

Malcolm X

Rediscovering Malcolm's Life

A Historian's Adventures in Living History

Manning Marable

To the majority of older white Americans, the noted African-American leaders Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. seem as different from each other as night vs. day. Mainstream culture and many history textbooks still suggest that the moderate Dr. King preached nonviolence and interracial harmony, whereas the militant Malcolm X advocated racial hatred and armed confrontation. Even Malcolm's infamous slogan, "By Any Means Necessary," still evokes among whites disturbing images of Molotov cocktails, armed shoot-outs, and violent urban insurrection. But to the great majority of Black Americans and to millions of whites under thirty, these two Black figures are now largely perceived as being fully complimentary with each other. Both leaders had favored the building of strong Black institutions and healthy communities; both had strongly denounced Black-on-Black violence and drugs within the urban ghetto; both had vigorously opposed America's war in Vietnam and had embraced the global cause of human rights. In a 1989 "dialogue" between the eldest daughters of these two assassinated Black heroes, Yolanda King and Attallah Shabazz, both women emphasized the fundamental common ground and great admiration the two men shared for each other. Shabazz complained that "playwrights always make Martin so passive and Malcolm so aggressive that those men wouldn't have lasted a minute in the same room." King concurred, noting that in one play "my father was this wimp who carried a Bible everywhere he went, including to someone's house for dinner." King argued, "That's not the kind of minister Daddy was! All these ridiculous clichés. . . ." Both agreed that the two giants were united in the pursuit of Black freedom and equality.

As a child of the radical sixties, I was well ahead of the national learning curve on the King vs. Malcolm dialectic. At age seventeen, as a high school senior, I had attended Dr. King's massive funeral at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, on April 9, 1968. I had walked behind the rugged mule-driven wagon carrying Dr. King's body, along with tens of thousands of other mourners. The chaotic events of 1968—the Vietnamese Tet offensive in February, President Johnson's surprise decision not to seek reelection, the assass-

sinations of both Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, the Paris student and worker uprising that summer, the “police riot” in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention—all were contributing factors in spinning the world upside down.

By the end of that turbulent year, for the generation of African-American students at overwhelmingly white college campuses, it was Malcolm X, not Dr. King, who overnight became the symbol for the times we were living through. As leader of my campus Black student union, I re-read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* during the winter of 1969. The full relevance and revolutionary meaning of the man suddenly became crystal clear to me. In short, the former “King Man” became almost overnight a confirmed, dedicated “X Man.”

Malcolm X was the Black Power generation’s greatest prophet, who spoke the uncomfortable truths that no one else had the courage or integrity to broach. Especially for young Black males, he personified for us *everything* we wanted to become: the embodiment of Black masculinist authority and power, uncompromising bravery in the face of racial oppression, the ebony standard for what the African-American liberation movement should be about. With Talmudic-like authority, we quoted him in our debates, citing chapter and verse, the precise passages from the *Autobiography*, and books like *Malcolm X Speaks, By Any Means Necessary*, and other edited volumes. These collected works represented almost sacred texts of Black identity to us. “Saint Malcolm X-the-Martyr” was the ecumenical ebony standard for collective “Blackness.” We even made feeble attempts to imitate Malcolm’s speaking style. Everyone quoted him to justify their own narrow political, cultural, and even religious formulations and activities. His birthday, May 19, was widely celebrated as a national Black holiday. Any criticisms, no matter how minor or mild, of Malcolm’s stated beliefs or evolving political career, were generally perceived as being not merely heretical, but almost treasonous to the entire Black race.

Working class Black people widely loved Brother Malcolm for what they perceived as his clear and uncomplicated style of language, and his peerless ability in making every complex issue “plain.” Indeed, one of Malcolm’s favorite expressions from the podium was his admonition to other speakers to “Make it Plain,” a phrase embodying his unshakable conviction that the Black masses themselves, “from the grassroots,” would ultimately become the makers of their own revolutionary Black history. Here again, inside impoverished Black urban neighborhoods and especially in the bowels of America’s prisons and jails, Malcolm’s powerful message had an evocative appeal to young Black males. In actor Ossie Davis’s memorable words, “Malcolm was our manhood! . . . And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves. And we will know him then for what he was and is—a Prince—our own Black shining Prince!—who didn’t hesitate to die, because he loved us so.”

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, released into print in November 1965, sold millions of copies within several years. By the late sixties, the *Autobiography* had been adopted in hundreds of college courses across the country. Malcolm X’s life story, as outlined by the *Autobiography*, became our quintessential story about the ordeal of being Black in America. Nearly every African American at the time was familiar with the story’s basic outline. Born in the Midwest, young Malcolm Little became an orphan: his father was brutally murdered by the Ku Klux Klan and his disturbed mother, overwhelmed by caring for seven little children, suffered a mental breakdown and had been institutionalized. Malcolm then relocated east to Roxbury and Harlem. He then became an urban outlaw, the notorious “Detroit Red,” a pimp, hustler, burglar, and drug dealer. Pinched by police, “Detroit Red” was sentenced to ten years’ hard labor in prison, where he then joined the Black Muslims. Once released, given the new name Malcolm X, he rapidly built the Black Muslims from an inconsequential sect to over one hundred thousand strong.

But then Malcolm X grew intellectually and politically well beyond the Muslim. He decided to launch his own Black nationalist group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He started preaching about human rights and “the ballot or the bullet.” Malcolm made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, converted to orthodox Islam, and became “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.” He was then acclaimed by Islamic, African, and Arab leaders as a leading voice for racial justice. Then, at the pinnacle of his worldwide influence and power, Malcolm was brutally struck down by assassins’ bullets at Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom. This was the basic story nearly every activist in my generation knew by heart.

A number of Malcolm X’s associates and others who had known him personally published articles and books in the late sixties, which firmly established the late leader as the true fountainhead of Black Power.¹ Far more influential, however, for popularizing the Malcolm Legend was the Black Arts Movement. Poets were particularly fascinated with the magnetic physical figure of Malcolm, as a kind of revolutionary Black Adonis. In life, towering at six feet, three inches tall and weighing a trim 175 to 180 pounds, broad-shouldered Malcolm X was mesmerizingly handsome, always displaying a broad, boyish smile, and always spotlessly well-groomed; in death, he would remain forever young. In photographs, he seemed both strong and sensitive. Poet Joyce Whitshitt captured this image of the fearless yet vulnerable model for a new Black manhood in “For Malcolm.”

... You were the brilliant embodiment
Of elusive manhood. Those who are less
Negate your death and fail to acknowledge
Righteousness felt of your logic.

Celebrated African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks echoed similar themes and images in her ode to Malcolm:

He had the hawk-man’s eyes.
We gasped. We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air.
And pushing us to walls.

One of the most popular and widely-read Black nationalist poets of the period was Sonia Sanchez, who for several years was a Nation of Islam member. Sanchez’s Malcolm was less overtly the paragon of Black masculinity, than the tragic symbol of loss for what might have been, an unhealed wound that “floods the womb until I drown”:

Do not speak to me of martyrdom
of men who die to be remembered
on some parish day.
I don’t believe in dying
though I too shall die
and violets like castanets
will echo me.

Yet this man
this dreamer,
thick-lipped with words
will never speak again
and in each winter
when the cold air cracks
with frost, I’ll breathe
his breath and mourn
my gun-filled nights.

He was the sun that tagged
 the western sky and
 melted tiger-scholars
 while they searched for stripes.
 He said, 'Fuck you white
 man. We have been
 curled too long. Nothing
 is sacred now. Not your
 white face nor any
 land that separates
 until some voices
 squat with spasms.'

Do not speak to me of living.
 life is obscene with crowds
 of white on black.
 death is my pulse.
 what might have been
 is not for him or me
 but what could have been
 floods the womb until I drown."

Malcolm's powerfully masculinist image was most unambiguously on full display in Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones's) famous and frequently-recited "A Poem for Black Hearts." Despite its blatantly homophobic final passage, Baraka powerfully projected Malcolm X as the ideal model for the perfect fulfillment of an ideal Black masculinity:

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke
 the face of some dumb white man. For
 Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
 all black and strong in his image
 of ourselves, for Malcolm's words
 fire darts, the victor's tireless
 thrusts, words hung above the world
 change as it may, he said it, and
 for this he was killed, for saying,
 and feeling, and being/change, all
 collected hot in his heart, For Malcolm's
 heart, raising us above our filthy cities,
 for his stride, and his beat, and his address
 to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's
 pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life,
 black men, for the filling of your minds
 with righteousness, For all of him dead and
 gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
 clings to our speech black god of our time.
 For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
 black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,
 black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,
 for Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing
 in us rest
 until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals
 that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if
 we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of
 the earth.

After receding somewhat during much of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Malcolm X's cultural reputation among artists, playwrights, and musicians exploded again with the flowering of the hip-hop generation. Malcolm's cultural renaissance began with the 1983 release of Keith LeBlanc's "No Sell-Out," a 12-inch dance single featuring a Malcolm X speech set to hip-hop beat. Old School group Afrika Bambaata and the Soul Sonic Force followed in 1986 with "Renegades of Funk," declaring that both King and Malcolm X had been bold and bad "renegades of the atomic age." On its classic 1988 hip-hop album, "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back," Public Enemy (PE) generously sampled from Malcolm's speeches. On the song "Bring The Noise," PE took two different excerpts from a Malcolm X speech, constructing the provocative phrase, "Too Black, Too Strong." On "Party for Your Right to Fight," Public Enemy told the hip-hop nation that "J. Edgar Hoover . . . had King and X set up." PE's massive popularity and its strong identification with Malcolm's image led other hip-hop artists to also incorporate Malcolm X into their own music. In 1989, the Stop the Violence Movement's "Self Destruction" album featured a Malcolm X lecture, and its companion video included beautiful murals of the Black leader as the hip-hop background for rappers. The less commercially popular but enormously talented artist Paris released "Break the Grip of Shame" in 1990, which prominently featured Malcolm's ringing indictment: "We declare our right on this Earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being to be given the rights of a human being in this society on this Earth in this day, which we intend to bring into existence, by any means necessary!"

As "Thug Life" and "Gangsta Rap" emerged from the West Coast and soon acquired a national commercial appeal, these artists painted Malcolm X in their own cultural contexts of misogynistic and homophobic violence. Ice Cube's 1992 "Predator," for example, sampled a Malcolm address over a beat on one cut; on another, "Wicked," Ice Cube rapped: "People wanna know how come I gotta gat and I'm looking out the window like Malcolm ready to bring that noise. Kinda trigger-happy like the Ghetto Boys." Less provocatively, KRS-One's 1995 "Ah-Yeah" spoke of Black reincarnation: "They tried to harm me, I used to be Malcolm X. Now I'm on the planet as the one called KRS." Perhaps the greatest individual artist hip-hop culture has yet produced, Tupac Shakur, fiercely identified himself with Malcolm X. On Tupac's classic 1996 "Makaveli" album, on the song "Blasphemy," he posed a provocative query:

Why you got these kids minds, thinking that they evil while the preacher being richer.
You say honor God's people, should we cry when the Pope die, my request, we
should cry if they cried when we buried Malcolm X. Mama tells me am I wrong, is
God just another cop waiting to beat my ass if I don't go pop?

The widespread release and commercial success of Spike Lee's 1992 biofilm "X," combined with hip-hop's celebration of Malcolm as a "homeboy," created the context for what historian Russell Rickford has termed "Malcolmology." Hundreds of thousands of African-American households owned and displayed portraits of Malcolm X, either in their homes, places of business, or at Black schools. Malcolm X by the 1990s had become one of the few historical figures to emerge from the Black nationalist tradition to be fully accepted and integrated into the pantheon of civil rights legends, an elite of Black forefathers, who included Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As with every mythic figure, the icon of Saint Malcolm accommodated a variety of parochial interpretations. To the bulk of the African-American middle class, the Malcolm legend was generally presented in terms of his inextricable trajectory of intellectual and political maturation, culminating with his dramatic break from the NOI and embrace of

interracial harmony. For much of the hip-hop nation, in sharp contrast, the most attractive characteristics of Saint Malcolm emphasized the incendiary and militant elements of his career. Many hip-hop artists made scant distinctions between Malcolm X and his former protege and later bitter rival, Louis X (Farrakhan). Some even insisted that Malcolm X had never supported any coalitions with whites, despite his numerous 1964-1965 public statements to the contrary. The hip-hop Malcolmologists seized Malcolm as the ultimate Black cultural rebel, unblemished and uncomplicated by the pragmatic politics of partisan compromise, which was fully reflected in the public careers of other post-Malcolm Black leaders, such as Jesse Jackson and Harold Washington. Despite their Black cultural nationalist rhetoric, however, hip-hop Malcolmologists also uncritically accepted the main parameters of the Black leader's tragic life story, as presented in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. They also glorified Malcolm's early gangster career, as the notorious, street-wise "Detroit Red," and tended to use selective quotations by the fallen leader that gave justification for their use of weapons in challenging police brutality.

The widespread sampling of Malcolm's speeches on hip-hop videos and albums, plus the popular acclaim for Lee's biopic, culminated into "Malcolmania" in 1992-1993. There were "X" posters, coffee mugs, potato chips, T-shirts and "X-caps," which newly elected President Bill Clinton wore occasionally when jogging outside the White House in the morning. CBS News at the time estimated the commercial market for X-related products at \$100 million annually. The Malcolmania hype had the effect of transporting the X-man from being merely a Black superhero into the exalted status of mainstream American idol.

This new privileged status for Malcolm X was even confirmed officially by the U.S. Government. On January 20, 1999, about 1,500 officials, celebrities, and guests crowded into Harlem's Apollo Theatre to mark the issuance by the U.S. Postal Service of the Malcolm X postage stamp. Prominently in attendance were actors Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and Harry Belafonte. Also on hand was Harlem millionaire entrepreneur, media-mogul (and Malcolm's former attorney) Percy Sutton. The Malcolm X stamp was the Postal Service's latest release in its "Black Heritage Stamp Series." Pennsylvania Congressman Chaka Fattah, the ranking Democrat on the House of Representatives Postal Subcommittee, remarked at the festive occasion, "There is no more appropriate honor than this stamp because Malcolm X sent all of us a message through his life and his life's work." To Congressman Fattah, Malcolm X's "thoughts, his ideas, his conviction, and his courage provide an inspiration even now to new generations to come." Few in the audience could ignore the rich irony of this event. One of America's sharpest and most unrelenting critics was now being praised and honored by the same government that had once carried out illegal harassment and surveillance against him. Ossie Davis, who understood the significance of this bittersweet moment better than anyone else, jokingly quipped: "We in this community look upon this commemorative stamp finally as America's stamp of approval . . ."

The Malcolm X postage stamp was the twenty-second release in the "Black Heritage Series," which had previously featured other Black heroes such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mary McLeod Bethune, and W.E.B. Du Bois. The U.S. Postal Service also released a short biographical statement accompanying the stamp's issuance, noting that the retouched photographic image of Malcolm X had been taken by an Associated Press photographer at a press conference held in New York City on May 21, 1964. The statement explains that soon after this photograph was taken, that Malcolm X "later broke away from the organization," referring to the NOI, and "disavowed his earlier separatist preaching. . . ." The most generous thing one could say about this curious statement was that it was the product of poor scholarship. The photograph actually had been taken during an interview in Cairo, Egypt, on July 14, 1964.

Malcolm X had publicly broken from the NOI on March 8, 1964, two months earlier than the official statement had suggested. More problematic was the U.S. Postal Service's assertion that Malcolm X had become, before his death, a proponent of "a more integrationist solution to racial problems." But none of these errors of fact and slight distortions disturbed most who had gathered to celebrate. The Malcolm X postage stamp was a final and fitting triumph of his legacy. The full "Americanization of Malcolm X" appeared to be complete.

When in 1987 I decided to write what was to have been a modest "political biography" of Malcolm X, there was already a substantial body of literature about him. By 2002, those published works had grown to roughly 930 books, 360 films and internet educational resources, and 350 sound recordings. As I plowed through dozens, then hundreds of books and articles, I was dismayed to discover that almost none of the scholarly literature or books about him had relied on serious research which would include a complete archival investigation of Malcolm's letters, personal documents, wills, diaries, transcripts of speeches and sermons, his actual criminal record, FBI files, and legal court proceedings. Some informative articles had appeared written by individuals who had either worked closely with Malcolm X or who described a specific event in which they had been brought into direct contact with the Black leader. But these reminiscences lacked analytical rigor and critical insight. What staggered the mind, however, was the literal mountain of badly written articles, the turgid prose, and various academic-styled ruminations about Malcolm X's life and thought, nearly all based on the same, limited collection of secondary sources.

There was remarkably little Malcolm X literature that employed the traditional tools of historical investigation. Few writers had conducted fresh interviews with Malcolm X's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, any of his closest co-workers, or the extended Little family. Writers made few efforts to investigate the actual criminal record of Malcolm X at the time of his 1946 incarceration. Not even the best previous scholarly studies of Malcolm X—a small group of books including Peter Goldman's *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (1973), Karl Evanzz's *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (1992), and Louis DeCaro's *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (1996)—had amassed a genuine "archival" or substantive database of documentation in order to form a true picture of Malcolm-X-the-man rather than the pristine icon.² One problem in this was Malcolm X's inescapable identification as the quintessential model of Black masculinity—which served as a kind of gendered barricade to any really objective appraisal of him. Cultural critic Philip Brian Harper has observed that Malcolm X and the Black Powerites who later imitated him constructed themselves as virile, potent, and hyper-masculinist, giving weight to the false impression that racial integrationists like King were weak and impotent.³

Nearly everyone writing about Malcolm X largely, with remarkably few exceptions, accepted *as fact* most if not all of the chronology of events and personal experiences depicted in the *Autobiography's* narrative. Few authors checked the edited, published "transcripts" of Malcolm X's speeches as presented in *Malcolm X Speaks* and *By Any Means Necessary* against the actual tape recordings of those speeches, or the transcribed excerpts of the same talks recorded by the FBI. Every historian worth her or his salt knows that "memoirs" like the *Autobiography* are inherently biased. They present a representation of the subject that privileges certain facts, while self-censuring others. There are deliberate omissions, the chronological re-ordering of events, and name-changes. Consequently, there existed no comprehensive biography of this man who arguably had come to personify modern, urban Black America in the past half century.

There continued to be, for me, so many unanswered basic questions about this dynamic yet ultimately elusive man that neither the *Autobiography*, nor the other nine

hundred-plus books written about him had answered satisfactorily. The most obvious queries concerned his murder. Substantial evidence had been compiled both by Goldman and attorney William Kuntzler that indicated that two of the men convicted in 1966 for gunning down Malcolm at the Audubon Ballroom, Thomas 15X Johnson and Norman 3X Butler, were completely innocent. In 1977, the only assassin who had been wounded and captured at the crime scene, Talmadge Hayer, had confessed to his prison clergyman that both Johnson and Butler had played absolutely no roles in the murder, confirming that in fact, they had not even been present at the Audubon that afternoon.

There had always been whispers for years that Louis Farrakhan had been responsible for the assassination; he had been Malcolm X's closest protege, and then following his vitriolic renunciation of Malcolm, inherited the leadership of Harlem's Mosque Number Seven following the murder. Then I had to explain the inexplicable behavior of the New York Police Department (NYPD) on the day of the assassination. Usually one to two dozen cops blanketed any event where Malcolm X was speaking. Normally at the Audubon rallies, a police captain or lieutenant was stationed in a command center above the Audubon's main entrance, on the second floor. Fifteen to twenty uniformed officers, at least, would be milling at the periphery of the crowd, a few always located at a small park directly across the street from the building. On February 21, 1965, however, the cops almost disappeared. There were no uniformed officers in the ballroom, at the main entrance, or even in the park, at the time of the shooting. Only two NYPD patrolmen were inside the Audubon, but at the opposite end of the building. When the NYPD investigation team arrived, forensic evidence wasn't properly collected, and significant eyewitnesses still at the scene weren't interviewed for days, and in several instances weeks, later. The crime scene itself was preserved for only a couple of hours. By 6 p.m. only three hours after Malcolm X's killing, a housekeeper with detergent and a bucket of water mopped up the floor, eliminating the bloody evidence. A dance was held in the same ballroom at 7 p.m. that night, as originally scheduled.

Perhaps I could never answer completely the greatest question about Malcolm X: if he *had* lived, or somehow had survived the assassination attempt, what could he have become? How would have another three or four decades of life altered how we imagine him, and the ways we interpret his legacy? The legion of books that he inspired presented widely different, and even diametrically opposing, theories on the subject. Virtually every group—the orthodox, Sunni Islamic community, Black cultural nationalists, Trotskyists, prisoners and former prisoners, mainstream integrationists, and hip-hop artists—had manipulated the “Black shining prince” to promote their own agendas, or to justify their causes. The enormous elasticity of Malcolm's visual image could be universally appropriated, stretching from Ice Cube's 1992 apocalyptic “predator” to being used as the template for the film character “Magneto” in the 1999 block buster hit, “The X-Men,” illustrated the great difficulty I now confronted. Malcolm X was being constantly *reinvented* within American society and popular culture.

But the first, most original, and most talented revisionist of Malcolm X was Malcolm X himself. I slowly began to realize that Malcolm X continuously and astutely refashioned his outward image, artfully redesigning his public style and even language, to facilitate overtures to different people in varied contexts. And yet, beneath the multiple layers of reinvention, *who was he?* Was the powerful impact of his short, thirty-nine years of existence actually grounded in what he had really accomplished, or based on the unfulfilled promise of what he might have become? Malcolm X is memorialized by millions of Americans largely because of the *Autobiography*, which is today a standard text of American literature. But was Malcolm's *hajj* to Mecca in April 1964, the dramatic turning point of the *Autobiography*, the glorious epiphany Malcolm claimed it was at the time, and that virtually all other interpreters of him have uncritically accepted? Was this

spiritual metamorphosis, the embracing of color blindness, and the public denouncing of Elijah Muhammad's sexual misconduct, all just part of the political price he was now prepared to pay to gain entry into the Civil Rights Movement's national leadership? Wasn't this final "reincarnation" the necessary role change for El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz to reach inside the court of the Saudi royal family, and to gain access to the corridors of governmental power throughout the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia?

With so many unanswered questions to explore, there seemed to me to exist paradoxically a *collective conspiracy of silence surrounding Malcolm X*, an unwitting or perhaps witting attempt not to examine things too closely, to stick to the accepted narrative offered by the *Autobiography* and Lee's biopic. By not peering below the surface, there would be no need to adjust the crafted image we have learned to adore, frozen in time. We could simply all find enduring comfort in the safe, masculinist gaze of our "Black shining prince."

Historians are trained in graduate school to state only what we can actually *prove*, based primarily on archival or secondary source evidence. Information we collect from oral interviews can only be used from informed subjects, who have an opportunity to review what they've said for the record. Thus the discipline itself provides certain safeguards to interviewees and informants. Most historians, in other words, do not see themselves as investigative reporters, or would-be "cold case" investigators. Yet the skills of both seemed to me necessary in order to crack open the Malcolm X collective conspiracy of silence. Malcolm's actual legacy was dogmatically preserved and fiercely guarded by nearly everyone privy to important information pertaining to him. This was a highly

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unusual situation for a researcher to confront, especially considering that Malcolm X lived a very “public” existence, appearing on numerous television shows, and speaking literally at thousands of venues across the country.

When I started my biography of Malcolm X in 1987 I was then Chair of Black Studies at Ohio State University. Working with several graduate students, we began compiling photocopies of articles about Malcolm X that appeared in academic journals. We began a newspaper clipping file of more recent media coverage related to our subject (remember, these were the days before the internet and world-wide web). I knew that I would need to penetrate four principal, core areas of investigation, in order to present a really balanced and fair portrait of the man. These four broad areas were: (1) the Black organizations in which Malcolm X played a significant leadership role—the Nation of Islam, the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity; (2) the surveillance of Malcolm X by the FBI and other governmental agencies; (3) the materials of Alex Haley, co-author of the *Autobiography*, used in preparing the book; and, of course (4) the family of Malcolm X, especially his widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, and their access to any manuscripts, correspondence, texts or transcripts of speeches and sermons, legal documents, and odd paraphernalia. All four of these areas, for different reasons, proved to be intractable. In 1989, I accepted a professorship in ethnic studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and in the following academic year I organized a research team of six to ten graduate students and work-study assistants, who were dedicated to reconstructing Malcolm’s life. After three hard years, we had made at best marginal headway. I then accepted my current appointment at Columbia. I had no idea at that time that another decade would elapse before I could really successfully infiltrate these four core areas of Malcolm-related investigation.

The first nearly overwhelming difficulty was the lack of a comprehensive, well-organized archive on Malcolm X. Primary source materials, such as correspondence and personal manuscripts, were literally scattered and fragmented. For some inexplicable reason, the Shabazz family had never authorized a group of historians or archivists to compile these rare documents into a central, publicly accessible repository. By my own count, as of 2003 chunks of Malcolm’s core memorabilia were located at seventy-three different U.S. archives and libraries, including the Library of Congress, New York University’s Tamiment Library, the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library, Cornell University Library, Wayne State University Library, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Emory University Library, Howard University Library and Columbia University’s Oral History Research Center. I contrasted this chaotic situation to the professionally archived life records of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., then at Atlanta’s King Center, that would serve as the core database for historian Clayborne Carson’s magnificent, 30-year-long effort, the King Papers Project. Booker T. Washington’s papers, carefully archived and preserved, fill exactly 1,077 linear feet of archival boxes at the Library of Congress. Most dedicated Malcolmologists also knew that Dr. Shabazz still retained hundreds of documents and manuscripts by her late husband in her Mount Vernon, New York home. But no one really had a clue how much primary source material there was, and whether any efforts had been made to preserve it.

I had more than a nostalgic desire to preserve memorabilia. As a historian, I also knew that all artifacts made by human beings inevitably disintegrate. Paper, left unprotected, without a climate-controlled environment and acid-free folders, “lives” only about seventy-five years. Audiotape recordings based on magnetic recording technology survive about forty years. People who had worked closely with Malcolm X and who had known him intimately would nearly all be dead in another two decades. Only the Shabazz family had the moral authority to initiate such an undertaking, to secure Malcolm X’s place in history. It simply didn’t make sense. Much later, in 2002, when the near-public auction by

Butterfield's of a major cache of Malcolm memorabilia fetching offers of \$600,000 and more came to light, I discovered that the Shabazz family had squirreled away several hundred pounds of Malcolm X-related documents and material. Maliakah Shabazz, the youngest daughter, had, without the rest of the family's knowledge, managed to pack and transport her father's materials to a Florida storage facility. Her failure to pay the storage facility's monthly fee led to the seizure and disposition of the bin's priceless contents. The new purchaser, in turn, had contacted E-Bay and Butterfield's to sell what he believed to be his property. Only a legal technicality voided the sale, returning the memorabilia to the Shabazzes.

After the international publicity and outcry surrounding the Butterfield's abortive auction, however, the Shabazzes decided to deposit their materials at the Schomburg Center in Harlem. In January 2003, the Schomburg publicly announced to the media its acquisition on the basis of a 75-year loan. I have previously written in detail about the Butterfield's abortive auction fiasco, and I had been extensively involved in the financial negotiations with the auction house and the Shabazzes on behalf of Columbia University. But what *none* of the principals, including myself, could bear to ask ourselves and the Shabazz Estate in public, is *why* had hundreds of pounds of documents, speeches, manuscripts, Malcolm's Holy Qu'ran, etc. been left deteriorating in storage in their basement *for thirty-five years?*

The intransigence of the Shabazzes forced me to contemplate negotiations with the Nation of Islam. I had written extensively, and quite critically, about Louis Farrakhan and his philosophy over a number of years. Yet during my research, I had learned that Muslim ministers like Malcolm X, under the strict authoritarian supervision of Elijah Muhammad, had been required to submit weekly reports about their mosques' activities. All sermons they delivered were audiotaped, with the tapes mailed to the national headquarters in Chicago. When I broached the possibility of examining their archives through third parties, the NOI curtly refused, explaining that they wished to "protect Dr. Betty Shabazz and her family."

Another potential avenue of biographical inquiry existed among Malcolm X's friends and associates in Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, two groups formed in 1964, and that had disintegrated in the months after Malcolm's assassination. Here I had better luck. Prior friendships with several prominent individuals, such as actor Ossie Davis, provided valuable oral histories of their relationships with Malcolm X. Most key individuals I wanted to interview, however, were either reclusive or elusive. Some were literally "underground," and living in exile in either South America, the Caribbean, or in Africa. A few, such as writer Sylvester Leaks, cordially agreed to converse off the record, then angrily refused to be formally interviewed. Some pivotal figures such as Malcolm X's personal bodyguard, Reuben Francis, had literally disappeared months following the murder. I subsequently learned that Francis had somehow been relocated to Mexico sometime in 1966, and from then fell into complete obscurity. Lynn Shiflett, OAAU secretary and a trusted personal assistant to Malcolm X, had refused all interviews and even written contacts since 1966.

The FBI avenue of inquiry proved to be even more daunting. Despite the passage of the Freedom of Information Act, which required the Bureau to declassify its internal memoranda that required secrecy for the sake of national security, by 1994 only about 2,300 pages of an estimated 50,000 pages of surveillance on Malcolm X was made public. Much of this information was heavily redacted or blacked out by FBI censors, supposedly to protect its informants, or to preserve "national security." For several years, a group of my student research assistants helped me to make sense of this maze of FBI bureaucratic mumbo jumbo. I learned eventually that whatever the FBI's original motives, they fairly accurately tracked Malcolm X's precise movements, public addresses

and dozens of telephone calls, all without legal warrants, of course. In 1995, Farrakhan had proposed announcing a national campaign to pressure the Bureau to open up its archives about Malcolm X, and especially to release any relevant information concerning his assassination. According to Farrakhan, the Shabazz family insisted that there be no effort to force the Bureau to divulge what it knew. Friends close to the family subsequently explained to me that the memories were still too painful, even after thirty long years. A public inquiry would be too traumatic for all concerned.

Without my knowledge, historian Clayborne Carson at Stanford University was, in the early 1990s, working independently along parallel lines. He successfully annotated the FBI memoranda at that time available, publishing an invaluable reference work, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995). Prior to the book's publication, however, attorneys for Dr. Shabazz expressed concerns that Carson should severely *limit* the amount of original material lifted by the FBI from Malcolm X's orations, writings, and wiretapped conversations. Thus the book that was comprised of letters and transcribed tape recordings already heavily censored by the FBI was, in effect, *censored a second time* for the purposes of not violating copyright infringement. When Black Studies scholar Abdul Alkalimat prepared a primer text, *Malcolm X for Beginners*, Dr. Shabazz threatened a lawsuit, based on the unusual legal claim that *anything* ever uttered by her late husband was her "intellectual property." Alkalimat finally consented to surrender any and all claims to royalties from the book to the Shabazz estate.

I then confronted the enigma of Alex Haley. Haley was the highest-selling author of Black nonfiction in U.S. history. His greatest achievement had been the 1976 book *Roots*, which like the co-authored *Autobiography* had become a celebrated, iconic text of Black identity and culture. Yet statements about Malcolm X made by Haley shortly before his death seemed to me strangely negative. Haley had even asserted that both Malcolm X and Dr. King were going "downhill" before their deaths.⁴ Haley had placed his papers at the University of Tennessee's archives, in January 1991. Yet there remained unusual restrictions on scholarly access to his personal records. I personally visited his archives in Knoxville twice. No photocopying of any document in the Haley files is permitted, without the prior written approval of his attorney, Paul Coleman of Knoxville, Tennessee. My letters to Coleman were unanswered. When in Knoxville during my second visit, I persuaded the archive's curator to phone Coleman directly on my behalf. Attorney Coleman then explained to me over the telephone that he needed to know the *precise pages* or documents to be photocopied, *in advance!* In practical terms, scholars are forced to copy passages in pencil, by hand, from Haley's archives. This laborious model of information transferal worked well for monks in the Middle Ages, but seems inappropriate for the age of digital technology.

As luck would have it, several years before Haley's death, he had named researcher Anne Romaine as his "official biographer." Romaine was a white folksinger, trained neither as a historian nor as a biographer. Yet she was apparently diligent and serious about her work. Between the late 1980s until to her death in 1995, Romaine had conducted audiotaped interviews with over fifty individuals, some of whom covered the background to Haley's role in producing the *Autobiography*. The great bulk of Romaine's papers and research materials pertaining to the *Autobiography* were also donated to the University of Tennessee's archives. To my delight, there were absolutely no restrictions on Romaine's papers; everything can be photocopied and reproduced. One folder in Romaine's papers includes the "raw materials" used to construct Chapter Sixteen of the *Autobiography*. Here, I found the actual mechanics of the Haley–Malcolm X collaboration. Malcolm X apparently would speak to Haley in "free style"; it was left to Haley to take hundreds of sentences into paragraphs and then appropriate subject areas. Malcolm also had a habit of scribbling notes to himself as he spoke. Haley learned to pocket these sketchy notes

and later reassemble them, integrating the conscious with subconscious reflections into a workable narrative. Although Malcolm X retained final approval of their hybrid text, he was not privy to the actual editorial processes superimposed from Haley's side. Chapters the two men had prepared were sometimes split and restructured into other chapters. These details may appear mundane and insignificant. But considering that Malcolm's final "metamorphosis" took place in 1963–65, the exact timing of when individual chapters were produced takes on enormous importance.

These new revelations made me realize that I also needed to learn much more about *Haley*. Born in Ithaca, New York in 1921, Alex Haley was the oldest of three sons of Simon Alexander Haley, a professor of agriculture, and Bertha George Palmer, a grade school teacher. Haley had been raised as a child in Henning, Tennessee. As a teenager, in 1939, Haley enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard as a mess boy. During World War II, he had come to the attention of white officers for his flair as a talented writer. During long assignments at sea, Haley had ghost-written hundreds of love letters for sailors' wives and sweethearts back at home. While Haley's repeated efforts to gain print publication for his unsolicited manuscripts failed for eight long years, his extracurricular activities gained the approval and admiration of his white superiors. By the late 1940s, Haley was advanced into a desk job; by the mid-1950s he was granted the post of "chief journalist" in the Coast Guard. After putting in twenty years' service, Haley started a career as a professional freelance writer. Politically, Haley was both a Republican and a committed advocate of racial integration. He was not, unlike C. Eric Lincoln or other African-American scholars who had studied the NOI's activities during the late 1950s, even mildly sympathetic with the Black group's aims and racial philosophy.

To Haley, the separatist Nation of Islam was an object lesson in America's failure to achieve interracial justice and fairness. As Mike Wallace's controversial 1959 television series on the Black Muslims had proclaimed, they represented "The Hate That Hate Produced." Haley completely concurred with Wallace's thesis. He, too, was convinced that the NOI was potentially a dangerous, racist cult, completely out of step with the lofty goals and integrationist aspirations of the civil rights movement. Haley was personally fascinated with Malcolm's charisma and angry rhetoric, but strongly disagreed with many of his ideas. Consequently, when Haley started work on the *Autobiography*, he held a very different set of objectives than those of Malcolm X. The Romaine papers also revealed that one of Haley's early articles about the NOI, co-authored with white writer Alfred Balk, had been written *in collaboration with the FBI*. The FBI had supplied its information about the NOI to Balk and Haley, which formed much of the basis for their *Saturday Evening Post* article that appeared on January 26, 1963, with the threatening title, "Black Merchants of Hate."⁵

I then began to wonder, as I poured through Romaine's papers, what Malcolm X really had known about the final text that would become his ultimate "testament." Couldn't I discover a way to find out what was going on inside Haley's head, or at Doubleday, which had paid a hefty \$20,000 advance for the *Autobiography* in June 1963? And why, only three weeks following Malcolm X's killing, had Doubleday canceled the contract for the completed book? The *Autobiography* would be eventually published by Grove Press in late 1965. Doubleday's hasty decision would cost the publisher millions of dollars.

The Library of Congress held the answers. Doubleday's corporate papers are now housed there. This collection includes the papers of Doubleday's then-executive editor, Kenneth McCormick, who had worked closely with Haley for several years as the *Autobiography* had been constructed. As in the Romaine papers, I found more evidence of Haley's sometimes weekly private commentary with McCormick about the laborious process of composing the book. These Haley letters of marginalia contained some crucial, never previously published intimate details about Malcolm's personal life. They

also revealed how several attorneys retained by Doubleday closely monitored and vetted entire sections of the controversial text in 1964, demanding numerous name changes, the reworking and deletion of blocks of paragraphs, and so forth. In late 1963, Haley was particularly worried about what he viewed as Malcolm X's anti-Semitism. He therefore rewrote material to eliminate a number of negative statements about Jews in the book manuscript, with the explicit covert goal of "getting them past Malcolm X," without his co-author's knowledge or consent. Thus the censorship of Malcolm X had begun well *prior* to his assassination.

A cardinal responsibility of the historian is to relate the full truth, however unpleasant. In the early 1960s, the Nation of Islam had been directly involved with the American Nazi Party and white supremacist organizations—all while Malcolm X had been its "national representative." This regrettable dimension of Malcolm's career had to be thoroughly investigated, yet few scholars, Black or white, had been willing to do so. In 1998, in my book *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), I had described Farrakhan's anti-Semitic, conservative, Black nationalism as an odious brand of "Black Fundamentalism." Farrakhan had been Malcolm's prime protege, and the question must now be posed whether Malcolm X was partially responsible for the bankrupt political legacy of Black anti-Semitism and Black Fundamentalism. The whole truth, not packaged icons, can only advance our complete understanding of the real man and his times.

The Romaine papers also had provided clear evidence that the lack of a clear political program or plan of action in the *Autobiography* was no accident. Something was indeed "missing" from the final version of the book, as it appeared in print in late 1965. In Haley's own correspondence to editor Kenneth McCormick, dated January 19, 1964, Haley had even described these chapters as having "the most impact material of the book, some of it rather lava-like."⁶ Now my quest shifted to finding out what the contents of this "impact material" were. The trail now led me to Detroit attorney Gregory Reed. In late 1992, Reed had purchased the original manuscripts of the *Autobiography* at the sale of the Haley Estate for \$100,000. Reed has in his possession, in his office safe, the three "missing chapters" from the *Autobiography*, which still have never been published. I contacted Reed, and after several lengthy telephone conversations, he agreed to show me the missing *Autobiography* chapters. With great enthusiasm, I flew to Detroit, and telephoned Reed at our agreed-upon time. Reed then curiously rejected meeting me at his law office. He insisted instead that we meet at a downtown restaurant. I arrived at our meeting place on time, and a half hour later Reed showed up, carrying a briefcase.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Reed informed me that he had not brought the entire original manuscript with him. However, he would permit me to read, at the restaurant table, small selections from the manuscript. I was deeply disappointed, but readily accepted Reed's new terms. For roughly fifteen minutes, I quickly read parts from the illusive "missing chapters." That was enough time for me to ascertain without doubt that these text fragments had been dictated and written sometime between October 1963 and January 1964. This coincided with the final months of Malcolm's NOI membership. More critically, in these missing chapters, Malcolm X proposed the construction of an unprecedented, African-American united front of Black political and civic organizations, including both the NOI and civil rights groups. He perhaps envisioned something similar in style to Farrakhan's Million Man March of 1995. Apparently, Malcolm X was aggressively pushing the NOI beyond Black Fundamentalism, into open, common dialogue and political collaboration with the civil rights community. Was this the prime reason that elements inside both the NOI and the FBI may have wanted to silence him? Since Reed owns the physical property, but the Shabazz estate retains the intellectual property rights of its contents, we may never know.

With each successive stumbling block, I became more intrigued. The complicated web of this man's life, the swirling world around him, his friends, family, and intimate associates, became ever more tangled and provocative. The tensions between these at times feuding factions, the innuendos, the missed opportunities, the angry refusals to speak on the record, the suppression of archival evidence, the broken loyalties and constant betrayals, all seemed too great. It required of me a difficult journey of many years, even to possess the knowledge of how to untangle the web, to make sense of it all. What I acquired, however, by 2003-2004, was a true depth of understanding and insight that was surprising, and much more revelatory than I had ever imagined. I finally learned that the answer to the question—why was this information about Malcolm X so fiercely protected—because the life, and the man had the potential to become much more dangerous to white America than any single individual had ever been.

Malcolm X, the *real* Malcolm X, was infinitely more remarkable than the personality presented in the *Autobiography*. The man who had been born Malcolm Little, and who had perished as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was no saint. He made many serious errors of judgment, several of which directly contributed to his murder. Yet despite these serious contradictions and personal failings, Malcolm X also possessed the unique potential for uniting Black America in any unprecedented coalition with African, Asian, and Caribbean nations. He alone could have established unity between Negro integrationists and Black nationalists inside the United States. He possessed the personal charisma, the rhetorical genius, and the moral courage to inspire and motivate millions of Blacks into unified action. Neither the *Autobiography* nor Spike Lee's 1992 movie revealed this powerful legacy of the man, or explained what he could have accomplished. What continues to be suppressed and censored also tells us something so huge about America itself, about where we were then, and where we, as a people, are now. Malcolm X was potentially a new type of world leader, personally drawn up from the "wretched of the earth," into a political stratosphere of international power. Telling that remarkable, true story is the purpose of my biography.

Notes

1. Immediately following Malcolm X's assassination, several individuals who had worked closely with the fallen leader sought to document his meaning to the larger Black freedom struggle. These early texts include: Leslie Alexander Lacy, "Malcolm X in Ghana," in John Henrik Clarke, ed., *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 217-255; Ossie Davis, "Why I Eulogized Malcolm X," *Negro Digest*, Vol. 15, no. 4 (February 1966): 64-66; Wyatt Tee Walker, "On Malcolm X: Nothing But A Man," *Negro Digest*, Vol. 14, no. 10 (August 1965): 29-32; and Albert B. Cleage, Jr., "Brother Malcolm," in Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 186-200.

The advocates of Black Power subsequently placed Malcolm X firmly within the Black nationalist tradition of Martin R. Delany and Marcus Garvey, emphasizing his dedication to the use of armed self defense by Blacks. Amiri Baraka's essay, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," in LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966), pp. 238-250, became the template for this line of interpretation. Following Baraka's Black nationalist thesis were: Eldridge Cleaver, "Initial Reactions on the Assassination of Malcolm X," in Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: Ramparts, 1968), pp. 50-61; James Boggs, "King, Malcolm, and the Future of the Black Revolution," in Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker's Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), pp. 104-129; Cedrick Robinson, "Malcolm Little as a Charismatic Leader," *Afro-American Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (September 1972): 81-96; and Robert Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1970), especially pages 30-40.

2. The best available studies of Malcolm X merit some consideration here. Although originally written more than three decades ago, *Newsweek* editor/journalist Peter Goldman's *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), still remains an excellent introduction to the man and his times. Well-written and researched, Goldman based the text on his own interviews with the subject. Karl Evanzz's *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), presents a persuasive

argument explaining the FBI's near-blanket surveillance of the subject. Evanzz was the first author to suggest that NOI National Secretary John Ali may have been an FBI informant. Louis A. DeCaro has written two thoughtful studies on Malcolm X's spiritual growth and religious orientation: *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X and Christianity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). DeCaro graciously agreed to be interviewed in 2001 for the Malcolm X Project at Columbia.

The field of religious studies has also produced other informative interpretations of Malcolm X. These works include: Lewis V. Baldwin, *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2002); a sound recording by Hamam Cross, Donna Scott, and Eugene Seals, "What's up with Malcolm? The real failure of Islam" (Southfield, Michigan: Readings for the Blind, 2001); Peter J. Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991).

3. Philip Brian Harper, in his book *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), argues that the simplistic stereotypes of King and his courageous followers as being "non-masculine" and "effeminate" and leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael as "super-masculine, Black males" became widely promulgated. "The Black power movement," Harper observes, was "conceived in terms of accession to a masculine identity, the problematic quality of those terms notwithstanding" (p. 68).

4. In an extraordinary interview with writer Thomas Hauser, Alex Haley stated that he had "worked closely with Malcolm X, and I also did a *Playboy* interview with Martin Luther King during the same period, so I knew one very closely and the other a little." Based on his knowledge of both men, he had concluded that they had "both died tragically at about the right time in terms of posterity. Both men were . . . beginning to decline. They were under attack." In Haley's opinion, Malcolm, in particular, "was having a rough time trying to keep things going. Both of them were killed just before it went really downhill for them, and as of their death, they were practically sainted." See Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1991), p. 508.

5. Alfred Balk had contacted the FBI in October 1962, seeking the Bureau's assistance in collecting information about the Nation of Islam for the proposed article he and Haley would write for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The Bureau gave Balk and Haley the data they requested, with the strict stipulation that the FBI's assistance not be mentioned. The Bureau was later quite pleased with the published article. See M.A. Jones to Mr. DeLoach, FBI Memorandum, October 9, 1963, in the Anne Romaine Papers, Series 1, Box 2, folder 16, University of Tennessee Library Special Collections. Also see Alfred Balk and Alex Haley, "Black Merchants of Hate," *Saturday Evening Post* (January 26, 1963).

6. On January 9, 1964, Haley wrote to Doubleday Executive Editor Kenneth McCormick and his agent, Paul Reynolds, that "the most impact material of the book, some of it rather lava-like, is what I have from Malcolm for the three essay chapters, 'The Negro,' 'The End of Christianity,' and 'Twenty Million Black Muslims.'" See Alex Haley to Kenneth McCormick, Wolcott Gibbs, Jr., and Paul Reynolds, January 19, 1964, in Annie Romaine Collection, the University of Tennessee Library Special Collection.