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MALCOLM X AS ICON

MALCOLM X IN OUR OWN IMAGE, Joe Wood, editor. St. Martin's Press, 1993. 246 pp., \$18.95.

It is a strange time, indeed, when a dead man is brought back from the grave to inspire the living. As far as we know, such an act of resurrection costs the dead nothing. It might even be a source of amusement in an otherwise drear eternity. But what does it say of the living?

The ascendancy of Malcolm X as a political icon bespeaks much about a vacuity in the political and intellectual leadership of black America, a leadership that all too often has played the roles of drum majors and majorettes in the cause of a black racial mystique. Malcolm's return also indicates that significant numbers of blacks dwell in valleys of such deep and deathly shadows that their only rays of hope emanate from the charisma of an apparition.

The advantages of having a leader who is dead are several: he can be whomever one wants him to be; he does not have to risk his ideas amid political and economic realities; he cannot betray or fail his followers.

But the adoration of Malcolm X is possible only to the extent that his image as a black man is separated from the content of his political thought. This was done in Spike Lee's film. It is also done in many of the essays in the volume under review.

Joe Wood, the *Village Voice* columnist and editor of *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, demonstrates this divorce of form and substance in the opening essay:

Last year at a music festival in Jackson, Mississippi, I wore my Malcolm X AK-47 T-shirt around those southern Black people and their Whites, and I felt proud; I was telling everyone what seemed obvious—I am Black. I was also announcing that I—and not anyone else—was the particular bearer of this “true” Black spirit. Wearing that T-shirt made me feel “real” Black, lean and competitive with the rest (as if my Blackness could compete with anybody's, especially anybody who resided in Mississippi). This competition even extended to members of non-African-American communities, to sympathetic members of those groups. Malcolm was making me Blacker than all, with little but the aid of his face, vested with the spirit of *my* people. . . .

Putting on the T-shirt that morning, I was also feeling the kind of anger you need to stay sane; periodic anger; cleansing, defining rage. Sometimes one needs this—these Black acts.

The form is an aggressive racial pride. The spoken content is an expression of racial superiority. (Notice especially the contempt toward other blacks in the phrase “those southern Black people and their Whites.”) The unspoken content is, however, racial inferiority. Only those who feel themselves to be without moral substance would feel “real” Black, lean and competitive with the rest” by wearing a T-shirt.

Earlier in the essay, Wood poignantly describes the *angst* of the contemporary black ethos.

In these hungry times, many African-Americans are hungry for an honorable sanctuary. . . . When used as a shelter—as a tool for emotional alliance—spirit, despite being fragile as a ghost, helps people weather alienation, despair, and weariness. . . . But we also seek a map to a better society. Ideology does that. *In the absence of a viable ideology, we settle with spirit; with spirit at our sides, we seek its signs: Malcolm, once dead, returns.* (Emphasis added)

How desolate the inner landscape of those who seek salvation in the graveyard. How devoid of confidence in their own spirits that they wear T-shirts and hats brandishing the X as if it were a weapon of war in a medieval duchy. How impoverished the souls of those black folks that they need find spirit in the remembered anger of a dead man.

In death as in life, no one in black American history has incarnated anger like Malcolm X. It is this anger that fills the senses of Joe Wood.

. . . Malcolm argued vigorously for one particular notion of Black spirit—a “true” Black spirit, meaning “militant,” “proud,” “angry.” Malcolm's icon has consequently come to signify the “truest” distillation of this Black spirit, and therefore the best product to validate and express “real” Black anger; anger about the way Black People have been treated everywhere we are Black, anger about the way we are now treated in America.

But anger is not political. It is merely raw energy, roiling with sound and fury. And, regardless of how righteous anger makes one feel, it is not moral. Black anger “about the way we are now treated in America” must be accompanied by black anger at

how “we” have permitted ourselves to be treated, by black anger at how “we” have treated ourselves. The extent to which one is angry at another is the extent to which one embraces the identity of a victim.

Expressions of anger and pride give one the veneer of radicalism. Such emotional exhibitionism appears radical only if one is deathly afraid.

When one looks beneath Malcolm’s anger and expressions of pride, the politics uncovered is black supremacy as promulgated by the Nation of Islam. In his contribution to the book Cornel West observes:

The basic aim of Black Muslim theology—with its distinct Black supremacist account of the origins of white people—was to counter white supremacy. Yet, this preoccupation with white supremacy still allowed white people to serve as the principal point of reference.

This is evident in Malcolm’s life. For all else that his autobiography expresses, it is also a painful description of racial self-hatred. In his youth, notes Arnold Rampersad, Malcolm was proud of his light skin, but later “he came to hate the ‘blood’ that had made it so; in short he came to hate himself.”

The idea of Malcolm’s self-hatred or of his ambivalence about his skin color is unpalatable to some of his admirers. Spike Lee, casting his motion picture about Malcolm, wanted no such complication: to play the part of Malcolm he chose a richly brown-skinned actor, Denzel Washington. . . . the colorization of Malcolm is designed for political ends.

Most of the essayists in this volume do not want to engage Malcolm’s racial self-hatred and the extent to which racial self-hatred is the substance of black life today. The essayists include some of the better known black intellectuals, academics, and journalists: Amiri Baraka, John Edgar Wideman, Patricia Williams, Cornel West, Angela Davis, Patricia Williams, Arnold Rampersad, and Adolph Reed, Jr., among others.

It is surprising, then, that, for the most part, the essays are apolitical and ahistorical, that is, they consider Malcolm X without regard to the politics of his time or ours, and as if he were an original political thinker. He did not pretend to be that. For nine-tenths of his political life he took pride in himself as a Black Muslim and as spokesman for

“the Honorable Elijah Muhammad,” a phrase that came from his mouth with regularity.

Unfortunately, the essayists are unable to separate themselves from the seductive charisma of his anger to look at the racist content of his politics. Cornel West’s essay, one of the two best in the collection, understands that there was (and is) a dangerous edge to Malcolm’s articulation of anger:

In contrast to Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad and Martin Luther King, Jr., understood one fundamental truth about Black rage: It must neither be ignored nor ignited. Both leaders, in their own ways, knew how to work with Black rage in a constructive manner, shape it through moral discipline, channel it into political organization, and guide it by charismatic leadership. Malcolm X could articulate Black rage much better than Elijah Muhammad or Martin Luther King, Jr.—but for most of his public life he tended to ignite Black rage and harness it for the Nation of Islam.

West compares Malcolm X and King and finds King’s contribution to be the greater.

Like Elijah Muhammad (and unlike Malcolm X), Martin Luther King, Jr., concluded that Black rage was so destructive and self-destructive that without a moral theology and political organization, it would wreak havoc on Black America. His project of nonviolent resistance to white racism was an attempt to channel Black rage in political directions that preserved Black dignity and changed American society.

Alone among the essayists, West raises questions about the “conversion” Malcolm underwent on his trip to Mecca. West wonders if “his relative silence” about the absolute monarchies of the Arab world “bespeak a downplaying of the role of democratic practices in empowering oppressed peoples?”

Malcolm found the most striking feature of the Islamic regimes not to be their undemocratic practices but their acceptance of his Black humanity. This great prophet of Black rage—with all his brilliance, courage, and conviction—remained blind to basic structures of domination based on class, gender, and sexual orientation in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, West retreats from his daring analysis and in his conclusion rather disingenuously states that Malcolm, unlike Elijah Muhammad and Martin Luther King, Jr., “did not live long enough to forge his own distinctive ideas and ways of

channeling black rage in constructive channels to change American society." That is true when Malcolm is compared to Elijah Muhammad. That is not true where King is concerned because Malcolm was born four years before King and both men were killed at age 39. They had the same amount of time.

The premier essay of this collection is Adolph Reed's "The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics." Reed is the author of *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in African American Politics*, a critical and sadly ignored analysis of Jackson's career. However, Reed, a professor at Northwestern, brings his considerable knowledge and analytical skill to bear on Malcolm X and places the resurgence of interest in him in the context of black politics today.

For those who argue that the resurrection of Malcolm X indicates how little has changed for black people since 1965, Reed points out that Malcolm X was killed "before the Watts uprising," before the enunciation of Black Power, before the election of the first black mayor. Instead, Reed maintains that the return of Malcolm X has nothing to do with a chimerical similarity between conditions for blacks now and blacks in the early sixties, but has everything to do with the black ethos of today:

. . . Malcolmmania has come at the same time as Jackson's attempt to embody the Black Leader myth appears to be running out of steam. . . . The King, Jackson, and Malcolm iconologies that have spread during the Reagan/Bush era—as well as the mythos of the singular Black Leader that connects them—are most meaningfully expressions of the tendency toward evasiveness that has undermined development of critical vision in black politics in the postsegregation era. Yes, the turn to Malcolm in part reflects deepening frustration with material conditions and Jackson's failure, but more importantly, it reproduces the vicarious, or even apolitical approach to politics that undergirded the earlier romanticizations of King and Jackson.

The invocation of Malcolm X at a time when black poverty is rampant, when more than half of black children are born to teenage single women, when 47 percent of black seventeen-year-olds are functionally illiterate, when the number one cause of death for black young men is either murder or suicide "amounts to wishing away the complexities that face us."

With the exception of the essays by West and Reed, this collection is an example of that evasiveness. However, omitted from its pages are

some of the most provocative black thinkers of today: Shelby Steele, Glenn Loury, Stanley Crouch, William Julius Wilson, Stephen Carter, and Harold Cruse. *In Our Own Image* fails by excluding black intellectuals whose angles of vision are not through a glass darkly. Until black intellectuals stop confusing shadows and reality, black political life will continue to be bereft of vision and the maturity that makes icons unnecessary. □

Peter Mandler

WRITTEN BY CANDLELIGHT

CUSTOMS IN COMMON, by E.P. Thompson. The New Press, 1992. 547 pp. \$29.95.

There is a powerful current in English political writing that is simultaneously radical and traditional. It is radical because harshly critical of the revolutionary impact of capitalism on the everyday life of the common people. It is traditional because it harks back to the small, rooted, roughly egalitarian communities of a premodern age. In its more Tory guises (in Carlyle, for instance, and often in Ruskin), it harks right back to mythically integrated Catholic, feudal communities. In less overtly nostalgic and romantic forms, however—in the radicalism of William Cobbett, for instance—it often finds a more comfortable home in the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century local communities were already able to use "modern" tools—literacy, a degree of prosperity, democratic ideas—to win themselves some autonomy from the control of the rich and powerful, yet these same communities had not yet been leveled by the more lethal forces of "modernization": the tyranny of private property, the subordination of customary rights and responsibilities to ruthlessly rapid economic growth, the homogenization of the local community by the centralizing State. Nor were these communities limited to passive resistance. They could use the same "modern" tools to construct fruitful syntheses of past and present: to re-present unwritten customs as the "rights of man," for instance, or to re-form the mutualities of the traditional rural community in urban settings, in trade unions or friendly societies or political parties. In this way "tradition" might survive even in the bowels of modernity, a reservoir of consciousness remaining to be drawn upon to help us respond to change and to remind us of alternative ways of life. Just as Burke saw history as a chain of