INTERVIEWER
What is the significance of the zoot suit nightlife for the black community?

ROBIN KELLEY
For black people, actually for all people of color, there’s something about breaking out of the uniform of your work, the thing that identifies you. And so, for Malcolm and for his friends the whole root to cultures was about breaking out of the uniform of being a working-class person. And more than that, it was about adopting a style that was cool, popular, masculine. And for a lot of the African-Americans he hung out with, whether it was in Boston or later in New York City, it’s precisely with this sort of nightlife with performance and music and dance that people could be their true selves, kind of liberated. But more than that, it was social. [There was] hustling going on at night with people buying and selling drugs or whatever. But the main thing is that it’s a place for performing where young people are trying to escape the world of everyday wage labor or whatever it is.

INTERVIEWER
How does that lifestyle exemplify the notion of masculinity?

ROBIN KELLEY
Being involved in that lifestyle, whether it's hustling and burglary or larceny, ended up putting him in prison. I think in the culture it was seen as normal to have nine-to-five jobs with no money, where you'd have to smile in front of white people. That was kind of perceived as somehow being less masculine than the things that he was doing. And so, by the time he ended up going to prison for crimes that he did commit, he's part of another national culture, one in which he's no longer dressed up in a zoot suit, but he's demonstrating his independence, his power, his strength in some ways. And one of the ways that he did that, actually, was to portray masculinity often. Instead, he became somewhat of a scholar. He became a leader among his peers back in the days of hustling because as a hustler he would always outthink like a great chess player. And again, that was an aspect of his perception. By the time he leaves prison and he adopts the culture of the Nation of Islam—I mean really embraces it—his ideas about masculinity tend to bend almost. This time, to be a responsible leader, a responsible family man—to be both means not just being a leader—but devoting his life to Allah and doing so in such a way that can bring a sense of pride and dignity to the world that he's working in.

INTERVIEWER
How does this lifestyle you describe parallel or contrast with the hip-hop world?
ROBIN KELLEY
I think there are some parallels with the kind of zoot suit culture of the '40s and the hip-hop world. And there are some very stark differences. One parallel might be the importance placed on escaping wage labor, on really creating a public persona in which you don't work and you have money in your pocket. Now, that's not necessarily appositional, because in some ways it mirrors one aspect of a capitalist culture—that is, accumulation, money [being] somehow part of your identity, being able to exploit others as part of your identity. You could see that. Another similarity is just the glorification of the rich figure, you know. You can see it especially in hip-hop today. I mean, the wealthy figure is a kind of an icon both in the music and the performance—the fact that you find figures in the hip-hop world spending thousands of dollars in gold teeth and there's nothing wrong with their teeth, you know. You could see some of that happening in the '40s as well. Now, there are some differences. Certainly, there are significant differences in the music and the culture. There are differences in terms of the celebration of jazz at a moment when jazz itself was becoming an art form, whereas hip-hop has been really embraced by corporate cultures. And it's a massive international phenomenon, because it's selling commodities. And so the same corporate culture in some ways I think keeps this culture in check in some ways, as opposed to the 1940s, where there wasn't such an investment in selling Duke Ellington around the world or Count Basie.

INTERVIEWER
In what ways did Malcolm X's embrace of black working-class culture and his own experiences make him the man he was?

ROBIN KELLEY
I learned a lot of lessons from his days in Harlem as a young person in the '40s. And those lessons suddenly translated into his later work—for one, his use of language as a speaker. So much of that came from the kind of hip language of the day, a language that is rooted in the working class culture, urban culture. But it's also connected to the music that he listened to. He sounded like Lester Young sometimes in the way he spoke and his cadence, his use of certain words. He learned the lesson of what urban life was actually like.

He had sympathy for the black working class, the black unemployed. He could speak from experience. He could take a story and use that as a way to draw crowds and to convey certain lessons. He also had connections to entertainment. I mean he knew a lot of these people who ended up having relationships with the Nation of Islam. He knew people like Redd Foxx. He knew Billie Holliday, who died young. He knew many people who he probably turned to in some ways for support for the work he was doing, especially after he became much more of a national figure.

And finally, I think that Malcolm as a hustler, and even before he was a hustler, knew how to outthink people and was a brilliant intellectual in that respect. He understood, as a chess player, politically, how to challenge his opponents, how
to think ahead of the game, whether it's within the Nation of Islam and his own internal tensions with other leaders, whether it's with the FBI or with any other people who had power. And I think that some of those lessons translated in his words.

**INTERVIEWER**
Why did Malcolm's image of his mother change later in his life?

**ROBIN KELLEY**
Malcolm had such reverence for his father. It comes out in the book that his mother's image, having a child out of wedlock, and given how important family is in Malcolm's whole ideology, would change in his eyes. He attributes her downward descent, not so much to this relationship, but to the loss of the father. The father of the other child played such a minor role in this that it becomes the loss of the father, the loss of the patriarch. And then the mother's behavior meant she was going totally crazy, as far as Malcolm's concerned. So, I think that would cause a long-standing resentment on the part of a young Malcolm and an older Malcolm whose memory of his mother is one of her betraying her husband's memory.

**INTERVIEWER**
Although Spike Lee eliminates Malcolm's half-sister Ella as a character in his movie, how important was she in Malcolm's life?

**ROBIN KELLEY**
For someone like Spike Lee—and not just him but his generation, maybe our generation, my generation because we're about the same age—we want to remember Malcolm as the shining prince that Ossie Davis explains. In the book, Ella is extremely important, both because she's a source of inspiration and she's the one that introduces him and immerses him into black culture. So you have nothing but admiration for her. She became this link to various worlds, the link to the ghetto in some ways. And I think that to attribute too much to her in Spike's film would, in his mind—and I'm leading too much here—strip the story away from a story in which Elijah Muhammad is his most important influence and other black men key influences. Ella is a key figure. She is a political figure; she's not just someone cooking soul food for him. And I think that the loss of Ella as a major figure is a tragedy in some ways for the history of the memory of Malcolm.

**INTERVIEWER**
Describe Malcolm’s commitment to his family in light of his role as a leader in the Nation.

**ROBIN KELLEY**
They were on the road sometimes 250 days out of the year. I do think it's striking when we look at the itinerary and how often they were on the road. I mean there are some who won't take the time, who won't go on the road. [Betty] had to have been pretty resentful.
On the other hand, I wonder if some of that resentment flourished later after his death. Because my assumption—I could be wrong about this—is that when she first got involved with Malcolm she sort of knew what was up. She had to have a sense that he was a public figure whose commitments to the movement were greater than his commitments to family, and that he expected her to take up the slack. That was her job in some respects. And it's not as if he was in the movement and she wasn't. She also was a Muslim. She was also in the Nation of Islam, but maybe didn't have the same commitments.

The reason your family would go on a trip less than a day after your house had been bombed—I think that this in some ways was a sign of Malcolm's deep overall commitment to the movement over other things, over family. I think that maybe more evidence of this might be in what he may say to other members of the Nation, what he may say to other activists about the kind of commitment you have to have, the commitment to throw yourself 100 percent into the work of organizing. I think that his notion of masculinity is one in which, if there's anyone who needs to take care of those children in times of crisis—this is Betty's job. And my job is to build a movement. And the fact that he spent his life not really taking much money, not trying to get the mortgage to that house, not trying to ask for a raise—I mean, he was pretty much penniless. It meant that he wasn't really concerned about making sure his family was taken care of. He thought the Nation would take care of that.

INTERVIEWER
What were Malcolm’s views on women? How is this take echoed in the role of women in hip-hop culture?

ROBIN KELLEY
In hip-hop culture and the kind of bebop culture that we're talking about, women are exploitable commodities. [The message] in Malcolm's autobiography and in some of the narratives in Latin music is that women are to be used, exploited; they're essentially sex figures. They're supposed to be available for the sexual needs of black men. So much of Malcolm's own story of being at the Savoy Ballroom is about beautiful women hanging on his arm, he performing his own sexual prowess on the dance floor.

One thing that may be different, though, is in the '40s there seemed to be such a reverence for white women. That's not to say that there isn't the same here, but in hip-hop culture, most of the images you see are not only of white women, in fact, not predominantly white women. Some will argue that there are light-skinned black women and there’s not a huge difference. But that's all debatable. I think the irony is that in the '40s there was a celebration and an almost obsession of white women. In the contemporary period it's not the same obsession, but there is an obsession with women as these sex objects who are owned and controlled in some ways.
INTERVIEWER
How does Malcolm X demonstrate the dynamic of the “House Negro, Field Negro” division?

ROBIN KELLEY
Malcolm is so famous for the House Negro, Field Negro division—meaning the house Negro as the kind of middle class, often educated leader whom he sees as Uncle Toms or, as he calls them, “nincompoops with PhDs” and that sort of thing. And the field Negro is the slave who worked, who never trusted the master, who was willing to revolt and rise up. That metaphor, I think, became a kind of organizing principal for the way you thought about class.

But there are different kinds of house Negroes. There are some house Negroes that he had enormous respect for, potential respect for—those black intellectuals who he felt that if they only had the right direction, if they only embraced white nationalists and understood where they’re coming from, their knowledge and skill could help build a movement. And I think he saw himself as sort of closer to that. He saw himself as an intellectual who could have gone to Harvard, who could have gotten a degree. And I think that he, in some ways, is ambivalent about that particular group of black intellectuals. On the other hand, he also saw perhaps his greatest enemies as those political leaders who were very much in the big house, as he put it, leaders of the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall, whom he had very strong opposition to for his critique of the Nation of Islam. But these were people who really were worthless—they should be leaders of the masses, but instead they are taking the orders from white people. And finally there were those who he, in fact, felt sorry for, if anything—working-class black people with middleclass bourgeois pretensions. And he called them the hill Negroes; the folks who’s identity really centered around the fact that they were employed by rich people as domestic workers. And I think he had a certain sympathy for them as much as he disliked them and their culture. He felt that they were just misguided. And so there are sort of these three categories.

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