Interview with Farrah Griffin
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NARRATOR
How does the narrative structure of Malcolm X’s autobiography reflect the reality of Malcolm X’s life?

FARRAH GRIFFIN
I think that part of the autobiography, one way to read it is not only as a historical document but as a narrative in the tradition of African-American autobiographical writing that has to set up certain figures. You know, it sets up a trajectory. And so we know what the end of the trajectory is going to be. The interjectory, well, we don't really know it at the time, but we do know that it's going to be this black male leader, this shining black prince. We will get to the end of that narrative. And so, if that is the end, if that's the person we want to construct, a representative of black masculinity, then the narrative has to lead up to that. And one of the ways of leading up to that is to identify with the parent, the father figure, especially during a time when you are consciously trying to reconstruct a notion of black masculinity. Then you want to have a father who's present, a father who is proud, a father who is strong, a father who's politically active—so that’s Malcolm’s [father] if he's going to inherit a sense of politics. If it's going to be foreshadowed, the way something is foreshadowed in a novel, it has to be foreshadowed from the figure of a father. We know where we want to end. It will determine where we want to begin.

If we want it to end with a Malcolm who some of us want to have now—a Malcolm who is very open around understanding the complexities of gender, a Malcolm who has been influenced throughout his life politically as well as emotionally and spiritually by women—then that narrative would require that we look more closely at the mother who doesn't disappoint us, should we look closely at her. And what we see is a political formation, a household much earlier on with a woman who is a very politically conscious woman, who is educated, who could be seen as someone who contributes to the political development of this young man, instead of just this figure whose skin, foreign birth, and education make her alienated from the strong black man. You need to fit the autobiography into an already [determined] pretense to understanding of who Malcolm is and what he becomes and having to explain that version of him.

INTERVIEWER
How do you think the black community has transformed or dealt with the life and legacy of Malcolm X?

FARRAH GRIFFIN
One of the things that black artists and organizers and intellectuals have to do is be very vigilant to the Malcolm who is a person in process. Without that, right now what we have is Malcolm as a kind of floating signifier, an empty signifier, and people can invest that X in any number of meanings. And there has to be a kind of self-conscious effort to say that, number one, we can’t take any historical figure and limit them to what they were at any given moment. But really what's fascinating is the process of change that people undergo, and that why they are of value to us today is because of the dynamism of them as people, right? That they are people who constantly are willing to rethink and
reevaluate and be self-critical. I think that we have to be very careful of taking slogans that were not empty but that have become empty, like “by any means necessary,” so that people can use “by any means necessary” to mean anything. I'm going to get mine by any means necessary. Bling, bling and champagne by any means necessary. We have to be vigilant against that, and one of the ways we can be vigilant against that is to be constantly critical of each other.

People really got on Baraka about being so critical of Spike. Well, he did exactly what he ought to have done. And maybe I don't agree with his critique of Spike, but as an intellectual that's what he's supposed to do, right? We're supposed to be visually critical of ourselves, of our traditions, and of forms that come out at us, whether it's organization, art forms, books, whatever. If you write a book about Malcolm, then I want to see a web page where everybody can say, “This is what's wrong with the book that you wrote.” The process of dialogue I think is one we have to maintain.

INTERVIEWER
How has nationalism affected the politics of gender, especially in the African-American community?

FARRAH GRIFFIN
I think that nationalist movements—by necessity black nationalism in the United States, at least, has constantly come up with these challenges, that patriarchy in this country has been challenged within the context of the nationalist movement, right? So that you can find the situation where, even though there's a patriarchal vision, there might be more room for black women as active leaders to express their opinions within the context of a nationalist organization than they would be allowed elsewhere, given that just by being black women their opinions are devalued. So I think that black nationals in the United States share the component with other nationalist movements, but also it's more complicated in many ways. Nationalism tends to be patriarchal, it tends to be—and I'm not just talking about black nationalism here—but it tends to base much of its power in the policing of black women's bodies, or women's bodies, whether it be policing of their bodies around reproduction, sexuality, clothing, walking two steps behind a man, or whatever. But at the same time those movements within are always being challenged around those issues and I think that's especially the case within black American nationalist organizations.

INTERVIEWER
In what ways did Malcolm X challenge the notions of beauty?

FARRAH GRIFFIN
Certainly, Malcolm is probably not the first black speaker to articulate the ways that notions of beauty, stereotypes of beauty, impact upon black people, but he's one whose messages were loudest, most broad. As early as Marcus Garvey—in the Garvey movement you get these kinds of discussions, or even when Madam C. J. Walker introduces her hair-straightening technologies—we get these discussions about black beauty. But I think nowhere, in no leader or intellectual of our tradition, is it as central as it is in the thoughts of Malcolm. Malcolm sees the assault of white supremacy on black humanity, on black intelligence, and on black beauty, which then leads to a kind of destructive self-hatred. And [he] begins to make a critique of himself in terms of how he, in his early life, bought into those constructions of beauty; and how he then begins to feel ashamed of the way that he bought into them; and how he begins to celebrate
things that have traditionally been denigrated in black people in general but black women in particular. And this is very appealing for a group of people who have been told that a lack of physical attraction also means a lack of humanity. So it's not just that you're ugly but you're ugly because you're not human. You're closer on the chain of being to the ape. A very destructive sense of self comes from that. And part of what all black nationalist movements have done—and not just the Nation but black churches, too, I think, or black preachers—is greet the congregation by saying, “How beautiful you all look this morning.” You know, it's an affirmation of something that the larger society denigrates.

One of the problems there, again, is that the critique of white supremacists’ constructions of beauty doesn't go far enough. It simply critiques those constructions of beauty; it doesn't critique the need for hierarchies of beauty at all. It doesn't dismantle all of those hierarchies, right? That the danger is in kind of flipping the script so that one aesthetic becomes the privileged and the valued one. And women always suffer the most from those kinds of aesthetic hierarchies. So I think that's the limitations—let's get rid of that discourse and value in physical beauty. And I think that's something that black feminism brings into play.

INTERVIEWER
Can you speak for a moment about Malcolm's treatment of women—where it came from and who influenced his outlook on a woman's role?

FARRAH GRIFFIN
According to Malcolm, at least in the autobiography—I think it says it two or three times—it's women's nature to be weak, women's nature to be manipulative, that women are in need of leadership of men. He talks about learning about women through his own mother pushing his father to the point where he had to physically abuse her. He talks about learning about women's nature from prostitutes. He talks even about Ella; he says he could see why it was so hard for her to stay married because she's this strong, independent woman. And even later on, when he joins the Nation, the Nation gives him a narrative right, gives him the framework for understanding women: the woman should be, I forget what it is, seven years younger than the man plus half your age or something. And women, again, are weak, and they need this kind of righteous leadership, a patriarchal leader in their lives. And so that's the consistency that we see throughout. The thing that is most appealing, I think, for black women about Malcolm's rhetoric in relation to gender is that it offers protection. It offers stability.

It offers a kind of leadership within the family that families won't be abandoned, that women will be cherished and protected, that there will economic stability in the family. And I think that that would have a particular appeal for a group of women who had been denied protection historically, whose very construction of subjects in a new world had been based upon their sexual availability to their masters and the lack of integrity of their marriage vows. The state didn't recognize their marriage vows. So to offer them the kind of protection that one believes had been afforded white women, particularly privileged white women, would be very attractive and very appealing to black women.

And it would also be appealing to black men, because this kind of denial of being able to play the role of protector of your family, whether it be the slave household or the slave master or the so-called free household, open to the state, that a black man doesn't have
a position of leadership in his family. That’s what Malcolm offered. What the Nation offered. That would be very attractive to black people.

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