

From Black Revolution to “Radical Humanism”: Malcolm X between Biography and International History

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Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention

Manning Marable

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Ever since his violent death at age thirty-nine, on February 21, 1965, the African American activist Malcolm X has become more of a cultural icon than a properly understood historical figure, a sort of blank screen onto which a seemingly endless variety of people and groups have projected their fantasies, ideas, and visions. This, in a way, is a strange fate for someone so profoundly political.¹ In popular culture, in varying national arenas, he has become a totemic posthumous presence. Around the world he is nearly as likely as Che Guevara to be found on t-shirts worn by idealistic young people who actually know little if anything about him. In the United States, the identification of individual African Americans with him transcends political orientation: he has been claimed as a model, for example, by Clarence Thomas, the right-wing Supreme Court justice, as well as by Chuck D, leader of the militant hip-hop group Public Enemy.² He has even been adopted by parts of the American mainstream: there are streets named after him, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is widely assigned in schools and colleges, and the U.S. Postal Service formalized his national status by putting his image on a stamp in 1999.

But it is really at the international level that Malcolm's life after death has had particular resonance; recent anecdotal (and sometimes disturbing) evidence abounds. After the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency in November 2008, al-Qaeda released a video featuring its then-deputy (now leader), the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, who described president-elect Obama as a “race traitor” and “hypocrite” when compared to Malcolm X. This was not new rhetoric from al-Zawahiri, who had frequently held up Malcolm X (to whom he always referred by Malcolm's Arabic name, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) as a paragon of “honorable black Americans” while attacking Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, during the years of the George W. Bush administration, as “house negroes” (harking back to Malcolm X's favorite pejorative description of moderate black American leaders who enjoyed the support of white liberals).

Toward the end of his biography of Malcolm X, Manning Marable is quick to

distance his subject from al-Qaeda's views of the world, arguing that Malcolm would have certainly found the attacks of September 11, 2001, abhorrent—"the negation of Islam's core tenets," as Marable puts it (487). This is a highly debatable point to which I will return. Nevertheless, al-Qaeda's embrace of Malcolm X (genuine or not) and al-Zawahiri's use of one of Malcolm's most famous speeches are revealing of a fascinating but thus far misunderstood historical development: the transformation of a uniquely American public figure, seemingly the product of specifically black American socio-historical circumstances, into a worldwide cultural, political, and religious symbol. In a way, al-Zawahiri's comments were already forecast more than twenty years earlier, when the postrevolutionary Iranian government released a postage stamp featuring an image of Malcolm X to promote the Universal Day of Struggle against Race Discrimination. These sorts of linkages between Malcolm X's politics and radical Islam were perhaps most notoriously put into action by John Walker Lindh, the young white Californian from upper-class Marin County who was inspired, after reading the *Autobiography*, to leave comfortable suburban America behind him and join the Taliban forces in the mountains of Afghanistan, where in 2002 he was captured by American troops.

These few examples are suggestive of the ways in which a full examination of Malcolm X's political and spiritual legacies can serve as a gateway for scholars seeking to understand the dynamics of international history in the last several decades, and particularly the place of the United States (and most specifically, black Americans) in a global context. Although extant scholarship on Malcolm X has focused primarily on his place within African American history, specifically his role vis-à-vis the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a number of scholars have begun an effort to link Malcolm X to a broader set of issues in the history of international politics. While his life story and public career reveal much about the United States and its racial-political conditions in the middle part of the twentieth century, Malcolm X's trajectory can also be studied to great profit by scholars interested in the past and present of human rights, the politics of citizenship, the impact of decolonization, anti-imperialism, the global and black left, and the tension between geopolitics and individual or collective political action. Marable's book, which was clearly written for the general public rather than for specialists, touches on some but not all of these issues, with mixed results. This essay will focus on both components of Malcolm X's late public career, the American and the international, while stressing the connections between them: neither Malcolm X's American nor global activism in the last year of his life, I argue, can be understood without the other.

Given that Malcolm X is one of the most famous names in twentieth-century history, it is easy to forget that at the end of his life he was—at least in the United States—a marginalized, isolated figure, marked for death by his enemies and seen by much of the public as a rabble-rousing demagogue. His reputation was largely transformed, and his fame cemented, by the publication of the *Autobiography* in 1965, shortly after his death.³ The words were supposedly Malcolm X's but the author was Alex Haley, a struggling black writer and former Coast Guardsman whose agenda, Marable notes, was that of a "liberal Republican" and integrationist (9). Malcolm X and Haley had collaborated on the work beginning in the early 1960s; Malcolm agreed

to the project with the primary goal of lauding his spiritual leader at the time, Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), a group known in the media as the Black Muslims. Haley's aim was different: to depict Malcolm's harsh life and militant message as a warning to white America of what a rejection of racial integration would lead to. In the end, Haley enjoyed control over the material and determined the *Autobiography's* tone and framing. He was responsible for the way Malcolm came to be seen by many: as a man who, through personal growth and spiritual epiphany, ended up rejecting black separatism, yearning for rapprochement with the civil rights movement, and espousing a more inclusive vision of his struggle, and whose life was cut short as he was beginning to present these newfound views to the world. At least two generations of readers have been swept away by the *Autobiography's* dramatic power, uplifted especially by Malcolm's account of his April 1964 trip to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and the subsequent drastic change in the way he saw white people—previously “blond-haired, blue-eyed devils,” now potential allies in his fight for black liberation.

Marable's book, which takes issue with this highly misleading view of Malcolm X's career, can be seen, first and foremost, as a lengthy reply to Haley's bestseller. Its first main goal is to situate Malcolm's life within the broader arc of African American history. Thanks in part to Spike Lee's eponymous 1992 film, Malcolm X became “a hero for black Americans,” as was overwhelmingly shown by a poll taken that year. Directly based on the *Autobiography*, given the full Hollywood treatment, starring the crowd-pleasing Denzel Washington, *Malcolm X* the film brought Malcolm X the figure a magnitude of attention, and acceptance, that he could never have experienced while alive.⁴ The problem, then, for Marable, became one of a different sort. Malcolm X was now seen by a new generation of African Americans as a saint, hero, and martyr: “the historical Malcolm,” Marable writes, “the man with all his strengths and flaws, was being strangled by the iconic legend that had been constructed around him” (490). What was needed was a full understanding of Malcolm X the person. And so Marable's second and most important goal was to “humanize” Malcolm X, to transform the icon into flesh and blood, to “go beyond the legend; to recount what actually occurred in Malcolm's life” (12).

The book's publication had a dramatic, and tragic, quality. Marable, along with a staff of dozens, had been working on it, on and off, for almost twenty years. As the founder and longtime director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University, Marable and his team put together the Malcolm X Project (MXP), an important pedagogical resource on the man and his times. Few books in recent years were as highly anticipated. For one thing, there was the sense (echoed by Marable himself) that Malcolm X had never gotten the historian or biographer he deserved, despite the shelves of books that had been devoted to him. Until the 1990s, Marable argues, Malcolm X was consigned to “the periphery of black history”; as for the literature on Malcolm X produced in the 1990s, Marable was “struck by its shallow character and lack of original sources” (8, 490). Marable's position at Columbia, and his standing as a prominent figure in the field of African American studies, gave him the sort of gravitas that previous Malcolm X scholars had seemingly lacked. He also did not play down the hype and pomp of the publication, giving interviews about the book for several years before it actually came out and

describing his findings in personal, definitive, and bombastic terms. At the same time, Marable suffered from sarcoidosis, a serious pulmonary disease. In 2010, he received a double lung transplant, and it was in these circumstances, including months of hospitalization, that he was able to finish work on the book. He died, aged sixty, on April 1, 2011; three days later the book finally appeared.

The initial public response was somewhat expected, given the matching of sexy subject and visible (and just-deceased) author. The book shot its way immediately up to near the top of bestseller lists. It received mostly glowing reviews (doubling as obituaries for Marable) in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and other venues; it was debated, sometimes virulently, among black intellectuals and activists who either loved the book or deeply disliked it (for reasons to be discussed below); and it even got some play on commercial television, thanks to its claims about Malcolm's murder. In 2012, it won the ultimate mark of mainstream approval—the Pulitzer Prize for History.

The first thing to say is that Marable has succeeded in his principal goal of “humanizing” Malcolm X. Many fixed ideas about the man's life will be overturned, or at least rethought. Then there is the question of whether Marable has accomplished the mission to fully *historicize* Malcolm X. Here the answer might well be a qualified, respectful, no. The book works well as biography, but it is less convincing as history. (The Pulitzer committee's decision to judge the book in the category of history rather than biography is all the more surprising.) Marable's work is a significant achievement in many respects and probably the most important book about Malcolm X since Peter Goldman's *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, published in 1974.⁵ Its Pulitzer means that for years to come it will be the go-to book for anyone interested in Malcolm X and his times. But it should not be the final word on its subject. Nor, one imagines, would Marable, always a lively intellectual interlocutor, want it to be.⁶

There is an odd tension at the heart of this book between Marable's framing of Malcolm X's life and his actual telling of it. Prior to the book's publication, Marable had stated in interviews that Malcolm X was “the most remarkable historical figure produced by Black America in the twentieth century.”⁷ But it is never entirely clear how (and if) the book actually conveys this. Although the biography begins and ends with laudatory statements about Malcolm X, its tone is, overall, fairly negative. One way to understand “remarkable” is that, in Marable's view, “more than any of his contemporaries, [Malcolm X] embodied the spirit, vitality, and political mood of an entire population—black, urban mid-twentieth-century America” (13). But given that Marable himself repeatedly points out how out of step Malcolm turned out to be with the dominant political and religious currents among American blacks, this too is a debatable claim. How did Malcolm arrive at such a different place from the great majority of blacks that grew up in the same settings he did, given that his experiences and “mood” were supposedly so representative? This is a question that the book should have answered, but I am not sure it does. The answer, I would argue, has to do with Malcolm's discovery of international politics.

The early stages of Malcolm X's life certainly reflected the harshness and brutality typically suffered by many black communities in the United States. Born Malcolm Little in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, he spent his childhood wandering with his family

through the Midwest, finally settling in Lansing, Michigan. Yet even this regional, parochial start to Malcolm's life contained the seeds of his future internationalism: both of his parents were poor but devoted followers of the West Indian 1920s black nationalist Marcus Garvey, leader of the "Back to Africa" movement, who would become a major influence on Malcolm's thinking. Malcolm's father died when the boy was thirteen, the victim of either a drunken accident at a railroad track or of the Black Knights, a white supremacist group. The family then slipped from poverty to destitution, and shortly thereafter, his mother was institutionalized. Malcolm would not see her again until he was an adult. He spent the rest of his adolescence in foster homes, and despite showing early promise at school, he did not get past the eighth grade and grew up to be a zoot-suited petty criminal. A powerful component of the *Autobiography* was to highlight the depths of crime and depravity to which Malcolm sunk in his youth and early adulthood, leading to his arrest in Boston (for burglary), conviction, and imprisonment, in 1946, when he was twenty years old. One of Marable's most trumpeted revisionist arguments (somewhat overplayed) is that Malcolm's criminal activities were relatively minor and that in the *Autobiography* he exaggerated his criminal past in order to underline the power of his eventual redemption. In the *Autobiography* Malcolm had also described his younger self as intellectually and politically clueless, and Marable shows that this too was a self-constructed myth: his parents' reverence for Garvey's ideas stayed with him throughout his youth.

Regardless, it was in prison that the criminal once nicknamed "Big Red" (and, according to the *Autobiography*, "Satan," by fellow prisoners) came under the influence of Elijah Muhammad, leader of an obscure "sect" (Marable's term), the Nation of Islam. Muhammad, formerly Poole, self-proclaimed Messenger of God (and a former convict himself), preached worship of Allah, abstention from vice, self-improvement and discipline, segregation of the sexes outside marriage, and a bizarre cosmic theology that had at its center the superiority of the black man to the white man.⁸ After his release from prison, in 1952, a converted, well-read, bespectacled, and cleaned-up Little, now calling himself Malcolm X, threw himself into proselytizing activism and, while remaining subservient to Muhammad, steadily rose through the ranks of the NOI. As he became a nationally prominent figure in the late 1950s and especially the early 1960s, he almost single-handedly catapulted the NOI to hitherto unknown levels of public visibility. His intelligence, magnetism, and wit, distinctive traits that neither Muhammad nor anyone else in the "sect" could hope to match, earned him a following among younger blacks in the northern cities, attention from the mainstream media, and the envy and resentment of many Black Muslims, including and especially Muhammad himself.

Then, at the peak of his fame, in early 1964, after a long period of intense internal discord, Malcolm publicly broke with Muhammad and set off on an independent path. The last year of his life was the most politically and religiously significant. It was in the ten or eleven months before his murder that Malcolm became a global- as well as national-level actor, an internationally recognized human rights campaigner, a Sunni Muslim, and the leader of two separate organizations, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and the Muslim Mosque Incorporated (MMI).⁹ It was also

then that he lost the structure within which he had operated for over a decade, and he was targeted for harassment and violence by both the leaders and the rank and file of the NOI, ending with his murder. Although the *Autobiography* presented this last act of Malcolm's life as a sort of catharsis, Marable focuses on the fact that Haley included very little material on Malcolm's political activity after his leaving the NOI and his trip to Mecca, and almost nothing on the OAAU and MMI. (Haley left the chapters dealing with these organizations out of the finished product.) Manning seeks to rectify these omissions, and to a large degree he succeeds.

In spite of Muhammad's crucial role in Malcolm's personal evolution, and the NOI's function of, at least, providing structure, meaning, and a sense of purpose to some disaffected urban blacks, Marable harbors no affection, to put it mildly, for the group. The book pulls no punches in its depiction of the bleak inner world of the NOI: the absolute fidelity to a petty and tyrannical leader, the violence and bullying, the obscurantism and parochialism, the misogyny and cruelty, the jealousies and hypocrisies. Marable and his team uncovered new and interesting information about Malcolm's time in the NOI, including his own casual imperiousness toward subordinates, and especially the complex, ultimately poisonous relationship with the father-figure Malcolm had long termed "the Honorable Elijah Muhammad."

According to the *Autobiography*, Malcolm wound up breaking with Muhammad primarily as a result of discovering that his former spiritual savior and the preacher of sexual rectitude had fathered numerous children with a succession of teenaged secretaries. (The book's rather pedestrian photo gallery includes one ironically stunning image of Muhammad greeting a comely young convert.¹⁰) One of the best parts of the book is the section dealing with the background and dynamics of Malcolm's departure from the Nation. Marable shows that it was in fact the NOI that ultimately pushed out Malcolm, who had increasingly chafed under Muhammad's perennial restrictions on political activity, and had also discovered, according to Marable, that the mother of one of Muhammad's out-of-wedlock progeny was a former girlfriend of Malcolm's for whom he still pined. Also, Malcolm was increasingly bothered by the fact that the NOI's esoteric brand of "Islam" had little or nothing to do with "Islam" the world religion. After Malcolm made his infamous statement following President Kennedy's assassination, implying that it was a sort of karmic payback for America's sins at home and abroad ("Kennedy never foresaw that the chickens would come home to roost so soon . . . Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad; they always made me glad"), Muhammad opportunistically muzzled his disciple for ninety days. A key point in the process of Malcolm's disillusionment was Muhammad's muted response to the shooting and killing of an NOI member by Los Angeles police in 1962; while Malcolm and some other members of the Nation wanted to respond in kind, Muhammad (probably wisely) ordered his disciples to do nothing. Marable shows the extent to which Malcolm was caught up in the racial-political whirlwind of his times, and his desire to be part of the action clashed with the NOI's rigid abstinence from contentious issues. There can be no doubt, after reading Marable's book, that Malcolm's interest in global affairs—in contrast with the NOI's relentless incuriousness—played a large part in the falling-out between guru and disciple (who would now be seen as a sort of

guru himself, on a much larger stage). Still, Malcolm tried to find ways to stay in the NOI until the bitter end, and even after the break he made occasional conciliatory gestures to Muhammad, a sign that a part of him still belonged to the group.¹¹

Along the way, Marable makes a number of claims, most of them speculative, about Malcolm X's personal life, and these, for better or worse, have played a major role in the attention given to the book; several of Malcolm's admirers have reacted sourly to Marable's rummaging in their hero's closet. It is admittedly interesting to learn that Malcolm might have (in his youthful delinquent days) been involved in a brief sexual relationship with a white Boston businessman; had a strained and mutually unfaithful marriage with his wife Betty Shabazz, which was not helped by his tendency to leave on long trips immediately after the birth of each one of his children (all of whom were, somewhat to his chagrin, daughters); consumed the occasional alcoholic drink.¹² These bits of gossip may indeed help "humanize" someone who has been generally depicted, post-prison, as a teetotaling paragon of morally upright manhood. But it is probably more important to know the extent to which Malcolm X, in his NOI days, tried to build alliances with both the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party (whose leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, was even invited to speak at an NOI event). The rationale for this cooperation was that the NOI and the white supremacists shared a belief in complete racial separation. Marable reserves some of his sternest lectures for these harebrained initiatives, as well as for the occasions when Malcolm said things that could be construed (with a bit of stretching) as anti-Semitic.

Perhaps the biography's most compelling chapter is on the murder itself. Marable should be applauded for confronting the matter directly: many others (myself included) have seen it as a morass from which serious scholars should steer clear. After providing a reconstruction of the entire ugly event, Marable elides some of the more elaborate conspiracy theories floated over the years and concurs with the generally accepted view that the murder at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom was committed by members of the NOI's Newark mosque. While Muhammad and his heavily FBI-infiltrated inner circle may not have given a direct order to kill Malcolm, they had to have known that this would be the result of their constant incitement, and in any case the killers were convinced that they were doing their leader's bidding. The FBI and New York City police, Marable argues, may have known of the murder in advance (thanks to the presence of numerous undercover agents in both the NOI and in Malcolm's organizations) and enabled it. Most startlingly, there are strong indications that Malcolm accepted and even helped orchestrate his own death, and by insisting that his wife and children attend the talk (they rarely if ever did), he envisioned his murder as a "symbolic . . . passion play" to be witnessed by family and friends (433). Lastly, Marable bolsters the accusations made over the years that the authorities purposely botched the investigation, covering up for their informants and framing two innocent men while letting one of the real killers (the man—still alive, and identified by name—who fired the fatal shot) go scot-free, while presenting the murder to the public as a hate crime committed by one group of black militants on the leader of another. As in all such historical detective work conducted years after the fact, Marable

cannot offer a definitive solution to the mystery. But he probably comes as close as anyone else has so far.

A more problematic tension in the book has to do with the meanings of Malcolm's politics at the time of his death. Here it is important to note that while the debate tends to revolve around Malcolm X's place in domestic civil rights history, the wider world is equally important, indeed crucial, in understanding Malcolm X's *American* activity. Marable—more about this later—does not do enough to emphasize that connection. He does justly take Haley and others to task for their depiction of Malcolm X's last year as “an effort to gain respectability as an integrationist and liberal reformer,” which Marable considers “not an accurate or complete reading,” as well as one of the main reasons for the *Autobiography's* mainstream popularity over the years (466). Marable is right to reject the common portrayal of Malcolm X as simply another part of the civil rights movement writ large—Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. in this typical view, represent two complementary poles of the movement, the former militant and the latter moderate (with the two moving steadily closer to each other).¹³ Marable's epilogue, which should be read as a self-standing essay rather than as a conclusion, contains a comparison between King and Malcolm X that should put to rest once and for all the facile linkages made between the two men.

But Marable's forceful statements notwithstanding, ultimately his portrayal does not stray far from Haley's; ironically, this may be part of why the book has enjoyed so much mainstream success, among the same sorts of readers who five decades ago loved the *Autobiography*. Much, perhaps too much, of the second half of the biography revolves around what Marable depicts as Malcolm X's conflicted relationship with the civil rights movement. Marable is perhaps at his most critical of his subject when juxtaposing the pragmatic, action-driven approach of the civil rights camp with the NOI's refusal to engage with politics and with Malcolm X's scornful attitude toward the civil rights mainstream. At the same time, Marable's Malcolm X is constantly moving, even before leaving the NOI, back and forth between wanting to work with civil rights leaders at some points and ridiculing them as “Uncle Toms” at others, and between seeing ways to work within the American political system (for example, in his famous speech “The Ballot or the Bullet”) and without it. But Marable, almost in spite of himself, winds up contextualizing Malcolm X's career too firmly within the civil rights framework. Too often the movement is the star around which Malcolm X orbits as little more than a defensive, sometimes petulant, satellite. It is clear where Marable stands: the friendlier Malcolm is to the movement, the friendlier Marable is to Malcolm; the more dismissive Malcolm is, so goes Marable. Although Malcolm X is ostensibly the subject of the book, the real heroes of this part of the narrative are such civil rights leaders as Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and, most predictably, King, all of whom were among Malcolm's harshest critics, and with all of whom Marable identifies more closely.

One of Malcolm X's principal faults in Marable's eyes was his failure, at times, to appreciate what these civil rights activists were doing for the lives of the ordinary blacks on whose behalf Malcolm X claimed to speak, and his disdain for gradual change. Marable mentions with some enthusiasm Farmer's taunting of Malcolm at a debate between them—“We know the disease, physician, what is your cure?” (203).

And he reminds us that while Malcolm X spoke caustic words, the civil rights leaders that he disparaged as stooges of the white man were busy *doing*, sometimes at daunting personal sacrifice, while he was mostly *talking* (this was a common complaint made about him at the time). “Malcolm’s political beliefs,” Marable writes, “may have led him to misunderstand the fundamental importance of the mainstream civil rights struggle to the large majority of black Americans. Whereas [Malcolm] . . . criticized the flaws in the nonviolent approach, [he] did not acknowledge how rewarding even incremental progress was . . . it apparently did not occur to him that great social change usually occurs through small transformations in individual behavior” (406).

One could agree with Marable’s implication that Malcolm missed the point of the civil rights struggle. But Marable might be missing a crucial point about Malcolm: what mattered about him, in this regard, was not his policy prescriptions (or lack thereof), or his precise positions on specific issues, such as whether blacks should vote in the 1964 presidential election for Lyndon Johnson or Barry Goldwater (whose statement “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue” Malcolm X adopted, for reasons different from Goldwater’s). Rather, what mattered was his general political temperament, which was revolutionary, not reformist, and toward the end of his life, focused on the global *and* the national rather than *just* or even *primarily* the national, as was the case for the civil rights mainstream. Malcolm’s ostensible support for Goldwater’s candidacy in 1964—really a tepid, tongue-in-cheek “endorsement” that Marable makes too much of, since Malcolm neither voted for Goldwater himself nor encouraged anyone else to—stemmed from his conviction that it was better for blacks to confront the “wolf” (Republican Goldwater) than the “fox” (Democrat Johnson). “In a wolf’s den,” he says in the *Autobiography*, “I’d always known exactly where I stood; I’d watch the dangerous wolf closer than I would the smooth, sly fox. The wolf’s very growling would keep me alert and fighting to survive, whereas I might be lulled and fooled by the tricky fox.”¹⁴

Malcolm X knew full well how important the civil rights movement was to many American blacks, but this, to him, was a source of concern (and envy): he saw these blacks as hoodwinked and wanted to bring them around to *his* view. Unlike the leaders of the civil rights mainstream, Malcolm X rejected American society in principle (or as he put it, speaking contemptuously of “middle class so-called Negroes,” “what to them is an American dream to us is an American nightmare”) and although he *was* eager to be part of the conversation about it, this should not be confused with wanting to be *of* it (202–3). For the record: Malcolm X was *not* part of the “civil rights movement,” unless one uses the term, incorrectly, to include every black American political activist of the period. To Malcolm X, the civil rights movement was engaged in a self-defeating project of trying to save a fundamentally corrupt system.

An important part of this issue is that Malcolm X, during the course of his last year, substituted “civil rights” with “human rights,” and the distinction was more than tactical or semantic. It signified a critical difference in how one viewed American blacks: whereas King and the rest of the civil rights mainstream saw American blacks first and foremost as U.S. citizens, deserving of full rights and equality as such, Malcolm X spoke of “Afro-Americans,” by which he meant all people of African

origin in the Western Hemisphere. It was the difference between conceiving the problem at hand as domestic or international. As Malcolm saw it, the oppression of American blacks was but one part of a Western phenomenon—colonialism/imperialism; they happened to be living in the United States because of the historical crime of slavery, and their affinity was not to other U.S. citizens but rather to a global community. To be in favor of civil rights meant appealing to the Constitution and the egalitarian vision of the founders (i.e., the Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal, not the Thomas Jefferson who owned slaves), and believing that there was a gap—one that could be closed, though it would not be easy—between American ideals and realities. To be for human rights, in this regard, meant that one considered American realities a reflection of America's true nature and thus its political and legal institutions as illegitimate (and hopeless) when it came to promoting the rights of blacks. Only a supranational authority, both moral and political, could bring about the outside pressure needed to change conditions within some day. The civil rights struggle, as Malcolm saw it, kept blacks under the control of America's domestic jurisdiction; he wanted to transform the black issue in the United States into a geopolitical concern.

We should, however, be wary of reading all this anachronistically. The notion that the black struggle in the United States constituted a human rights matter was not a new one in the 1960s, nor did Malcolm X invent it; rather, he helped promote its connection to anticolonialism, a trend begun by other African American intellectuals in earlier years. Human rights, for Malcolm, were not utopian but rather a strategy, a means to an end, a precondition for civil rights.¹⁵ His rationale was simple: on the world stage, he reasoned, nonwhites were in the majority, and presenting the plight of blacks in the United States as a human rights issue would be an embarrassment to the American government. As he put it in a speech in November 1964, "America . . . is not qualified to handle the solving of her race problem . . . It has to be made into a world problem—or a problem for humanity—not a negro problem or an American problem or one only she has the say-so over." His plan (which he was unable to realize before his death) was to bring his case before the UN General Assembly and charge the United States with violating the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Charter itself, "for its refusal to bring a halt to the continued mistreatment of the 22 million black people in [the United States]."¹⁶

Marable discusses Malcolm X's human rights activism at some length, but there is yet another tension in the book—one that also constitutes perhaps its major flaw—between its continual emphasis on Malcolm X's "global vision" on the one hand, and its almost relentless America-centeredness on the other. As strong as the book may be at analyzing Malcolm's early life from the perspective of African American studies, it is far weaker at dealing with Malcolm X's later career in the context of international history, specifically the field that has vaguely become known as "the United States in the world." This is partly a problem of format: the biographer's obligation to cover a person's life from birth to death differs from the historian's prerogative of weighing the relative importance of distinct periods. Thus the book's later sections on Malcolm's extensive and intensive worldwide travel and activity in his last year are both extremely detailed and deeply frustrating. One of the sources Marable uncovered

is Malcolm's travel diary, and on the basis of this invaluable document, along with many of Malcolm's other papers, Marable and his team were able to reconstitute almost everything Malcolm did abroad in that last year. The trip to Mecca is covered in lavish detail; every meeting in Africa and the Middle East is duly noted; that which may have transpired in Malcolm's private quarters is brought to light. But the book does not convey the full extent and meaning of Malcolm's international activism.

Malcolm X's engagement with the politics of the wider world had begun already in his NOI years. He first visited Africa in 1959, briefly, as the NOI spokesman; in the summer of 1964, after his return from Mecca, he traveled to Africa for five months (interrupted by one return trip to the United States), visiting fourteen countries, this time representing his new organizations—in a word, himself. He met with a number of heads of state, including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Gamal Abdel-Nasser of Egypt, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, and Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria—charismatic postcolonial leaders who saw themselves as defying the Western powers and whose varying fusions of African-style socialism and Pan-Africanism (or Pan-Arabism) appealed to Malcolm X's evolving conception of power politics. What made American officials most nervous about Malcolm X's comings and goings was that they considered all these leaders either potential or active allies of the Soviet Union. (Equally of note were the countries Malcolm X did not visit: Senegal and the Ivory Coast, for example, both of whose governments remained very much under French influence and sought out Western involvement after independence.)

Part of the reason for Malcolm's long stay abroad was the growing threat to his life at home. But his agenda was ambitious. In Ghana, he spent five weeks in the company of self-exiled African American intellectuals, including the family of W. E. B. Du Bois, who had become a Ghanaian citizen in 1962 and died there in 1963.¹⁷ Malcolm attended a meeting in Cairo of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the OAAU's namesake, where despite his failure to convince fearful delegates to support a resolution condemning the United States for human rights violations, he was able to get through a more moderate resolution against "racial oppression." In Kenya, he was invited to speak before the parliament, which endorsed, at least symbolically, his human rights initiative. He was then instantly subjected to aggressive interrogation by local American diplomats. American officials were so wary of his activism that the attorney general wrote to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover—who had long had Malcolm, and all other oppositional black leaders, under surveillance—to verify whether Malcolm was in violation of the Logan Act, the federal law that forbids unauthorized citizens from negotiating with foreign governments.¹⁸

It was also in 1964 that Malcolm X and his friends abroad became increasingly obsessed with the fate of the Republic of Congo, which to them was ground zero in the worldwide struggle between good (black liberation) and evil (Western imperialism), and to which Marable probably does not devote enough attention. One of Malcolm's role models—and a man to whom he was frequently compared by his international supporters, both before and especially after his death—was Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Congo, murdered in 1961 by internal enemies, reputedly with the involvement of the United States and Belgium

and the complicity of the United Nations.¹⁹ (Malcolm, when he was still the NOI spokesman, could be found among those who angrily protested outside the UN in the aftermath of the murder.) In 1964 the Congo was mired in a brutal civil war between so-called Lumumbist forces and the pro-Western, Katanga-based regime of Moïse Tshombe, one of those originally responsible for Lumumba's murder, to whom Malcolm X referred to as "the worst person on earth."²⁰ Few issues were as important to Malcolm X toward the end of his life as the Congo crisis, which he saw as the result of the American involvement in Lumumba's murder and support for the Western mercenaries recruited to fight for Tshombe. In the debate over the Congo held in December 1964 in the UN General Assembly, Malcolm X was able to claim one symbolic victory over American foreign officials when African UN representatives accused the United States of "being indifferent to the fate of blacks" and cited as evidence "the attitude of the United States government toward the civil rights struggle in Mississippi."²¹ Connecting the situation in the Congo to the one in the American south was precisely both the sort of global politics that Malcolm X wanted to advance and that the U.S. foreign policy establishment wanted to avoid. Given all this, both Lumumba and Tshombe, and their polar-opposite significance to Malcolm, are given short shrift in Marable's book.²²

Marable does his best to describe goings-on in Africa and the Middle East during Malcolm's trip. But the overall effect is that of missing the forest for the trees. One problem lies in the writing: these sections of the book transcribe Malcolm's memorabilia so faithfully that the reader is overwhelmed with minutiae (names of hotels, what Malcolm had for breakfast, where he purchased tickets) and underwhelmed with perspective or analysis. A more glaring problem is that Marable does not engage with the now extensive scholarship on the global Cold War and the relationship between the civil rights movement and American Cold War interests, which adds substantially to our understanding of Malcolm X's place in international politics.

Several scholars have shown that it is impossible to understand the relative successes of the civil rights movement, and in particular the groundbreaking decisions made at the top—including President Eisenhower's sending of federal troops to enforce the desegregation of a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, or President Johnson's pushing for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—without an understanding of the worldwide propaganda campaigns that the United States and the Communist bloc were waging on one another, and the ways in which the civil rights struggle in the United States became a focal point of both those campaigns (the Soviets highlighted brutality and discrimination against blacks, the Americans emphasized racial progress). These geopolitical considerations explain the degree to which American officials and authorities hounded Malcolm X and his friends both inside and outside the United States, as well as the level of tension between Malcolm X and some of his more moderate rivals, who often traveled to some of the same places he did, sometimes with American support, specifically to contradict his arguments and speak as representatives of the civil rights mainstream. One reason that Malcolm spent so much energy denigrating the civil rights movement (the 1963 March on Washington was, in his version, "the farce on Washington") while he was in Africa or Europe was because he wanted to convince his foreign audiences that the civil rights

movement's primary role was propagandistic. This also helps to contextualize his call for human rights as opposed to civil rights.²³

In this regard, some of Marable's critics have pointed out that Malcolm X was a less significant figure in the United States in the early 1960s than Marable makes him out to be, and they have a point.²⁴ For all of Marable's insistence that Malcolm X represented some essential "mood" among urban blacks, neither the NOI nor Malcolm X enjoyed anywhere near the support in the early 1960s that the mainstream civil rights groups did, even among urban poor blacks, Malcolm X's most natural American constituency.²⁵ Malcolm X surely fascinated and terrified people in equal measure, but arguing for his political importance in the United States at the time he was killed is a retroactive assessment, a function of the iconic status that he later attained thanks to the *Autobiography* and, more recently, Lee's film.

It also ignores the increasingly global nature of his activism. In 1964 and 1965 Malcolm X was growing ever more alienated from his American, and especially African American, surroundings. Despite his occasional overtures to the leaders of the civil rights movement, such people as King, Whitney Young (executive director of the National Urban League), and Roy Wilkins (executive director of the NAACP)—along with Farmer, these were the so-called Big Four of the movement—generally wanted little to do with him, and in any case would not publicly debate or share a stage with him. (Since Malcolm X had been sporadically labeling them "Uncle Toms" and "house negroes" for years, one can understand their coolness.²⁶) The parts of the book that lead up to Malcolm's murder vividly capture the isolation and anxiety of his final days in the United States: traveling mostly alone, dependent on bodyguards, abandoned by many of his followers, bombed out of his home, forced to borrow money, speaking in front of shrinking audiences about such global issues as the Congo crisis and Third World revolution, which, truth be told, interested relatively few African Americans.

It is only when one looks at Malcolm X's activity from a global perspective, then, that his political significance in that last year (or half-year), even in the United States, comes into sharp relief. But "global perspective" does not just mean chronicling the man's activity abroad, or letting us know that he possessed such perspective; a transnational subject demands transnational research. In this regard the book is a major letdown. A look at its sources is revealing. No archive was consulted that is not located in the United States. No one outside the United States was interviewed. Aside from a few English-language sources like the *Ghanaian Times* and the *Egyptian Gazette*, no foreign newspaper was perused or translated. Nor were any foreign-language scholarly materials used. We know that Malcolm X was deeply impressed and transformed by his travels abroad, but what sort of impression did *he* leave? How did he impact the many people and places he visited? What did non-Americans—not only state leaders—make of him? Was his "global vision" reciprocated? These questions cannot be answered only by Malcolm's own diary, detailed as it is. In this book, however, they are not systematically posed.

Malcolm X's trips to Europe are a case in point: they were arguably the high point of his global activism but are fairly neglected in this book—as they are, it should be noted, in virtually all the scholarship on Malcolm X. They are also not particularly

well served by Marable's mixture of the private and the public, or his frequent failure to separate the trivial from the substantive. One example: in November 1964, on his way back to the United States after the five months in Africa, Malcolm made a stop in Geneva, en route to Paris. Marable tells us that Malcolm's objective was to "make contact with the city's Islamic Center and to deepen his links to the Muslim Brotherhood" (385). Marable then describes a "surprise encounter with a young woman named Fifi," to which the subsequent few sentences, based on Malcolm's diary, are slyly devoted. Even though we are also told that Malcolm met with Said Ramadan, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (and father of the Swiss Islamist intellectual Tariq Ramadan), and several others, Marable does not say what was discussed or who was there. Even though earlier in the narrative Marable recounts a correspondence between Malcolm X and Ramadan over the place of race in Islam, we are not told what the two men had to say to each other in Geneva, or hoped to accomplish by meeting, or how this may have fit into Malcolm's (or for that matter, Ramadan's) "global vision." Malcolm's personal papers say nothing about this, so we are left in the dark. The issue is especially intriguing because of Malcolm's earlier meeting with Nasser, who had previously expelled Ramadan and the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt. Establishing contact with both Nasser and Ramadan, enemies within the Arab world, nicely captures the dual quality of Malcolm's activity—as had the simultaneous creation of the OAAU (radical, secular) and MMI (conservative, religious), whose respective members had little in common besides an allegiance to Malcolm.

Elsewhere Marable does go into more detail about Malcolm's "attraction to the [Muslim] Brotherhood," which Marable believes "was probably due to its . . . grounding real-world politics in a spiritual basis." This, however, is not entirely convincing; as Marable points out in his next sentence, this was "exactly the opposite position [Malcolm] had reached in the [United States], having concluded that he would need to keep separate his religious and political groups," the OAAU and MMI (312). There is no reason, really, to think that Malcolm would have a different view about Islam and politics abroad, or believed that outside the United States they should be fused rather than kept separate. Rather, it makes more sense to see his politics regarding the United States and the rest of the world as one and the same—at least in those last months. The one drew on the other.

For that matter, Marable has nothing to say about the rift that had taken place within the Muslim Brotherhood between Ramadan's circle and followers of the more radical Sayyid Qutb, nor does he give any indication that Malcolm was either aware of it or interested in the Brotherhood's internal politics. We can probably thus conclude that Malcolm kept his rapport to religion mostly separate from his rapport to politics; he expected different things from each domain, even if he did not necessarily see the two as competing or contradictory. As a relative newcomer to orthodox Sunni Islam, his religious involvement revealed a certain innocence, in which one Muslim was, so to speak, as good as the other (this, in a way, was the lesson he had taught himself in Mecca). A good example of his attitude toward the Muslim world can be seen in his courting of two rival, even hostile, organizations, the Muslim World League in Mecca and Nasser's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Cairo. In discussing this balancing act, Marable observes that Malcolm had "become a pluralist

in the Muslim world” (390). But this pluralism is never explained, and when it comes to Geneva, Fifi gets more space than Ramadan. While this might help “humanize” Malcolm, it does not help to historicize him. After all, he went there to meet Ramadan, not Fifi.

Malcolm’s next stop was Paris; Marable devotes one paragraph to this trip. We are told that Malcolm checked into the Hôtel Delavine and stayed for a week, and we are then given a summary of Malcolm’s talk at the Maison de la Mutualité. (Nothing else Malcolm did during the week—a relatively long stretch of time, given his work rate in those last few months—is mentioned.) Marable focuses on Malcolm’s statements on American politics and the civil rights movement, and, quoting from the diary, claims that “[Malcolm] seemed to lack mental focus in the formulation of new political ideas, especially in the aftermath of Johnson’s presidential victory” (386). But a look at the transcript of Malcolm’s talk, and a deeper delving into the context and background of his Paris visit, reveal that there was much more to it than that. The talk was more interesting and wide-ranging than Marable supposes: Malcolm explained his human rights initiative, drew connections between the black struggle in the United States and African postcolonial politics, and suggested—provocatively, if unrealistically—that France might support his case against the United States at the United Nations. Though this was perhaps not the most electrifying talk that Malcolm ever gave, it was a fine example nonetheless of his “global vision” as it was developing in late 1964.²⁷

Marable’s focus, however, is elsewhere. In his summary of Malcolm’s Paris talk, Marable carelessly charges that “[Malcolm’s] trip to Africa and the Middle East . . . seemed to have revived his inflammatory anti-Semitic views” (386). Why a trip to Africa and the Middle East would necessarily inspire anti-Semitism is not clear, but in any case this interpretation stems from a basic, yet telling, misreading of Malcolm’s words: “‘Negroes . . . have been maneuvered into doing more crying for the Jews than they cry for themselves,’” Marable quotes Malcolm, and adds that Malcolm went on to “present a fictive history of progressive Jews and claiming, incorrectly, that they had not participated as Freedom Riders. ‘If they were barred from hotels they bought the hotel. But when they join us, they don’t show us how to solve our problem that way’” (386).

It is a tad harsh to term these statements anti-Semitic, even if they *are* sloppy and unpleasant, and the label should not be used as easily as Marable does here, even if his intentions are noble. The transcript reveals, first, that Malcolm was responding to an audience member who asked for his “opinion of the Jewish problem and the solidarity of Jews and Negroes against racism,” and second, that he saw American Jews as a *model* for blacks:

In America Jews used to be segregated. They never were “Freedom Riders.” They didn’t use this tactic to solve their problem—begging in, walking in, wading in. Whenever they were barred from a neighborhood, they pooled their economic power and bought that neighborhood. If they were barred from hotels, they bought the hotel. But when they join us, they don’t show us how to solve the problem that way. They show us how to wade in, and crawl in, and beg in. So

I'm for the Jew when he shows me how to solve my problem like he has solved his problem.²⁸

Crass history and political incorrectness aside, it is clear that Malcolm was *not* saying that Jews had not participated in the civil rights Freedom Rides (nor, for that matter, was he presenting a “history of progressive Jews,” fictive or otherwise), but rather that they did, and his view of these Jews was not much different from his view of progressive whites who, say, marched in Washington in 1963. As he saw it, they were encouraging blacks to pursue a defeatist path. He remarked that “most white people who profess to be for the Negro struggle are usually with it as long as he’s non-violent and they’re the ones who encourage them to be non-violent, to love his enemies, and turn the other cheek. But those who are genuinely for the freedom of the Black Man—as far as we’re concerned, they’re all right.”²⁹ The point was not the Jews; it was about his differences with the civil rights strategy. The statement was consistent with his conception of how politics worked—through group strength, with which one fought power with power. (He liked Mao’s China, for example, not because it was communist but because it had obtained nuclear weapons and thus was using “the only language the imperialists understand.”³⁰) One can also dislike, as some did, Malcolm’s view that American blacks and Jews were *not* in the same boat, at least no longer. But Marable’s pursuit of unsavory elements in Malcolm’s rhetoric has, in this case, blinded him to the more significant aspects of this specific event and its place in Malcolm’s political journey. After all, Malcolm did not go to Paris to talk about the Jews.

Although Marable quotes one reporter’s recollection that “there wasn’t a square inch of unoccupied space in the meeting room,” he does not ask why Malcolm X would draw such a large audience in Paris, or who these people might have been (386). Surely they had other things on their minds besides Lyndon Johnson’s electoral victory in the United States or Malcolm X’s thoughts on Jews. It could very well be, as Marable states, that the large crowd turned out because “Malcolm’s international reputation preceded him” (*ibid.*). But why and how would his appeal translate to an audience in Paris? Was it just a matter of a famous person coming through town? For that matter, why would the French government deny Malcolm X entry into the country when he traveled there for a second time, in February 1965, less than two weeks before his murder—a mystifying incident to which Marable devotes even less space than did previous biographers? Was it simply the case, as Malcolm suspected, that this was done at the bidding of the United States government—a suspicion that Marable neither challenges nor supports? Or did other issues—perhaps having to do with the political situation in early 1960s France, which was dealing with, among other things, immigration from Africa and other effects of decolonization—come into play?

The French, contrary to what Malcolm may have come to think, did not take their orders from Washington and had geopolitical interests and domestic motives of their own. Marable tells us elsewhere that Malcolm had planned to go to Paris to set up a local branch of the OAAU—a sign that not only were his interests international, so were his commitments. What sort of response might this have provoked among

French, and European, observers? Who would have joined a Paris branch of the OAAU, and what sort of relationship did these potential members have with the French state? In not tackling these questions, Marable misses an opportunity to examine the tangible, and local, applications of Malcolm X's "global vision"—and of his importance beyond the United States.

In his preface, Marable makes a brief but apt comparison between Malcolm X and three other black American intellectuals: Du Bois, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. Like them, Marable observes, Malcolm X "denounced the psychological costs that racism had imposed on his people" (17). Marable does not notice the most striking common denominator between these three men, and the one that is arguably the most pertinent in thinking about Malcolm X's legacy: they all chose to live out their lives in self-exile. In his epilogue, Marable does not resist the temptation to imagine what Malcolm might have done had he lived, what he would have said about this or that, and what he would have made of our present condition, forty-six years after his death. But Marable implicitly assumes that a post-1965 Malcolm would have led a primarily American existence. If we are to play this sort of guessing game, we need to take into account the possibility that Malcolm would also have eventually repudiated life in the United States; that would have been a logical result of his growing internationalism. (It is worth juxtaposing the dismalness of his final days in New York with the enthusiasm accorded him in Accra, or London, or Paris.)

Engaging in such speculation puts Marable on shaky ground, because in doing so he is not much different from the many others who have projected their own sensibilities onto Malcolm X's heritage, and he is really writing about the legend, not the man—precisely what he set out not to do. The difficult truth is that it remains purely a thought experiment to link Malcolm X to the present—like anyone else, he was a product of his times, and his thinking in February 1965 cannot be wholly transposed to 2011. Marable, to be fair, makes an attempt at moderation. He believes that Malcolm's trajectory at the time of his death was moving in two directions: within Islam, and toward what Marable calls "the politics of radical humanism" (487). His Malcolm—and all writers on Malcolm have *their* Malcolm—is ultimately pretty tame, more or less in line with current-day soft-left proclivities, and seemingly incompatible with the Malcolm X whom Marable consistently criticizes for not having been moderate enough when he was alive. Marable's Malcolm would have been pleased with the United Nations World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, which "was in many ways a fulfillment of Malcolm's international vision"; "would certainly have condemned," as mentioned at the outset of this essay, the attacks of September 11, 2001; and maybe even been tickled pink at the 2008 election of Barack Obama, which Marable views as a fulfillment of Malcolm's prediction "that the black electorate could potentially be the balance of power in a divided white republic," and for whom it "raises the question of whether blacks have a separate political destiny from their white fellow citizens." Malcolm's vision, Marable adds, "would have to radically redefine self-determination and the meaning of black power in a political environment that appeared to many to be 'post-racial'" (484–87).

Maybe. There is a lively debate to be had over whether, or to what extent,

Obama's presidency represents a radical break with the past, racial and otherwise, but this is less relevant here.³¹ Malcolm X the fiery revolutionary might have aged into Malcolm the wizened pragmatist—who knows. But one finds it somehow easy to imagine that were Malcolm X circa 1965 transported to our own day, he would have condemned the current U.S. president as the ultimate “house negro,” and perhaps, for good measure, even added a putdown about Obama's residing in the *White House*. Malcolm's distinctions between African leaders he liked and those he didn't makes it clear that he was not one to be impressed solely with the color of a leader's skin—the leader's politics were just as, if not more, important. Some of Obama's foes on the right have espoused a version of the notion that the U.S. president is in some way the heir to 1960s black radicalism: see Newt Gingrich's claim that Obama exhibits “Kenyan, anti-colonial behavior.” But despite some stylistic similarities, and a common emphasis on rousing speechmaking, I see little connection between Malcolm X's “global vision” and Obama's policies or political worldview. More to the point, Malcolm's political duality toward the end of his life makes it impossible to guess where he would have “ended up,” geographically or politically. Reportedly, all he could tell an acquaintance in London shortly before his murder, when pressed for his philosophical outlook, was that he was “a revolutionary and a Muslim.”³² Malcolm did not see these two things, revolution and Islam, as necessarily bound together, and he was not sure where he thought he was headed. Marable's assessments about Malcolm X's connections to the present thus rely on a set of arguable assumptions. In an American context—the only one that seems to matter in the book's conclusion—an almost straight line runs, in Marable's thinking, from Malcolm X's message of black liberation to the black power movement of the late 1960s to the advent of such Democratic politicians as Jesse Jackson and Harold Washington to the election of Obama.³³ This rests largely on Marable's conviction that “at the end of his life [Malcolm] realized that blacks indeed could achieve representation and even power under America's constitutional system” (482).

Of course, any claim that Malcolm X was part of the political and intellectual lineage of a post-1965 agenda is based less on what Malcolm said while he was alive and more on what others have said about him since his death. This is as true for the black power crowd as for others. The founders of the Black Panther Party, for example, proclaimed Malcolm X as their patron saint, and scholars have taken the connection for granted; but if Malcolm X in his last months was indeed moving toward “radical humanism” and “resisted identification as a ‘black nationalist,’” as Marable says (485), one wonders what he would have made of the Panthers' fusion of Maoism and black nationalism, or their fondness for guns and obscenity (in any case, Malcolm considered Marxism a “white man's ideology”).³⁴ By the 1980s, Eldridge Cleaver, the Panthers' former minister of information, had become a right-wing evangelical. Would a Malcolm X who hadn't been killed have seen Cleaver as a traitor, or as another victim of the power structure? Or would he have joined with him? For that matter, what would a world in which Malcolm X had not been murdered look like? How can we know? So much for counterfactuals.

In a similar manner, much of the epilogue is taken up with Islam, which Marable sees as “the spiritual platform from which [Malcolm] constructed a politics of Third

World revolution,” and also “the political bridge that brought Malcolm into contact with the Islamic Brotherhood in Lebanon, as well as in Egypt and Gaza, with the Palestine Liberation Organization” (12). For Marable, Malcolm today “represents the most important bridge between the American people and more than one billion Muslims around the world” (486). But where Marable sees cohesiveness and continuity through Islam, it is no less plausible to see the same sort of internal conflict that helped to do Malcolm in. In my view, it is an error to simply conflate Malcolm X’s religious beliefs with his revolutionary politics. To wit, most of his supporters in the OAAU (and abroad) were secular and on the left, whereas the MMI members grew disillusioned with Malcolm’s increasing cosmopolitanism, progressive views on women, and closeness to intellectuals. It is wrong, for that matter, to conflate the Islamic Brotherhood with the secular, leftist PLO—Marable, who taught at the same university as Edward Said, surely knew that the Muslim and Arab worlds are not the same, and also that there is no such thing as one Muslim world.

All this highlights, in a way, a troubling aspect of Marable’s book that makes it all the more difficult to make sense of the “historical” Malcolm X—that is, the Malcolm that actually existed. In its relentless, almost breathless chronological pace, the book never stops to systematically discuss, and thus take seriously, the development of Malcolm’s political thought. That process, especially toward the end of his life, took place at breakneck speed—to the consternation, and eventually exasperation, of Malcolm’s followers—and deserves a chronology (and analysis) of its own, separate from what was happening in his day-to-day life. There is something to be said for someone writing a dispassionate *intellectual* biography of Malcolm X. In the book’s section on Malcolm’s prison years, Marable wonderfully captures the start of Malcolm’s development into the “organic intellectual” that Gramsci, in his own prison years, had described. But when the book actually deals with Malcolm’s ideas, its method is usually to offer snippets of Malcolm’s statements and Marable’s opinions on these, or else to entirely substitute Malcolm’s words with Marable’s evaluations of them. The result is too often a Malcolm X that produces provocative sound bites, or has his words shortened and condensed just enough that we get some sense of their power but not necessarily of their substance. The full force of Malcolm X’s speeches only comes to light when they are read (or better yet, heard) in their entirety, or at least at some length; which is why, for those interested in the historical Malcolm X, the best place to start—before Marable’s book and even the *Autobiography*—is to pick up one of the collections of his speeches, or to seek them out on the Internet.³⁵

For Marable, the main theme of Malcolm’s life—as the book’s subtitle makes clear—is reinvention. This is different from development, or evolution, and it somehow implies that in all phases of his life Malcolm essentially remained the same Malcolm, remaking himself, in protean fashion, as circumstances around him changed. But one quality—or perhaps two—always stood out. “What made [Malcolm] truly original,” Marable writes, explaining Malcolm’s appeal to African Americans, “was that he presented himself as the embodiment of two central figures of African-American folk culture, simultaneously the hustler/trickster and the preacher/minister. Janus-faced, the trickster is unpredictable, capable of outrageous transgressions; the minister saves souls, redeems shattered lives, and promises a new

world” (11). Frozen in time, it is easy to see Malcolm as the larger-than-life figure Marable describes, and it is nice to imagine that he would have maintained that status had he lived. But it is also a restrictively *American* view—Malcolm could have settled, as Du Bois, Baldwin, and Wright had, elsewhere. Of all of Malcolm’s possible future “reinventions,” somehow the one that seems most likely is that the organic intellectual with the eighth-grade education would have wound up somewhere in academia—still traveling the world, but out of sight of the mainstream mass media that was once so taken with him, and increasingly marginalized in a political world that has long left the revolutionary imaginary of the 1960s behind and since settled, uncomfortably, at the center.

NOTES

1. Malcolm X has been viewed through the lenses (among others) of black separatism, continental Marxism, Afro-Caribbean nationalism, psychoanalysis, African American conservatism, Trotskyism, and anticommunism. See, e.g., Ferruccio Gambino, “The Transgression of a Laborer: Malcolm X in the Wilderness of America,” *Radical History Review* 55 (winter 1993): 7–31; Steven Hahn, “Marcus Garvey, the UNIA, and the Hidden Political History of African Americans,” in *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 115–62; Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Angela D. Dillard, “Malcolm X and African American Conservatism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90–100; George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York: Schocken, 1967); Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Morrow Books, 1967), *passim*.

2. See Robin D. G. Kelley, “Malcolm X,” in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 424–27.

3. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine, 1965).

4. *Malcolm X*, dir. Spike Lee (1993; Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD. For critical historical assessments of this film, see Gerald Horne, “‘Myth’ and the Making of *Malcolm X*,” *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (1993): 440–50; and Nell Irvin Painter, “Malcolm X across the Genres,” *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (1993): 432–39.

5. Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

6. For radically-minded critiques of the biography, see the essays in Jared Ball and Todd Steven Burroughs, eds., *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable’s Malcolm X* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2012). One of the contributors to this volume, Amiri Baraka, has been a harsh critic of Marable’s book. See his on-air clash with Michael Eric Dyson in “Manning Marable’s Controversial New Biography Refuels Debate on Life and Legacy of Malcolm X,” http://www.democracynow.org/2011/5/19/manning_marables_controversial_new_biography_refuels, May 11, 2011 (accessed August 7, 2011)

7. See http://www.democracynow.org/2011/5/19/malcolm_x_a_life_of_reinvention (accessed August 31, 2011).

8. There is an extensive literature on Muhammad and the NOI, much of it by members of

the movement; the first important scholarly studies were C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), which has been through numerous editions, and E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Search for an Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). For a broader and more up-to-date analysis, see Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 7. See also Herbert Berg, *Elijah Muhammad and Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Claude Clegg, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

9. See William W. Sales Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).

10. Some of the images in the book appeared previously in the outstanding collection by Howard Chapnick and Thulani Davis, *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1993).

11. For another vivid account of these internecine struggles, and Malcolm's break with the NOI, see Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), passim.

12. Many of these personal issues had been featured in Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Books, 1991).

13. See, e.g., James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); and David Howard-Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 2004).

14. Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 381.

15. Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race and Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997). For the attempts to bring back the human rights framework after his death, see Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). For Malcolm's activism and its place in the recent history of human rights, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 104–6, and Talal Asad, "What Do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Enquiry," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 4 (2000): 1–28.

16. See Malcolm X, "The Black Struggle in the United States," *Présence Africaine* 54, no. 2 (1965): 8–24.

17. See Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

18. See Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1991). The FBI opened its Malcolm X surveillance file in 1953, one year after his release from prison. On one occasion Malcolm recorded a conversation with two FBI agents who tried to recruit him as an informant: see "A Visit from the FBI, May 29, 1964," in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 182–204.

19. See Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Fenby (London: Verso, 2001), or the outstanding film *Lumumba*, dir. Raoul Peck (2000; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2001), DVD.

20. "Malcolm X Turned Back," Associated Press report, February 10, 1965.
21. Quoted in Ernest R. May and Richard F. Neustadt, "Malcolm X," Harvard Kennedy School of Government Case Study, Series C15-81-366, unpublished, 27.
22. For U.S. involvement, see Stephen Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo, 1960-1964* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).
23. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
24. Randall Kennedy, "Imagining Malcolm X," *American Prospect*, July 1, 2011.
25. See Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), which is oddly missing from Marable's bibliography.
26. Goldman, *Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 17.
27. Malcolm X, "Black Struggle."
28. *Ibid.*, 13.
29. *Ibid.*, 12.
30. Quoted in *Malcolm X: The Struggle for Freedom*, dir. Lebert Bethune (New York: Grove Press Film Division, 1967).
31. One starting point for the discussion is Thomas Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).
32. Jan Carew, *Ghosts in Our Blood: With Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 36.
33. Almost all of Marable's previous work is framed explicitly to the present: see, e.g., *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985); *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006); *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). In a similar vein, see Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010).
34. On this point, see Painter, "Malcolm X across the Genres," 439. For the ways in which black power groups claimed Malcolm after his death, see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "Introduction: Black Power Revisited," in *Is It Nation Time: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 4 and passim. See also Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2007); and Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2010).
35. See, for example, Betty Shabazz, ed., *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), or Marable's own collection at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/mxspeaks.html> (accessed August 31, 2011).