

The Public, Spiritual, and Humanistic Odyssey of Malcolm X: A Critical Bibliographical Debate

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X is a socially compelling work which not only describes one man's pursuit of dignity, but also that of a people's quest to build a more human culture. In this respect, *The Autobiography* presents a powerful set of cultural and literary experiences. While depicting a cultural drama weighted in social, economic, and political significance, *The Autobiography* also employs artistic collaboration, as Alex Haley helps Malcolm not only to recreate each stage of his life, but also to discuss such matters as women, trust, and the past in general with a deep sense of integrity and moral sensitivity. As the autobiographical reel is slowly run backward, one observes that Malcolm was much more than the sensationalized image of black hate, which Mike Wallace dramatized in the CBS television documentary, "The Hate That Hate Produced." Although he was similar to Ellison's Ras, "The Destroyer," Malcolm was more like Ras, "The Exhorter" channeling his anger into 'the word' which provided him a much more effective weapon, not only for his public prophesies of doom (Malcolm's classic indictment of America), but also for his prophesies of hope.

Malcolm talked shit, and talking shit is the iron in a young nigger's blood. Malcolm mastered language and used it as a sword to slash his way through the veil of lies that for four hundred years gave the white man the power of the word.

As he hammered and chiseled away toward a singular identity, he immersed himself in a public role and in a cause which, over time, could be described as anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and certainly pan-humanist (advocating human rights). Although once labeled as mascot, hustler, and controversialist, Malcolm became primarily a teacher whose speeches and life commitment imported much force because of their, "substantive fullness, their penetration and honesty, as well as their closeness to reality."¹ This study will attempt to illuminate this strain in Malcolm, the social-religious leader who attempted to expose the hegemonic forms of American social oppression which not only contradicted the American creed, but also short-circuited the American dream for so many Afro-Americans.

The psychoanalytic case has been made that autobiographies are generally overdetermined documents and that black autobiography uniquely ties art, history, and personal experience very closely.² Consequently, the cultural proposition that Malcolm's personal history of changing self-concepts represents a multi-disciplinary study of public identity and history, religious myth and strategy, and a human philosophy of social change, may help to strengthen our perception of the humanistic dimension of his personality, as well as the ethical nature of *The Autobiography*. As Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, called for new men and women and a new world, so *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* likewise propounds new values and myths to inspire hope and courage for a more humanized culture and identity. Thus, as a cultural artifact it identifies the oppressed people struggling for freedom and liberation, and achieves a special power of consciousness.³ As literature, it carves an artistic pattern over individual chaos, and establishes continuity and rootedness in the self-creative process.⁴ And it also provides the reader with a picaresque narrative of Malcolm's beliefs, his form, and his voice:

Shorty would take me to groovy, frantic scenes in different chick's and cat's pads, where with the lights and juke down mellow, everybody blew gage and juiced back and jumped. I met chicks who were as fine as May wine, and cats who were hip to all the happenings.

In his essay on Franklin, Thoreau, Whitman, and Henry Adams, James Cox notes that if you scratch the surface of an American autobiography, somewhere inside is a revolution or a revolutionary. Although dramatizing a human experience that lies outside of the American mainstream, *The Autobiography*, which according to Albert Stone represents the best in American collaborative autobiography, also explores the multifarious selves that contributed to Malcolm's public identity. A veritable history and drama of names, this series of incarnations reveals not only personal relations but community ties, starting with the name Malcolm Little and becoming in turn juvenile delinquent, prize student, mascot, country bumpkin, Shorty's homeboy, Red, Detroit Red, Satan, Minister Malcolm X, and finally El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Wilhelm Dilthey has suggested that autobiography is a way of placing man in the pattern of history.⁵ These fashionable, almost metaphorical names (Mascot, Red, Satan) reflect Malcolm's losing battle to gain control of his public world. On the one hand, such public images reveal an unconscious victim of society's stereotypes, and on the other they reveal that colonized mind which is enslaved by the baser standards of the white community.⁶

As a consequence of the physical and psychological disintegration of his family, Malcolm Little as orphan is innocent and unquestioning of society's imprisoning stereotypes. While at Pleasant Grove school, he thought that racial slurs such as 'nigger,' 'darkie,' and 'rastus' were natural names of blacks. It is conceivable that these names used by white youth were interpreted more as societal labels than as racially charged invectives. Neverthe-

less, his lack of social consciousness and his lack of dark complexioned skin, combined with his social popularity and academic achievement at Mason Junior High, ironically do not propel him in the direction of white middle class success. Mr. Ostrowski, his eighth grade teacher, informs him that the occupation of lawyer is “no realistic goal for a nigger” (*AM*, p.36). Signaling the demise of his aspirations to belong to white society, this comment forces Malcolm to confront his dehumanization and to reckon with his social invisibility in a provincial white environment. In the meantime, he has expressed an interest in leaving Michigan. So, upon his completion of the eighth grade, his step-sister Ella managed to have his custody transferred to her in Massachusetts. He boarded a Greyhound bus for Boston the very same week. Upon relocating to another state, Malcolm envisioned the possibility of a new attitude as well as a new set of social and human relations. Unlike Richard Wright, whose crisis helped to sever all ties he had with any community,⁷ Malcolm’s new start proved tenuous at best (as his decline from innocence continued). It led him to an underworld life style and a new but dangerous identity in the Roxbury ghetto, “Not only was this part of Roxbury much more exciting (than the Hill: the black middle class district), but I felt much more relaxed among Negroes who were being their natural selves and not putting on airs” (*AM*, p. 43).

The frustration from prior strenuous efforts to be white as well as his calculated distrust of the assimilationist black middle class combined to reshape Malcolm and usher him into his new world as a rebel. As his knowledge of the street world grew and his fascination for the intrigues of Small’s Paradise deepened, all semblance of (his unconscious) innocence disappeared and his mind was captured by enslaving standards of the white underworld: crime, violence, straight hair (conked), money, and white women. This section of the autobiography, reporting both the glitter and danger of the underworld, as well as Malcolm’s quick wit, presents a variety of colorful images, like a series of snapshots in a family picture album. Uninitiated in the ways of big city life, he is labeled ‘country bumpkin’ and dubbed ‘Homeboy’ by his close friend, Shorty, who also schools him “to the happenings”; later he becomes ‘Red,’ descriptive of his bright red, conked hair; lastly, ‘Red’ becomes, ‘Detroit Red,’ to distinguish him from two other famous ‘Reds’ of Harlem—‘Chicago Red’ and ‘St. Louis Red.’ In becoming a model student of the street, Malcolm achieves the high rank of hustler and masters the arts of numbers, pimping, gambling, drinking, bootlegging, steering for a house of prostitution, con games of many kinds, dope peddling, and thievery of all sorts, including armed robbery. He learns his trade from such notables as Shorty, who first exposed him to the machinations of street life, Sammy the Pimp, his closest friend in Harlem, and West Indian Archie, a numbers runner, who later turns on him. As the trade of hustling, particularly in the northern ghettos, gradually became a symbol of the rebel (a black hero), challenging an emasculating system and therefore recovering

his manhood, the hustler's lifestyle not only appeared legitimate, but was also actually liberating. Thus, we glimpse the fascination that the role of hustler held for Malcolm. Julius Lester describes the ascendancy of the hustler in his book, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*:

Today resistance manifests itself in what whites can only see as "social ills" of the ghetto, i.e., crime, high school dropouts, unemployment, etc. In actuality, many blacks have consciously rebelled against the system and dropped out. After all, why waste your life working at a job you hate, getting paid next to nothing, when you can make more money with half the effort. So a new class is created, the hustler who gambles, runs numbers, pushes drugs, lives off women, and does anything to avoid going to "meet the man" five days a week, year in and year out. It is a dangerous, rough, and none too beautiful life, but it has some compensation; a modicum of self-respect and the respect of a good segment of the community is gained.

Ironically, however, Malcolm's life regressed socially, as his profession of street hustler proved self-destructive, as he conformed to the expectations of white society and masked belief in his own black inferiority. He describes his first conk:

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: When I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair, I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are 'inferior'—and that the white people 'superior'—and that they will even violate their God-created bodies to look 'pretty' by white standards. (*AM*, p. 54)

Having internalized the rules of the underworld and intent on surviving, Malcolm, who was by now profane, cynical and atheistic, became a kind of predatory animal. The autobiographer keenly narrates this process of dehumanization in exquisite but reductive animal imagery. Initially, he seemed to whites like a "pet canary," a "fine colt," a "pedigreed pup" or a "pink poodle." But now, his "near-bottom" state painted him as no less than a nervy, cunning, exploitative ghetto vulture:

Looking back, I think I really was at least slightly out of my mind. I viewed narcotics as most people regard food. I wore my guns as today I wear my neckties. Deep down, I actually believed that after living as fully as humanly possible, one should then die violently (*AM*, p. 138)

Far removed from the thought of zoot suits and lindy-hopping, Malcolm had reached that dangerous stage where he literally "walked on his own coffin," a psychically and spiritually demoralized state in which he courted physical oblivion. Finally, when his luck ran out, he was arrested for trying to pick up a stolen watch, which he had left for repairs. It was perhaps this prison sentence of ten years which saved him from physical destruction. It failed to protect him spiritually, however, for he paced in his cell for hours like a caged leopard—cursing everyone and everything, especially the Bible and God. Such angry stalking earned him yet another identity, that of the ultimate outlaw, "Satan." Similarly, Malcolm's earlier view of himself as a snake, reflected a condition of moral depravity; he now believed himself to

be Satan, revealing a spiritual state of mind even beyond atheism. Sidonie Smith describes Malcolm's Faustian condition in comparative and symbolic terms. "His physical imprisonment is the literal equivalent of his spiritual imprisonment; and . . . his state of physical imprisonment becomes symbolic of the bars that the black American faces all his life as a second-class citizen."⁸ Thus, the seemingly uninhibited and extemporaneous style of Roxbury and Harlem which intrigued and seduced Malcolm, does not lead to the reconstruction of truly liberating attitudes and human relations; on the contrary, it spawns new forms of enslavement—he finds a life of crime and eventual self-imprisonment.

For the crime of burglary Malcolm receives an excessive sentence of ten years in prison. Paradoxically, however, his prison experience allows him for the first time to examine intensely the enormity of his life's guilt. This act of reflection and clarification leads to the peeling off of a false layer of the self, as in Anais Nin's *Diary I*, and therefore leads to the achievement of a spiritual rejuvenation. Erik Erikson has referred to such crises as potential personality shapers. Malcolm not only pressed in the direction of intellectual selfhood, he also embraced the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims), the only religion actually generated by economic and racial conditions in America. Introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad as well as to the nature of his oppressor, Malcolm "was (not only) knocked to the ground by the light of the truth while on an evil journey, but . . . rose from the dust stunned, with a new name and a burning zeal to travel in the opposite direction and carry America's twenty million Negroes with him."⁹ As Malcolm said, "I don't think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did." Seeing the world differently altered how he saw himself. With the help of his brother, Reginald, he discarded his Christian slave name, "Little," and adopted an "X," to symbolize his original unknown African name. Later the "X" became synonymous with "exhorter" for the Black Muslim movement.

During his seven years in prison, Malcolm studied the dictionary, took a course in Latin, read such books as Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History*, Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*, and W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, and discovered the works of Mahatma Gandhi, and generally acquired the language of power—especially through Bimbi, a convict whose knowledge and skill with words represented power. This was an intense period of mental fire and skepticism, which helped Malcolm to understand his own rebellious anger (stemming from among other things his own abortive effort to assimilate into the white society in Mason, Michigan) as well as the broader social collision of black and white. In Malcolm's contemplation and elaboration of a new faith, his prison cell was transformed into a monk's cell.¹⁰ The catalyst of his liberation was none other than Elijah Muhammad, depicted by Ron Karenga as the father of the Nation of Islam. Although Malcolm achieved the single-mindedness of a revolutionary at this juncture in his life he had

not moved in the direction of full intellectual and spiritual selfhood. His mission of forcing white America to own up to the social, economic, and political discrimination perpetrated against blacks as well as his message of inspiration for blacks (“wake up, clean up, and stand up”) had first to be undertaken and accomplished. The situational tension that develops between his urgent social cause and his driving personal needs creates a powerful narrative of artistic and cultural impact. As such, *The Autobiography* functions as a dynamic strategy of dramatic self-performances, “unified by shared cultural values”¹¹ (i.e., Malcolm the “exhorter” for black freedom). Working closely with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm rose quickly to become the Nation of Islam’s official national spokesman. Since Malcolm had accepted Elijah Muhammad’s religious truths, he generally remained very faithful to these truths for a period of twelve years. “I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life’s thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof” (*AM*, p. 170). Aside from the daily ascetic restrictions against eating pork, drinking, gambling, dancing, and dating, the Nation of Islam’s cosmological mission concerned itself with the restoration of that true knowledge of self and God. According to Malcolm, America had alienated her black population and then taught the race to hate itself, “We Negroes hated . . . the African nose, the shape of our lips, the color of our skin, the texture of our hair . . .”¹² Judging black Americans to be intellectually, spiritually, and culturally dead, the Nation of Islam held that they were victims who had lost their humanity. Thus, central to the Nation’s metaphysic was the Yacub myth of black genetic superiority. The myth held that a black scientist embittered with Allah, created a devil in the form of a white person, who in turn polluted the world with deceit, cruelty and tyranny. By nature, the devil has always sought the total destruction of black people. Therefore, through the Nation of Islam the Yacub myth served to awaken and protect black people against the devil’s lies, deceits, hypocrisy, and its process of scientific brainwashing. Once the black man was enlightened, this knowledge presumably compelled him to separate from society’s evil source.

The Nation of Islam’s sectarian interpretation of American reality predictably influenced their understanding of the history of modern Christianity. They believed devoutly that the Christian church in uniform fashion became infected with racism when it entered Europe. “The Christian church returned to Africa under the banner of the cross—conquering, killing, exploiting, pillaging, raping, bullying, beating and teaching white supremacy. This is how the white man thrust himself into the position of leadership of the world through the use of naked physical power. And he was totally inadequate spiritually” (*AM*, p. 368). According to Peter J. Paris in *Black Leaders in Conflict*, Malcolm recognized the oppressor as a power and understood that power acknowledged only power. In the face of lesser power it gains power, in the face of more power it loses power.¹³ Thus, as a corrupting manifestation of power, American Christianity’s greatest failure was its inability to

combat racism. Reflecting on the past, Malcolm personally repudiated Christianity, “. . . I don’t need the crutches I used to think I had to have. When I was in the world of the Christians, I believed as they did; I did what the white man did because, like everybody else, I thought his was the best possible thing to do.”¹⁴ Malcolm believed that the black man has been America’s most fervent Christian but that this sad reality has not achieved for him a sense of his own humanity. In such a hypocritical society, he believed that it was understandable that the white man’s education should waste the great verbal and mathematical talents of ghetto blacks, just as it failed (through its sociologists, psychologists, penologists, and criminologists) to build a more humane prison system for criminal rehabilitation. A. Porter Abbott explained that the Nation of Islam believed Christianity to be an effective tool of white domination through its indoctrination of the dominated, preaching a humble acceptance of oppression in the interests of an infinite reward after death. Upon further analysis, he found that “by removing salvation from their theology, the Black Muslims make their religion, and in particular the dignified way of life it requires, an end in itself.”¹⁵ In his concluding observation, he described their morality as going beyond the boundaries of an eschatological bribe, since it centered on the realization here on earth of their own divinity.

Revelling in the fact that Islam held off the white man’s Christianity for a thousand years and deriving satisfaction from its pragmatic approach to the problems of life, Malcolm, through his many social and moral preachments, sought to convince black Americans that they desperately needed the religion of Islam. The most meaningful definition of Islam for The Nation emphasized the universal principles of brotherhood: truth, freedom, justice, equality, and human dignity in America. Therefore, in his many speeches, Malcolm addressed these issues with unwavering commitment:

Our objective is complete freedom, complete justice, complete equality, by any means necessary. That never changes. Complete and immediate recognition and respect as human beings, that doesn’t change, that’s what all of us want. I don’t care what you belong to—you still want that, recognition and respect as a human being.¹⁶

Like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who dedicated The Nation to reforming thousands in American prisons by restoring their pride, racial identity, and their desire to be men, Malcolm would also school the black man to his systematic oppression, as well as his need for liberation through self-understanding. He recalled how Islam had intervened in his own life.

. . . how deeply the religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been: a dead criminal in a grave, or if still alive, a flint-hard, bitter, thirty-seven-year-old convict in some penitentiary, or insane asylum. Or, at best, I would have been an old, fading Detroit Red, hustling, stealing enough for food and narcotics, and myself being stalked as prey by cruelly ambitious younger hustlers such as Detroit Red had been. (AM, p. 287)

He also measured the success of Islam over Christianity by its pragmatic ability to administer to thousands of black Americans stuck behind America's prison walls:

They say man should never be condemned or tried twice for the same crime once he has paid the penalty. Yet, when a man goes to prison and pays his debt to society, when he comes out he's still looked upon as a criminal . . . Well, Mr. Muhammad has succeeded there where Western Christianity has failed. When a man becomes a Muslim, it doesn't make any difference what he was (doing) before as long as he has stopped doing this. He is looked upon with honor and respect and is not judged for what he was doing yesterday. And this, I think, explains why we have so many men, who were in prison following Mr. Muhammad today.¹⁷

Malcolm believed and advocated that Islam was the one religion which would abolish the race problem from society.

The Western world's most learned diplomats have failed to solve this grave race problem. Her learned legal experts have failed. Her civil leaders have failed. Her fraternal leaders have failed. (*AM*, p. 246)

Perhaps it was inevitable that Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad, men of such strong visions, programs, and ideas would ultimately collide.

When Malcolm's excommunication from the doctrinaire Nation of Islam finally came, he bided his time, then resumed his moral prophesies—telling the white man like it was, never once forgetting that it was this problem of 'race' that had bifurcated American society into its rigid North versus South, Black versus White antagonisms. Many alleged that Malcolm was expelled from The Nation as a result of the bad timing of his "Chickens Come Home to Roost" speech, implying that the government's effort to overthrow Castro had not only backfired but had led to the assassination of the American President, John F. Kennedy.¹⁸ Explaining the break from The Nation in ideological terms, Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* characterized Malcolm as a radical nationalist whose views eventually pitted him up against the conservative nationalism of Elijah Muhammad.¹⁹ As this matter of expulsion from The Nation gained national attention, it provided much speculation and theory. Yet an earlier problem perhaps proved just as serious and continued to plague his image throughout his public life. This matter involved not only his acceptance of Muhammad's Yacub myth but also his fervent promotion of it. Some critics questioned this form of radicalism and wondered whether Malcolm's personal experience of liberation had not imprisoned him within a racist ideology. M. S. Handler in his introductory comments to *The Autobiography*, raised the delicate and slippery issue of Malcolm's acceptance of the Yacub myth of black racial superiority, calling into question, among other things, Malcolm's judgment. Referring to a conversation with Malcolm, Handler recalled that, "Malcolm's exposition of his social ideas was clear and thoughtful, if somewhat shocking to the white initiate. . . Most disconcerting in our talk was Malcolm's belief in Elijah Muhammad's history of the origins of man, and in a genetic theory devised

to prove the superiority of black over white—a theory stunning to me in its sheer absurdity” (*AM*, p. xi). David Demarest, in “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: Beyond Didacticism” suggests, however, that Malcolm was not a fanatical supporter of Muhammad’s mythology, but found the Yacub myth to be primarily a useful metaphor. He further argued that Malcolm’s tone resisted simplistic dogma and that the specific slogan, “the white man is the devil,” was more often qualified than one might expect, as the last line in the following passage reflects:

I always had to be careful. I never knew when some brainwashed black imp, some dyed-in-the-wool Uncle Tom, would nod at me and then go running to tell the white man. When one was ripe—and I could tell—then away from the rest, I’d drop it on him, what Mr. Muhammad taught: “The White Man is the devil.” That would shock many of them until they started to think about it . . . You tell that to any Negro. Except for those relatively few ‘integration-mad,’ so-called ‘intellectuals,’ and those black men who are otherwise fat, happy, and deaf, dumb and blinded, with their crumbs from the white man’s table, you have struck a nerve center in the American black man. He may take a day to react, a month, a year; he may never respond openly; but of one thing you can be sure—when he thinks about his own life, he is going to see where, to him personally, the white man sure has acted like a devil.²⁰

Since Malcolm had once preached the politics of separatism and proclaimed that whites were “blue-eyed devils,” he was often labeled a hatemonger, racist, dangerous fanatic, and black supremacist. However, John Henrik Clarke viewed him as none of these things but as a catalytic agent who inspired black pride, black redemption, and black reaffirmation.²¹ In defense against such labeling, Malcolm was quick to point out that, “If we react to white racism with violent reaction, to me that’s not racism. Yours is racism, but my reaction has nothing to do with racism.”²² In addition, Eugene V. Wolfstein in *The Victims of Democracy*, suggests that this fiery man with glasses, brief case and wristwatch was probably doing the rational thing in following Muhammad’s Yacub mythology, since it strongly reinforced a pattern of racial transcendence: “wake up, clean up, and stand up” (a recovery of black birthright and dignity denied by white culture)—a course which was in keeping with political separatism and religious transcendentalism.²³

Beyond the implicit threat and danger that the Yacub myth represented, Malcolm’s speeches, interviews, and much-sought-after opinions still met with outrage and general misunderstanding, as did his views on civil disobedience, racism, school boycotts, Negro leaders and the black bourgeoisie, Civil Rights legislation, American leadership, and the struggle of the black masses against poverty. His views reflected not only a strident voice but also an unwavering radical vision. In accordance with other social critics, Leroi Jones, in *Home: Social Essays*, found Malcolm’s greatest contribution to be his preaching of black consciousness to the black man.²⁴ As the social forces of the 1960s mixed to create a renaissance of black nationalism, Malcolm emerged as the most deeply responsible leader for the flowering of black identity, Afro-American unity, and black power. As Malcolm learned to

externalize and redirect his destructive aggression toward the common, white-racist enemy, he concomitantly challenged the black militant to struggle for racial pride and mutual responsibility, to throw off his shackles of shame and guilt.

This is the worst racist society on this earth. There is no country on earth in which you can live, and racism be brought out in you—whether you're white or black—more so than this country that poses as a democracy. This is a country where the social, economic, political atmosphere creates a sort of psychological atmosphere that makes it almost impossible, if you're in your right mind, to walk down the street with a white person and not be self-conscious, or he or she not be self-conscious.²⁵

In assessing the impact and effectiveness of Malcolm and *The Nation*, some critics have asserted that *The Nation's* militancy was really undermined by its own political inactivity. John Illo believed that the weakness of Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad was that, unlike Martin Luther King, they were not true activists. Malcolm's success in enlarging *The Nation* from 400 to 40,000 did not come from an appeal to indiscriminate assaults on whites but from a strategy of words and ideas which could attack with sweltering moral fury, and which always emphasized the necessity of self-defense as well as the need for moral responsibility. Thus through Muslim rhetoric, shaped by eloquence and personal magnetism, Malcolm helped to redefine reality.²⁶

They call me the angriest Negro in America. I wouldn't deny that charge. . . . They called me "a teacher, a fomentor of violence." I would say pointblank, that is a lie. I am not for wanton violence, I'm for justice. I feel that if white people are attacked by Negroes—if the forces of law proved unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes—then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law fails to protect Negroes from whites' attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves. (*AM*, p. 366)

According to Illo, "The American press attributed the preaching of violence to a man who was no political activist, who moved in the arena of violence rather than urged a justifiably violent response."²⁷ Often referred to as a "crazy nigger gone public," Malcolm was a religious exhorter and philosopher but could not be bitter or descend to obscenity in expressing moral outrage. According to Peter Goldman, Malcolm was a man of rich bubbling humor.

Malcolm could talk for an hour and a half at a meeting, and then, on the way to the car, he'd say something like "Was I bad . . . or was I baad?"—this time drawly and low. A minute before, he was showing you the pits of hell and the possible pinnacles of heaven, and then, between leaving the meeting and getting into the car, you'd be laughing.²⁸

Capturing the radiant inner glow that was Malcolm's humanity, Illo wrote that, "The laughter or chuckling, in his several oratorical styles, was, in motive and sound, not embittered, or malicious, or frustrated, but apodictic; it was the laughter of assured rectitude, and amusement at the radical

unreason of the opposition.”²⁹ In regard to *The Autobiography*, Demarest found the white reader to be converted to admiration for Malcolm, not only because of its literary effectiveness, its showing of the fullness of Malcolm as a man, and its pattern of spiritual conversions, but also because of its author’s ability to laugh at his own moral-drawing conventions. “The world’s most unlikely pimp was ‘Cadillac’ Drake . . . Cadillac had a string of about a dozen of the stringiest, scrawniest, black and white street prostitutes in Harlem . . .” (*AM*, p. 88). Beyond comic relief, Joyce Nower, in “Cleaver’s Vision of America and The White Radical: A Legacy of Malcolm X,” explained that Malcolm indeed saw the potential for social change in white youth who sat at lunch counters and participated in boycotts with blacks. Moved to action by their consciences, they were also immersed in a form of political radicalization.³⁰ Sidonie Smith, in her in-depth study of Malcolm’s life, moved far beyond the media-inspired images as she described both Malcolm and Cleaver as “race men” who transformed their repressed hatred into revolutionary programs, doing battle with society and not allowing this negative motivation to become self-destructive. Thus, the sacrifice of their private lives for public responsibility leads them, paradoxically, toward deeper inner knowledge, strength, and self-fulfillment.³¹

The multi-angular nature of *The Autobiography* has allowed us to view from several perspectives—historical, religious, and social—the agility of the human spirit. Thus, we witness Malcolm in a state of perpetual metamorphosis; initially he is trapped in one puppet-like role after another, until he is inspired to struggle against each imposing and enslaving ideology of his puppeteers. *The Autobiography*, in reporting upon its own process, reveals that Malcolm became adept at “picking up the discord between the vitality of existence and the rigidity of social myth.”³²

Many times since, I have thought about it, and what it really meant. In one sense, we were huddled there, bonded together in seeking security and warmth and comfort from each other and we didn’t know it. All of us—who might have probed space, or cured cancer, or built industries—were, instead, black victims of the white man’s American social system. (*AM*, p. 90)

This passage of critical analysis and social perception differentiating between the “warm fellowship of Small’s” and his exclusion from the American power structure is at once a historical, psychological, and sociological reading of the black experience in America. And while it is perhaps true as Roger Rosenblatt points out, that some black autobiographies represent concrete social protests, political texts of survival, and testimonies of one long bad night,³³ Michael G. Cooke in “Modern Black Autobiography in the Tradition,” provides an alternative perspective on black autobiography. His approach towards *The Autobiography* in particular may help to broaden the way we read, think, and talk about autobiography overall. Cooke describes the genius of *The Autobiography* as its remarkably practical atmosphere, its quick-moving pace, its responsiveness to crystallizations of meanings, its full discus-

sion of social ills, its avoidance of anxiety, and its lack of a restrictive ideology.³⁴ This more liberal interpretation seems to allow *The Autobiography* to be read more comfortably not only as artistic literature fashioned around individual and collective resistance to the forces of dehumanization, but also as a cultural narrative whose purpose is social change (in America). Thus, it is also aimed at flushing the racism of whites to the surface.³⁵ In "Witness and Testaments: Two Contemporary Classics" Warner Berthoff also subscribes to a more comprehensive understanding of black autobiography, rejecting Richard Gilman's suggestions that Western standards of literary criticism should be suspended in evaluating works of black autobiographical creation and self-definition.³⁶ Recognizing that black literature often operates from a different set of cultural imperatives, Berthoff nevertheless raises a series of searching questions which seriously challenge Gilman's thesis.

If they (black autobiographies) represent an act of mind so remote from ordinary literary performances, will anything such criticism chooses to say make a difference one way or the other? Will it in fact keep these books from doing their special job, or will their authors be beaten into silence and their proper readers turned away by comments that by definition are so immensely irrelevant? Most broadly, is it really impossible to enter imaginatively, rationally the world of discourse of people whose outlook and life-experience are substantially different from our own, and whose stake in the making of books differs correspondingly?³⁷

Conceding that a great deal of work remains to be done in non-mainstream American cultural values and assumptions, but confident that discretion, informed good sense, and critical assessment can prevail, Berthoff locates black autobiographical writing in the following American literary tradition: "The open letter, the preaching, the apology, the parable or representative anecdote, the capitulatory brief, the tirade, the narrative or polemical expose, the public prayer, the appeal to conscience, and the call to arms."³⁸ In addition, John Illo found no saner, more honest, perspicuous analysis of the racial problem than Malcolm's last speeches and statements. "In the full Aristotelean meaning he was a rhetorician, who to be such, knew more than rhetoric: ethics, logic, grammar, psychology, law, history, politics, and his best speeches might be texts for students of that comprehensive science and art."³⁹

Both the liberal superstructure and the practical atmosphere which Cooke suggests characterize *The Autobiography* can be observed as a genuine part of its narrative structure as, "certain figures [and] organizations with Malcolm's journey and pilgrimage [which] are transformed into foils [and] against which we begin to see his strength and determination."⁴⁰ Initially, when his public cause is stripped from him and he is reduced to the status of an invisible man, the 'X' comes to symbolize his unknown private self. This period of disillusionment, once again, rendered pain and confusion for Malcolm: "My head felt like it was bleeding inside. I felt my brain was damaged" (*AM*, p. 303). However, this breakdown was very brief, as his pilgrimage to Mecca

culminates not only in a new identity represented by 'X,' but also the adoption of a new name, symbolizing a broadened perspective of universal brotherhood—El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. John Henrik Clarke has claimed that Malcolm's trip to Mecca had a revolutionary impact upon his thinking. After his return to America, he no longer arbitrarily opposed black-white brotherhood or repudiated efforts with progressive whites. His mental freedom and new political understanding no longer allowed him to make sweeping indictments against all white people, as he realized that some whites were truly sincere and genuinely capable of being brotherly toward a black man.⁴¹ The Muslim world of brotherhood and multiple complexions had spurred Malcolm not only toward a broader sense of his own humanity but in the direction of a more moral nationalism. "It's smarter," he observed, "to say you're going to shoot a man for what he is doing to you than because he is white. If you attack him because he is white, you give him no out . . . (because) he can't stop being white" (*AM*, p. 213). His active life of reading, travel, debate, and reflection had helped him realize that three hundred and forty-five years of racism preached from the pulpit, taught in the primer and textbook, practiced by the government, deified on editorial pages, lauded on the airways and the television screens, had all helped to cultivate a deeply embedded white cultural ego.⁴² As slavery once degraded both the slave and the master in colonial times, so Malcolm believed that racism in modern America had victimized both the oppressed and the oppressors. He wrote in 1965 that, "the white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly. The society has produced and nourishes a psychology which brings out the lowest, most base part of human beings."⁴³ Butterfield observed that Malcolm saw no contradictions between being human and having a black identity. Black identity served to move blacks beyond the image of themselves, just as Malcolm journeyed from his social period of "nigger," to his spiritual summit of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, reflective of both an individual and a universal humanity.⁴⁴ It should be underscored that although Malcolm extended his geographical horizons and divested himself of racial chauvanism, he maintained individual, racial, and cultural integrity. ". . . no religion will ever make me forget the condition of our people in this country . . . I want to make that point clear."⁴⁵ Malcolm X's commitment to a philosophy of social change assumed a greater level of sophistication as he was willing not only to find common ground with Negro organizations, but also to end his opposition to progressive whites' working with revolutionary blacks in an effort to convince the unconverted white communities of the cause of black humanity. Both Malcolm and his autobiography urgently confronted the American racist—and through wit, logic, and reason—forced the country to at least recognize the contradictions inherent in its values: property versus people, man versus money, color versus character, and Christ versus culture. Therefore, in its accounting of the black revolution, *The Autobiography* becomes a resource for another type

of human truth. Although Malcolm challenged the national consciousness to recognize its multi-racial, multi-national, and pluralistic legacy, as well as such institutional practices as racial exclusion, racial exploitation, and racial segregation, Cruse points out in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* that he did not reconcile or substantially address the historic and theoretical national black question of integrationism (Civil rights, racial equality, accommodation, assimilation) versus nationalism (separatism, self-segregation, economic nationalism, group solidarity and self-help).⁴⁶ This discussion continues today among scholars, activists, and theoreticians, and is examined in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. Neither the charismatic personality of Malcolm as a social force nor his autobiography as a personalized social theory achieves or explains what Peter Clecak terms, “a full-scale redistribution of opportunity and reward in the sphere of political economy, or a substantial redefinition of values and sensibilities of a vast majority of Americans away from possessive individualism toward a radical communitarianism.”⁴⁷ However, while it is true that Malcolm talked very seriously about the meaning of his life, as well as about the possible value of *The Autobiography*, as it exposes the crucial issues of social inequality, his narrative nevertheless remains a collaborative autobiography—artistically shaping the story of his life and the experience of the masses. Thus, it is not a social science or political theory. According to Sidonie Smith, *The Autobiography* is a testimony “to the continental possibilities for rebirth open to the black self at the same time that it dramatizes the heroic possibilities of racial leadership inherent in Malcolm X’s drama of self-hood.”⁴⁸ Robert Allen pondered the radical vision and clarity of thought that inspired Malcolm’s leadership and adroitly fashioned this theory of this struggle for revolutionary change in America:

He sought to establish an intellectual framework for revolutionary black nationalism by weaving into an integrated whole a series of disjointed ideas. He pointed up the necessity for psychological liberation and black pride. He demanded black control of black organizations and communities; and he was an advocate of self-defense for those communities. Malcolm was an unrelenting opponent of the white, capitalist power structure, and its political vehicles, the democratic and republican parties. He identified this power structure, rather than the white population as a whole, as the primary agent of black oppression. To counter this power structure he called for independent black political action. Finally, Malcolm identified the condition of black people in the United States as domestic colonialism, explicitly calling for an aggressive internationalism among all colonial peoples if any of them are to be truly liberated.⁴⁹

Perhaps one of the most powerful social and literary aspects of *The Autobiography* concerns its narration of movements and events, heightening social awareness and stimulating social change, as it journeys into Malcolm’s interior, documenting his exuberant quest for identity and humanity.

Taken as a whole, we may represent the development of Malcolm’s self-consciousness as the process through which he learned to think for himself, to recognize that his sincerity was his credentials, and to accept the responsibilities of revolutionary leadership He became a mirror in which black people saw reflected their pain and rage, and

he provided interpretations of that pain and rage which led to both insight and action This process, which Malcolm's autobiography so clearly reveals, is a moving and dramatic affirmation of the human spirit.⁵⁰

Although the spiritual and intellectual identity of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz had not fully crystalized at the time of his assassination, many critics, including G. Thomas Couser, believed that a most profound transformation was underway; "that in his last years he was simply absorbed in the process of becoming."⁵¹ Facing this crisis in his life, Malcolm stated, "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" (*AM*, p. 428). Illo says that "He emerged from dope, prostitution, burglary, prison, and a fanciful sectarianism to enter the perennial humanist art, to achieve a brilliant facility in oratory and debate, in less time than many of us consume in ambling through graduate school."⁵² Francis R. Hart, in "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," characterized Malcolm as "a resilient, open, loving man, the antithesis of hate, who . . . found and recreated human value and vitality in each new world or underworld he entered."⁵³ Thus, the public, spiritual, and humanistic odyssey of Malcolm toward a more humane universe reflected his adaptive vitality, as well as his creative variousness. In his assertion of Malcolm's humanity, M. Ron Karenga accepts Malcolm's predisposition toward open-mindedness and gauged Malcolm's most lasting gift to be his "ability to change in the light of new evidence and analysis."⁵⁴

NOTES

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