stamp goes to the Stamp

Development Office of the USPS. Terry McCaffrey, the manager of the Stamp Development Office during the USPS MX stamp development and release, explained the process further:

> Once the design is done, it is given back to the stamp director [who] scans it into his computer, affixes the type and perforations to make it look like a stamp, and then it is brought to the next meeting [Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee] and shown in the subcommittee for design. This is made up of six design professionals, they review each piece of art and make comments on it—adjusting color or the art isn't good enough or we want to try something different or whatever—and then it is taken back for those changes and then it is brought back three months later and tried again and eventually it works. So, it takes on average a year to a year and a half to do a stamp because they [CSAC] only meet every three months. (McCaffrey)

When asked how this process went for the design of the MX stamp, McCaffrey responded by saying:

> We had a research team…their name is Photo Assist [Inc.] and they researched Malcolm X's subject and came back with a wider range, array of photographs to work from and the designer narrowed it down to…two or three different photographs that he felt worked well as a stamp...it did take long for the subcommittee to reach agreement that the one we chose is the one that they felt was the best. (McCaffrey)

When asked about the selection, McCaffrey noted the process of the selection committee's decision to choose the photo that was used as the stamp.

> I vividly remember the subject selection, well actually the photo selection…going through the different photos and trying to find a photo that worked well as a stamp... There were a number of photos where he looked very angry. We didn't want to do that, because people do not want to put stamps on their envelopes of somebody looking angry. So we had to find photos that had some depth to it and was a good quality photo, not a candid photograph. (McCaffrey)

The idea of MX as an "angry" person did not originate with the Stamp Development Committee. MX was often referred to by the *New York Daily News* moniker "the angriest black man in America." Malcolm's political behavior that labeled him as an "angry black man," (a title which he embraced and used) would have to be minimized if he were to transition into an American icon. To reach a wider audience, MX's image could not be attached to Black Nationalist ideas, politics, or

images. Presenting an image of MX that supported a political message of revolution and one that would reconnect him to his political ideology and message, would prevent the majority of Americans from accessing MX as simply an American icon.

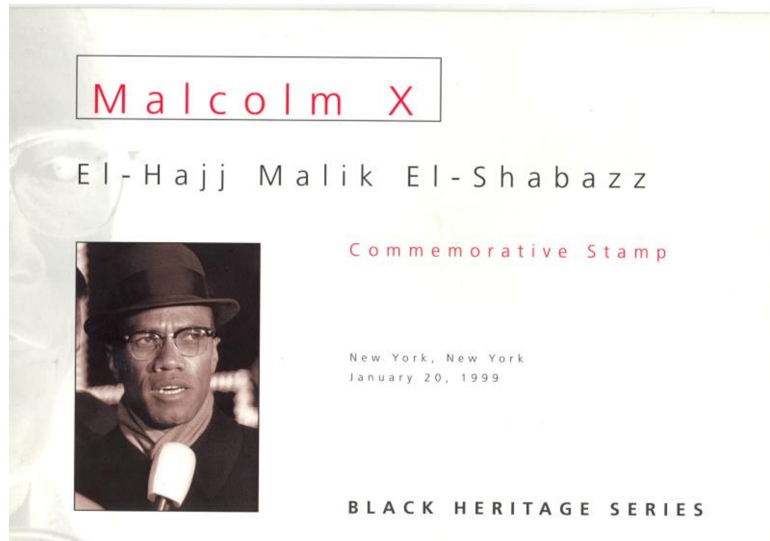
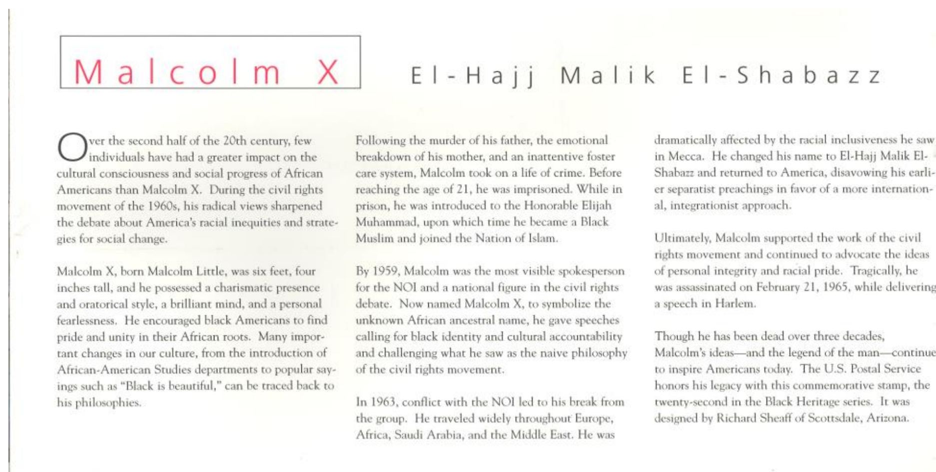


Figure 1. U.S. Postal Service. *Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Commemorative Stamp Program—Cover Page,* Cover photos: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, Stamp Design: Richard Sheaff, Layout and Design: Pat Marshall Design, Inc., 1998.

This is precisely why USPS Governor Fineman referred to MX as “a modern-day revolutionary who openly fought for the end of oppression and injustice” (Lewis 5). Fineman does not mention the methods adopted to bring about revolutionary change such as MX’s campaign to bring the United States in front of the United Nations to stand trial for its inhuman treatment of black people by courting the favor of newly independent African nations during the Cold War. Without historical knowledge of MX’s legacy, it is difficult to find a verification for this tribute in the USPS’s Opening Ceremony Program. In fact, the postal program (see Figure 1) states that MX “disavowed his earlier separatist preaching in favor of a more international, integrationist approach” (see Figure 2). According to the Malcolm X Commemoration Committee’s Communication Officer Zayid Muhammad:

> In our position then, the government, with this stamp, is continuing its efforts to distort and co-op Malcolm's legacy in death the way they absolutely could not do so in life…by implicitly asserting that he became an "American integrationist Civil Rights leader," and that he was not the fearless, uncompromising revolutionary that we know he was. (Muhammad 9)

MX did note his broadening perspective on race relations in the United States in various speeches and interviews. However, he rarely talked about integration in terms that Roy Wilkins, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, would recognize. MX spoke in terms of coalition building rather than of integration: "People in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change and a better world has to be built, and the only way it's going to be built is with extreme methods. I for one will join with anyone, I don't care what color you are, as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth" (X 182). MX was happy to employ any person in the army he envisioned. But his revolutionary intent is not reflected in the label of "American integrationist."



Malcolm X

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

Over the second half of the 20th century, few individuals have had a greater impact on the cultural consciousness and social progress of African Americans than Malcolm X. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, his radical views sharpened the debate about America's racial inequities and strategies for social change.

Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, was six feet, four inches tall, and he possessed a charismatic presence and oratorical style, a brilliant mind, and a personal fearlessness. He encouraged black Americans to find pride and unity in their African roots. Many important changes in our culture, from the introduction of African-American Studies departments to popular sayings such as "Black is beautiful," can be traced back to his philosophies.

Following the murder of his father, the emotional breakdown of his mother, and an inattentive foster care system, Malcolm took on a life of crime. Before reaching the age of 21, he was imprisoned. While in prison, he was introduced to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, upon which time he became a Black Muslim and joined the Nation of Islam.

By 1959, Malcolm was the most visible spokesperson for the NOI and a national figure in the civil rights debate. Now named Malcolm X, to symbolize the unknown African ancestral name, he gave speeches calling for black identity and cultural accountability and challenging what he saw as the naive philosophy of the civil rights movement.

In 1963, conflict with the NOI led to his break from the group. He traveled widely throughout Europe, Africa, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East. He was dramatically affected by the racial inclusiveness he saw in Mecca. He changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and returned to America, disavowing his earlier separatist preachings in favor of a more international, integrationist approach.

Ultimately, Malcolm supported the work of the civil rights movement and continued to advocate the ideas of personal integrity and racial pride. Tragically, he was assassinated on February 21, 1965, while delivering a speech in Harlem.

Though he has been dead over three decades, Malcolm's ideas—and the legend of the man—continue to inspire Americans today. The U.S. Postal Service honors his legacy with this commemorative stamp, the twenty-second in the Black Heritage series. It was designed by Richard Sheaff of Scottsdale, Arizona.

Figure 2. U.S. Postal Service. *Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Commemorative Stamp—Biography*, Cover photos: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, Stamp Design: Richard Sheaff, Layout and Design: Pat Marshall Design, Inc., 1998.

Once the decision to create the stamp had been made, the USPS faced the thorny issue of which photograph to choose. The press release about the stamp stated that the photograph chosen was taken in New York City on May 21, 1964, MX's first appearance after his "historic and broadening trip to the Moslem holy city of

Mecca" (USPS). In fact, according to Paul Lee, the historian for *Malcolm X*, the stamp photo was "taken during an interview in a Cairo, Egypt hotel lobby on July 14, 1964" (Lee "Debate Escalates"). This disparity is significant because it indicates how important it was for the USPS to place the photo and, by extension, the image of MX in his age of enlightenment, and not in the earlier portions of his political life. If the photo could be attached to one of the most significant moments of transformation in the life of MX, it would authenticate the representation of MX as an American icon. Robert L. Haggins, MX's personal photographer, believed that "Malcolm would have rejected the photograph used on the postage stamp" (Gilyard 8). According to Manuel Gilyard, president of the New York Chapter of the Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections (ESPER), Haggins believed that the picture used for the "poster issued by the postal [service] should have been the one used for the stamp" (Gilyard 8). The photo (see Figure 3) showed a smiling Malcolm, in a non-candid photograph, one of the criteria for a stamp.

Figure 3. Photograph of Malcolm X suggested by Robert Haggins. www.malcolm-x.org/media/pic_07.htm.

To imply the USPS did not take into account the previous images of MX would be incorrect. According to McCaffrey:

> the postal service was not apprehensive, but they were concerned about the issuance of the Malcolm X stamp…what the reaction would be with the American public and they debated it within the Committee for a while and it was discussed with the Postmaster General and everyone felt…he certainly was worthy of a stamp even though he is controversial…and we decided, let's go ahead with it…Let's see what happens. (McCaffrey)

The notion that Malcolm's controversial legacy might affect the reception of the stamp implies that the USPS explicitly decided to honor the authentic prince rather than the revolutionary. It is clear that the USPS actively participated in choosing an image of MX based primarily in the perception of MX as an American icon. McCaffrey and others state that the Shabazz family, first Dr. Betty and later Attallah, Malcolm's eldest daughter, agreed with the choice of image. Attallah Shabazz felt that the stamp "shows how Malcolm appeared to most Americans" (Lee "Debate Escalates").

Using another photograph—an "angry" one, for example—might have decreased the momentum pushing MX's image toward iconization. Tension between the prince and the revolutionary is exemplified in debates surrounding the USPS's choice of image for the stamp. Significantly, the image chosen depicts neither a heroic black man nor an angry MX with clenched fist and index finger in the air. The stamp portrays a thoughtful intellectual wearing glasses with his hand curled next to his chin in a professor-like pose rather than a clenched fist. This choice of image presents a fascinating amalgamation of two strains of popular thought surrounding MX in the 1990s. Neither the clenched fist nor the shining prince, this MX is made acceptable to American culture at large expressly by being absorbed into an academic, thinking narrative. A prince governs, a revolutionary fights, and an academic merely philosophizes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Photograph of Malcolm X Stamp by USPS. colnect.com/en/stamps/stamp/97142-Malcolm_X-Black_Heritage_Series-United_States_of_America.

Overall, the stamp was an enormous success. The stamp sold out of its first 100 million copies, more than twice the number for the previous Black Heritage Stamp (Akilah) and almost five times the number of identified black Americans. As the sale numbers indicate, Malcolm had entered into mainstream culture as currency and commercial property. No longer restricted to black history, the mediated image of MX became that of an American icon, an image that would go into the twenty-first century as a symbol of American transformation and opportunity.

Among opponents of the stamp were Black Nationalists who were appalled by the same co-option that the Lee film produced. Indeed, many of them such as Yemi Touré claimed that "Malcolm's on a Stamp and We Got Licked." Like Akilah Monifah, they struggled to remind the American public of Malcolm's activities and words during the final moments of his life. Many who disliked the stamp such as Paul Lee concluded that the stamp was an attempt "to bring Malcolm 'in' … a cultural symbol, a conferring of status, a mark of acceptance" (Touré).

Yet negative opinions never gained enough momentum to result in a letter-writing campaign to the USPS. As McCaffrey states:

> We expected more criticism from the public, but we never really received it…um…those few letters we received…were…you expect that sort of thing. When we did the Malcolm X stamp, we assumed that there would be criticism, but we were surprised at how little criticism there was…were pleasantly surprised at that. (McCaffrey)

When asked if he and other members of the committee were surprised that the groups that had rejected MX during his lifetime including B'nai B'rith and other Jewish organizations, supported the stamp, his reaction was similar: "We were a little bit surprised by that. We weren't sure who was going to support it, but we were surprised by the array of people that did support it. That's always a pleasant surprise for us" (McCaffrey). The lack of negative public response signaled the strength of the transformation of MX. But it also reflected the nature of the stamp itself. An intellectual MX is a domesticated MX. His fist's transformation to a chin-prop does not leave much ground for disagreement.

With his movie *Malcolm X*, Lee rekindled a mass-marketed revival in MX. The phenomenon of the X-memorabilia took over the country for a short period in the 1990s and assured that MX's mediated image would thrive outside of the black community. *Malcolm X* and the cultural production surrounding it projected MX into the annals of American folklore and substantiated his legacy as an American

icon. It also added significant fodder to the perception of MX as an American intellectual. As Paul Shackel suggests, “The public memory associated with highly visible objects is always being constructed, changed, and challenged, and at all times power and the challenge to power are situational” (657). Certainly, the moment of high visibility of the image during the 1990s is not with us presently. However, a current display of any X paraphernalia still allows the user to “Fight the Power!” Indeed, the construction of MX’s mediated image exemplified the construction of public memory debates. The process of commemorating MX led to the incorporation of MX into popular culture. This allowed various types of Americans to become familiar with the mediated image regardless of previous knowledge or connection to MX. Moreover, the circulation of the image in popular culture led to a re-examination of MX by leading international scholars of the black experience.

Fueled by the cultural production of Spike Lee’s film and the USPS stamp, MX became an American icon that moved unfettered through different sectors of America due, in large part, to his depoliticization and ahistorical treatment. Without both the cultural production of Spike Lee’s film and the USPS stamp, it is doubtful MX would have made the transition from “angriest black man” to American icon. Crucial to the racialized project is the production of images that can signify meanings publicly. The importance of the mediated image, however fragmented, depoliticized, or ahistorical it may be, cannot be understated.

Davis’s transformation of MX into a shining black prince allowed a black man to gain heroic stature into mainstream American consciousness. The commodification of MX’s image—which extended from hats and potato chip bags to a stamp—did lead to a wider knowledge of MX’s thought. Yet, by being made into an American hero, MX lost both his status as a prince and his status as a revolutionary. The process led from his invocation as a “shining hero” to being a letter on a t-shirt symbolizing what he once really stood for to finally being moved to a piece of paper with monetary value. In true American fashion, the process of commodification led to a real commodity. One that could be depicted in a museum, a funny YouTube video, or even on an envelope—able to carry messages or pay bills without the heavy burden of attempting to create a movement to free black people.

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