

Malcolm X

"I do not pretend to be a divine man, but I do believe in divine guidance, divine power, and the fulfillment of divine prophecy. I am not educated, nor am I an expert in any particular field...but my sincerity is my credential."

Malcolm X, March 12, 1964.

Malcolm X was born as Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Louisa Little, from the West Indies, and Earl Little, a Baptist preacher and a member of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Project. As a child Malcolm faced blatant and violent forms of racism as the Ku Klux Klan burnt his family's home, were suspected in his father's murder, and as his family was broken up by racist welfare agencies placing him and his siblings into white foster homes across the country. Although the young Malcolm had aspirations to become a lawyer, his dreams were suppressed by a white supremacist schooling.¹ As black militancy rose with the outbreak of World War II, Malcolm became part of black hipster and gangster culture, zoot suiting, "conking" his hair, and avoiding wage work whenever possible. In 1943, he worked a train between Boston and New York City which led him to stay in Harlem where he made money through petty hustling, drug dealing, pimping, gambling and exploiting women.²

In 1946 he was arrested in Boston for burglary when caught picking up a stolen watch at a jewelry store. In his autobiography Malcolm reflects on his decision not to shoot the cop who arrested him, that "I believe that Allah was with me even then. I didn't try to shoot him and that saved my life."³ Malcolm was tried with his friends, Shorty, and two upper-middle-class white women, who were sentenced for fewer years and less bail. Malcolm and Shorty were sentenced to 10 years in the Charlestown State Prison with a bail of \$10,000 each. Malcolm recalls that despite the charge, the prosecution was more concerned with their association, as two black men, with the "well-to-do" white women.⁴

Malcolm underwent a profound transformation during his time in prison. Through the influence of friends on the outside and the mentorship of a Muslim friend on the inside, he began studying the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Submitting to the discipline and practice of Islam, Malcolm also became a rigorous prison "intellectual" (although he may not have used that term), reading whatever books were available to him, writing letters regularly, and becoming the leader of the debate team, where he trained as an orator and rhetorician.⁵ Through more focused study, Malcolm began developing his political ideology and praxis inside prison. In 1952, the NOI give's Malcolm the surname "X" in order to reflect the fact that his African name remained unknown.⁶

The political and intellectual transformations that Malcolm X underwent throughout his life are particularly important, because he argued for the need to “see for yourself, listen for yourself, and think for yourself” and continues to be known for his ability to do so.⁷ His conversion to the NOI occurred at a moment in his life when he had “sunk to the bottom.” Some would argue that the attraction to the NOI was both religious and non-religious, and that it provided a way to deal with his own experiences with white supremacy and a vehicle which intended to end it.⁸

As he began to study the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X also became a prison intellectual and through his politicization, a political prisoner:

As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America.⁹

His political ideology at that point centered around the NOI's sense of justice, truth, morality and black nationalism. “The white man is the devil,” a phrase which Malcolm used in many of his earlier speeches, continues to be used to further the public's fixation on Malcolm as reactionary and self-destructive; it also reflects the oppositional relationship between blackness and whiteness used to assert a positive image and definition of blackness. Given the systematic and historical development of the white supremacist prison, Malcolm explains that the idea of the white man as devil is merely an echo of the lifelong experience of the black convict.¹⁰

Malcolm X was released from prison in 1954, the year of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, worked as a furniture salesman and auto-assemblyman, and immediately began working as a minister in temples across the country. He founded *Muhammad Speaks*, the NOI newspaper and led or participated in rallies confronting local police about brutality towards the Muslim and African-American brothers and sisters. He married Betty Sanders (later Betty Shabazz) in 1958. Malcolm's position as a public, national figure of the NOI heightened as the civil rights movement gained momentum with sit-ins and the formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the anti-colonial independence movements in Africa were on-going.¹¹

Through speeches, Malcolm X communicated his ideas. His use of metaphor, plays on words, and “simple” language characterize these incisive speeches, which called to militant black women and mostly men to the NOI to wake people up mentally and spiritually. “Message to the Underground,” given in 1963 to the Detroit Council for Human Rights asserts themes which come up in other speeches during this time. Malcolm argues that the “Negro problem” is also the problem of the black community, because, as he states, “we are the problem.” He urges the African-American audience to recognize their status as ex-slaves. He furthermore argues that a revolution, as it has been proven historically, requires bloodshed and the defense of land in order to argue that the use of non-violence in the civil rights struggle is part of a slave (“House Slave”) mentality. The ex-slaves who are willing to engage in revolution are the masses, those with the least to lose. Malcolm argues that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s tactics advocate “suffering peacefully” and lend themselves to the cooptation, destabilization, and infiltration of white liberals.¹²

Tensions built between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad, as Malcolm’s growing leadership posed a threat Muhammad’s, and as Malcolm learned that the NOI’s spiritual and moral leader had fathered multiple children of former secretaries. 1960-61 was a historical moment of increasing white supremacist violence (mob-attacks and bus-bombings in Alabama, church burnings) and a military state used to enforce segregation.¹³ In 1963 Elijah Muhammad silenced him for his public comment that the recent assassination of John F. Kennedy was an example of “the chickens coming home to roost.”¹⁴ On March 8, 1964 Malcolm announced his resignation from the Nation of Islam and formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc., a new Islamic movement, which intended to build a broader base by working with civil rights leaders.

A month later and two weeks before the transformative pilgrimage to Africa and the Arab world, he gives the speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” The speech was the first of a series of speeches given in Harlem, which intended to build a philosophy and ideology for the new movement, marked by the break from the NOI. Malcolm speaks urgently about the need to build unity across a base of different religious and political groups (Muslim, Methodist, Christian, nationalist, civil rights), whereas before he had advocated a more strict separatism. Given the

context of reactionary and repressive violence apparent across the country, Malcolm X saw two options: the ballot (the vote), or the bullet (armed resistance). He argues that the ballot is ineffective because the government is criminal and that furthermore it makes no sense to fight for or within a country that systematically deprives one's people of housing, education, and health, and human agency. In this instance, we can understand the context in which Malcolm X declared that the struggle would be employed "by means necessary," using all the tactics available and necessary to assert one's freedom.

The speech functions as an announcement that the Negro is emerging with a new tactic: a broader analysis of the civil rights movement, a fight for *human* rights within an international perspective, a black nationalism that unifies before it separates, and preparation for guerilla warfare. The combination of both a broadened, unifying vision and a revolutionary analysis of the state (unprecedented in earlier speeches) is politically and intellectually significant. Malcolm became increasingly threatening to both the NOI and the state as his analysis became increasingly effective in creating a mass movement.

His primary orientation became less institution and more towards the masses that were also envisioning a new tactic. The role of Islam would no longer play an institutional role in this new movement, representing another shift in Malcolm's political ideology and praxis. While he continued to practice Islam, it would no longer control the practices of his new organization. Furthermore, despite that the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization for Afro-American Unity were barely formulated at the time of his death, the speech implies that Malcolm X was taking a new approach to the relationship between organizations/institutions and the masses.

At this moment, Malcolm X's ability to articulate an ideology of unity based on a systematic analysis and to present a potentially effective means of mass confrontation with the state marks an active step in embodying a greater threat to the status quo. "We will fight until we overcome," may be interpreted as a direct criticism of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. More likely, it symbolized, in the turning around of this household phrase, the calling for a new militancy.

The speech is also significant because of Malcolm's upcoming travels during which he would again rethink his analysis and return announcing an altered vision of black liberation and

nationalism. In May 1964, he returned renamed El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz for his pilgrimage, calling for an increased international focus on black liberation. He publicly denied that white people are not “devils,” while continuing to differentiate between white liberals who intellectually support the struggle and the allies who are willing to actively confront the state and risk their lives. The summer of 1964, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) which advocated for independent black institutions and supported for mainstream politics, such as electoral campaigns. His planned to submit to the United Nations a document that recorded human rights violations and action genocide against African American people. While the document was never realized, the international call to justice would be echoed in the internationalist and later intercommunalist orientation of the Black Panther Party.

For the next nine months, Malcolm X worked and spoke to SNCC and Fannie Lou Hamer, visited Martin Luther King Jr. while he was jailed in Selma, Alabama, and continued to speak. His assassination in February 1965 by men associated with the NOI came after months of death threats, FBI surveillance, and the bombing of his house. Many agree with George Breitman that his assassins “because they could not answer, frighten, buy or corrupt him—wanted not only to silence his voice but to prevent the consolidation of a new movement that would seriously threaten their power and privileges.”¹⁵

Malcolm X is not commonly acknowledged as a political prisoner and prison intellectual, because his life after prison has been disassociated from the political and intellectual work he did for the ten years he was incarcerated. To consider this transformation as one from immoral to moral, criminal to just, or ignorant to enlightened would trivialize his previous “life” as other, deviant, and criminal and privilege his life afterwards. The political praxis and ideology reflected in the years after his incarceration began to manifest in a critical engagement with his (and his people’s) state of incarceration. The before and after of his transformation can be considered particularly interconnected. Malcolm himself asserts such a vision of his life: that “all of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that has every happened to us is an ingredient.”¹⁶

The process of educating himself, Malcolm not only converted to Islam, but also began to perform the function which Huey P. Newton asserts characterizes the political prisoner: “to question the legitimacy

of the assumptions upon which the society is based”¹⁷ and to argue for its overthrow. Malcolm fully develops such a systemic analysis in his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Despite that Malcolm is no longer a prisoner when he gives the speech, the ideological and political process represented in the speech indicates the fundamental experience that prison provided in developing a revolutionary praxis after his incarceration.

Malcolm enters the prison as a social prisoner, but through the awakening of his mind to his experiences as a black man and at that moment a black man in prison, Malcolm X *left* prison a political prisoner and prison intellectual, less reformed or socialized in the way he had been upon being locked up, with both an analysis of his own oppression and a commitment to a developing liberation movement. While Malcolm X was never again incarcerated, he fits, to an extent, Angela Davis’s definition which states that the political prisoner breaks the law, not for one’s own interest, but “in the interests of a class of people whose oppression is expressed either directly or indirectly through that particular law.”¹⁸ While Malcolm X remained uncaptured, he was still considered criminal. The a priori culpability placed on anyone who challenges the legitimacy of the state or who acts in the interest of the oppressed led to the CIA/FBI’s file and constant surveillance on him. It also led to the media’s characterization of Malcolm as a monster and quasi-criminal, remembered as a “twisted man, turning many true gifts to evil purpose.”¹⁹ Even the way he is remembered as a historical figure make him is part of the same delegitimizing, criminalizing process.

Malcolm X as a prison intellectual remains meaningful to political prisoners and prison intellectuals today. Yaki Yakubu argues that the self-reflection and community orientation that Malcolm X models in a sense, provides a particular inspiration “for those whom Malcolm considered the most perfectly preconditioned to begin a revolutionary transformation of their lives: the nearly one-half-million Afrikan men and women who are held in U.S. prisons and jails.”²⁰ Yakubu underscores that such a process is not particular to Malcolm X’s experience in prison at all, but instead an experience many Afrikan prisoners identify with and draw strength from. Prisoners can also learn from Malcolm X’s understanding of the “prison of the mind” which Malcolm X faced first within prison and then outside it’s the physical structures.

Angela Davis argues that while his political philosophy and the “content of his speeches retained previous invocations of black imprisonment—the dialectics of social and psychological incarceration—what was different about his approach two years later was a more flexible construction of the unity he proposed as a strategy for escape.”²¹ Malcolm X has had significance not only for individual prisoners but for organizations concerned with the black liberation such as The Black Panther Party for Self Defense,²² which was founded after his assassination, and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement²³, which today continues to teach black self-determination and works to free political prisoners.

Despite that Malcolm X, in his legacy, has been widely misinterpreted, coopted, and reified from his existence as a historical figure, we still have the opportunity to learn from Malcolm X in our own historical moment. Patricia Hill Collins criticizes Malcolm X’s biological understanding of race and racism, his failure to address poverty and the global scale of capitalism, and the masculinist vision of nation and self-determination. What should be remembered, she asserts, is Malcolm X’s ability to think for himself and in doing so recognize where his analysis fell short in order to develop an understanding of community development and liberation that takes into consideration the seriousness of current historical issues that communities (especially women) of color face today.²⁴

Michael Eric Dyson adds that public reinvention of Malcolm X that has created “the seductive mythology of the perfect black man”²⁵ undermines the fact that we remain in a context in which white supremacist and imperialist policies and functions of the state continue to consolidate nation-wide and world-wide.

Angela Davis wonders not what Malcolm might have become, but what his legacy means today. The use of the commodified X used to reproduce a masculinist, ahistorical argument for violent revolution miss that Malcolm argued for “the ballot or the bullet” or for “any means necessary” not as a moral imperative, but as a tactic developed within a specific historical and political context. She asks: “how do we challenge the police violence inflicted on untold numbers of black men, such as Rodney King, and at the same time organize against the pervasive sexual violence that continues to be perpetuated by men who claim to be actual or potential revolutionaries?”²⁶ While Malcolm X’s rhetorical style and language was incisive enough that parts of his speeches are remembered today, there must be a way to learn from him without turning his language into simplified, acontextual slogans. We must find a way to push forth

militancy and thinking that challenges hegemonic formations of ideology we wish to challenge in ourselves during a time when there is a growing hunger for new vision.

NOTES

- ¹ “Malcolm X,” *Africana: Encyclopedia of African and African American Experience*, 1999 ed.
- ² “Malcolm X,” *Africana*.
- ³ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1964), 152.
- ⁴ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 153.
- ⁵ “Malcolm X,” *Africana*.
- ⁶ Thulani Davis and Howard Chapnick, *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 1993), 159.
- ⁷ Malcolm X, “To Mississippi Youth,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1990), 137-146; Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning to Think For Ourselves,” *The Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), 59-85.
- ⁸ George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 6.
- ⁹ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 182.
- ¹⁰ Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 187.
- ¹¹ Thulani Davis and Howard Chapnick, *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs*, 159-161.
- ¹² Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” *Malcolm X Speaks*, 3-17.
- ¹³ Thulani Davis and Howard Chapnick, *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs*, 159-161.
- ¹⁴ “Malcolm X,” *Africana: Encyclopedia of African and African American Experience*, 1999 ed.
- ¹⁵ Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary*, 141.
- ¹⁶ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 153.
- ¹⁷ Huey P. Newton, “Prisons.”
- ¹⁸ Angela Y. Davis, “Prisons, Repression, and Resistance.”
- ¹⁹ “Malcolm X,” Editorial, *New York Times*, 22 Feb 1965: L20.

²⁰ Owosu Yaki Yakubu, "The Meaning of Malcolm X for the Imprisoned Afrikans in the United States," in *Teaching Malcolm X*, ed. Theresa Perry (New York: Routledge, 1996), 153.

²¹ Angela Y. Davis, "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 281.

²² see Charles E. Jones, ed. *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic, 1998), and Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds. *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

²³ Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, *Malcolm X Grassroots Movement Page*, (6 Mar. 2002), <http://www.malcolmxgrassroots.org>

²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning to Think for Ourselves: Malcolm X's Black Nationalism Reconsidered," in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 60.

²⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, "Inventing and Interpreting Malcolm X," in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and Davis Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1999), 44-45.

²⁶ Angela Y. Davis, "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X," *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 287.

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- . "To Mississippi Youth," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman, New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1990.
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Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. His mother, Louise Norton Little, was a homemaker occupied with the family's eight children. His father, Earl Little, was an outspoken Baptist minister and avid supporter of Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. Earl's civil rights activism prompted death threats from the white supremacist organization Black Legion, forcing the family to relocate twice before Malcolm's fourth birthday. Photo by Abode of Chaos. 2. Untitled Slide. Malcolm X was a prominent black nationalist leader who served as a spokesman for the Nation of