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# Studies on Malcolm X: A Review Essay and Research Design

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Malcolm X (1925–1965) continues to be a major point of reference within black political culture, and his importance has yet to reach its apex. Within the popular culture of rap music the image of Malcolm X is second to none, and the power of his persona is so great that it has even been abbreviated to the letter “X” on caps, T-shirts, buttons and posters. The critical point to make, however, is that this universality of recognition conceals within it a great diversity of meanings, and this diversity is the basis for a debate over who “owns” Malcolm X, and what is the “meaning” of Malcolm X.

The debate over the diverse interpretations of Malcolm X has been raging since he emerged as an activist in the 1950s in both the popular media and the scholarly literature. The overall debate has been both within the black community and between whites and blacks, but it has always been a challenge to the status quo. This has intensified in the last few years within the extreme class polarization that has dominated the USA and most of the world. Malcolm X has been reborn because unprecedented numbers of people have been dislodged from the seductive illusions of an “American Dream” and dumped into the pit of the “nightmare” he so clearly defined. It seems that the 1990s will be more relevant for the ideas of Malcolm X than the 1960s before he was assassinated.

During autumn 1992 the discussion of Malcolm X will be heightened because of a controversial new film on Malcolm X by the young African-American film maker Spike Lee. This is likely to be a major event in the political culture of black youth, if not race relations in general. We strongly suggest that students, scholars and activists study the literature presented in this review essay in order to clarify ideas and sharpen up the debate with all of the available facts, especially the ideas as presented by Malcolm X himself, over the entire period of his life.

## 1. Bibliography of Studies on Malcolm X

The literature by and about Malcolm X has been documented in several major bibliographical compilations (Bailey, 1969 (1990); Goldman, 1979; People's College, 1980; Davis, 1984; Johnson, 1986). The most comprehensive to date is by Johnson, Malcolm X A Comprehensive Bibliography (1986). While employed at Northwestern University Library, Johnson began working with People's College and built upon their bibliographical research. This is a 192-page book with a comprehensive author and subject index. Containing only a minimum of errors, this annotated listing of books, journal articles and newspaper articles is highly recommended for all serious students of Malcolm X.

This is a two-part review. My purpose is first to introduce the reader to the main historical work on Malcolm X. The second part will explore the current debate, including the controversy of alternative critical viewpoints on the film. In the first part of this essay I will not be dealing with unpublished MA and PHD theses, newspaper and journal articles, tapes, records, films or videos. I will be reviewing only the main published literature, and will refer only to the most important available texts. Further, I will conclude this exercise with a research design that builds upon this literature and points to future directions that research might take. In general, there are five major questions to deal with: Who was Malcolm X? What did he believe? What does his life (beliefs and actions) mean? What has his influence been? What new research needs to be carried out?

## 2. Autobiography and Biographical Reconstruction

Malcolm X was born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, USA. His father was a Baptist minister and both parents were active in the UNIA, led by Marcus Garvey. His father was killed and his mother was driven to a nervous breakdown. Malcolm descended into a life of crime after moving to Boston with his paternal half-sister. While in prison for armed robbery, he reversed his motion and converted to the Nation of Islam (NOI) under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. From 1952 to 1964 Malcolm X became a devoted follower, and rose to the position of National Spokesperson for the NOI. Conflicts emerged and for the last year of his life he was outside the NOI while he was developing as an anti-imperialist black liberation leader of world

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stature. He founded two organizations, the Muslim Mosque Incorporated and the Organization of Afro-American unity, having converted to Sunni Islam following his pilgrimage to Mecca and his attendance at the Cairo meeting of the Organization of African Unity. He was assassinated on 21 February 1965, before his fortieth birthday on 19 May.

The single most important book on the life of Malcolm X is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965)*. This book has never been out of print in 27 years. Malcolm X dictated the book to Alex Haley over an extended period of time. Haley had done previous articles and interviews with both Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, and after some negotiation was granted permission to provide editorial services for this book. The final product is 455 pages, in 19 chapters. There is an authorial issue that has to be cleared up: as the title indicates, the primary author is Malcolm X, while Alex Haley gave necessary editorial assistance. All bibliographical references should be to Malcolm X.

There are two significant editions of *The Autobiography* in addition to the most commonly available paperback in the USA: the original hardback (long out of print) has an important selection of photographs otherwise unavailable, and the British edition (Penguin, 1968) is the only edition that has a very useful detailed index.

As with all autobiographical texts there is the issue of distortion based on the possibility of self-serving recall or interpretation. Hence biographical reconstruction is one of the major issues of the literature on Malcolm X. The task facing scholars is to locate independent and objective data to validate or correct *The Autobiography*, or at least to amass as much subjective data as possible, especially if its legitimation is based on direct personal experience and it is corroborated.

Because of the Freedom of Information Act (that allegedly enables scholars to have access to previously secret government files) all studies of radical politics have to evaluate how to use data based on government surveillance. This has been the case for Malcolm X since Scholarly Resources published a microfilm version of a set of FBI files in 1978. Now Gallen (1991) has published a 500-page collection of what he alleges to be accurate FBI files, *Can We Trust the FBI to Tell the Truth about Malcolm X?* Since there can be no definitive affirmative answer to this we must insist that any research using this data set must always present alternative sources. The scholarly credibility of this book is weakened by the fact that it is not introduced by a Malcolm X scholar but by a Martin Luther King

scholar and a (non-scholar) film maker (Claybourne Carson and Spike Lee).

One of the major concerns is what we know about Malcolm's family life. Vincent (1989) presents evidence from *The Negro World* that helps to recast our understanding of Louise Little, the mother of Malcolm X, as an activist in the UNIA. We have several statements from Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X (Knebel, 1969; Shabazz, 1969; Cain, 1985; Shabazz, 1987). She adds personal anecdotes and her personal reminiscences, but she adds little to our understanding of the main themes of his thought and leadership. Also, we have some articles about the acting career and brief reminiscences of Atillah Shabazz, the oldest of Malcolm X's six daughters (Ebony, 1979; Bailey, 1982; Johnson, 1986).

The experiences that Malcolm had in the movement are hidden in the polemical fabric of past organizational secrecy. However, Jamal (1972) and Grant (1990) give some insights into how Malcolm was perceived within the **NOI** and the **MMI**. They uphold the image of organizational discipline and ideological focus that we find reported in *The Autobiography*. His spellbinding impact is upheld by two people who recount personal experiences with Malcolm in Ghana in 1964 (Lacy, 1970; Angelou, 1986). His impact is further detailed in autobiographical statements by James Farmer (1985), James Forman (1972), Amiri Baraka (1984a), Angela Davis (1974), Coretta Scott King (1969), Bobby Seale (1978), and Roy Wilkins (1982), to name a few.

There is a continuing controversy about the assassination of Malcolm X. The best overall compilation is *The Assassination of Malcolm X*, written and compiled by staff writers of *The Militant* (Miah, 1976), newspaper of the Socialist Workers' Party. They provide a detailed description of the events, including maps and charts of the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated. They also reprint FBI documents they obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Seraile (1981) provides a comprehensive survey of how the press in the USA, Europe and Africa reported the events of Malcolm's assassination. The points-of view included Malcolm as a budding integrationist, as the victim of violence, as the confused racist with wasted talent, and as a revolutionary martyr.

Overall, while there have been several attempts to sum up the life of Malcolm X, only one fits into the framework of biographical reconstruction, while the others are more explicit ideological or political reinterpretations. In this context we have to mention the

recent book by Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (1991). The research that Perry states he carried out is quite extensive. He titillates or infuriates the reader with anecdotes from single sources, and seems to rely uncritically on FBI files. His most polemical treatment is to allege criminal and sexual deviance for Malcolm and his family. All of this is used for the purposes of a psycho-reductionist portrait similar to William Styron's treatment of Nat Turner or Martin Duberman's treatment of Paul Robeson.

Wolfenstein (1981) is a far superior work to Perry even though there is no original previously unreported data, but his Freudian search for subjective factors is offset by his Marxist search for objective factors. Most importantly, Wolfenstein makes his theoretical ideas clear while Perry hides behind the false front of empiricism.

### 3. Ideological Production by Malcolm X

It is refreshing to turn to the work produced by Malcolm X because his is an authentic voice of black radicalism. Malcolm X was an agitator and propagandist of the highest order, mainly utilizing exceptional skills as a public speaker. We have over 50 published lectures, debates, interviews and discussions. Further we have about 20 newspaper articles, mainly from the *Amsterdam News* column "God's Angry Men" published in 1957 (see Johnson, 1986).

There are eight major collections of texts by Malcolm X. Lomax (1963) includes five speeches by Malcolm X delivered from 1960 to 1962. These were mainly speeches delivered to student audiences (Harvard, Yale and Queens in New York). He is the organizational voice of the NOI and concentrates on presenting their views on Islam and black nationalism. Goodman (Benjamin, 1971) includes four speeches Malcolm delivered while in the NOI, including the last one delivered (4 December 1963, 'God's Judgment of White America—The Chickens Are Coming Home to Roost').

The main compiler of Malcolm's speeches has been the Socialist Workers' Party, especially George Breitman. The first major collection edited by Breitman was published in 1965, *Malcolm X Speaks*. This collection contains 15 selections, all but one from the period after Malcolm X left the NOI. The two most famous speeches are included here, "Message to the Grassroots" (Detroit, 10 November 1963) and "The Ballot or the Bullet" (Cleveland, 3 April 1964).

These speeches reveal wit and wisdom in the penetrating and powerful logic of his analysis. Malcolm X put university level scholarship into the everyday language of the community, and he educated a generation.

His most profound point of focus was linking racist capitalist exploitation within the USA to the worldwide exploitation of Africa and the Third World. Malcolm X discussed how revolution was the main historical motion in the Third World, and he popularized the issues involved in building a revolutionary movement inside the US as well. He made it plain: **“You** can’t understand what is going on in Mississippi if you don’t understand what is going on in the Congo. . . .They’re both the same. The same interests are at stake” (p. **133**).

The second major collection edited by Breitman is *By Any Means Necessary* (**1970**). This book contains **12** selections, all produced after Malcolm X left the NOI. Three of these were important policy speeches given to **1964** rallies of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (**28 June, 5 July and 29 November**). These speeches describe the democratic programme Malcolm X proposed in the **mid-1960s**, and link it with his strategic vision of world revolution, especially the struggle in Africa. There are also three important statements Malcolm made outside the USA in Cairo, Paris and London.

Archie Epps edited *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard* (**1968**). Epps has a long theoretical introduction in which he invokes Shakespearean comparisons to capture the **larger-than-life** dynamic of Malcolm X at Harvard. Epps attempts satire, but conveys awe. There are three speeches in this collection (**24 March 1961, 18 March 1964 and 16 December 1964**). Malcolm X entered the Harvard den (bastion of white racist rule) and bearded the lion by proclaiming the moral degeneracy of imperialism and its Christian rationale and upholding the moral high ground for the oppressed.

*Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (**1970**) is another Pathfinder collection based on a speech given to the OAAU (**24 January 1965**). Malcolm X utilizes history to discuss the historical forms of oppression faced by black people and the corresponding forms of struggle necessary for liberation. Ancient history is discussed to demonstrate that black people have a background that was **stolen, as was** knowledge of past greatness, language and names that linked people to that past history. Further, he discussed the impact of slavery in this same regard. In addition to this speech an excerpt is

included from *The Autobiography* in which he discusses how he studied history while in prison.

Another collection is *Malcolm X Talks to Young People* (Clark, **1991**). This expanded and revised text (originally published in **1965**) contains five speeches delivered in Africa (University of Ghana, **13 May 1964**), England (Oxford University, **3 December 1964** and London School of Economics, **11 February 1965**) and the USA (**1 January 1965** and **18 January 1965**). In these talks Malcolm X makes it clear that in his view black people have been victims in the USA and retain their identity with Africa. Further, he advances a defence of Africa against European colonialism, and builds a rationale for revolutionary war.

Finally, *Malcolm X The Last Speeches* (Perry, **1989**) contains six selections (two speeches from **1963**, two interviews from **1964** and two speeches from **1965**). These texts are especially useful in at least four ways; **(1)** they demonstrate the clear-sighted criticism that Malcolm X insisted on, whether dealing with the racist system, civil rights leadership, or even Elijah Muhammad; **(2)** the importance of historical understanding, especially refutation of "Eurocentrism"; **(3)** the importance of naming ourselves African-Americans and having a perspective that includes Africa and its Diaspora; and **(4)** the focus on what Malcolm X calls the "international Western power structure". The last speech (delivered in Rochester, New York, five days before his assassination) is a classic text that sums up his views at the end of his life.

The main body of these speeches and interviews cover three stages of Malcolm X as a mature political thinker: **(1)** the messianic nationalism of an **NOI** minister; **(2)** the secular black nationalism of the black liberation movement; and **(3)** the anti-imperialist pan-African internationalism of Third World revolution.

#### 4 Literary Criticism and Modes of Meaning

Academic scholars have researched and reflected on the texts produced by Malcolm X, especially his autobiography. In this case literary criticism has mainly sought to read for the logical coherence and substantive assertions of these texts, and then to manufacture modes of meaning based on discovered patterns of intertextuality, directly or by analogy. While this literature has not begun to exhaust

the possibilities it is here that we can find a glimpse of the greatness that seems due to Malcolm.

One of the main concerns is to read Malcolm X as the supreme icon of black political culture. Thomas (1984) links Malcolm X's autobiographical reflections to several key "social and cultural phenomena . . . that have historically helped to regulate a sense of being in the Black American urban community". These include Africanisms, hairstyles, dance, dress, speech, nicknaming and "hustling".

Flick (1979, 1980, 1981) explores alternative modes of meaning. First, he explores the modality of prison as the direct experience of Malcolm X and as political trope in the thought of Malcolm X. Second, he explores religion and how Malcolm X utilized it to establish and embellish a strong black identity. And third, how Malcolm X destroyed racist myths, that blacks were animals, that blacks were a minority (in the USA versus the world), and that blacks supported integration as a goal rather than a means to human dignity.

The meaning of Malcolm X within the political culture of the black community is nowhere more eloquently shouted than in the praise poetry organized by Randall and Burroughs (1969). The meaning seems captured in a line by Robert Hayden, that Malcolm "became much more than there was time for him to be".

Other critics have placed *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* within the context of American letters in general. Ohmann (1970) compares the texts of Malcolm X to the seminal American autobiography by Benjamin Franklin. She states that they "resemble each other in the conception of the self they convey, in the categories by which they apprehend men and events, in the standards by which they judge them, and in the ways, looking backward as autobiographers do, they pattern or structure the raw materials of their own lives". Miller (1972) continues the comparison by approving of their efforts to "turn history into a novel . . . to express what cannot be understood by facts alone".

Whitfield (1978), in comparing Franklin, Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X, points to the pragmatic utility of writing an autobiography to demonstrate that one was indeed as good as people thought. He states that "even if these autobiographers forgot or fudged or misrepresented parts of their lives, the significance of their stories has overshadowed their failure to attain the reality of candor

... through the craft of autobiography and the art of impression management, dead men can and do tell tales”.

**Berthoff** (1971) makes these same points in a comparison of autobiographies by Malcolm X and Norman Mailer. **Holte** (1982), in a comparison of Malcolm with other ethnic immigrant experiences, argues that his voice emerges within the transformative process of acculturation to embody the essence of what it means to be an American. It is amazing that this scholarly literature, focusing exclusively on the text about his life and not the conflict-ridden social relations of his life, can find a way of fitting Malcolm X into a version of the American Dream.

Eakins (1976) argues, conversely, that Malcolm X was much more self-restrained and stayed within self-defined limits. In fact he suggests that Malcolm had not worked out schemata for his thinking and, given his usual spontaneous candour, we have to regard him as staying true to unusually accurate recall of the past. He was honest enough to tell **Alex Haley** near the end of their interview sessions: “I’m man enough to tell you that I can’t put my finger on exactly what my philosophy is now, but I’m flexible.” Eakins argues that this is not the view of a callous manipulator of personal history who insists on a manufactured coherence and an idealized sense of self.

Rose (1987) identifies the theme of literacy as the path to individual freedom (autonomy) as a myth adopted by Malcolm X. By reading and writing one could understand, control and create a new reality for oneself. Each process of transformation in Malcolm’s life involved an act of reading and/or writing. In fact the last three pages of *The Autobiography* contain his soliloquy to literacy, Malcolm X’s special politicized form of multicultural literacy, that makes this point in a very powerful way. Imagine Malcolm X saying in the last year of his life: “You can believe me . . . I would not be one bit ashamed to go back into any New York City public school and start where I left off at the ninth grade, and go on through a degree.”

This profound humility of a man whose life embodies conversions of epic proportions has led to comparative analyses that place him within the context of world literature. Van Home (1986) compares Malcolm X to the African known as Saint Augustine. His purpose is “to trace the journey of their souls from the agony of rebellion through the transfiguration of revelation to the sanctification of redemption and on to the joy of regeneration”. This comparative tale of conversion is also discussed by **Abbott** (1979) and **Mandel** (1972),



















