

Manning Marable,
director of the
Malcolm X Project.

Will we ever fully understand him? A Columbia University professor is trying to shed new light on the charismatic, often misinterpreted figure with a massive, Internet-based multimedia project.

SEEKING MALCOLM X

BY C. GERALD FRASER

SURELY, A STAR-CROSSED FAMILY. The father, Earl Little, died violently. The mother, Louise Little, confined in a mental hospital for 25 years. Their famous son, Malcolm, assassinated at age 39. One of Malcolm's daughters, Qubilah, accused of hiring a hit man to avenge her father's death. Her mother, Betty, burned to death by her grandson. Malcolm's bloody, bullet-damaged address book, in his pocket when he was gunned down, stolen from a police property room by someone who envisioned a lucrative sale. And recently, significant documents—Malcolm's notebooks, manuscripts, letters and his Koran—finding their way to the auction block, available to any prospective buyer—scholar, speculator, or curio collector.

Fate has dealt the family a bitter hand. However, in the 37 years since his death,

Malcolm X, or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, as he renamed himself, has grown ever more lustrous in memory.

The Columbia University historian Manning Marable says: "Most chroniclers of the black experience now rank Malcolm X among the half-dozen most influential personalities in African-American history, an elite group that includes Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since the early 1990s Malcolm X has become a genuine cultural icon to millions of young African-Americans and other young people throughout the world." Those who saw Malcolm in action agree with Marable that he was an outstanding orator who helped build an influential black-nationalist organization, and that he was

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a man of personal integrity and political courage. Additionally, Malcolm X recognized the connection between the challenges facing African-Americans and the struggles of Third World nations against colonialism.

When earlier this year a plan was revealed to auction an impressive new cache of Malcolm X documents, major institutions practically salivated. The New York Public Library's Schomburg Center and Columbia University instantly offered to be the repository of the treasure. Marable, who has himself collected thousands of Malcolm X documents, had long suspected the existence of the material that had found its way to the auctioneers, and for more than a year he had been negotiating with the people who had custody of it—Joseph Fleming, the Shabazz family's lawyer, and Malcolm's six daughters—"trying to reach an agreement regarding the preservation and the cataloging of the family documents."

The death in 1997 of Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow, is responsible, Marable believes, for the family disarray that brought this situation about. The "tragic circumstances under which she died left the daughters devastated," he says. Dr. Shabazz, who received her Ph.D. in edu-

cation from the University of Massachusetts in 1975, is described by Marable as "the anchor, the soul of the family, the bedrock. This is a family that had gone through tragedy of the proportions that dramatists portray; Hamlet has nothing on them. It was difficult for them to navigate themselves, to consolidate the material legacies of their father and mother."

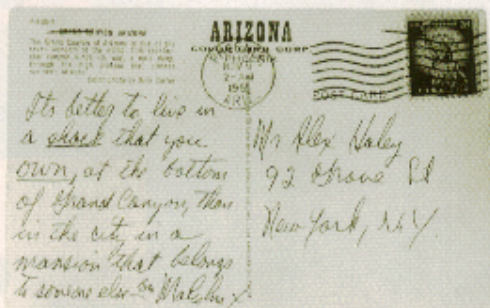
Columbia University is eager to get at the newly discovered documents, now being held by Butterfields Auctioneers, to bolster its million-dollar Malcolm X Project, which Marable established last year. He began it, he says, with "the guidance of the Shabazz family" and \$750,000 in seed money from Columbia. He is seeking further funding.

Marable's ambitious design is to tell Malcolm's story in a variety of ways. There will be a multimedia version of *The Auto-*

biography of Malcolm X; a Malcolm X-Betty Shabazz Oral History Project will include interviews with surviving relatives, friends, contemporaries, and others; an exhaustive biography; a yearly research seminar, an annual symposium where international scholars, writers, and artists ponder Malcolm's legacy; and a comprehensive published compilation of Malcolm X's correspondence, speeches, interviews, and previously unpublished writing. Marable considers this last especially important. "Getting at the 'real' figure of Malcolm X," he says, "requires the skills of the historical archaeologist, chipping away at deep misconceptions and distortions." In scholarly research, there has been what Marable calls "a profound difference" between work done on Malcolm X and work done on other "African-American leaders of equal stature." Eleven hundred boxes of archival material on Booker T. Washington are housed in the Library of Congress—catalogued, preserved, and published. "Du Bois's entire published works are listed in an annotated bibliography that Herbert Aptheker took 10 years to produce," Marable says. "Dr. King's papers are in Stanford and Boston Universities, and he has a living memorial, the King Center, in Atlanta. And

The Project team, led by Marable (center, right), discusses the scope of their work with the writer and activist Awiri Baraka (center, left).





Left: A postcard from Malcolm X to his ghostwriter Alex Haley indicates Malcolm's frame of mind in late 1961. Below: Malcolm's daughters Malaak and Ilyasah Shabazz speak at a 2001 gathering in Harlem honoring their father.

Marcus Garvey's papers were collected, edited, and published by Robert Hill—a 20-year effort."

Marable has long been committed to examining the real political legacy and relevancy of Malcolm X, citing the confusion generated by much that has been written about him since his assassination. This includes "the Malcolm represented by black playwrights, poets, and novelists; Spike Lee's Malcolm, as Denzel Washington; and the hip-hop culture's expropriation of Malcolm."

Marable began acquiring materials on Malcolm X in 1987. However, climbing the academic ladder forced him temporarily to put aside writing a definitive biography. He taught at Colgate University from 1983 to 1986 and founded its Africana and Hispanic Studies program. He chaired Ohio State University's Department of Black Studies from 1987 to 1989, migrated to the University of Colorado to serve as professor of ethnic studies, history, and political science, and arrived on Columbia's campus in 1993. There, as a professor of history and political science, he created Columbia's Institute for Research in African-American Studies.

Marable's office, in the 105-year-old Fayerweather Hall, is appropriately old-school—book-lined, roomy, and comfortable. It's remarkably tidy for the workplace of a scholar who has written and



edited hundreds of articles, academic papers, and newspaper columns, plus close to 20 books. The desk is turned toward the office door, and all who enter must face the professor—the power position, some say. Marable's appearance was especially distinctive when he wore a broad Afro of graying hair and a matching beard that flared out from both cheeks, but the beard is gone, and if his coiffure still suggests an Afro style, it has been conservatively trimmed.

Now 51, Marable is continuing the work he began so intensively at University of Colorado. Of the thousands of documents he has amassed, most are copies of FBI records. This treasure-trove of intelligence files on Malcolm X is essential for a solid understanding of the civil rights

movement of his time and his role in it. When Marable was at the University of Colorado, "only about 2,200 pages of these FBI documents were available," he says, "and they had not been catalogued." At that time, Clayborn Carson, the biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the editor of the King papers, was also researching Malcolm X. But due to fair use limitations and his lack of a binding legal agreement with Dr. Betty Shabazz, Carson was unable to publish any remarks made by Malcolm X except those recorded in the FBI files, which the Freedom of

Information Act had ushered into the public domain. "What we will do," Marable says, "is to guarantee the integrity of the material, and digitize it as quickly as possible to make it accessible to the public."

"There are now 19,000 pages of FBI archival materials on Malcolm X available at the National Archives, and some 4,500 are available online. I'm hiring an archivist to spend a year plowing through the material that is not online. Plus, we have hundreds of newspaper clippings, and well over a thousand articles

published about Malcolm X since 1960." The legal relationship that Marable seeks with the family would ensure that anything he and his team produces would benefit the Shabazz daughters materially. "Another reason I'm negotiating with the family," he adds, "is that I would like to have the legal authority to access the CIA archives."

Marable also hopes that an agreement with Malcolm X's daughters will grant him access to galley's of their father's autobiography and allow him to "publish the chapters and passages that were deleted from the original publication of the autobiography," which was written with the help of Alex Haley. Marable explains, "I recognized finally, after many years of looking at this, that I have to rewrite the autobiography to write the true biogra-

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of Malcolm speaking, you can hit another icon and see that while you read the text. You hit yet another icon and see the FBI agent's report of the event. And hit another one and learn how scholars like Cornell West, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Robin D. G. Kelly, or Kevin Powell interpret it. Or get the views of older activists who knew Malcolm, like Amiri Baraka."

The prototype of the multimedia study environment, which he calls the MSE, is almost ready. The full MSE will take another two and a half years to complete. "The beauty of digital technology is that it continues to grow," Marable says. "The methodology that we're using has not been done on any figure in black history, because it hasn't existed until the last two or three years." He praises the recent work of Abdul Alkalimat, at the University of Toledo, who has put together "a real education service, a web-based learning environment that charts the chronology of Malcolm X."

Since that fatal 1965 Sunday afternoon

in upper Manhattan, the question has remained how and why Malcolm X was murdered, and what the role of the federal government was. "Clearly, the truth has not yet come out," Marable says. "We know a good deal about the events of that day, but we do not know exactly what the New York Police Department, the U.S. government, or the FBI knew prior to the event. Also not known is the involvement of FBI agents operating under the program later known as COINTELPRO. That was the counterintelligence program, authorized by the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to disrupt and destroy King or Malcolm or Stokely Carmichael

or Paul Robeson or any black voice who emerged as a leader of the black struggle. The Black Panther party fell victim to the COINTELPRO agenda."

Even though three black gunmen, one who confessed he was a member of the Nation of Islam, were convicted of Malcolm's murder, Marable says it is possible that the federal government was involved. "We can't say for certain, but as we comb through the papers at the National Archives, we may finally be able to reconstruct the events of that day."

Marable will count the project a success if it creates a living memorial to the life and legacy of Malcolm X, develops a new methodology for the exploration of history beyond the boundaries of printed pages, and tells in a new, more complete way the tale of Malcolm X's extraordinary life and his even more complex place in today's culture. ★

C. Gerald Fraser, a *New York Times* reporter for 24 years, is now a senior editor at *Earth Times*.

MALCOLM X ON eBAY

How his private papers almost ended up scattered among the highest bidders

A sample of items almost auctioned off.

A COLLECTION OF PAPERS BELONGING TO the late Malcolm X is now the subject of three-way negotiations among his daughters, Butterfields auction house in San Francisco, and a Florida man who briefly owned them. The material includes handwritten journals, letters, photographs, and Malcolm X's personal Koran. Butterfields planned to sell the documents last March and had also put the items up on eBay, which owns the auction house. But questions quickly arose regarding the papers' ownership, and Butterfields stopped the auction.

In the spring of 1999, Malikah Shabazz Brown, one of Malcolm X's six daughters, had taken the documents, without the consent or knowledge of her sisters, from New York City to a town near Orlando, Florida. There she put them in a storage locker. Within about two months she left Florida, leaving the papers behind. The rent on the storage space went into arrears, so in September 2001 the facility's owners offered the contents for sale. James Calhoun, a Florida resident, bought the material and then consigned it to Butterfields. The auction house never contacted the Shabazz family, who found out about the sale only when Butterfields began advertising it.

Should Malcolm X's daughters get the documents back, they will place them in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library. But the family would still own them.



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