

Malcolm X

## The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X

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**A**lmost four decades after Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X offered sharply contrasting ideas regarding the future direction of black politics, they still symbolize opposing positions that divide African Americans. Their sometimes rancorous debate, carried on mainly through public statements rather than direct dialogue, set the tone for the disruptive, even deadly ideological and tactical conflicts within Black communities in the years since their deaths. Contemporary Black young people seeking social justice are still torn between racial integration and racial separation, between Martin's call for non-violent resistance and Malcolm's insistence on "any means necessary."

But was the split between them inevitable? Were their ideas actually incompatible? Or were they in some ways complimentary? Must African Americans choose between their ideological legacies? Would Martin and Malcolm have resolved some of their differences, if they had not been assassinated? Was their inability to achieve such a resolution a missed opportunity that has hobbled subsequent African-American politics? Why, now, years after their deaths, are these questions relevant?

Martin and Malcolm have become the two most recognizable African-American icons of the twentieth century, but popular understanding of the two men rarely extends beyond caricatures and sound bites. Martin has been honored with a national holiday that typically focuses on the "I have a dream" passage concluding his address at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Yet few Americans have listened to his entire speech at the march, and still fewer have heard his other remarkable speeches and sermons. Malcolm's image has appeared on a U.S. postage stamp, and his life has been chronicled in Alex Haley's best-selling *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and portrayed by Denzel Washington in Spike Lee's epic motion picture.<sup>1</sup> Yet Malcolm's political evolution during his final years remains little understood—a source of unwanted human complexity for those who prefer simplistic heroes or villains.

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Scholars have subjected Martin's life to meticulous, critical examination based on a wealth of archival materials, but writings on Malcolm have been hampered by over reliance on his own autobiographical statements and a tendency in biographical works toward hagiography rather than serious analysis.<sup>2</sup> Martin and Malcolm crafted public personae that obscured aspects of their past even while revealing some of their flaws.

What the two men revealed about their formative years helps to explain both their similarities and differences. They were born in the 1920s—Malcolm in Omaha in 1925; Martin in Atlanta in 1929. Both were sons of politically active Baptist preachers, and both became advocates of innovative theologies of liberation. In his autobiography, Malcolm X would remember that his father was “not a frightened Negro, as most of them were.”<sup>3</sup> Instead the Reverend Earl Little was a dedicated organizer for the Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey. King would similarly remember the Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr.—Daddy King to those around him—as a “fearless and courageous” NAACP leader who led a fight to make Black teachers' salaries equal to those of their white counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

But Malcolm's childhood experiences were far more traumatic than those of King. Malcolm remembered his father as “belligerent toward all the children, except me”—an exception he attributed to his father's inclination, despite generally antiwhite attitudes, “to favor the light ones, and I was his lightest child.”<sup>5</sup> King, in contrast, marvelled at the congenial relationship of his parents and attributed his lifelong optimism about human nature to growing up “in a family where love was central.”<sup>6</sup>

While Martin lived through the Depression in relative comfort as the offspring of a successful minister, Malcolm's family began a downward slide after the death in 1931 of his father—the victim, he believed, of a white racist group. “Some kind of psychological deterioration hit our family circle and began to eat away our pride,” Malcolm recalled of his family's dependence on charity and government welfare.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 1930s, Malcolm's mother had been institutionalized in an insane asylum, and he became a ward of the court, to be raised by white guardians in various reform schools and foster homes. Martin recalled the “tension-paced atmosphere” associated with his father's political activism, but racial hostility never resulted in physical attacks from whites. Martin “never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities,” and when there were problems, “I could always call Daddy.”<sup>8</sup>

Malcolm attended predominantly-white public schools in Michigan, where he learned from white teachers and interacted with white students. He had little contact with Black community institutions and felt little sense of racial pride. In his autobiography, he recalled that as a youngster he “was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be white.”<sup>9</sup> Martin made few white friends while attending Atlanta's Black grade schools and Morehouse College. At the age of fifteen, he delivered an oration proudly proclaiming his desire to stand beside his “brother of Blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect.”<sup>10</sup>

During his early adulthood, Malcolm's criminal activity and drug use fostered negative attitudes toward all authority, Black or white, and undermined his self respect. When he found a father figure in Elijah Muhammad and joined the Nation of Islam while serving a prison term for burglary, he broke with his past and abandoned his “slave name,” Malcolm Little, to become Malcolm X. In contrast, Martin was exposed to many positive Black role models such as Morehouse president Benjamin Mays and religion professor George Kelsey—“the ideal of what I wanted a minister to be.”<sup>11</sup> He saw his father as “a noble example I didn't mind following.” Whatever its slave origin, the King family name was to Martin a source of pride.

Malcolm became the nation's best known advocate of Black nationalism, but during his formative years he had far less exposure than did King to the positive aspects of Black

culture and history. He was an outsider who joined a religious group on the margins of African-American life and found a new past for himself in the historical mythology of the Nation of Islam. King became a Baptist, the most popular religious affiliation for Black Americans, and identified himself with the historical continuum of the African-American freedom struggles. Malcolm's ministry influenced thousands of Black Muslims, while Martin's affected millions of Black Christians, but both men experienced difficulty as they pushed their respective religious groups toward ecumenical political militancy.

By the late 1950s, Malcolm had become the Nation of Islam's most effective proselytizer. He traveled to Africa in 1959 and was featured on Mike Wallace's television series, "The Hate that Hate Produced." King, for his part, had become the nation's best known Black leader. He attended Ghana's independence ceremony in 1959 and was the invited guest of the Indian government in 1959. Both leaders often spoke of the linkage between the African-American freedom struggle and anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia. Yet both were unprepared for the upsurge in southern Black protests that followed the student-led lunch counter sit-ins of 1960. Malcolm dismissed the new nonviolent activism as misguided in its adherence to King's nonviolent principles, but King himself realized that "the students had taken the struggle for justice into their own hands."<sup>12</sup>

During the Birmingham campaign of 1963, both Malcolm and Martin confronted new leadership responsibilities that forced them to recognize that the Black freedom struggle was beyond the control of any single leader. King's SCLC had initiated the campaign, but he faced skepticism and resentment from some local Black leaders. His decision to be arrested in April was a crucial turning point in his career as a civil rights leader, but even then he recognized that the Black struggle might veer toward widespread racial violence and Black nationalism. In his letter from Birmingham's jail, King argued that African Americans should "emulate neither the 'do-nothingism' of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the Black nationalist." Instead he advised, "there is a more excellent way of love and non-violent protest," adding, "if this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood."<sup>13</sup>

King may have been thinking of the Nation of Islam when he counseled against hatred and despair, but Malcolm meanwhile was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with Elijah Muhammad's policy of non-engagement, which prevented members of the Nation of Islam from participating in politics and protests. In his autobiography, Malcolm acknowledged his disappointment in the failure of the Nation of Islam to become involved in the escalating Black freedom struggle: "I felt that, wherever black people committed themselves, in the Little Rocks and the Birminghams and other places, militantly disciplined Muslims should also be there for all the world to see, and respect, and discuss. It could be heard increasingly in the Negro communities: 'Those Muslims *talk* tough, but they never *do* anything, unless somebody bothers Muslims.'"<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Malcolm knew that the Nation of Islam's apolitical stance obscured Elijah Muhammad's willingness to make political accommodations with reactionary white racists. In January 1961, Muhammad had sent Malcolm to Atlanta to meet with Ku Klux Klan officials to obtain the white supremacist group's support for the Nation's plan to create a separate Black state.<sup>15</sup> This meeting, which remained a well-kept secret until Malcolm's break with the Nation, was one of the factors that caused Malcolm to become increasingly skeptical of Muhammad's motives and integrity even before he learned of his mentor's infidelities.

Malcolm publicly charged that King and other national civil rights leaders stifled the grassroots militancy that fueled the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—"They didn't integrate it, they infiltrated it." But the mass Black support given to the march made Malcolm more determined than ever to exert his own influence on the increasingly massive Black struggle. On July 31, 1963, less than a month before the March



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on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, he invited Martin Luther King, Jr. and other national civil rights leaders to speak at a Muslim rally in Harlem. In his letter, Malcolm warned that the nation's racial crisis might "erupt into an uncontrollable explosion" and insisted that racial unity was urgently needed. "If capitalistic Kennedy and communistic Khrushchev can find something in common on which to form a United Front despite their tremendous ideological differences, it is a disgrace for Negro leaders not to be able to submerge our 'minor' differences in order to seek a common solution to a common problem posed by a Common Enemy," Malcolm argued. Malcolm assured the civil rights leaders that he would "moderate the meeting and guarantee order and courtesy for all speakers," but none of them accepted his invitation. Martin did not even respond, and this rebuff may have increased the intensity of Malcolm's subsequent criticisms of King.

After the March on Washington in August 1963, Martin and Malcolm sensed the growing festering frustration and anger of African Americans, especially when four Black girls were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham. Leading a Black delegation to the White House in September, Martin told President Kennedy: "the Negro community is about to reach a breaking point." He explained that it had become more difficult for Black leaders to call for nonviolence: "more and more we are faced with the problem of our people saying, 'What's the use?'" He advised Kennedy, "if something isn't done to

give the Negro a new sense of hope and a sense of protection, there is a danger we will face the worse race riot we have ever seen in this country.”<sup>16</sup>

Malcolm’s frustrations also escalated after the church bombing. “I made comments—but not what should have been said about the climate of hate that the American white man was generating and nourishing,” he remembered.<sup>17</sup> His dissatisfaction with his own silence may have contributed to the stridency of his attacks against national civil rights leaders such as King who, he believed, had allowed themselves to be “used against the Negro revolution.” In his “Message to the Grass Roots” speech in November 1963, Malcolm told a Detroit audience that the march’s white financial backers had manipulated Black leaders, thereby transforming a potentially militant mass protest into a “picnic, a circus.” White supporters of the march should get Academy Awards, he suggested, because “they acted like they really loved Negroes and fool a whole lot of Negroes.” Malcolm sardonically noted that the Black leaders also deserved awards “for the best supporting cast.”<sup>18</sup>

Given Malcolm X’s abrasive criticisms and his advocacy of racial separatism, it was not surprising that King rejected the occasional overtures from his fiercest Black critic. He may have thought that he had little to gain and much to lose from any association with the Nation of Islam. A national survey of African-Americans by *Newsweek* in the summer of 1963 found that 88 percent had positive opinions regarding Martin, while only 15 percent thought positively about Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm was not even deemed sufficiently prominent to be listed on the survey form. Nevertheless, Martin could not ignore Malcolm’s increasing popularity among young, politically active Black people.

Firmly convinced that nonviolent direct action was the only effective tactic available to discontented Black people, Martin struggled to understand why some alienated African Americans were attracted to Black nationalist rhetoric. “Malcolm was clearly a product of the hate and violence invested in the Negro’s blighted existence in this nation,” he observed. “He, like so many of our number, was a victim of the despair inevitably deriving from the conditions of oppression, poverty and injustice which engulf the masses of our race. In his youth, there was no hope, no preaching, teaching or movements of non-violence. He was too young for the Garvey Movement, and too poor to be a Communist—for the Communists geared their work to Negro intellectuals and labor without realizing that the masses of Negroes were unrelated to either—and yet he possessed a native intelligence and drive which demanded an outlet and means of expression.”<sup>19</sup>

Although King saw Malcolm as “very articulate” and conceded that he had “some of the answers,” he condemned “the demagogic oratory” of “extremist leaders who preach revolution. He strongly disagreed with Malcolm’s rhetorical militancy, which he saw as far less useful for African Americans than nonviolent direct action. Reflecting on their differences, King asserted: “I have often wished that he would talk less of violence, because violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. Fiery, demagogic oratory in the Black ghettos, urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.”<sup>20</sup>

Martin was also disturbed by the personal nature of some of Malcolm’s verbal assaults. Suspecting that Malcolm may have been responsible for an egg-throwing incident he endured in Harlem, Martin was dismayed that some Black nationalists “transferred their bitterness toward the white man to me,” seeing him as “soft” or “a sort of polished Uncle Tom.”<sup>21</sup> For Martin, such criticisms were hypocritical, because nonviolent activists were at least confronting Southern racists rather than simply engaging in verbal combat: “They don’t see that there’s a great deal of difference between nonresistance to evil and nonviolent resistance.”<sup>22</sup>

At the end of 1963, Elijah Muhammad reacted to Malcolm's increasing popularity, independence, and outspokenness by suspending his most effective proselytizer. The pretext for the suspension was Malcolm's statement that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a case of "chickens coming home to roost." Actually, the split between the two men derived from Malcolm's longstanding frustration with Muhammad's apolitical stance and Muhammad's resentment of Malcolm's increasing popularity. Malcolm was determined to follow a course that paralleled King's—that is, to combine religious leadership and political action.

When Malcolm returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca in the spring of 1964, he broke with the Nation of Islam and began forging ties to the more militant elements within the Black protest movement. Although his principal objective was to ally with grass-roots leaders and youthful activists in SNCC, he also sought to repair the damage caused by his earlier criticisms of Martin and other national civil rights leaders.

He continued to reject King's nonviolent, integrationist approach, but he had a brief, cordial encounter with King on March 26, 1964 as the latter left a press conference at the U.S. Capitol. As photographers gathered around, the two men shook hands. Malcolm orchestrated the impromptu meeting, grinning broadly at the clearly surprised Martin. This passing encounter did not bridge the gulf between the two men, for Malcolm was more concerned about the vicious infighting in his own camp, while King's attention was focused on the pending civil rights legislation.

Malcolm's primary concern during 1964 was to establish ties with the Black activists he saw as more militant than King. Later in 1964, he was able to meet with a number of SNCC workers, including its chairman, John Lewis, and Mississippi organizer Fannie Lou Hamer. He saw his Organization of Afro-American Unity as a potential source of ideological guidance for the militant veterans of the southern civil rights movement. At the same time, he looked to the Southern struggle for inspiration in his effort to politicize and thereby revitalize the moribund Black nationalist movement.

In early February 1965, Malcolm continued his overtures to the Southern struggle by going to Selma, Alabama, during a major voting rights campaign. SNCC workers arranged his appearances in order to encourage Black students to join their efforts, and Malcolm's fiery speeches aroused the students even while upsetting SCLC representatives. Martin, who was in jail at the time, heard that Malcolm said "some pretty passionate things against me," but he also learned of Malcolm's more cordial private meeting with Coretta Scott King. "He spoke at length to my wife Coretta about his personal struggles and expressed an interest in working more closely with the nonviolent movement," Martin recalled. "He thought he could help me more by attacking me than praising me. He thought it would make it easier for me in the long run. He said, 'If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King.'"

Just a few weeks after the visit to Selma, on Feb 21st, Malcolm X was assassinated. His death ended any chance that he would be able to discuss with King his goal of forging "a common solution to a common problem." Martin called the assassination "shocking and tragic." In a telegram to Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, he remarked: "While we did not always see eye to eye on methods to solve the race problem, I always had a deep affection for Malcolm and felt that he had a great ability to put his finger on the existence and root of the problem."<sup>23</sup>

Martin regretted that Malcolm did not have the chance to develop his growing "interest in politics as a way of dealing with the problems of the Negro." Unfortunately, Martin lamented, "history would not have it so. A man who lived under the torment of knowledge of the rape of his grandmother and murder of his father under the conditions of the present social order, does not readily accept that social order or seek to integrate into it."<sup>24</sup>

Martin saw Malcolm's murder as a symptom of the kind of conflict that was not only damaging African-American political life but also harming newly independent African nations, such as the Congo. "The American Negro cannot afford to destroy its leadership," Martin observed. "Certainly we will continue to disagree, but we must disagree without becoming violently disagreeable. We will still suffer the temptation to bitterness, but we must learn that hate is too great a burden for a people moving on toward their date with destiny. Men of talent are too scarce to be destroyed by envy, greed and tribal rivalry before they reach their full maturity." He asserted that Malcolm's murder deprived "the world of a potentially great leader."

Martin would witness the destructive internal conflicts that disrupted African-American political life in the years after Malcolm's assassination. More than Martin could have known in 1965, Malcolm's death signaled the beginning of bitter battles involving proponents of the ideological alternatives the two men represented.

Rather than recognizing the points of convergence in the ideas of Martin and Malcolm, most Black leaders of the era after King's death in 1968 saw them as irreconcilable alternatives. Black people were advised to choose between Martin and Malcolm, rather than affirming that each offered a partial answer to the problems of the race. Unlike many of their followers, the two men understood at the end of their lives that their basic messages were compatible rather than contradictory. Both saw that the building of strong, Black-controlled institutions in African-American communities did not contradict the goal of achieving equal rights within the American political system; indeed, they came to understand that achieving one goal could contribute to the achievement of the other. Perhaps the most important consequence of their tragic deaths was that they were unavailable to serve as elder statesmen for the African-American freedom struggle during the period of ideological uncertainty following the passage of historic civil rights legislation.

Had they lived, Malcolm and Martin might have advised their followers that the differences between the two were not as significant as was their shared sense of dedication to the struggle for racial advancement. Malcolm came to realize that nonviolent tactics could be used militantly and were essential aspects of any mass struggle. Indeed, he was himself a peaceful man who never used violence to achieve his goals. Martin, for his part, remained philosophically committed to the ideals of Gandhian nonviolence, but he increasingly recognized that mass militancy driven by positive racial consciousness was essential for African-American progress. "I am not sad that Black Americans are rebelling," he remarked in his last published essay, "Without this magnificent ferment among Negroes, the old evasions and procrastinations would have continued indefinitely."

Malcolm and Martin understood the African-American dilemma from different perspectives rooted in their different experiences. Each leader was a visionary. Yet the ideas of each man were still evolving when their lives were cut short by assassination; neither fully comprehended, for example, the leadership potential of women. Each exhibited remarkable leadership skills, but each was also a product of an era of remarkable mass struggles.

Malcolm experienced the enduring problems of poverty, despair, and powerlessness that we have yet to overcome. He insisted that African Americans address these problems by strengthening the institutions in their communities and by acquiring a positive sense of racial identity. He continues to have special significance for African Americans at the bottom of the U.S. social order, because he was once there and felt the bitterness and frustration of those who remain there. He continues to inspire and enlighten Black people who experience the American nightmare rather than the American dream.

Martin also understood the importance of racial pride, even if he took such pride for granted. He recognized that African Americans would never be free until they signed

their own emancipation proclamation “with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood,” but he also saw that the destiny of African Americans was inextricably linked to that of all people and that any freedom struggle should have reconciliation as its ultimate goal. His message can enlighten us in these times when racial and ethnic conflicts have engulfed many nations and may yet engulf this one. He knew that nonviolent struggles seeking reconciliation and redemption do not offer the same excitement and emotional satisfaction as do revenge and retaliation; yet he also understood that, despite our differences, we are inextricably bound together in a network of interdependence on our increasingly endangered planet.

## Notes

1. Alex Haley, with Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
2. Among the few biographies of Malcolm X that displays original biographical research that extends beyond Haley's *Autobiography* is Bruce Perry's iconoclastic psychobiography, *Malcolm X: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (New York: Station Hill, 1991).
3. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1.
4. Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 4, 5.
5. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 4.
6. Martin Luther King, “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume I: Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, 111.
7. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 14.
8. King, “An Autobiography of Religious Development,” 360.
9. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 31.
10. Martin Luther King, “The Negro and the Constitution,” in Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume I: Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, 111.
11. Carson, ed., *Autobiography*, 16.
12. *Ibid.*, 139.
13. *Ibid.*, 197.
14. Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 291.
15. Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1991), 203–204.
16. Carson, ed., *Autobiography*, 233.
17. Haley, 293.
18. “Message to the Grass Roots, November 10, 1963,” in Geore Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1965), 17.
19. Carson, ed., *Autobiography*, 267.
20. *Ibid.*, 265–266.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 268.
23. *Ibid.*, 265.
24. *Ibid.*, 268.