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Introduction

Mention Malcolm X, and you are almost certain to receive a reaction. Many admire him, many loathe him, but even now, more than four decades after his death, few lack an opinion about him. A polarizing figure, in death as in life, Malcolm X continues to haunt American national consciousness like few other figures. His name is known around the world, his autobiography is on American high school and college reading lists around the country, his life was the subject of a blockbuster Hollywood film, hundreds of websites are dedicated to his legacy, and he has even appeared on a United States postage stamp. And yet he resists now, as he did then, being fully accepted – or co-opted, depending on your point of view – by the culture that he spent his life critiquing. Malcolm X will forever speak to all of us from the margins, pointing out our collective failure to live according to the ideals we proclaim, taking us to task for the inconsistencies and hypocrisies that riddle our politics, revealing our complicity and reviling our complacency. He will always speak in the voice of the marginalized, a voice that cannot be placated or patronized, a voice both self-righteous and self-educated, passionate and cerebral, angry and eloquent. As a passionate advocate for his people, a persistent critic of inequity, a widely emulated and appropriated cultural icon, and an extraordinarily gifted orator, Malcolm X will have few equals.

Scholars, it seems, are as susceptible to the allure of Malcolm X as anyone else. The tremendous flood of words that he produced during his lifetime – his speeches, press releases, public letters, television appearances, campus debates, radio interviews, newspaper columns, and of course his *Autobiography* – has been more than matched by a formidable torrent of scholarly work. Library shelves and the pages of academic journals are laden with cultural and psychological biographies; memoirs of his children, and of those who knew him and worked with him; critical analyses of Malcolm's oratory and *Autobiography*; explorations of his influence on, and representation in, art, music, and politics; comparisons between Malcolm X and other revolutionary leaders, including his contemporaries, his antecedents, and his

ideological progeny; efforts to align him with various political categories or organizations; and speculations about what he might have said or thought or done had he lived longer. The scholarly attention focused on Malcolm X began as soon as he and the Nation of Islam rose to national prominence and has continued unabated.

The vitality and breadth of this scholarly work reflects the complexities of the man. Malcolm X lived multiple lives – overachieving Midwestern schoolkid, anxious foster child, teenaged hoodlum, unskilled service worker, petty criminal, small-time hustler, convicted felon, zealous religious convert, Muslim minister, respected orator, civil rights leader, international celebrity, and martyr – each of which has attracted scholarly attention, and sometimes multiple analytical approaches. The resulting riot of academic work indicates a healthy and vigorous area of study, one untroubled by calcifying orthodoxy but also without a clear center of gravity. On the one hand, this is an entirely fitting state of affairs for an iconoclast who often vehemently rejected efforts to define himself or his position. On the other hand, however, this scholarly diversity can make it difficult to tease out the central questions and themes that animate and integrate all this work.

This book is intended as an introduction and as a contribution to the scholarship on Malcolm X; it also represents the range of this work in an interdisciplinary microcosm. Just as the scholarship on Malcolm X is produced by scholars trained in a variety of disciplines, so too are the essays in this volume. The latter come from men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, from younger and more established scholars. But perhaps most significantly, just as there are themes that recur throughout the scholarship, despite its diversity and variety, so too there are for these essays. For the researcher in the early stages of their work, this volume should provide a starting point that not only presents some of the most important scholarly approaches to Malcolm X but also – through the guide for further reading as well as the endnotes for each essay – directions for further study. For the more established researcher, these new essays both draw upon and contribute to established scholarship.

In the first essay, Claude Clegg provides an overview of the complex, mutually dependent, and eventually destructive relationship between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. That his essay also provides a condensed biography of Malcolm X is a testament not only to Clegg's skill, but also to the fact that the rise and fall of Malcolm X are tied so intimately to the relationship between these two men. There could have been no Malcolm X without Elijah Muhammad, of course; but also, and no less substantively, there could have been no Elijah Muhammad – at least not as we know him – without Malcolm X. And more broadly, as their connection flourished,

matured, and finally soured, it can be understood as an extended analogy to the generational and ideological tensions that arose in the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Clegg, then, rightly gives this relationship a central place in our understanding of both Malcolm X and of the history of that time.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X occupies a similar status, being both the fundamental text at the center of all studies of Malcolm X and a vital record of one man's experience of mid-twentieth-century America. In this literary masterpiece we see not only the shattering transformations that Malcolm underwent during his lifetime, but also, through his eyes, the world in which and against which he wrought those changes. The *Autobiography* was largely complete at the time of Malcolm's death, and he was able to proofread the text. However, Haley convinced Malcolm not to revise the sections that deal with his early devotion to Elijah Muhammad, and as a result the text is something of a palimpsest, less a narrative of complete transformation than an evolution of an identity in which traces of all previous identities are retained. Alex Gillespie argues that the *Autobiography* draws upon cultural expectations, or "narrative resources," in its construction and as such should not be misunderstood as a transparent portrait of the man and his times. In fact, as Gillespie discusses, the *Autobiography* itself is an important element of the life that it chronicles: that it constitutes Malcolm X at least as much as it represents him. That is, the *Autobiography* might be seen as not merely a record of transformations, but also as itself a transformative moment in the life of Malcolm X.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that a story with such far-reaching significance and narrative appeal eventually would be brought to Hollywood, but it is not widely known that the first efforts to do so involved commissioning the African American writer James Baldwin to write a screenplay. Brian Norman takes Baldwin's work as an example of a "closet screenplay," published in book form but never produced as a film. The work of adapting the life of an iconoclast like Malcolm X to a medium that largely traffics in icons is inevitably rife with difficulty and compromise, and Norman attends carefully to the differences between Baldwin's failed screenplay and Spike Lee's successful and critically-acclaimed film. The script is more experimental in form, for example, breaking up the linear narrative of transformation that governs the *Autobiography* and thus self-consciously presenting a multi-layered personality that is in some ways analogous to the one that Gillespie describes. By resisting the heroic narrative arc that commonly shapes blockbuster biopics, Norman argues, Baldwin also resisted providing Malcolm's story with a definitive ending: Malcolm's work remains unfinished. Significantly, Norman also argues that Baldwin resisted the hypermasculine stance often ascribed to Malcolm X by inserting into his screenplay proto-feminist and queer subtexts that were not part of Lee's film.

Jeffrey Leak specifically explores the implications of the *Autobiography* for understanding African American masculinity. He sees the text as a narrative representation of a process of change, as does Gillespie, and argues that Malcolm does not present a static icon of black masculinity, but rather an evolving process that points toward, even if it does not fully define, a more progressive masculine stance. While the close relationship between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, as explored by Clegg, helped to define Malcolm X, Leak notes that the close collaboration between Malcolm X and Alex Haley shaped the *Autobiography*. Further, he points out, this relationship between two African American men models a collaborative and mutually supportive form of black masculinity that is not often portrayed in public culture. Malcolm's relationships with women, as presented in the *Autobiography*, offer further evidence of an evolving rather than static presentation of black manhood. Comparing Malcolm's portrayal of his mother to the more complex portrayal of his half-sister Ella, Leak finds a potentially progressive portrayal of African American manhood that is nonetheless undermined by a consistent suspicion of strong black women.

Indeed, Malcolm's public statements about black women, including those in the *Autobiography*, have been almost uniformly described as misogynist. But Sheila Radford-Hill argues for "womanizing" Malcolm X, attending to the roles that women played in his life rather than exclusively to what he said, and thus shifting the focus toward female agency. This form of feminist critique, she suggests, helps to illuminate how women helped to shape Malcolm X. Supplementing their limited portrayals within the *Autobiography*, Radford-Hill explores Malcolm's personal relationships with his mother and with Ella, as well as those with his other sisters, his girlfriends, his wife Betty, and his professional collaboration with female civil-rights leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer. The portrait that emerges is subtle and complex, a constructive response to, rather than a full repudiation of, other feminist critiques: in contrast to his statements, Malcolm's actual relationships and attitudes toward African American women draw upon a less restricted emotional palate and a more equitable gender sensibility. Radford-Hill then builds on her analysis to explore the gender norms that inform Malcolm's intellectual and ideological descendents, from Black Power forward, and finds that Malcolm's more progressive tendencies do have some degree of continued presence in contemporary black nationalist gender critique.

The Black Arts Movement flourished during the 1960s and 1970s and consisted of politically engaged artists and art institutions that were aligned ideologically with Black Power. And, as James Smethurst argues, this movement also was strongly influenced by Malcolm X, beginning with his rise to

prominence with the Nation of Islam and extending beyond his death. Smethurst points out that a part of Malcolm's influence on the Black Arts Movement stemmed directly from his speeches and statements: his persistent message of racial pride and his fluid, eloquent, markedly African American rhetorical artistry served as a model and inspiration. But in addition, Malcolm's influence also came from his actions: he frequently took time to talk with the rank-and-file members of grass-roots organizations who later participated in or aligned themselves with the Black Arts Movement. Smethurst notes that Malcolm X offered a unique combination that attracted many young activist artists: a core of black nationalism together with an insistence that the African American freedom struggle must be understood within a global context. The multiple points of contact between Malcolm X and the Black Arts Movement illuminate a dense network of association and influence, and it was within this nourishing environment, and especially after his death, that artists began the process of appropriating Malcolm's words and image into a wide variety of media.

Throughout his life, Malcolm X held a special attraction for young people. Though he actually was a few years older than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm often aligned himself with youth and characterized the more mainstream civil-rights leaders as older and out of touch. It is not surprising, then, that youth culture has been especially active in its appropriation of Malcolm's words and image; somewhat analogous to his presence in Black Arts Movement poetry, Malcolm is a prominent presence in rap music and hip-hop culture. Indeed, for the latter, he is so ubiquitous a presence in their multi-mediated world – his ideas, his likeness, his words, his attitudes, his struggles, his martyrdom – that sweeping or general surveys may miss much of the subtlety of Malcolm's influence. Richard Turner concentrates on a particular site of this appropriation: Malcolm's effect on African American Muslim youth in university communities. This focus allows Turner to provide a very fine-grained analysis, utilizing textual analysis and personal interviews, to flesh out the meanings and connotations that are associated with Malcolm X within a specific community. Taking as starting points the two organizations that Malcolm founded after his split with the Nation of Islam and his conversion to Sunni Islam – the Organization for Afro-American Unity and the Muslim Mosque, Inc. – Turner explores the multiple inventional resources that Malcolm X presents for these young contemporary artists and audiences.

Among the less obvious audiences for whom Malcolm's legacy has offered resources for identity and legitimacy in recent years have been black conservatives. His endorsement of traditional gender roles and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps, self-help, free-market capitalism, especially while he was affiliated with the Nation of Islam, seem to fit easily with contemporary

conservative views. But such an appropriation of Malcolm X is uneasy at best, while calling for neither a cynical dismissal nor an uncritical acceptance. Angela Dillard explores the terrain upon which black nationalism and black conservatism intersect, and some of the ways that Malcolm's ideas were themselves influenced by these intersections. Her analysis thus provides the historical and ideological context that enables a more careful and nuanced assessment regarding the degree to which Malcolm X might legitimately be called "conservative." As is so often the case with regard to him, and as Smethurst also argues regarding his appeal in the Black Arts Movement, Dillard's assessment shows that Malcolm X presented a uniquely complex mixture of many influences and traditions. Attempts at appropriation that force Malcolm into artificially narrow confines necessarily ignore his fundamental complexity and thus diminish our understanding of the liberatory potential of his words and ideas.

Mark McPhail takes up one aspect of this potential, arguing that Malcolm's public speeches and statements present a manifestation of the "rhetorical ideal," in which style and ornamentation are appreciated as substantive, rather than superfluous. In contrast to the age-old attack on rhetoric as a form of obfuscation and mystification that protects those in power, McPhail argues that Malcolm's was a specifically African American rhetorical ideal, which challenged the norms of the dominant culture from within, utilizing the tropes and figures of traditional rhetoric to critique racial hierarchy. Eschewing the "sweet talk" that had characterized so much of the discourse about race relations in the United States, Malcolm X offered instead a searing indictment that deployed analogy, metaphor, synecdoche, and irony to sharpen rather than sweeten his argument. Ultimately, McPhail concludes that the collapse of the style/content opposition in Malcolm's discourse renders his rhetorical practice analogous to jazz, an indigenous American art form rooted firmly in African and African American stylistic traditions. The improvisational impulse that is fundamental to jazz suggests not only Malcolm's own use of an extemporaneous speech delivery, but also the flexible and inventive political style that he invited his audiences to adopt. As McPhail puts it, Malcolm X provides for his audiences "*equipment for living together*."

In my own essay I take another approach to exploring the sort of rhetorical "equipment" that Malcolm X provides for his audiences. Because Malcolm's concrete legacy consists primarily of his public address, I argue that understanding that legacy is best grounded in close attention to those texts. I analyze two speeches from the last year of his life, after his split with the Nation of Islam, a time in which his ideas were undergoing especially rapid change. Taken together, these texts illustrate a shift in Malcolm's thought, from the straightforward call for African Americans to identify themselves

primarily as Africans that characterized his rhetoric immediately after he cast off the limitations of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, to a more complex call to occupy a sort of ideological middle ground, where African Americans would be suspended between domestic and global perspectives. From this interstitial space, his audience is able to critique the oppressive practices in both places without being co-opted and thus silenced by either. Through the performative artistry of his public address, then, Malcolm X is modelling for his audiences a tactic of interpretive judgment that he would have them take up and emulate.

The sustained effort, especially in his last year, that Malcolm X made to broaden his audience's horizons, and then to help them to understand the connections and parallels between their struggles in the United States and those of oppressed peoples across the globe, can be understood as geographic in scope. Malcolm encouraged his listeners to see their familiar landscape in a new way, as a part of a contiguous and international whole rather than as an isolated backwater. James Tyner situates Malcolm's "geographical imagination," his effort to remake the spaces occupied by his audiences, within a tradition of dystopian literature, and thus highlights the special qualities of Malcolm's social critique. Though his speeches and statements clearly were not intended as fictions, Tyner argues that their critical potentials were in some ways similar to that of dystopian fiction. Because a person's sense of self emanates, in part, from their perception of the environment with which they interact, by altering his audience's perception of their environment Malcolm X was able to alter their perception of themselves. He was empowering his audiences to read, and to critique, the oppressive landscapes in which they lived their everyday lives.

The specific perspective that Malcolm X was working to provide for his audiences has much in common with that now called *Afrocentric*. While he did not seek to replace all European ways of thinking and being with African ways, as the paradigmatic Afrocentrist might, Malcolm certainly was attempting to supplant those that were inauthentic and thus dysfunctional. Malcolm was among the first, for example, to insist that the terms "black" or "Afro-American" replace "Negro," because that word offered no connection to African culture. Molefi Kete Asante shows that Malcolm consistently schooled his audiences not only on the importance of Africa but on understanding themselves as African, not only to have pride in Africa but also in themselves as peoples of African descent. Asante argues that Malcolm understood that knowledge of, and practice of, cultural traditions that reinforced his audience's African identity were a powerful source of resistance, and that his project entailed the reconstruction and maintenance of culture in the face of a domination that would negate that culture.

Malcolm X spent much of his last year, after his split with the Nation of Islam, outside of the United States, exploring important connections between Africans and African Americans. No serious study could exclude both an account of his international presence during that time and an assessment of the global scope of his legacy. Kevin Gaines argues that not only were Malcolm's international experiences important to the formation of his evolving thought, but also that they have had a significant impact on the way that he is remembered, at home and abroad. Malcolm worked to help his African American audiences see their connection to the African diaspora, he urged his global audiences to recognize their stake in the African American freedom struggle, and on a personal level, he reached out to leaders and movements around the world – working toward bringing into concrete manifestation the ideological breadth of scope that so many have noted as a key component of his thought.

William Sales, in the final essay, offers a detailed survey of the legacy of Malcolm X, arguing that Malcolm X was central to the restoration of an African American resistance tradition extending back at least to Martin Delany, whom many consider to be the father of black nationalism. In the last year of his life, Sales notes, Malcolm founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity on the principles that he believed would enable it to become an umbrella organization under which black nationalist groups and ideas could be developed and coordinated. This was to be a democratic body in which women were to hold leadership roles, and it was to be politically independent yet not politically inert; the organization would participate in electoral politics but on its own terms. While the Organization of Afro-American Unity did not perhaps achieve the sort of high-profile political activity that Malcolm seems to have hoped for, Sales finds the political legacy and continuing influence of Malcolm X is especially evident in academia, in archival library and museum institutions, in popular culture, and in political thought and action. He provides thorough yet efficient summaries of each of these areas; though each site necessarily privileges particular facets of this most multifaceted man, in practice there is considerable overlap among academia and archive, popular and political culture.

When I contacted the contributors, I told them that I wanted their help in producing a book that would be "a fitting contribution to the legacy of this most extraordinary man." And I hope that we have fulfilled that promise, because, as Sales points out, while Malcolm X remains a vigorous presence in American and African American life, maintaining that vigor requires a proactive and coordinated effort. By bringing together scholars from diverse backgrounds and academic disciplines, this volume is intended both to represent and to encourage the continuing, overlapping, and interdisciplinary interest

in Malcolm X that is helping to keep his legacy alive. From the rise of politically conservative African American "mega-churches" to the rolling back of civil liberties in post-9/11 America, Malcolm's spirit and ideas face continuing resistance. Throughout his many transformations, for example, he never abandoned his commitment to Islam, a religion that has been denigrated repeatedly since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Though he softened his views somewhat on many issues, he never wavered on his insistence that violence was justified in self-defense; he never endorsed simple assimilation; he never described the political system in the United States as anything other than thoroughly and institutionally corrupt; and he never publically imagined that America could one day throw back the cloak of racism and emerge as a society characterized by justice, equity, and brotherhood. His speeches and statements, his ideas and his condemnations, sound as breathtakingly fearless, compelling, perceptive – and yes, to some, as dangerous – today as they were when he first uttered them. Yet they persist, for as long as there remains a racial hierarchy, the model of personal and political development that Malcolm X presents will remain relevant. Young people searching for their own identities will recognize themselves in the *Autobiography*; artists seeking an authentic and original vision will be inspired; politicians and public figures of all ideological stripes will feel compelled to embrace him, to shun him, or to answer to him. And, I hope, we will continue to find within him something to feed our individual souls and our collective selves.

1

CLAUDE CLEGG

Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad rarely granted press interviews. His reluctance to indulge reporters was at least partially due to a history of unflattering news coverage of his organization, the Nation of Islam, which was routinely characterized in the media as racist, extremist, and un-American. Moreover, Muhammad's modest formal education and advanced age – he was in his early sixties when his group became the object of dubious press scrutiny in 1959 – further discouraged active engagement with news organizations that were largely in the hands of whites hostile to his message. His last significant encounter with newsmen took place in January 1972 in the comfort of his Chicago mansion. It was a far-reaching exploration of topics, ranging from matters of theology (he reaffirmed a decades-long commitment to a racially exclusivist iteration of Islam) to his own reaction to dissenters within the Nation (he summarily dismissed their influence as negligible). A press inquiry about one apostate in particular did elicit specific comments from Muhammad, even though the individual in question had died several years earlier. When asked about Malcolm X, a former national minister of the Nation, Muhammad appeared roiled by the query. "I would not lose any time with a man that has been talked and talked about for years," Muhammad shot back, before veering away into other subject matter.[1]

The unwillingness of Muhammad to countenance a discussion of Malcolm X was not a new development. He had avoided extended public commentary on the topic since the mid-1960s, when he and his former lieutenant grappled for months in an open conflict that ultimately resulted in Malcolm's assassination in February 1965. Even after death, the reverence that Malcolm's brand of black nationalism still evoked among the Black Power generation of African American activists continued to annoy Muhammad. Malcolm's posthumously published autobiography, detailing a fascinating personal journey through social alienation and self-destructiveness to political awakening and self-realization, conferred more longevity upon his views and relevance than he would have likely predicted during his thirty-nine years