

From Malcolm Little to El-Haji Malik El-Shabazz

A Life of Revolutionary Transformation

The Black Scholar Forum on Manning Marable's

Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention

Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua
African American Studies &
History
University of Illinois
schajua@illinois.edu

I believe that there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice, and equality for everyone, and those who want to continue the system of exploitation. I believe there will be that kind of clash, but I don't think that it will be based on the color of the skin.

Malcolm X, 1965

Introduction

As an academically located black scholar activist Manning Marable had few peers. Over the last quarter of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century few rivaled his productivity and impact or were as involved in black social movement organizations and institutions. His *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* stands as a contemporary classic and from a black radical perspective, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* remains the most worthwhile text of the black liberation struggle during the long sixties (1955-1977). Through his newspaper column and radio commentary, "Along the Color Line," syndicated in scores of black newspapers and on urban radio, journal articles, and frequent book publications, Marable informed and educated a generation of African American scholar activists. On April 1, at the age of 60, Manning Marable transitioned.

Two days after his tragic death, what some have called his "magnum opus," *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* was posthumously published. The book has sparked a level of controversy unseen in Black Studies and the African American liberation movement in nearly two decades, not since the 1992 Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill dispute. In many ways, Marable's controversial book is regenerating the critical dialogue characteristic of the transdiscipline, at its best.

A Life of Reinvention is meticulously researched. Marable has uncovered virtually every available source, in the United States. It offers an exemplary model of historical recovery. Unlike his predecessors,

he had access to Malcolm's newly archived diary, of which he made superb use. Additionally, he accomplished the presumably impossible task of convincing Nation of Islam leader, Minister Louis Farrakhan, who himself is implicated in Malcolm's assassination, to sit for an interview, encourage other veteran NOI members to participate, and give him access to 50-year-old tapes of Malcolm's in-mosque sermons and lectures. Heretofore, Marable has been an outstanding analyst of contemporary African American history and politics; in *A Life of Reinvention* he demonstrates a talent for storytelling, the province of narrative historians.

Yet, in other ways, *A Life of Reinvention* is disappointing. Its interpretative framework; it is a historical narrative, and because stories are descriptive rather than analytical, they explain how and what, but not why, telling the story at too many points took precedence over thoroughly analyzing Malcolm's intellectual and political development. As historian Lawrence Stone noted decades ago, a narrative approach can "focus attention upon the sensational" especially "stories of violence and sex." And indeed too much of *A Life of Reinvention* engages in meaningless speculation about personal sexual practices--allegations that Malcolm participated in homosexual sex and that both he and Betty had extra-marital affairs—and accusations that he exaggerated his criminal exploits. More significant, especially since Marable treats Malcolm as a tragic figure, are the implications that his murder resulted partly from his own personal flaws. According to Marable, after freeing himself from the NOI's conservative grip, Malcolm's tragic flaws led him to constantly "provoke" Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Significantly, the most important new information is political. The first claims Malcolm supported the racist arch conservative Barry Goldwater in his quest for the U.S. presidency. Throughout the text, Marable occasionally implies Malcolm was transforming himself into a mainstream civil rights activist. In the epilogue, however, he backs away from that implication. Many of these accusations are provocative, and contribute immensely to the book's popularity or notoriety, depending on your perspective.¹

A Life of Reinvention is simultaneously a sweeping narrative of El-Haji Malik El-Shabazz's life and a mundane recapitulation of what scholars uncovered decades ago. It is what Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* termed "normal science." That is, it does not represent a groundbreaking paradigm shift, but rather provides more detailed information within the conventional framework. For instance, Malcolm's parents' Garveyite activities are revealed in the *Autobiography* and Victor Eugene Wolfenstein and Bruce Perry explored them in their biographical works. Marable presents far richer information about their lives and black nationalist activism, but his argument is not essentially different from Perry's. Moreover, the scholarship on Malcolm has long sought to plumb his interior life, to explain his sociopsychological transformations, reconstruct his intellectual development, interrogate his shift to orthodox Islam, chart the trajectory of his politics at the time of his death, and investigate his assassination, in an effort to determine who or more precisely what social forces murdered him. In this regard, Marable presents more about Malcolm, especially his last year, than any previous scholar; however, much of it appears to be information and not necessarily knowledge. In many ways, *A Life of Reinvention* is as big as its subject, the world historical figure, Malcolm X. Yet, embedded within Marable's sometimes mesmerizing account of Malcolm's life story are factual errors, questionable interpretations, and from the standpoint of Black Intellectual Traditions, missed opportunities. *A Life of Reinvention* richly deserves both commendation *and* condemnation.²

I approach this review from the standpoint of the black scholar activist paradigm. That is, I am both concerned with it as a work of scholarship and as an intervention in the politics of the black liberation movement. My review is guided by the core intellectual principles of Black Studies--that scholarship on African Americans and/or people of African descent must center the experiences, thought, and culture of blacks, present African descendant people as active agents, privilege Black Intellectual Traditions in its analytical framework, and be oriented toward critiquing racial oppression, in both its material and

ideological manifestations, and contribute toward the empowerment and liberation of the African people under study. In this review, I outline the book's thesis, interrogate its goals, investigate several of its assertions, explore its theoretical premises, and discuss the stakes for the transdiscipline of Black Studies and the African American liberation movement.

Reinvention: An Ordinary Thesis

A Life of Reinvention's central argument is that Malcolm's life was "a brilliant series of reinventions."³ This thesis is prosaic, both in the sense that "reinvention" or the process psychologists call "actualization" is a normal healthy human developmental experience, and it is at least a secondary thesis of the major biographical studies of the man popularly known as Malcolm X.⁴ Humanistic psychologists as different as Carl Rogers and Afrocentric scholar Linda James Myers contend that human consciousness is engaged in a process of "becoming," striving toward actualization.⁵ Most major studies of Malcolm explored his humanistic quest noting his transformations in consciousness, values, and behavior from Malcolm Little to Detroit Red/Satan to Malcolm X to Malik Shabazz. Moreover, Eugene Victor Wolfenstein's sophisticated Marxist psychoanalysis *Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* focused on excavating and explicating Malcolm's developing consciousness. Wolfenstein argued⁶

Finally, when viewed from the perspective of the problematic of racist oppression and the related problem of false consciousness, Malcolm's life history falls into two distinct phases: The first, extending from his birth to his imprisonment . . . was a period of intensifying alienation and falsification of consciousness, of regression or descent into the depths of a racially oppressive society. As such it constitutes a negation of Malcolm's potential for racially self-conscious activity. The second phase, the negation of the negation, is the period during which Malcolm progressively overcame the alienation and

falsification of his self-conscious activity, beginning with his conversion to Islam while he was still in prison.

What is important here, are the processes by which Malcolm transformed himself, not that he did so. Wolfenstein interprets Malcolm's identity transformations as a self-liberatory process through which his participation in collective action engendered his shredding of successive veils of false consciousness in his struggle toward self-consciousness. Marable has a different interpretation, on page 10, he interprets Malcolm's "reinventions" as the conscious creation of "multiple masks" to shield his "inner self from the outside world." Surprisingly, this is closer to Bruce Perry's than Wolfenstein's interpretation. Perry contended Malcolm was a "chameleon" whose "public image was carefully contrived" and that racial identity was among the inner conflicts plaguing him.⁷

Marable does not engage questions about Malcolm's racial identity development, too bad, because pursuing this line of analysis might have spurred him to incorporate African American psychologist William E. Cross, Jr.'s theory of psychological Nigrescence, the paradigmatic work in black identity theory. Nigrescence would have given Marable a framework through which to analyze Malcolm's "reinventions." Moreover, such a move would have demonstrated the power of Black Studies as a transdiscipline by using knowledge from one of its subfields to illuminate Malcolm's sociopsychological, intellectual, and political development. Application of Cross's Nigrescence theory would have added theoretical depth to the reinvention concept by providing an explanatory model to account for Malcolm's periodic "reinventions."⁸

Reinvention or Malcolm's alleged chameleon-like character is not the only similarity between Marable and Perry. Additionally, they share the theoretical objective of "humanizing" Malcolm. Transcending the myths and legends enshrouding Malcolm is an admirable goal; no one should want a hagiographic account of Malcolm's or any one else's life. However, unfortunately, Marable's humanization

project manifests itself largely by stressing the salacious, specifically accusations of homosexual encounters and infidelity.⁹

Factual Errors and Questionable Interpretations

Allegations of homosexuality are not new; interestingly, they first surfaced in Perry's 1991 work. On this question, Marable's source(s) are even more problematic than Perry's. Marable reinterprets a passage in the *Autobiography* in which Malcolm claims an acquaintance named "Rudy" had a gig wherein he undressed an elderly white man and himself then sprinkled talcum powder on the old guy, who got off from the experience. First, based on what he describes as "circumstantial but strong evidence" that Malcolm "falsely attributed" his own "homosexual encounters" with William Paul Lennon to a "character named Rudy." Second and third, Marable converts one scene from the *Autobiography* in which no sexual intimacy occurs into a series of "paid homosexual encounters." Yet, shockingly, the only citation to corroborate his interpretation refers to Malcolm's description on page 143 of the *Autobiography* (see reference to the third 66 on page 506). Moreover, though on page 66, Marable frames this alleged act of prostitution, as a speculation by page 78 he asserts "homosexual lover" was one of Malcolm's many identities! Interestingly, Marable claims he uncovered no other references to alleged incidents of homosexual behavior in Malcolm's life—not in his youth, during his six-year incarceration, or during the rest of his life. Interestingly, this contradicts Perry's allegations. Since Marable does not believe Malcolm was gay or bisexual, why publicize unsubstantiated rumors? If Malcolm, in his Detroit Red persona engaged in homosexual sex for money or pleasure, why does it matter? What difference does it make? At best, it is an historical fact of little significance.¹⁰

Marable clearly described his goals and research methodology. One of his goals was "to recount what actually occurred in Malcolm's life." This of course is impossible and more importantly it offers no

insight into the process of fact selection. How did he determine factual significance, that is, which facts to include or exclude? What made questions about Malcolm's sexuality and his and Betty's fidelity important "facts"? Why and in what ways are they relevant to Marable's goals, theoretical framework, or explanatory model?

The allegations about the Malcolm's and Betty's' infidelity are based on rumor and speculation—which are either devoid of a source or present only one source. For instance, on pages 385-86, Marable notes that Fifi, a Swiss national who in an earlier conversation claimed to love Malcolm, was at his door when he returned from dinner. Apparently she was the only woman permitted to enter his private space during his international travel. Yet, despite Malcolm's noting that after Fifi left, he took a walk in the rain "alone and feeling lonely . . . thinking of Betty," Marable speculates they slept together. Why? Because Malcolm "uncharacteristically" did not record "what transpired" in his diary. Moreover, he uses "Malcolm's hesitant diary entries about the *night spent with Fifi*" to suggest Betty's accusation that he was sleeping with Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) organizing secretary, Lynne Shiflett might have been true. The final alleged affair discussed in *A Life of Reinvention*, with the 18-year-old Muslim woman, Sharon X Poole, is equally based on rumor and speculation. Marable's first mention of this alleged relationship occurs on page 394, however, he provides no source. The only note for that page is a citation to a speech Malcolm gave critiquing racist ideology! Later, on page 423, he suggests that the night before Malcolm's murder Poole "may have joined him in his hotel room." The allegation that Betty had an extramarital affair is equally based on rumor, suspicion, and speculation. Betty was pregnant when Malcolm left for Africa and the Middle East on April 13, 1964. He returned on May 21, left again in July returning on November 24, and remained in the U.S. until his assassination. If you place Betty's alleged affair in sociohistorical context, its logic is that a pregnant Betty began an affair that continued though the birth of her fourth child,

Gamillah in December and possibly through Malcolm's assassination. Again, even if true, other than irresponsible "truth telling," what purpose does this "revelation" serve?¹¹

One of the most questionable interpretations is Marable's endorsement of an apparently racist psychological profile of Malcolm's sister Ella Collins written in 1960, which he uses to explain her behavior during the 1940s! On June 9, 1960, Dr. Elvin Semrad of the Massachusetts Mental Health Center diagnosed Collins as a "paranoid character" who "because of the *militant* nature of her character . . . could be considered a dangerous character." Except the term paranoid, the language of Semrad's report does not identify a mental disorder listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders I* (DSM I). Written in 1952, *DSM I* was the psychiatrist's bible until the *DSM II* supplanted it in 1968. Semrad seems to have evaluated Collins as having "militant episode disorder," or "intermittent explosive disorder," a form of impulse control disorder that did not exist in 1960. Because mental health diagnoses are social constructions, it is important to locate Semrad's assessment in its sociohistorical and discursive contexts.¹²

Sparked by black student-led sit-ins, the militant phase of the Civil Rights movement had exploded across the country, by the time Semrad issued his assessment of Collins. "Within two months" of its February 1 beginnings in Greensboro, North Carolina, according to sociologist Aldon Morris, "sit-in demonstrations" involving 50,000 activists "swept through thirteen states and hundreds of communities."¹³ In addition, Marable reports that between 1953 and 1955, the NOI "quadrupled" in membership from 1,200 to about 6,000 and by 1961 increased tenfold, and possibly as high as 75,000 members. Additionally, by 1960, not only was Malcolm sponsoring massive rallies in Harlem but also, he had become a media celebrity extolling NOI theology and his evolving political perspective in print, on radio, television, and at college campuses across the United States. Nevertheless, despite the dramatic effect of the rising CRM and Malcolm's rhetoric, social activists were still seen through psychological deficit frameworks.¹⁴

In the early 1960s, *classical collective behavior theory* viewed collective action as a product of individual psychology, as a manifestation of anxiety and “tension-releasing devices for pent-up frustrations,” rather than societal inequities. Furthermore, these theorists and mainstream U.S. society viewed movement activists as “dangerous, threatening, extreme, or irrational.” Though no longer attending the mosque, in June of 1960, Collins still believed NOI theology--the myth of Yacub, that all whites were inherent devils performing wickedness against the “Asiatic black man,” and that God-Allah would soon destroy them and exalt Muhammad’s followers. Her beliefs would seem a textbook example of social movement activists’ “irrationality.”¹⁵

It was in a sociohistorical context in which African Americans were engaged in militant mass campaigns challenging the existing racial formation, the rapid growth of a black nationalist organization whose beliefs Collins supported, and a discursive context in which social movement participants were seen as “non rational actors” that a 51-year-old white psychiatrist from Able, Nebraska diagnosed her as “paranoid,” “militant,” and “dangerous.” Semrad issued this diagnosis despite his observation that she had been “a model patient, entirely reasonable, showing wit, intelligence, and charm.” Given the sociohistorical moment, the discursive context, Semrad’s background and Collins’s worldview, Semrad’s unfavorable diagnosis should be *expected* and *challenged*.¹⁶

Additionally, *A Life of Reinvention* is replete with factual errors. One example concerns the date of Malcolm’s wedding. At the beginning of the last paragraph on page 145, Marable states that they drove to northern Indiana to get married on January 14, but toward the end of that same paragraph he claims the ceremony occurred on January 4. This type of minor factual error occurs in every work and should not be a cause for alarm. However, *A Life of Reinvention* is replete with similar factual errors, questionable interpretations, and missed opportunities.¹⁷

Another example, but of a more serious nature is Marable's attribution of the theory of black self-activity, specifically the notion that the black liberation movement could spark the socialist revolution to Leon Trotsky, rather than C.L.R. James. The comment appears on page 302 and the citation on page 536-7. The problem is compounded by the fact that the reference refers to page 52 in Marable's own *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson*. Moreover, notes 52 and 53 which appear on page 308 do not cite Trotsky but instead refer to Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class*, Gerda Lerner's edited volume *Black Women in America, Crusade for Justice*, Alfreda Duster's edited autobiography of Ida B. Wells, and Walter Rodney's *How Europe Undeveloped Africa*.¹⁸

The two most inflammatory political reinterpretations advanced in *A Life of Reinvention* are Malcolm's alleged support of Barry Goldwater during the 1964 U.S. presidential election and the suggestion that his experiences during the Hajji led Malcolm to try and reinvent himself as a mainstream civil rights activist. In his initial mention of Goldwater on pages 3 and 11, Marable observed that after his break with the NOI Malcolm routinely condemned both Lyndon Baines Johnson and Goldwater, usually describing Johnson as a fox and Goldwater as a wolf. On page 213, Marable draws out the similarities between Malcolm and Goldwater's alleged rhetoric of "extremism." It is on page 352, referencing a letter from Alex Haley written to his agent, Paul Reynolds, that he first claims Malcolm backed Goldwater. According to Haley, Malcolm had written an essay entitled "Why I Am for Goldwater." Based on Marable's discussion, presumably this article was not one of the three chapters deleted from the *Autobiography*. On page 367, Marable argues that though "nearly alone" among major African American leaders Malcolm continued to support Goldwater during the fall of 1964. On page 383, he reports, while in Ghana, Malcolm learned of Goldwater's thrashing. The last reference to Goldwater occurs on page 391 and refers to Malcolm's participation in a "formal debate" at Oxford University defending Goldwater's statement, "extremism in the

defense of liberty is no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtual." In sum, Haley's mention of the essay in his letter to Reynolds is the only evidence supporting Marable's claim.¹⁹

Since Marable does not quote from the essay he obviously could not access it, and since he presents no statement of support for Goldwater from the diary, we can surmise that it is silent on this question. It is entirely possible that Malcolm drafted such an argument in 1963, maybe before he left the NOI. Yet, the existence of the essay could only prove Malcolm crafted an argument in support of Goldwater, at the time of its writing, not at a later point. And given the silence of the diary, his failure to articulate it in his public speeches, and the lack of corroboration by any member of the OAAU makes this proposition extremely doubtful.

Marable is correct, both Malcolm and Goldwater adopted militant "By any means necessary" rhetoric, but two issues should be explored before one unites the arch conservative and black revolutionary "becoming." First, Malcolm's argument is part of a long tradition of militant rhetoric in the black liberation struggle. It echoes Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Robert Williams and numerous black activists before him. In 1857, speaking on "the philosophy of reform," Douglass declared, "If we ever get free from the oppressions . . . We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others." In the midst of a lynching scourge, arguing for what she called "armed self-help," in 1892, Ida B. Wells avowed, "The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every Black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give." And during Malcolm's own lifetime, in response to a southern jury's inhuman verdict releasing a white man who attempted to rape a pregnant black woman, Robert Williams asserted, "We will meet violence with violence." The tradition of militant black rhetoric and action suggests the second issue.²⁰

What is most important is the sociohistorical context in which they addressed their oratory. Malcolm and Goldwater's views only appear similar when compared in the abstract. When judged against the concretely existing circumstances they addressed, their commonality quickly fades. Viewed from the context of the African American condition, most of Malcolm's rhetoric was not "extreme," but rather what Wolfenstein called "situationally rational." That is, Malcolm's call for armed self-defense represented a cogent understanding of the system of racial oppression and the gross violence used to maintain it. In that sociohistorical context Malcolm's rhetoric was not extremism.²¹

As Marable observed, Malcolm was a "committed student of black folk culture" who incorporated "animal stories, rural metaphors, and trickster tales" into his speeches. He had a particular fondness for animal stories, which Perry traces, back to his love of *Aesop's Fables*. Within the tradition of working class African American male rhetoric, Malcolm often created graphic images, what Amiri Baraka has called "word pictures," many of which exposed the violence undergirding the system of racial oppression. While lions often appeared in Malcolm's tales, his most popular animal stories featured the wolf and fox metaphor, because it best conveyed his nightmarish interpretation of the African American condition.²² According to Hank Flick and Larry Powell, "Malcolm's use of animal imagery can be seen as a response to the situation and condition blacks faced" and was "an attempt to invert the images that blacks had of white Americans." The tone and tenure of Malcolm's use of the fox and wolf metaphors and his sharp movement leftward after his departure from the NOI tends to mitigate against an argument that aligns him with Goldwater. Initially, he deployed the metaphors situationally depending on audience, but over time as his political perspective moved leftward, one can detect a more radical use of the metaphor. Over time, the wolf was transformed from an allegory for white southerners to one of white conservatives and the fox moved from a metaphor of white northerners to one of white liberals.²³ For instance in "God's Judgment of White America," the speech after which he made the "chickens come home to roost" comment, he argued:²⁴

The white conservatives aren't friends of the Negro either, but they at least don't try to hide it. They are like wolves; they show their teeth in a snarl that keeps the Negro always aware of where he stands with them. But the white liberals are foxes, who also show their teeth to the Negro but pretend that they are smiling. The white liberals are more dangerous than the conservatives; they lure the Negro, and as the Negro runs from the growling wolf, he flees into the open jaws of the 'smiling fox.

The job of the Negro civil rights leader is to make the Negro forget that the wolf and the fox both belong to the (same) family. Both are canines; and no matter which one of them the Negro places his trust in, he never ends up in the White House, but always in the dog house.

Nearly a year later in October 1964, while in Kenya speaking of the Democrats and Republicans he posited, "One is the wolf, the other is a fox. No matter what, they'll both eat you." However, after this initial salvo he pushed the allegory decidedly leftward declaring, "The shrewd capitalists, the shrewd imperialists knew that the only way people would run towards the fox (Johnson) would be if you showed them the wolf (Goldwater). So they created a ghastly alternative." If Malcolm genuinely saw Goldwater as an appalling, terrible, frightful option, to support his bid for the presidency, would have been a tremendous act of cynicism.²⁵

Assertions, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

The major assertion Marable makes is to boldly dismiss the previous literature on Malcolm. He correctly contends, "Nearly all of the scholarly work on Malcolm was based on a rather narrow selection of primary sources." Continuing, he declared, "I was struck by its shallow character and lack of original sources." Presumably Marable's observation also applies to works published prior to the 1990s, like Peter

Goldman's *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* and Wolfenstein's *Victim's of Democracy*.²⁶ The works produced during the 1990s Malcolm X resurrection, were uneven, some were as awful as Marable claimed, some made important contributions, and a few were quite good. For instance, William W. Sales Jr.'s *From Civil Rights to Black Power: Malcolm X and the Organization Afro-American Unity* is an astute analysis of the OAAU and its impact on the black liberation movement. Incidentally, Sales's drew on much more than "transcribed speeches, and secondary sources, such as newspaper articles." He used the FBI files and conducted 13 interviews. While Perry's work pathologizes Malcolm and his family, and though Karl Evanzz's, *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* is not a full-fledged biography, neither work is shallow. And like Sales both made extensive use of the then available primary sources. Like Sales, Perry and Evanzz made extensive use of the FBI files, though not necessarily the same ones as Marable. Perry and Evanzz both made greater use of oral histories and interviews than Marable; in fact Perry has probably five times more interviews than Marable has of both oral histories and interviews. While we should question Perry's focus on Malcolm's childhood acquaintances, the fact remains both he and Evanzz interviewed more people than Marable. *A Life of Reinvention* is marred by Marable's failure to engage the previous literature.²⁷

Several places in *A Life of Reinvention* could have benefitted from engaging the earlier scholarship. For instance, allegations of Malcolm's infidelity could have been placed in conversation with two incidents described by Perry. From interviews with Ethel Minor, the future Communications Secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and Sara Mitchell, two young women activists in the OAAU, Perry discovered that Malcolm had opportunities to "hit" on each of them, but did not. The winner of a Harlem beauty contest, Mitchell's case is particularly suggestive. Malcolm arrived at her home one night exhausted and stated, "I just want to sleep." According to her story, despite what Perry claims was a "double entendre" Malcolm "curled up and went to sleep." Summing up these incidents, Perry concluded, "He had

enormous self-control.”²⁸ Do these incidents “prove” Malcolm did not have affairs with Fifi, Shiflett, or Poole, of course not, but given the highly speculative nature of the allegations, these corresponding occurrences, during the same historical moment, should raise doubt?

Missed Opportunities and Black Studies

Marable does an outstanding job of describing the sociohistorical context in which Malcolm lived; however, he does a less sterling job of situating him in the intellectual and cultural context of his times, especially during the 1960s. Hence, *A Life of Reinvention* is silent on a number of questions of import to Black Studies scholars. Perhaps, the most serious missed opportunity concerns Marable’s failure to explore the intellectual roots of Malcolm’s evolving thought. For instance, on page 91, he reports Malcolm “devoured” the works of “W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and J.A. Rogers” and that he “studied the history of the transatlantic slave trade, the impact of the ‘peculiar institution’ of chattel slavery in the United States, and African American revolts.” What specific works did he read? Concerning Du Bois, it would matter greatly, for instance, whether he read *The Philadelphia Negro* or *Black Reconstruction*. Yet, despite his prison reading, or maybe because of it, he developed an “interpretation of enslavement” that “cast black culture as utterly decimated by the institution of slavery” and “racial oppression.” As Malcolm’s famous metaphor of the house slave and the field slave attest, he was capable of distilling physical resistance from his studies, but consistent with the dominant intellectual climate he saw African American culture as distorted and pathological. Again consistent with the times, he appeared ignorant of African cultural retentions or of the ways enslaved African Americans deployed cultural resistance. Did E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States*, Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey’s *Mark of Oppression* or Stanley Elkin’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Life and Culture* shape his thinking on these issues? Malcolm seems to have maintained his ignorance and negative interpretation of African American culture

throughout his NOI days. This is not surprising, since as Richard King observed, “It was only by the end of the 1960s that a consensus emerged, particularly among African American intellectuals, that African American culture was a culture of ‘creativity and resistance.’” Somehow during the mid-1960s, Malcolm broke with the pathological view and became an advocate of “cultural revolution,” of excavating the African elements of African American culture.²⁹

What role did scholarship play in his break from the pathological view of African American culture? Did he subscribe to or regularly read the *Journal of Negro History*, *Phylon*, *Journal of Negro Education*, or *Freedomways*? Did Lerone Bennett’s *Before the Mayflower*, published in 1962, influence him? How did his intellectual explorations contribute to his “ability to reinvent himself”? Unfortunately, after his release from prison, Marable does not explore the intellectual roots of Malcolm’s developing radical political and cultural perspectives.

A Life of Reinvention also misses opportunities to connect individuals with whom Malcolm worked to political developments, especially Black Power-era Black nationalist organizations inspired by his praxis. Herman Ferguson and Milton Henry represent two such examples. Ferguson sat for four “oral histories,” and is one of the most quoted figures in *A Life of Reinvention*. He appears on 16 pages and is quoted no fewer than 14 times, yet his later activities as a founding member, the Minister of Education, of the Republic of New Africa is never revealed. Even more curiously, Milton Henry is presented as “Malcolm’s good friend,” “an attorney,” and “leader of Michigan’s “Freedom Now Party.” However, Henry’s role in Malcolm’s life and in the black liberation movement was much greater. He was the co-owner of the Afro-American Broadcasting Company, the firm that issued Malcolm’s most famous speeches, “*Message to the Grassroots*” and *The Ballot or the Bullet*. Given the detailed nature of Marable’s coverage of Malcolm’s international travel, it is surprising that he does not mention Henry’s presence in Egypt, where he joined Malcolm to cover his lobbying at the OAU’s second summit, in 1964. In addition to his role in the FNP,

Henry was involved in the Group On Advanced Leadership (GOAL), co-led the Malcolm X Society, which sponsored the Black Government Conference that led to the formation of the Republic of New Africa, in which he and Betty Shabazz served as vice presidents. Why were these “facts” not deemed historically significant?³⁰

Conclusion: Stakes for Black Studies and the Black Liberation Movement

The primary task of a scholar using historical methodologies is to uncover information, facts, if you will, sift through them, make selections, and analyze and organize them into a coherent story, or narrative. Manning Marable should be commended for the enormous amount of new information he and his score of student researchers uncovered. Among the most important new information are Malcolm’s diary, tapes of his early NOI sermons and lectures, and the interviews with Louis Farrakhan and NOI members that knew Malcolm. These new data allow Marable to construct a more detailed account of Malcolm’s life than any previous scholar. The last two hundred pages of the narrative are particularly engrossing, more for the forensic nature than its literary style, but engrossing nonetheless. Marable achieves his goal of exposing “the extent of illegal” government surveillance, identifying the traitors in Malcolm’s organizations, and naming the killers, albeit much of this information was already known. Nonetheless, on empirical grounds, *A Life of Reinvention* is a tremendous accomplishment.

Much of the uproar over it, however, concerns the validity of several of the “facts” Marable presents. Two issues are important here. First, given the speculative character and sparse corroboration for most of the “facts” presented about Malcolm’s homosexual encounters and his and Betty’s extramarital affairs, one wonders why present information that is circumstantial at best? Second, assuming these “facts” are true what role do they serve in the larger narrative? Why are they historically significant? For the most part the allegations seem to hang there disconnected from a larger analysis. The lone exception is

Malcolm's initial sexual difficulties with Betty. The 'facts' of this deeply personal issue has historical significance because John and Ethel Shariëff used knowledge of it to ridicule Malcolm thereby widening the split within the NOI. The other sex-related "facts" do not rise to the level of historical significance. And only in a very casual sense does Marable connect them to his reinvention thesis.

On analytical grounds, the verdict on *A Life of Reinvention* is mixed. We learn nothing new of significance. For the most part, Marable merely provides greater detail of things already known. The political speculations—Malcolm supported Goldwater, embraced violence, or he was mainstreaming his views, becoming a civil rights leader--do not hold up to scrutiny. The epilogue "Reflections on a Revolutionary Vision" largely makes up for the analytical failings in the body of the work. There, Marable brings coherence to a series of arguments dispersed throughout the text. In the epilogue, he corrects textual implications that Malcolm was evolving into a black liberal integrationist or advocated "violence for its own sake." His conclusion that Malcolm was shifting his vision of black self-determination away from the separate state idea to a more pragmatic proto-nationalism based on proportional representation tied to a broader Pan-Africanist vision and linked to Third World revolution is a plausible interpretation of Malcolm's political trajectory. However, it is eerily similar to Marable's own social democratic politics.

Perhaps it is too early to judge, but like the specter of Malcolm's assassination, the question haunts us, what is the historical significance of *A Life of Reinvention*? What is its impact on Black Studies? In the short-term it has sent a bolt of energy throughout the discipline. In less than two months nearly 100 scholar activists have published reviews or observations of it. I doubt any previous work in the discipline has elicited such an extensive and passionate response. It is likely that it will inspired Black Studies units to offer several new courses on Malcolm. Manning Marable's empirical accomplishment should spur Black Studies scholar activists on the humanities side of the discipline to adopt a similar large-scale research team approach. To accomplish the tasks of the discipline, in the future, Black Studies scholar activists will

need to move beyond the lone researcher model and even the senior researcher-research assistant model used by Marable to create genuine research teams composed of several scholar activists.³¹

Manning Marable's final contribution has been to resurrect Malcolm X and in doing so to ignite a firestorm throughout the discipline and the movement. Struggling over the meaning of our most important icon puts the core mission, the National Council for Black Studies slogan--academic excellence and social responsibility--back in the forefront of the discipline. Debates over Malcolm, especially about the "last" Malcolm contribute to reviving the radical critical tendency in both the discipline and the movement.

¹. Lawrence Stone, "Revival of Narrative: Reflections on New Old History," *Past and Present* No. 85, (November 1979), 23; Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 294, 350.

². Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970; 1962), 10, Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man that Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill, 1991).

³. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 10.

⁴. I consider Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man that Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill, 1991), Karl Evanzz, *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (Thunder Mouth

Press, 1992) and Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* to constitute the major biographies. These studies do not exhaust the important work on Malcolm X.

⁵. Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (London: Constable, 1961); Linda James Myers, "Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to African and African American Psychology," chapter in Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey, *Handbook of African American Psychology* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 44.

⁶. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 39.

⁷. Perry confuses what linguists and sociologists call "code switching" with insecurity and the lack of a grounded identity. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 10; Bruce Perry, *Malcolm*, ix-x, 36-45.

⁸. William E. Cross, Jr., "The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience," *Black World* Vol. 20, No. 9, (July 1971): 13-27; William E. Cross, Jr., *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Beverly J. Vandiver, Peony E. Fhagen-Smith, Kevin O. Cokley, William E. Cross, Jr., Frank C. Worrell, "Cross's Nigrescence Model: From Theory To Scale To Theory," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (July 1, 2001): 174-200; Beverly J. Vandiver, William E. Cross, Jr., Frank C. Worrell and Peony E. Fhagen-Smith, "Validating the Cross Racial Identity Scale," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* Vol. 49, No. 1, (2002,): 71–85.

⁹. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 12; Perry, *Malcolm*, x.

¹⁰. Ibid, 66, 78, 506.

¹¹. I italicized the phrase “night spent with Fifi” to emphasize its inappropriateness since by Marable’s own acknowledgement they did not spend the night together. Ibid, 385-86, 393; John Henrik Clarke (ed.), *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), 307-20. Marable source for the speculation about Sharon X Poole seems to be an oral history with James 67X Warren and an interview with Abdur- Rahman Muhammad. The tentative nature of Marable’s phrasing suggest that neither could confirm Poole’s presence with Malcolm at the Hilton. Strangely, he does not mention the FBI, so either their surveillance did not confirm her presence or he chose not to use them as a source for this allegation. The former seems likely, since he uses the FBI throughout the book. Indeed, they are the primary source regarding Betty’s alleged affair with Charles Kenyatta. According the FBI report they planned to marry

¹². Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 40; “Explosive disorder,” *The Psychologist*, http://www.psychologistanywhereanytime.com/disorders_psychologist_and_psychologists/psychologist_explosive_disorder.htm; American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Mental Disorders* (Washington, D. C. , 1952), <http://www.psychiatryonline.com/DSMPDF/dsm-i.pdf>.

¹³. Aldon Morris, “Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 46 (December, 1981): 745, 764; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2003), 237.

¹⁴. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 123.

¹⁵. Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 276-77; Steven M. Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism: The Political Economy and Cultural Construction of Social Activism* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000), 20-21.

¹⁶. Stephanie Adler and Max Day, "Learning to Do Psychotherapy With Psychotic Patients: In Memory of Elvin Semrad, MD," *Psychiatric Times* Vol. 27, No. 2 (February 5, 2010), 1, <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/1519938>.

¹⁷. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 145.

¹⁸. Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985), 52.

¹⁹. Marble, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 3, 11, 213, 352, 367, 383, and 391.

²⁰. Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies." Speech, Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857 chapter in John W. Blassingame (ed.), *The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 3: 1855-63* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 204; Ida B. *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York, 1892), 22-3; Robert Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1973; New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), 63; .Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free*

Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 149.

²¹. Wolfenstein, *Victims of Democracy*, 78-86.

²². Malcolm may have also been attracted to Aesop because of his former slave status and the distinct possibility that he was an African. Frank M. Snowden, Jr., questions the validity of Maximus Planudes account that Aesop was Ethiopian but later he seems to give credence to this contention. Marable, *A Life of Reinvention*, 11; Perry, *Malcolm*, 109, 177, 371; J.A. Rogers, *World's Great Men of Color Vol. 1: Asia and Africa, and Historical Figures Before Christ, Including Aesop, Hannibal, Cleopatra, Zenobia, Askia the Great, and Many Others* (New York: Simon & Shuster 1996; New York: J.A. Rogers, 1946), 73-80; Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 6, 188.

²³. Hank Flick and Larry Powell, "Animal Imagery in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Jun., 1988): 438, 442.

²⁴. Malcolm X, "God's Judgment of White America (The Chickens Come Home to Roost)," December 4, 1963, *The Black Commentator*, http://www.blackcommentator.com/91/91_malcolm.html.

²⁵. Kenya: The House Of Wolves And Foxes <http://fwambancfwamba.wordpress.com/2007/01/30/kenyathe-wolf-intends-to-make-you-his-meal/>

²⁶. Marable did interview Goldman and made extensive use of it in the text. Marable, *A Life of Reinvention*, 489, 490.

-
- ²⁷. William W. Sales Jr., *From Civil Rights To Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994); Marable, *A Life of Reinvention*, 490; Perry, Malcolm, 382-83, 521-29; Evanzz's, *The Judas Factor*, 325-26, 372-74
- ²⁸. Perry, *Malcolm*, 274-75; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1981, 267-68.
- ²⁹. Marable, *A Life of Reinvention*, 91, 408; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression*. (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1951); Richard King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 125.
- ³⁰. References to Ferguson and Henry in Marable, *A Life of Reinvention* 565, 267-68, 273, 323, 324, 328, 350, 374-76, 389, 416, 419, 429, 437, 440, 456; 418. Background on the International Dimensions of the African American Struggle: Part 2, The Global Struggle's Links to Detroit's 1967 Rebellion," Worker World, August 13, 2007, <http://www.workers.org/2007/us/detroit1967-0816/index.html>.
- ³¹. Abdul Alkalimat, H-AFRO-AM listserv, May 26, 2011/, <http://tinyurl.com/100reviews>

Bibliography

Stephanie Adler and Max Day, "Learning to Do Psychotherapy With Psychotic Patients: In Memory of Elvin Semrad, MD," *Psychiatric Times* Vol. 27, No. 2 (February 5, 2010), 1, <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article/10168/1519938>.

Abdul Alkalimat, H-AFRO-AM listserv, May 26, 2011/.

Steven M. Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism: The Political Economy and Cultural Construction of Social Activism* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2000).

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

John Henrik Clarke (ed.), *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), 307-20.

William E. Cross, Jr., "The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience," *Black World* Vol. 20, No. 9, (July 1971): 13-27.

----- *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies." Speech, Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857 chapter in John W. Blassingame (ed.), *The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 3: 1855-63* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Karl Evanzz, *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (Thunder Mouth Press, 1992).

Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

"Explosive disorder," *The Psychologist*, [http:// www.psychologistanywhereanytime.com/disorders_psychologist_and_psychologists/psychologist_explosive_disorder.htm](http://www.psychologistanywhereanytime.com/disorders_psychologist_and_psychologists/psychologist_explosive_disorder.htm); American Psychiatric Association,

Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Mental Disorders (Washington, D. C. , 1952), <http://www.psychiatryonline.com/DSMPDF/dsm-i.pdf>.

Hank Flick and Larry Powell, "Animal Imagery in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (June 1988).

E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939)

Michael Friedly, *Malcolm X: The Assassination* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression*. (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1951).

Kenya: The House Of Wolves And Foxes <http://fwambanfwamba.wordpress.com/2007/01/30/kenyathe-wolf-intends-to-make-you-his-meal/>

Richard King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004).

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970; 1962).

Malcolm X, "God's Judgment of White America (The Chickens Come Home to Roost)," December 4, 1963, *The Black Commentator*, http://www.blackcommentator.com/91/91_malcolm.html.

Manning Marble, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985).

-----, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking Press, 2011).

Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 46 (December, 1981):

-----, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

Linda James Myers, "Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to African and African American Psychology," chapter in Helen A. Neville, Brendesha M. Tynes, and Shawn O. Utsey, *Handbook of African American Psychology* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man that Changed Black America* (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill, 1991).

Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2003).

Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (London: Constable, 1961).

J.A. Rogers, *World's Great Men of Color Vol. 1: Asia and Africa, and Historical Figures Before Christ, Including Aesop, Hannibal, Cleopatra, Zenobia, Askia the Great, and Many Others* (New York: Simon & Shuster 1996; New York: J.A. Rogers, 1946).

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

Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970).

Lawrence Stone, "Revival of Narrative: Reflections on New Old History," *Past and Present* No. 85, (November 1979).

Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Beverly J. Vandiver, Peony E. Fhagen-Smith, Kevin O. Cokley, William E. Cross, Jr., Frank C. Worrell, "Cross's Nigrescence Model: From Theory To Scale To Theory," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (July 1, 2001): 174-200.

-----, William E. Cross, Jr., Frank C. Worrell and Peony E. Fhagen-Smith, "Validating the Cross Racial Identity Scale," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* Vol. 49, No. 1, (2002,): 71–85.

Ida B. Wells *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York, 1892).

Robert Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1973; New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962).

Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

"Background on the International Dimensions of the African American Struggle: Part 2, The Global Struggle's Links to Detroit's 1967 Rebellion," *Worker World*, August 13, 2007, <http://www.workers.org/2007/us/detroit1967-0816/index.html>.