

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

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**From the Selected Works of Amilcar Shabazz**

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## Review of Soulfires: Young Black Men on Love and Violence

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Black Life, History,  
and Culture

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*Soulfires: Young Men on Love and Violence*. Edited by Daniel J. Wideman and Rohan B. Preston. Introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996. 398 pp., \$13.95 paper).

In Spike Lee's movie, "Get on the Bus," about a fictional road trip from California to Washington, D.C. for the Million Man March, an interesting and moving part of this multi-layered film is the relationship between a long absent father and his hardcore, gang-banging son. Their stories and that of the other men on the bus are part of cinematic *tour de force* directed by Lee and financially backed by an array of celebrity status black men against the negative images of black men with which the mass media inundates us. What "Get on the Bus" does at the motion picture level, *Soulfires* does at the level of poetry and literature. Where Lee's movie crams many of the emotional and explosive issues regarding black men into the ninety-minute-or-so format of a feature film, and in doing so leaves the complexity of many of the problems on the cutting room floor, *Soulfires* can, with the word, take us more completely into the myriad worlds of the black male experience. It is a journey we all should not hesitate to take.

The Million Man March and *Soulfires* share other reference points. Although the editors of the volume put out their call to black men under the age of forty to submit their literary expressions on the theme of love and violence before the march occurred, they drew inspiration from the momentum that produced that historic day. Reflexively, the anthology presents important insights into the diverse, complex mind of the black youth that thronged the capital city in October of 1995 to tell the world they were more than what the world might have thought of them. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who—by sheer numbers—has become the introducer of books on black life extraordinary, offers a post-March statement that the reader would do well to simply skip. Those intrigued by or in love with "Skip" Gates will find it typical Gatesian wordplay about the March as a "camp meeting" and the "orgiastic apex" of Louis Farrakhan's "long march from obscurity" (p. xviii). About the significance of *Soulfires* he says very little except that a collection of the work of young black males on themselves is, by his lights, unprecedented.

Unprecedented or not, *Soulfires* is a rich and worthy digest that should find its way into black literature and history classes, sociology and gender studies circles, and into the hands of general readers in search of writing that penetrates deep into the minds and souls of young black men. Thirty authors contribute seventy-three pieces that are organized across styles into three parts: "Dear Brother," "Loving Each Other," and "Brothertalk." Nearly every narrative style is exploited from epistolary, interview, one-act play, essay, haiku and other poetic forms, love songs, praise songs, and rap songs, to selections from forthcoming novels. These powerful and brilliant and natural voices expropriate and reinvent literary conventions to speak their special truths, to sing their harmonious/disconcerting melodies. *Soulfires* is like the strong, black coffee Malcolm X versified about: novacaine you will not find.

So what about young black men and love and violence? The interview with filmmaker John Singleton gave a most interesting iteration of the basic answer *Soulfires* provides to the question. In the "Brothertalk" section, the editors pop up at the Culver

City, California, office of the youngest ever Oscar-nominated director and they roll tape while they're still explaining the purpose of the interview and the book of which it will be a part. Singleton starts "rappin":

So the thing is that Black America lives under the auspices of being a population whose survival is a miracle in itself, but a lot of people are running around thinking that they are not really at war, they're not really aware of the fact that they're at war, and they don't understand why so many things happen. . . . People say, 'Oh, there's a conspiracy,' this white angst, this white contingent, and Black people always say, 'There's a conspiracy to destroy Black people.' It's *not* a conspiracy to destroy Black people; it's a very natural part of institutionalized racism to destroy Black people (p. 206-07).

The survival of black people is, indeed, a miracle, much as *Soulfires* is a miracle. Violence is an endemic part of the Black Experience and the black youngster is and has always been the most vulnerable part of the race. Young black males encounter this violence in a uniquely problematic way. Their gendered socialization tells them to be tough, strong, and that they have the duty of protecting their mother/daughter/sister/lover and babies from harm. The difficulty of fulfilling that role requirement in which their self-concept, their ability to love and be loved, is so tied up with, leads them down paths of self-destruction. The young black male has become self-conscious of this problem and is realizing that the answer begins with love. Only if he loves himself and his kinsmen and kinswomen can he miraculously go beyond survival to liberation, deinstitutionalizing the racism, sexism, classism that makes industries of destroying black people.

*Soulfires* is not a part of Black American Destruction, Inc. It is construction of the finest sort and should be widely read and enjoyed. I salute, above all, the honesty with which the authors approached the project. In the "rap" with Singleton, they make reference to how, initially, their publisher wanted "more gangster stuff" (p. 206). It is not often one finds in a book comments critical of the publisher, but honesty is what makes *Soulfires* such a special and refreshing work.

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