

**REINVENTING MALCOLM WITH MARABLE:
PURSUING PATHOLOGY BY ANOTHER NAME**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Every work reflects, consciously or unconsciously, a philosophical framework within which it is rooted, conceived and carried out, no matter what claims are made about objectivity and detached critical analysis, and Manning Marable's recent, posthumously published and problematic book on the life of Min. Malcolm X, *El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz*, is not exempt from this rule or reality. Indeed, Marable's work and the subsequent controversy of denunciation and praise which surrounds it, raises larger questions beyond the book about how we understand, interpret and write history. It also raises interrelated questions of how we address the tendency of so many Black intellectuals to embrace the deconstructionist approach to history and humanities writing, pursuing criticism as an act of faith and revelation of the unseemly as proof of progress toward "humanizing" persons thought to be in need of it.

Clearly, deconstructive writing as critical analysis is to be embraced and encouraged, but deconstructionism in its most negative forms can easily degenerate into collecting and musing over trivia, trash and other extraneous information whose sensationalist character becomes a substitute for things relevant and more intellectually rewarding. Indeed, it becomes little more than the passionate pursuit of racialized pathology by another name. And, at its worst, it takes the form of "scavenger history," the constant search for stench and stain, bottom feeding on the salacious, unseemly and sensational. This leads to pretensions and claims of revealing new material and offering original insights into things found earlier by others and rejected as uninformative and unuseful to a more disciplined and rigorous scholarship.

It is Malcolm, himself, who affirmed that "of all our studies, history is best prepared to

reward our research." But this, in the Malcolmian critical thinking tradition, assumes a mind receptive to discovery, not one determined to prove preconceptions. And it presupposes an emancipatory intent in pursuit of knowledge, not one that binds the mind in ever-tighter conceptual chains forged and offered as liberational tools by the established order. As Malcolm noted in a lecture at Harvard, the logic of the oppressed cannot be the logic of the oppressor, if they seek liberation.

Marable embraced a deconstructionist approach to the life of Malcolm X as one of repeated re-invention as the title of his book, *Malcolm X: A Life of Re-Invention*, indicates. It is this academically faddish and popular culture category that informs and problematizes Marable's work, for it can be understood as an expression of agency or indictment. Thus, it can reflect creative and constructive change or manipulative masking and shape-shifting of the most indictable kind.

It is also Malcolm in his *Autobiography* who defined the positive self-constructive changes of his life. He said, "my whole life has been a chronology of changes." Moreover, he states that "despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts and to accept the reality of life as new experiences and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand and hand with every intelligent search for truth."

This is salutary change and self-transformation that the *Odu Ifa* (245:1) teaches when it says, "If we are given birth, we should bring ourselves into being again." This is self-creation in the most positive sense, not the negative deconstructionist conception of invention as a deliberate disguising, a constant change of costumes and character in

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manipulative ways. Unfortunately, Marable's reinvention of Malcolm is too often portrayed in negative and diminishing ways, depriving Malcolm of one of his most definitive characteristics, an audacious agency reflective of the awesome history and expansive humanity of his people.

Conceptually imprisoned by the philosophical framework he has chosen and the presuppositions it invites and imposes, Malcolm is portrayed as a wily wearer of "multiple masks" with an astute ability "to package himself." Moreover, it is said he lined his life with "layers of personality," "manipulated" his voice, told tales and was "consciously a performer."

Pursuing the deconstructionist popular culture path, Marable situates Malcolm in "the folk tradition of Black outlaws and dissidents," not in the Black cultural tradition of master teacher and moral leader. He assigns to this list Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Stagger Lee, blues guitarist Robert Johnson, and catering to the hip-hop constituency, rapper Tupac Shakur. A few lines down we discover he is not talking about Malcolm, but rather Detroit Red. This, too, is a problem of his portrayal of Malcolm, the collapsing of Detroit Red with Malcolm X, refusing to accept the radical rupture Malcolm makes to reconstruct himself as a more worthy and world-historical person and a continuously unfolding human possibility. This is the audacious agency that appealed even to President Obama in his search for an African anchor for his identity, purpose and direction, and is the basis of Malcolm's durability as a model of African and human excellence and achievement among his people.

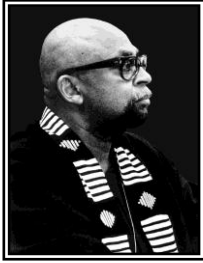
Marable tells us that he and his researchers and perhaps, co-writers of sections, wanted to "humanize" Malcolm, a

kind of saving him from his "manufactured" self and from the alleged mythological conceptions of him hosted and harbored by those too appreciative of Malcolm to see his flaws. But it is important to know what these "humanizers" really mean by this self-assigned and sanctimonious sounding mission of "humanizing" Malcolm. In such a conception, the flaws are the defining feature of Malcolm's being human and his excellence assumes a secondary role and relevance.

Malcolm, himself, expressed a myriad of flaws, but Marable believes he exaggerated some and left out others, and he must set the historical record straight, assigning Malcolm flaws which cater to or coincide with current tastes and talk, disrobing and redressing him in costumes of assumed audience and publisher and PR preference. Thus, Marable dismisses Malcolm's pre-Muslim serious juvenile and adult lumpen life, downgrading it to a kind of *lumpen lite*. He pursues his deconstructive argument against available evidence by characterizing Malcolm's pre-Muslim life of crime as a thief, robber, numbers runner, dope-dealer, pimp, panderer and burglar by terming it "amateurish," "clumsy," and "ridiculous," and calling his crime partners "a motley crew."

In addition, he tells us that pre-Muslim Malcolm's efforts to shield his younger brother from lumpen life, "suggests he was never himself a hardened criminal." It's like arguing a mafia member, shielding his son from his business or a pimp protecting his daughter from prostitution makes them less lumpen, i.e., less committed to crime. It is such specious speculation and repeated misreading of Malcolm in too many places that calls to mind a diligent but mistaken scholar trying to translate a Swahili text with a Zulu dictionary. (TO BE CONTINUED)

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Part II. Marable's re-invented Malcolm is deconstructed and pieced back together in such problematic and unproductive ways, the project clearly falls short of his goal to provide a corrective or even reliable supplement to Malcolm's original narrative told to Alex Haley. However, Malcolm's *Autobiography* is not as flawed as Marable wishes to make it in order to augment the importance of his own work. In fact, its reliable reflection of Malcolm's thinking and work is revealed through a comparative reading of Malcolm's *Autobiography* and lectures in and after the Nation of Islam (NOI). Malcolm hoped that his "life's account, read objectively . . . might prove to be a testimony of some social value." Indeed, Malcolm is a world historical figure whose life and struggle, rightly read, offers an invaluable resource and legacy and Marable's book in no way alters this firmly grounded fact or diminishes the enduring relevance of Malcolm's own account.

Marable's book does have additional material, but critical analysis is not always evident and its quality is attenuated and often tainted by its mixture with trivia, trash and material extraneous to the political mission and meaning of Malcolm X. One could argue "the personal is political" and that all related can be used in political discourse. But what kind of personal and related material is to be sought after and used? Certainly, we could in the midst of discussing Martin Luther's central role in the Protestant Reformation raise questions about reports of his chronic constipation, but to what useful or scholarly ends? Likewise, with Malcolm, a major figure in the Black Freedom Movement, what counts as truly useful in understanding him and the Movement? And when does the pursuit of the insignificant and uninformative, the petty, rumored, and imaginary and anecdotal sexual material become little more than sensationalist

tales from supermarket tabloids with numerous footnotes?

Lacking a self-regulating rationale, the deconstructionist project, in its pursuit of things to criticize, easily moves from trying to find meaning in things to finding things out of which to make meaning. Likewise, it moves from finding meaning in things that are actually there to putting things there to find meaning in them. It clearly contrasts with the *sankofa* project of recovery and reconstruction of African history in the most intellectually disciplined, depthful and dignity-affirming ways possible.

Marable's deconstructionist impulses led him to repeat and pursue lurid and baseless rumors concerning Detroit Red's sexuality. His decision reflects a growing tendency to try to "dress-the-hero-in-drag" or otherwise expressed, to discover and disrobe the Marlboro Man believed to be concealed under the covers of questionable conceptions of masculinity. It is also an attempt to be current and correct, a concession to an insistent constituency, gays and lesbians, concerned with discovering and identifying unrecognized, disguised and distinguished members of their community.

There is no way or need to discuss the *concrete evidence* for Marable's make-believe claims, for there is none and Marable admits it. Indeed, they are neither real, related or relevant to Malcolm's life and work. Thus, a question could be raised about Marable's intended message and motive in cobbling together and presenting this sordid assembly of rumor, innuendo, insinuations and unfounded assumptions. Other questions can also be raised, but to do so would prolong the discussion and give it more attention than it deserves. After all, we could discuss the presence of leprechauns and elves in Ireland, but lack of evidence and the demands of scholar-

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ship direct us away from this and toward that which is more thoughtful, relevant and real.

Marable's attempt to convince us Malcolm's life as Detroit Red was not as degraded and desperate as his *Autobiography* leads us to believe is a deconstructionist thrust directed against both Malcolm and the NOI and its leader, Messenger Elijah Muhammad. He speculates that Malcolm presented his pre-conversion life in such low-life and lumpen terms to better praise Messenger Muhammad and the NOI for lifting him up from the "grave of ignorance," immorality and self- and community destructive activity. Thus, Marable did not critically engage the Nation's complex theology and ethics of knowledge acquisition, agency and self-transformation, and instead contented himself with repeated references to the Yacub narrative.

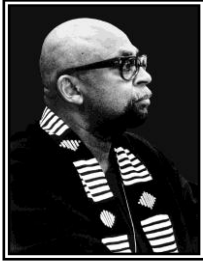
But Malcolm is justified in giving due and lavish praise to his God, leader, religion and organization. It is what is done every day and certainly on every Sunday by Christians who bear witness to wondrous things that their Savior God, pastor/bishop, religion and church have done for them. It is an expression of the religious experience, a normal practice, not the pretension or less than honest activity Marable's deconstructionist project depicts it to be.

Moreover, for those who appreciate the rich resource of Black cultural and religious practices, bearing witness is a beautiful poetic expression and experience. Therefore, Marable missed a chance to critically explore the meaning of Malcolm's conversion and his description of it, as he did with the meaning of his break with the NOI, trying instead to direct

the latter toward speculation about imagined sexual jealousies and related irrelevant anecdotes. Clearly, there is both literary and historical value in Malcolm's looking at his old lumpen hideout from a window at the Harvard Law School Forum and musing over his rise from such a low level of life and the old hustler's fate that was waiting for him if Islam had not enabled and elevated him. Indeed, he says, "But Allah had blessed me to learn about the religion of Islam, which had enabled me to lift myself up from the muck and mire of this rotting world."

An even more poetic and powerful window into his thought and commitment is a quote from a university lecture, recorded by Louis Lomax, which points to the sense of agency, possibility and promise Islam, its Messenger here in the wilderness of North America and the NOI gave him. He says, "I myself, being one who was lost, dead, buried here in the rubbish of the West, in the sick darkness of sin and ignorance, hoodwinked completely by the false teachings of the slave master am able to stand upright today, perpendicular, on the square with my God, Allah, and my own kind . . . able for the first time in 400 years to see and hear." I see no reason to suspect Malcolm's motives in bearing such witness. It is part of the moral anthropology he taught, i.e., the capacity of human beings for *audacious agency*, self-transformation and liberational struggle, while recognizing the awesome conditions under which they labor and rightly praising the source of their insight, grounding and achievement. (TO BE CONTINUED)

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Part III. Regardless of all the other philosophical and factual flaws that weaken and undermine the structural and intellectual integrity of Marable's work, the reef and rock on which his deconstructionist project flounders and is ultimately wrecked is his limited and less than expansive and thus, inadequate conception of Blackness and Black nationalism. He wants to portray Blackness and Black nationalism as narrow notions needing repair and rehabilitation, if not outright rejection. This is one of the reasons he portrays Malcolm as reaching out to the Civil Rights leaders as a repentant and reformed petitioner rather than a colleague and ally, pursuing a politics of united front as a self-conscious and carefully conceived strategy rooted in long-held nationalist views and values.

But Black nationalism is not the reactive practice born of the belief in the impossible assimilation of Blacks that Marable suggests. On the contrary, nationalism is profound commitment to community, to peoplehood and the right and responsibility of a people to exist, to be self-determining, and to define, develop and defend its members and interests. Malcolm is renamed an internationalist, as if nationalism in its expansive and progressive form does not include and require a world-encompassing understanding and ethic, and as if there can be an internationalism without the nations that embrace and practice it.

It is Malcolm, himself, who teaches this expansive conception of Black nationalism, not only in his NOI, early Third World and Bandung period, but also in his last lectures. Praising the global thinking that characterizes the new Black consciousness of the Movement, Malcolm states that one of its defining features is that "the thinking . . . is broad. It's more international." He goes on to say that "you find the masses of Black people

today think in terms of Black. And this enables them to think beyond the confines of America. And they look all over the world. They look at the happenings of the international context."

Indeed, Marable's reinvention of Malcolm has him constantly whittling down Malcolm's feet to fit Marable's deconstructionist shoes, and desperately and repeatedly trying to reshape Malcolm's head to fit the various hats he's chosen for him to wear. Thus, he claims that "Malcolm's strength was his ability to reinvent himself," not his brilliant mind, his incisive analysis, his ethics of liberation, his organizing skill or his personal discipline, dedication and courage. Also, he claims Malcolm becomes "less intolerant and more open to multiethnic and interfaith coalitions." But Malcolm was, since the NOI, committed to Third World alliances and Black united fronts on the model of Bandung.

He also wants us to believe Malcolm "resisted identification as a Black nationalist, seeking ideological shelter under the race-neutral concepts of Pan-Africanism and Third World revolution," a possible concession to post-racial fantasy discourse. But Malcolm is clear about the racial bases of pan-Africanism—defining it as a project of "peoples of African heritage" and the Third World was always defined as the dark peoples of the world, those oppressed and exploited by the White imperialist West. In his last speeches, he talks of "we nationalists," defines the OAAU as nationalist, and in his travel diaries, he wrote that "our success in America will involve two circles: Black nationalism and Islam."

If we want to advance beyond the philosophical and factual flaws of Marable's attempt to reinvent Malcolm and understand Malcolm in the most expansive, productive

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and promising sense, we must read and study him and his ideas as they evolved and developed in processes of both *change* and *continuity*. Clearly what is called for here is a critical practice that is emancipatory and inclusive, rather than narrowly focused and faddish, and self-determining and constructive, rather than deconstructionist and derived from the established order.

As Malcolm says, it begins with forming “the habit of seeing for ourselves, hearing for ourselves, thinking for ourselves, and then we can come to an intelligent judgment for ourselves.” It requires also the development of “a new system of reason and logic,” a liberational logic, both oppositional and affirmative, and rooted in our own culture. He says, “we must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are to liberate ourselves from the bonds of White supremacy.” Indeed, he said “we must launch a cultural revolution” that frees our hearts and minds and prepares us for and sustains us in the larger liberation struggle. Therefore, he says, “culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle.”

Moreover, Malcolm says “we should keep an open mind which is necessary to the flexibility which must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.” Malcolm, by his own self-definition, was “a Black nationalist freedom fighter.” And his nationalism is defined by three major principles and practices: self-determination, self-respect and self-defense. This means control of our space, destiny and daily life in this country and the world African community; cultural grounding which affirms our identity and dignity as persons and a people; and the right and responsibility to

defend ourselves against systemic and social violence and oppression by any means necessary, including armed struggle.

These are the concentric circles, the hinge and hub on which his thought and practice turn. It is these three principles and practices that we of the organization Us embraced and used to define and struggle for Black Power. As I stated elsewhere, “In the Sixties we had stood up seeing ourselves as descendents of Malcolm with an awesome obligation to wage the revolution he had conceived and called for,” – both the cultural and political revolution. Indeed, we saw ourselves as servants and soldiers of our people and keepers of his legacy and have not abandoned or budged from this position or project.

Having met and talked with Malcolm, I have studied, written and lectured on his thought and work and that of the Nation since the Sixties. As a Malcolm scholar in the process of writing a book on his ethics of liberation which has a complex, personal and social transformative dimension, I do not dare assume to “humanize” Malcolm, but rather seek to understand and interpret his humanity in its most profound and expansive form. And I explore, not paths to imagined or possible pathology or flaw, but the ground and applicability of his excellence, as expressed in his intellectual and social practice. For in the final analysis, we engage him, even in criticism, not as a model of flaws and failure, but as a model of excellence achieved against the heavy odds of a history of savage and sustained oppression and in the radical and relentless struggle for liberation which forms and grounds his enduring legacy.

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