

## Oral History in Performance: Weaving Narrative Identity and Reinventing Malcolm X

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### Abstract:

As a coda to his emotionally charged 1992 film *Malcolm X*, director Spike Lee inserted a narrative excerpt understood to be actor and writer Ossie Davis's "eulogy" for Malcolm X, performed at the activist leader's sole funeral service. Davis's commemorative narrative was instead a public profession of X's historic contribution to society, and Lee's project served to mythologize X as a leader whose violent end echoed the violence commonly committed against Black men. The passage was in fact an edited excerpt of comments made by Davis during a memorial service held one day earlier. Less understood is that the two different services held in commemoration of the slain leader each served to address multiple aspects of a disparately located man while seeking an authentic commemoration of both Malcolm X and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The primary question lies in how theories of archive and repertoire affect our current understanding of acoustic evidence and how closely we interrogate those recorded materials and analyze the contexts surrounding their use. As historical evidence Lee's film leaves much to be desired, yet achieves its goal of entertaining and educating movie audiences. I argue that Davis's speech performed on the day before Malcolm X's funeral, has come to be remembered as the sole instance of commemorative narrative largely based on the reception of Lee's landmark film, in which Lee relocated the speech to provide a more poetic, personal, and polemical narrative of Malcolm X.

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Spike Lee's 1992 biographical film *Malcolm X* utilizes a recording of a speech constructed and performed by actor and dramatist Ossie Davis as the coda to the film and presents it as Davis's eulogy for the slain leader. In truth, Davis presented a different narrative as eulogy for Malcolm X, and the excerpt presented by Lee was in fact taken from comments made by Davis during an earlier memorial event commemorating the slain leader's passing. Lee's film sought to reframe or possibly to elaborate multiple beliefs held by scholars regarding both the public and private images of Malcolm X. Lee's cinematic retelling of the life of El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, alias Malcolm X, alias Malcolm Little served as one of many attempts to clarify the life of a man who some perceived as a promoter of violence against multiple groups. Still others perceived the efforts of Lee's retelling of Malcolm X's life, as well as that of Alex Haley's (1992), as fictionalized narratives, each attempting aspects of what Manning Marable described as "re-invention" rather than simple clarifications of history.

The validity of Ossie Davis's comments and authorship in the recording used by director Lee are not in question. However, the poetic nature of the excerpt caused Manning Marable to reference it as *soliloquy* and, while Lee's attempt to valorize and historicize Malcolm X's legacy is poignant, only through the deciphering of recorded materials and Federal Bureau of Investigation documents can the reader clarify the facts of the performative events. The meaning generated by sometimes falsely

constructed oral texts, based upon memory and folklore, allows for the possible manipulations of contexts. In this case, the problematic nature of recorded materials as representative of factual archive may call into question the validity of that archive.

Director Spike Lee's "artistic license" is similar to narrative liberties taken by writer Alex Haley in his "autobiography" of Malcolm X. In that instance, Haley's book could not in truth be an actual autobiographical narrative in that it was in fact "told to" Haley and exists today as an example of autobiography as literary nonfiction rather than straight autobiography. While the defining aspects between the two remain unclear, Paul John Eakin provides clarification by defining autobiography as the work that self-narration performs and, more importantly as "a discourse of identity, delivered, bit by bit, in the stories we tell ourselves day in and day out." For Eakin the construction of autobiographical narrative exists as an integral part of "a lifelong process of identity construction" (2004, 4). Since the Haley written text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was "told to" Haley, to what extent might it be read as a romanticized construct meant to preserve X's legacy? Most importantly, this article provides a commentary on works by Lee and others that sought to clarify the lived experiences of Malcolm X and it does so by presenting aspects of those works alongside the historical archive.

A study by theorist Philippe Lejeune on the structure of autobiographical narrative suggests the presence of an *autobiographical pact*. The existence of such a pact, according to Lejeune, while leaving certain points blurred as to the identity of author and narrator when the two require distinction, locates autobiography first as a "contractual genre" so that analysis of such a genre becomes less about "internal analysis of the functioning of the text, of the structure, or of aspects of the published text" and more specifically about the "implicit or explicit contract proposed by author to reader" (1989, 30). Thus, the Haley/Malcolm X-rendered collaboration might, as read through Lejeune's study, exist as a private, immutable contract between author(s) and reader. But, does such a contract extend to director Lee as he too embarks upon a similar weaving of the narrative surrounding the life and works of Malcolm X? Is such a fictionalization of history, in the very documents we assume to be factual, a legitimate practice? Spike Lee's task was: to create a popular cinematic narrative that could satisfy an audience's thirst for information about the life of Malcolm X, and to meet certain established criteria at the box office. Does this give him license to misplace Davis's speech, or is he misrepresenting the historical truth? Does his manipulation of the acoustical archive render that archive less trustworthy?

This article is an exploration of Davis's eulogy as an instance of commemorative reimagining toward a combining of diverse group efforts. However, more specifically the eulogy is analyzed as an instance where the reinscriptions of previously constructed images were of great import. It is an instance of Malcolm X's separatist image as the representative of the Nation of Islam being in conflict with images necessary for his valorization and how best to reorder conflicted narrative imagery toward a positively located biographical narrative of that valorization. It also shows how such an act of *reinvention* on the part of Davis, Lee, and others serves in small part to reorder social movement organizational efforts, and present-day community involvement strategies, and more importantly to rewrite histories toward much desired positive outcomes both then and now.

### **"Did you know Brother Malcolm?"**

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, or Malcolm X, was born on May 19, 1925 at Omaha, Nebraska's University Hospital and was christened Malcolm Little. His parents, Earl Little and Louise Norton were

avid supporters of Marcus Garvey's UNIA or Universal Negro Improvement Association.<sup>[1]</sup> Following the still questionable death of Earl Little, Malcolm and his siblings moved for a time to Lansing, Michigan. After a tumultuous childhood of poverty and violence on the part of rural Whites, young Malcolm was relocated to Boston in order to improve his educational prospects. This move, however, led to the young man's involvement in a life of petty crime and violence. After multiple arrests Malcolm's involvement in a burglary scheme conviction led to three eight-to-ten year sentences in Massachusetts state prisons (Bangura 2010). During this period Malcolm Little, also known as Detroit Red,<sup>[2]</sup> began correspondence with the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad. (Clegg 2009).

Correspondence would lead to a full conversion to the beliefs and religious teachings of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm Little would become Malcolm X. More than any of Malcolm's reinventions the loss of his given name was most significant. He stated, "I dropped my slave name. That was my Malcolm Little, but I don't carry a slave name anymore. I carry X. I carry X because I don't know my real last name" (Gallen 1995, 55). In one of his final acts of reinvention Malcolm laid the groundwork for his last act of narrative reordering. What also becomes clear is the possibility that director Lee in his film has merely taken up the baton of reinvention practiced by Malcolm X.

### **Funeral at Faith Temple Church of God in Christ** <sup>[3]</sup>

The funeral for El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, most commonly known as Malcolm X, was held on Saturday, February 27, 1965 at the Faith Temple Church of God in Christ in Harlem, New York. The church had been established in 1948 by a small congregation under the guidance of Dr. Alvin A. Childs and its first location was in the Imperial Elks Hall on Harlem's 129<sup>th</sup> St. In its early history the church was a transitory entity and was at times housed in a circus tent, and at other locations in the area. On Mother's Day, May 1952 the church leased its permanent home at 1763 Amsterdam Avenue and commemorated the event with a congregational march to its new location.

Due to bomb threats and the heightened tensions surrounding the assassination of Malcolm X larger venues of worship closed their doors to the possibility of the outspoken leader's funeral service. According to the church's website, "A fearless Bishop A. A. Childs dared to allow Malcolm X's slim body with bullet holes in the chest to be rolled into Faith Temple" (Childs Memorial Temple). The hyperbole contained within the Faith Temple's own narrative retelling also mirrors the fictionalizations, some heightened, some realistic, in the construction of the narrative surrounding Malcolm X.

In a *Village Voice* article published in the aftermath of Malcolm X's funeral service, Marlene Nadel commented on the "strangeness" of the slain Muslim leader's funeral service. It is that strangeness that allows for a discussion not only of the funeral but also of the multiple instances of eulogy, funeral oration, and comments presented and the resulting ambiguities of each of those narratives. Nadel's observations supply the reader with an objective view of what occurred during the service. A primary point of focus lies within the recognition of existing dualities of faith at play during the service. Those same dualities, while likely present throughout Malcolm X's turbulent rise, were made all the more prevalent through attempts at commemoration and mourning. Present during the funeral were mourners, family members, press representatives, and law enforcement officials from both the New York City Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Followers of both Islam and of a deeply felt African American-based Christianity each staked a claim of possession to the

deceased leader's legacy. It is in reference to those claims that the suggested strangeness arose. According to Nadel:

The funeral of the man known as Malcolm X was a blend of Islamic faith and Christian custom. The priest wore the brown robe and white turban of the Middle East; the widow the black veiling and clothes of western tradition. (1965, 1)

Observable conflict arose almost instantly from within the ranks of mourners as well as among close family members.

Flowers are not part of a Moslem's funeral. Yet Betty Shabazz sent flowers to her husband. Embossed on the five-by-two-foot bank of red carnations was the Star and Crescent of Islam. . . . Death for a Moslem is supposed to be a private matter. There is not supposed to be any public exhibition of the body, which must not be kept from the grave beyond two sunsets. Yet they kept Malcolm's body for a full week, and 30,000 people visited Unity Funeral Home and another 3,000 came to the church trying to hold onto the part of them that had died. (Ibid.)

This attempted sharing of the deceased's legacy can be traced to the placement of Malcolm X as a spokesman for two aspects of African American life and faith: first, as a spokesman who acted aggressively in the interest of African Americans and for whom passive resistance seemed ineffective compared to possible direct action and, secondly, as a spiritual spokesman whose more secularized stance via The Nation of Islam could legitimate the suggestion of physical force in the face of escalating brutality. Malcolm X located himself as the locus of White recognition of Black America's increasing rage regarding their worsening circumstances.

Manning Marable also addresses existing dualities in the public perceptions of Malcolm X:

What made him truly original was that he presented himself as the embodiment of the two central figures of African American folk culture, simultaneously the hustler/trickster and the preacher/minister. Janus-faced, the trickster is unpredictable, capable of outrageous transgressions; the minister saves souls, redeems shattered lives, and promises a new world (2011, 11).

In his comments regarding Malcolm X, Ossie Davis attempted to engage the existing dualities of Malcolm X in comments to interviewers in the days following the murder. Davis himself referenced the presence of two distinct aspects of Harlem, the location of most of Malcolm X's core support (Goldman 1973, 299).<sup>[4]</sup> As speaker Davis's comments were in service to the reinvented aspects of Malcolm X commemorated during the event, one of many FBI reports identified Ossie Davis as the master of ceremonies rather than as a reader of eulogy or speaker. During the funeral service Davis is known to have served as both narrator and familial conduit for those in attendance. The funeral service itself had been planned by what some called a "backstage committee" led by Davis and then lawyer and civil rights advocate Percy Sutton (Bell 2009).<sup>[5]</sup> The two men would also be responsible for raising funds to bury Malcolm X and to provide financial support for his widow Betty Shabazz and their children. The fundraising efforts resulted in Malcolm X being placed in a \$2,100 bronze coffin and covered in glass to allow mourners to view the deceased.

Faith Temple Church of God in Christ was a sturdy building that had been a Harlem movie house that was “made-over” for the funeral. According to reports police saturated the location and were stationed on rooftops surrounding the event. Peter Goldman, then senior editor at *Newsweek* Magazine stated:

There were 350 people queued up in the freezing cold when the doors opened that night, and 22,000 filed past the coffin during the week. They came in and out of the alleys and the stockrooms and the bootblack stands and Miss Anne’s kitchen to say goodbye. Women wept and fainted. One night a [B]lack stood at the coffin and said that he wanted to die with Brother Malcolm and raged at the police to shoot him; they moved him gently out. (1973, 301)

The police presence for the funeral itself counted in the hundreds although numbers vary. While the majority were stationed at various exits and around the seating area, eight officers surrounded the coffin and two Black plainclothes officers flanked the widow Betty Shabazz.

### **Davis’s Funeral Oration and the Absent Eulogy**

Standard eulogy is defined by its ability to commend the character and services of an individual. A sermon, in its most basic form, is defined as a particularized speech or discourse but with the addition of specific variables of location, religious belief, and cultural aspects its definition shifts. With the addition of a historically rooted signifier such as a preacher or a specific type of speaker that same sermon becomes a particular type of narrative form with a definitive cultural currency. A sermon based on a text of scripture and constructed for the purpose of giving religious instruction becomes a method of conveying meanings that are spiritual in nature. Folklorist Gerald L. Davis referenced these types of religious speech as “supposed spontaneous sermon” and suggested that such scripture or “the word” as “God’s codebook for secular living and sacred example.” The word, as presented by G. Davis, is also expressed as possessing aspects that require validation. This type of validation is conveyed upon the speaker by those in attendance; further, a great deal of the interaction that occurs between a preacher and his congregation is visual (1985, xiv).

Bruce A. Rosenberg, a professor of folklore, studied similar sermons for their formulaic qualities. According to Rosenberg, it is “by the skillful manipulation of metrically consistent phrases, some memorized and some spontaneously composed” that speakers have been able to spin culturally constructed narratives at great length (1988, 1). It is then through the construction of such narratives and their performance that a speaker’s community persona is either denied or validated by those in attendance; it is through the bestowing of such authority that spoken texts are allowed to resonate or certain speakers are removed from the event or from the historical narrative of such events. The ability to manipulate the spoken word to a congregation using specifically set methods of conveyance adds to the acceptance of the speaker and the message shared. A sermon can accomplish sacred and non-sacred outcomes similar to those suggested of an eulogy.

In part this article reads the funeral oration and eulogy constructed and performed by actor and activist Ossie Davis as one attempt to combine multiple narratives in a then prevailing climate of emergent counter movements within the civil rights movement’s existing organizational structure. Similar to the redefinitions taking place in the movement of the time, [6] Manning Marable, professor of

public affairs, posits that Malcolm X's life was one also heavily dependent upon reinvention. Such a journey of reinvention was, according to Marable, centered on Malcolm's "lifelong quest to discern the meaning and substance of faith" (2011, 12). Similar to the modern civil rights movement of which he remained on the fringes, Malcolm X suffered the fruits of his own reordering—his own attempts at a clarification of purpose.

A second aspect of the article explores the location of the eulogy for Malcolm X as ambiguous due to the absence of its actual speaker from all but a few master narratives of the funeral event. The speaker Ahmed, or according to some, Omar Osman, has himself been at times cast out from the existing Malcolm X narrative, and at other times given authority to convey his perceptions of the true Malcolm X. The presence of such ambiguities simply mirrors equally engaging questions regarding the many possible truths of one deceased individual whose identity was marked by multiple instances of self-naming as emblems of each self-reinvention.

So, the two individuals, Ossie Davis and Ahmed Omar Osman are remembered on several fronts as the speakers most polarizing in their ability to address the two divergent aspects of the deceased Malcolm X's faith. Davis's funeral oration for Malcolm X addressed the deceased leader's service and faith in African America's ability to fight for a place within the existing American system. The message was one of a newly situated intolerance for White society's treatment of a large percentage of its population through political, economic, and social engagement. Omar Osman's eulogy sought to clarify Malcolm X's transition from a less-informed follower of an African American Islam to the universality of Islam as all-inclusive and diverse.

Ossie Davis was an actor, playwright, producer, director, and civil rights activist best known for his work in theater and in films. Davis's life mirrored that of Malcolm X in many ways: each had been raised in rural areas of the country, and each had experienced years of Jim Crow-era stigmatization. Davis was well known in the African American community at large and was easily recognized in Harlem. Like Malcolm X, Davis and his wife, the actress Ruby Dee, lived and worked in the New York area and had become well known as successful performers when few in the entertainment industry succeeded in gaining any recognition. Davis, like Malcolm X, had also embraced his duty to the people of Harlem as one who could be depended upon to speak in defense of that community during instances of strife. Davis's recognition and efforts on behalf of Harlem's poor delegated him to a position of authority within that community. With his activities on behalf of Malcolm's widow he gained further currency as the speaker for the family and, more importantly as, "master of ceremonies" during the funeral event for the deceased Malcolm X.

Regarding Ahmed Omar Osman, little is known, but multiple publications by Malcolm X's immediate family solidify his place as interlocutor in the slain leader's awakening to a true Islam. One of many Federal Bureau of Investigation reports and dispatches written during the funeral service identifies him as being present during the service and as having delivered the eulogy alongside Davis's oration. However, beyond these resources, more solidly verifiable references become problematic. According to the same Federal Bureau of Investigation internal report:

Eulogies were given by Armond Osmon/Phonetic/, identified only as from Sudan and as a representative of the Islamic Center of Geneva and the United States, who commented on a trip to the Middle East and Africa made by Malcolm X in Nineteen Sixty Four. This speaker claimed that after Malcolm X broke with the Nation of Islam he changed and was for racial equality. (Sizoo 1965, 3)

While this report references the individual as a close confidant of the deceased yet another source inserts a conflicting reference. Marable draws attention to an individual similarly named and adds other vital aspects to the identification of Osman. Marable wrote:

Also in 1962, another Sudanese Muslim, Ahmed Osman, studying at Dartmouth College, attended Mosque No. 7 services and directly challenged Malcolm X during a question and answer period. Osman was particularly agitated by the NOI's (Nation of Islam) claims that Elijah Muhammad was the "Messenger of God," and that whites were literally "devils." Osman came away "greatly impressed with Malcolm," but "unsatisfied" with his answers. (2011, 224)

Other sources substantiate the existence of Ahmed Omar Osman as the individual referenced in FBI reports and by Marable as one and the same. In her *Village Voice* article covering the funeral of Malcolm X, Marlene Nadel shared an interview with a man who was identified as Ahmed Os(s)man, head of the Islamic Center in Switzerland. According to Nadel:

Ahmed Ossman, head of the Islamic Center in Switzerland, said that he was shocked by the remarks of Carl Rowan, the Negro director of the United States Information Agency. Rowan had said that the African press was mistaken in interpreting the death of Malcolm X as the death of a hero. He charged Malcolm with preaching separation and [B]lack supremacy. Osman fervently declared that Malcolm had abjured all racism after making his pilgrimage to Mecca. (1965, 10)

While a concrete clarification regarding the identity of the individual in question is important, this study finds equal importance in the individual Osman's specific references to the deceased leader's faith. Clarifications regarding the relationship of the two men can also be found in publications by Malcolm X's widow Betty Shabazz. These references coupled with others allow this study to focus on Ahmed Osman as a verifiable link to discussions of Malcolm X's radical transformations of faith and how those same shifts exist as one of many identifiable instances of reinvention in the narratives surrounding him.

Betty Shabazz further clarifies both the existence of Osman and the importance of the relationship between him and Malcolm X. Shabazz substantiates the circumstances surrounding their first meeting and verifies Osman as having been the same student who had confronted the validity of the teachings of Elijah Mohammad identified by Marable. Most important to this identification is the fact that it was Osman who began a period of correspondence that would enable Malcolm X to begin to understand a pure Islam. In his biography on the life of Betty Shabazz, Russell Rickford, a professor of history, wrote of Osman's importance to both Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz. According to Rickford:

Osman began sending Malcolm orthodox Islamic literature in 1962. The minister responded graciously to the graduate student, but only in a note invoking nation dogma, printed on the sect's stationery, and embroidered with homages to (Elijah) Muhammad. (2003, 178)

While their initial engagements were minimal the two men soon established a concrete tutorial relationship, which pinpoints Osman as the individual who had assisted in Malcolm X's transition of faith and supports the contention that it was Osman who gave Malcolm X his true faith. It was that faith that served as part of a dichotomous relation reflected in the Christian and Muslim aspects of Malcolm X's reinvention during his funeral service, with the assistance of eulogistic narrative and funeral oration. It was the existence of such a dichotomy and the mediation of the tensions created by it that called for an all-inclusive funeral event.

First and foremost Davis's funeral oration, while heavily metaphoric in structure, limited the commemoration of Malcolm X to his work and community recognition in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. In those comments Malcolm X was identified as a champion of that community and, most importantly, of the interests of that community rather than those of the wider civil rights struggle. While Malcolm X's rhetoric had gained recognition within large numbers of African American communities, wider recognition and dispersal would come after his death rather than during his tumultuous lifetime. The comments also addressed the possibility of those who would locate the slain leader negatively and as alienated from other social movements working outside the limited New York metropolitan area. Why is this? The answer lies in the fact that New York, and more specifically Harlem, can best be seen as yet another in the grouping of previously mentioned grassroots social movements whose goals, recruitment, and mobilization efforts addressed the interests specific to its community. This fact more than any other identifies Davis's comments as a specific community-focused commentary rather than as a eulogy for Malcolm X.

In his remarks, Davis's task was twofold: to attempt a reordering of the social movement goals and tactics for Harlem while also repositioning the leader for a national palate. Thus Ossie Davis stated:

Many will ask what Harlem finds to honor in this stormy, controversial and bold young captain—and we will smile. Many will say turn away—away from this man; for he is not a man but a demon, a monster, a subverter and an enemy of the [B]lack man—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 to 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? Did he ever do a mean thing? 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, [B]lack manhood! (O. Davis 2010, 29)

With these statements Davis identified Malcolm X's importance as specific to the interests of the Harlem community but invites the listener beyond the scope of Harlem to seek knowledge of the deceased. He also questioned whether the listener was truly aware of the deceased's importance to that community and later suggested that other interpretations of him were negated by those actions accomplished in defense of a specific community.

This was his meaning to his people. And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves. Last year, from Africa, he wrote these words to a friend: "My journey," he says, "is almost ended, and I have a much broader scope than when I started out, which I believe will add new life and dimension to our struggle for freedom and honor and dignity in the States." (Ibid.)

Davis utilized the commemoration of the passing of Malcolm X as a means of seeking a biographical method of fixing Malcolm X's legacy. Whereas previous funerals functioned as commemorations of iconic personalities and served various communities' continuation of group mobilization efforts—in essence a remobilization in the face of symbolic loss—this service sought to solidify image as historical narrative.

The perceived negative content contained within Malcolm X's earlier narratives would require mollification. While the leader himself had come to a shifting of his previous beliefs regarding his separatist views, his death would require attempts by others to continue the softening of that narrative. Davis's eulogy can be read as such an attempt. Toward that effort Davis and Osman would each seek to



shift perceptions of Malcolm X's rhetoric from one of violent action to that of a faith-based martyr seeking religious resolve shortly before his passing.

### **The Trustworthiness of Historical Evidence**

Lee's film *Malcolm X* was released in February of 1992 to mixed reviews after multiple issues regarding the film's content and conflicts over its post-production funding. Lee's earlier films already stood at the forefront of a new wave of Black filmmakers that had begun to push Black filmmaking projects into the upper levels of film production and distribution and to garner new interest from mainstream film audiences (Canby 1992). Like the plays of August Wilson, these films utilized themes which supported well-constructed narratives based within realistic constructions of African American lives and experience. What resulted were distinctly cohesive representations of the lives of individuals whose experiences were drawn sharply rather than blurred by fictionalized narratives lacking believable story construction.

In addressing the question of how any passage of time may or may not affect the trustworthiness of acoustic historical evidence, as in the case of the funeral services for Malcolm X, Lee's film presents one such instance wherein the validity of acoustical evidence, as narration, becomes complicated by the use of that evidence in both performative and narrative acts.

In his article, "Autobiography, Authorship, and the Contested Self in *Malcolm X*" film theorist David LaRocca seeks to clarify our understanding of re-imaginings of Malcolm X through the discussion of Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1992). LaRocca rightly suggests the presence of a reconsideration of our understanding of autobiography. According to LaRocca autobiography is filled with "self creation." With works such as Haley's book that are both "autobiographical and not written by its subject," the question of the authenticity of the work becomes even more complicated because others have constructed the existing work. (2011, 260.)

LaRocca makes a valid point when suggesting that, "like the life it aims to account for, autobiography is fashioned, a literary artifact, necessarily created and fictitious" (264). In truth, since Malcolm X's own instance of supposed autobiography exists only "as told to" actual writer Alex Haley, what becomes obvious is Lee's co-opting, not only of those popular aspects of the life of the slain leader and those especially performative aspects of Haley's text, but also that distancing qualifier "as told to" and its ability to resonate forward as a factual narrative or further, as an instance of heightened autobiography. Does Lee, too, engage in a narrative construction not unlike Haley's? Though the question calls for exploration, it is the use of specific acoustical tools and their placement as coda to the Lee film that begs a separate inquiry. Lee's filmic rendering of the life and death of Malcolm X serves all the needs of a popular movie and its telling serves to both historicize the deceased but more importantly to effectively valorize him.

Coda is by definition a concluding act forming an addition to the basic structure of a narrative. Whether the narrative be a musical or textual effort the fact remains that coda as gesture serves to elaborate the existing work. Further, such inquiry, in this instance, also calls into question not only the validity of authorship in other instances of narratives based on the slain leader's life but also

understandings of authorship and autobiography and their perception in certain groups and communities.

Spike Lee created a poignant narrative, but it is a narrative that is not fully historical. The historical narrative neither satisfies nor complicates the accepted social narrative. As historical evidence Lee's film leaves much to be desired, yet it achieves its goal of entertaining a movie audience. As historical evidence, the recordings of Davis's actual eulogy and the commemorative discourse performed at an earlier memorial service each serve as proof of the actual events. The question becomes what is important about the facts of the situation and what is not. What is important about analysis of the historical eulogy over the more poetic comments presented? Is it important that we *not* allow Spike Lee to rewrite history for what he deems the "greater good?"

The eulogy and commemorative discourses presented at the funeral and memorial services for Malcolm X were constructed as instances of collective reimagining. They were instances where existing images of the deceased complicated the new meanings generated within the commemorative narrative. The individual narratives each accomplish those aspects of eulogy and commemorative discourse accepted within both standard religious and civic services. Seeking to clarify those aspects specific to funeral eulogy Bryant Keith Alexander suggests the following as framework criteria toward the construction of a well-made eulogistic narrative.

A eulogy responds to those human needs created when a community is sundered by death of one of its members.

A eulogy will acknowledge the death.

A eulogy will attempt to transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense.

A eulogy establishes the relationship between the speaker and the deceased and those on whose behalf the speaker speaks.

A eulogy may attempt to reconcile the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the deceased.

A eulogy may attempt to ease the mourners terror at confronting their own mortality.

A eulogy will console the mourners by arguing that the deceased lives on.

A eulogy will signal shared cultural beliefs about the death.

A eulogy will attempt to reknit the community. (2006, 172)

The requirements as suggested allow for a eulogy "to be accomplished in a manner fit for the solemnity of the occasion." The importance of such "truth" is so that "in the midst of addressing the primary eulogistic requirements, that the 'true' character of the deceased is not lost." Further, Alexander references eulogies as "*dynamis* [moral power], fusing multiple intensions and expectations both public and private" (Ibid. 172–174). It is this trait, more than the strivings toward a supposed "truth" that

function most in service to the sustaining of social movement and group dynamics necessary during the emotionally charged periods of civil strife.

By such criteria it might be said that Lee's cinematic narrative falls squarely within those aspects necessary for a successful eulogy. The individual narratives themselves, while structured toward specific purposes, might each serve to accomplish the duties of both eulogy and discursive commentary. The comments presented as eulogy by Lee read as if written by the speaker Davis while the actual eulogy is similar to a civic discourse in structure in its ability to suggest future action within a social movement. Placing the Davis comments as coda to his film and elevating those comments to the status of eulogy could be perceived by a viewing audience as Lee's attempt to add historical legitimacy to his effort.

However, with such historical legitimacy comes the inevitable burden of proof as that which authenticates. Some might suggest that no matter the time and location of the original comments, the importance lies in the act of having delivered those comments in commemoration of the deceased leader. Were the comments constructed and delivered by Davis on the occasion of Malcolm X/Shabazz's death? Yes. Other questions, though, are harder to answer. Were the comments constructed by Davis identified by Lee as specific to one or the other occasion or were they disseminated into popular culture as such? Do the individual narratives reflect particular aspects necessary for either eulogy specifically or commemorative discourse in general?

Lee's use of voice-over rather than a specific staging of a funeral for Malcolm X is referenced by Lee in Cynthia Fuch's *Spike Lee: Interviews* in which Lee specifically addresses the use of Davis' eulogy for the film *Malcolm X*. In it Lee references another historical film Oliver Stone's *JFK* as the primary inspiration for the filmatic structure of Lee's own epilogue for *Malcolm X* (Fuchs 76). [\[7\]](#) As an attempt at a historical (albeit filmatic) document Lee's film attempts a feat similar to that attempted by director Stone. Each presents historical documentation via ahistorical means, i.e. fictional retellings of historically documented information. Each utilizes specific filmatic techniques via editing, sound, and reconstructed imagery in order to provide narrative structure in service to the film projects as a whole. In the case of Lee's film the montage and its inclusion of images from Soweto attempt to heighten the film's action by attaching imagery meaningful to the time period in which the film was produced. Director Lee makes clear in interviews, however, that the script narrative used in this section were actual words from the eulogy itself.

Also important is the fact that Ossie Davis's original sound recording of the same eulogistic narrative from the 1972 documentary film *Malcolm X Speaks* (O. Davis 1972) found its way into countless African American households. The presence of this LP in numerous Black homes provides ample proof, for good or for ill, of why some might accept or "assume" the narration as actual/factual or might place such a narrative excerpt within a historical/ahistorical dichotomy. While the suggestion that this recording made its way into each and every African American home moves perilously close to suggestions of an all-knowing collective Black cultural monolith, assumptions that the recording in question made its way into more than a few Black households allows for further discussion.

If the primary question lies in how theories of archive and repertoire affect our current understanding of evidence within various archives then it is necessary to more closely interrogate those recorded materials and to police the contexts surrounding their use. By scanning the official FBI transcript, photographic and video evidence, and listening to recordings of each event we know when a specific spoken narrative was performed. Absent other supported methods of proof, audiences accept the validity of materials merely by their location within a film or, more specifically by how the creator of the narrative positions the materials in question. In this age of new technologies it is important to

consider various levels of literacy regarding film and internet as transformative technologies that require equally stringent adherence to research guidelines. What becomes clear is the locating of African American communities as newly constructed groupings dependent upon what Walter J. Ong identifies as instances of “secondary orality” which have, in the recent past depended solely upon writing and print (2012, 129). In this case, new and emergent digital technologies allow that certain groups and communities might be identified by a similar “orality” that would leave them bound to recorded materials located as film and recorded entertainment, which remain far from historical but may be accepted and disseminated as such or, at least, argued as viable scholarship. [8]

Expanding such a second orality further, a dependence upon more emergent technologies of television and film become equally vibrant resources for performance histories. By shifting the context of the original eulogistic narrative in favor of the more poetic narrative and possibly cinematically poignant “clip,” does Lee ask his audience to ignore his manipulation of the facts? I think the opposite is true in that once presented with factually historical resources and information those same communities insert newly garnered truths into those narratives previously inhabited by memory, and postmemory alone. Is there an ongoing effort to reinvent the problematic legacy of Malcolm X in an attempt to make the man and his legacy more palatable for today’s audience? The answer to that question, while subjective on its surface, would have to be yes. What remains are questions of authenticity and authorship, which are readily pushed aside and replaced with the acceptance of multiple acts of reevaluation. Eakin offers the best clarification for such acts of life writing:

When we tell or write about our own lives, our stories establish our identities both as content—I am the person who did these things—and as act—I am someone with a story to tell. And we do something even more fundamental—we establish ourselves as person.” (2004, 5)

In the end what remains are attempts by Haley, Davis, Marable, and Lee to clarify, mediate, establish, and maintain Malcolm X as a person of worth and substance on behalf of many, through any necessary narrative means.

#### Notes

[1] Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey established Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in August of 1914. Garvey was an advocate for the reaffirmation of Africans and their descendants and a foe of White supremacy. The organization created economic cooperatives, organized international conventions, and published a newspaper with a wide African American readership.

[2] In his autobiography Malcolm X states that: “Anyway, before long, my nickname happened. Just when, I don’t know—but people, knowing I was from Michigan, would ask me what city. Since most New Yorkers had never heard of Lansing, I would name Detroit. Gradually, I began to be called ‘Detroit Red’—and it stuck” (Haley 1992, 112).

3. Faith Temple Church of God in Christ was renamed in 1973 after the death of its founder Bishop A. A. Childs. The church is now called Child's Memorial Temple and Bible Institute ("City of New York Landmark Commission Report," 15).

4. In a discussion with the author, Davis references the fact that "Harlem was afraid." When asked, Davis clarified with "at least civic Harlem" (Goldman 1978, 301).

5. Sutton would go on to become the 21<sup>st</sup> Manhattan Borough President and later face accusations of financial misdeeds.

6. Groups such as CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) each sought new strategies and methods of engagement beyond those espoused by previous efforts. As the existing civil rights movement experienced successes and failures, changes were required in the implementation of new goals and tactics. The newly established movement groupings sought to support grassroots mobilization and towards that goal embedded themselves in mostly rural southern Black communities. Their efforts were directed primarily at community and individual empowerment within what were at the time the poorest areas of the United States. This radicalized approach pushed back against beliefs held by larger organizational structures that the continued violence in rural Black-belt areas of the deep South made direct organizing efforts all but impossible there. One source of such a radicalization of established social movement strategies could be seen as having risen from the then well-established Black Nationalist beliefs of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam.

7. In *Spike Lee: Interviews* Lee states that, "I gotta give my props here to Oliver Stone. Barry Brown [the editor who cut *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*] and I saw Oliver Stone's *JFK* the first day it came out, and I said, 'Barry, man, look what they're doing. C'mon!' That film gave us great inspiration. You remember the opening newsreel montage in *JFK*? Well, well we tried to do the same thing, or better it, with our montage at the end where Ossie Davis delivers the eulogy. We also had some of the black and white thing going, like newsreel footage" (Fuchs 74).

8. During the writing of this paper controversy arose regarding the historical accuracy of events depicted in the film *Selma* (Schuessler 2015).

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