

The Fault Lies Not in Our Starts, But in Our Biographers: Minutes to Midnight, Manning Marable Succumbs

by

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Abstract

Almost half a century after the publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Columbia University scholar-activist Manning Marable had made a major attempt to tell Malcolm's story in a new biography before his untimely death. Unfortunately, Marable, who battled with serious health issues while putting the book together, fails to do the primary research necessary for a full biography. His book, "Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention," relies on a small number of interviews, extensive use of established secondary sources, Marable's own analysis of Malcolm X, and controversial allegations not backed up by multiple sources. Malcolm X deserves better—a full, rich biography that brings his life and work further. This book carries some understanding of Malcolm forward, but not definitively. It could have come close with much more time and primary source research, but time tragically ran out for its author.

Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* is the example, unfortunately, of a serious Black Marxist activist-intellectual being seduced by 21st century celebrity academia in the last years of his extraordinarily productive life. Originally meant to be a work of scholarship, it devolved, for more than one reason, into a work of entrepreneurship, peppered with some author hubris.

This biography, hailed as a masterwork by those in journalism and academia who know better but don't want to spit on a great Black writer's grave, was researched by a assemblage of hand-picked graduate students for a decade while the author worked on at least two other books and battled the lung condition that, at one point, left him immobile and ultimately claimed him the weekend eve of publication. The back-cover author blurbs are not from Malcolm X scholars like Zak Kondo, William Sales and Paul Lee, but from celebrity talking-heads Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, an Ivy League-smothered trio who have done well in the last 20 years role-playing the progressive scribe for love and money.

This book is a breakthrough—if that word is defined as an accomplishment of well-written compilation and commentary. A reading of the footnotes shows that Marable's Malcolm is, in many ways, the product of four previous books—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the 1978 updated version of Peter Goldman's *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, Louis A. DeCaro's *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* and, to a lesser extent, DeCaro's *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity*.

What is new, then? First, the creation of a narrative using much of the new Malcolm scholarship since the publishing of Bruce Perry's much-maligned *Malcolm X: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* almost 20 years ago. Second, the painfully personal parts of Malcolm's life—his sexual dysfunction, possible marital infidelity and, according to one main source and one third-hand source, a possible pay-for-play homosexual relationship he had with a rich white man while still the hustler Detroit Red. (The last item was in Perry's book, but that revelation failed to produce the international electric shock that this mass-marketed book is doing now.) Third, use of Malcolm's diary of his international travels. This feat is achieved, tragically, by interviewing fewer than 30 subjects using, apparently, a single grant from Columbia University, where Marable taught for about 20 years. So instead of interviewing 100 to 1,000 people, standard for A-1 biographers, Marable conducts his own orchestra without all of the instruments, filling gaps by whistling his own critiques of Malcolm's intellectual development.

The outline of the story is well-known, and well told by Marable when he sticks to, and adds to, established scholarship. Detroit Red transformed himself, through discipline and faith, and turned his righteous wrath on the white world. He gains power and loses faith. He gains a new faith but at the cost of his life. He becomes almost a concept unto himself, cheering Pan-Africanism, Black Power and Black Consciousness from the Realm of the Ancestors as Afro-ed revolutionaries come forth, bringing into the daylight the ideas Malcolm told Alex Haley late at night. “He presented himself as an uncompromising man wholly dedicated to the empowerment of Black people, without regard for his own personal safety,” writes Marable. Now he is a Hollywood film and a postage stamp, the other half of “Martin And” every February. Like Charlie Parker, Marilyn Monroe and Lou Gehrig, Malcolm is safely ensconced in the middle of the last century, a favorite selection in the historical Netflix of black-and-white documentary footage.

Malcolm’s essence, however, still means power to those who seek that through him. Men and women in the nation’s jails and prisons, studying for their GEDs and college degrees through correspondence courses, still hold on to *The Autobiography* in the hopes of imitating it on some small level. For decades, young Blacks in college either attempted to imitate his voice and his style when they are trying to make a point, or just quote him directly, as if his declarations were Biblical scripture used by church leaders to instantly quell a theological argument: “Just like Brother Malcolm said.....” That his spirit lives can be quantified: just find that one brother wearing horned-rimmed glasses and a goatee at any Black activist rally. El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz’s face and image are all over youtube, ever present, eternally alternating between that direct punch and that aside laughter.

And now, almost half a century after *The Autobiography’s* publication, the story sees major-league print again. “Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention” has created a conflagration of responses as the Old Guard gets older and grayer and the Young Lions, awash with electronic toys that supposedly empower them while tracking their every (consumer) move, are largely indifferent to any event or person no longer trending. The author’s death early in the spring of 2011 was quickly followed by the transitions of master musician Gil Scott-Heron, former Black Panther Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt, one of the nation’s most prominent political prisoners, and Abdias do Nascimento, the renowned Afro-Brazilian activist, political leader and artist. (The last three deaths were within a 14-day period.) That spring was a season of death for longtime national and international Black activist voices. The reality of Malcolm X has proven more than powerful enough to defeat any attempt at popular culture co-optation or liberal intellectual and historical isolation, but can it, will it, defeat time itself? How will this book and its subject fall into the Wikipedia-ization of knowledge?

Those Elders—who, like their role model Brother Malcolm, have used words to liberate—now have to compete not only with their own mortality, but with the technological reality that, by the age of 15, young people in 2011 have been hit with a bombardment of commercialized words and images that would put the Blitz to shame. Actually, the Black activist rage over *Reinvention* may delve deeper than a rushed, dying author making controversial claims using flimsy sources: it could be that the brouhaha over the telling of this particular story, a holy one among formerly young Black radicals internationally, is but another skirmish in a continuing mental war for, but unnoticed by, most of today's electronically-brainwashed Black young. The problem is that any victory might seem invisible as more Elders join the Ancestors, the villages in slow burn, their individual and collective stories fading whispers in the wind.

Biography is a hard game to play and an easy one to lose, although only other historians and some well-read journalists will ever see the losing score. First, the biographer must choose a person he or she wants to spend years of life living with, thinking about and, most importantly, thinking *through*. Second, the author must learn all he or she can about his subject, literally tracing his or her life from the first day to the last. Significantly, while doing the first two tasks, the biographer must learn the differences between his views and his subject's views, but at the same time learn about himself through his subject. Exploring the subject's world gives the biographer insight into his or her own.

Marable only succeeds in the first of the three tasks, and even then only partially. Malcolm X is profiled by Marable as a performance-loving street cat who grew into a religious zealot and demagogue, who then grew into a prophetic voice and then, ultimately, emerged as an ambassador representing Black America in the Middle East, what El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz termed "The Muslim World." He gives an ongoing analysis of Malcolm's words that has him close to calling Malcolm an anti-Semite more than once. Marable claims that Malcolm twisted facts about the March on Washington and its leaders. (He seems to be the first author to do this; although I would assume he would say that he was the first Malcolm biographer to take Malcolm's speeches seriously enough to do this.) This point is even more interesting because Marable doesn't back up his assertion, but radical historian Howard Zinn, in his classic "A People's History of the United States," backs up his (and Malcolm's): that the Movement leaders were meekly following the goals of the Kennedy administration, and using the March to that end. An epilogue that tries to tie Malcolm into the empty symbolism of the World Conferences Against Racism just tones down what Malcolm says and does elsewhere in the book. (That idea is clearly Marable's.) What is most disturbing and disappointing is how Marable uses only one or two sources to make all manner of claims.

For instance, Marable said that journalist A. Peter Bailey said he attended a meeting of what would become the Organization for Afro-American Unity before Malcolm broke with the Nation of Islam in March, 1964. "If true, this would explain the highly secretive character of these clandestine meetings, suggesting that perhaps Malcolm was pursuing a dual-track strategy: continuing to appeal to rejoin the Nation while simultaneously building an independent base loyal to himself." Why couldn't Marable and/or the graduate students find the others who attended "the small gathering of about fifteen people" so this very important piece of information could be confirmed and pinned down? This is basic History 101 stuff, dodged in this book over and over again by too many perhaps, suggests and ifs. Woulda, coulda, shoulda.

The author does a good job in showing how first Malcolm X, and later El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, put real fear into America by upstaging it at home and abroad, dumbfounding those who started dumb. "At every step, Malcolm was treated like a visiting dignitary, and his prominence over the course of several days at social and public events must have stunned the CIA and FBI," Marable writes. "The Bureau had spent years trying to split Malcolm from Elijah Muhammad, with the expectation that the NOI schism would weaken the organization and its leaders...[W]ith each stop in his itinerary, the FBI received fresh reports about Malcolm's expansive social calendar and his growing credibility among African heads of state." Marable explains that Malcolm had specific goals, which included not just "forging a Pan-Africanist alliance between the newly independent African states and Black America," but also delegitimizing the Nation of Islam in the Muslim World, with Mecca ever denied to heretics. Whether with Black nationalists in America, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana or the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon, the man born Malcolm Little becomes a world leader, representing a nation that exists only in the decolonized mind.

The pyrrhic victories are Malcolm's, but to paraphrase the last line of *The Autobiography*, the mistakes have been Marable's. Illness and death, although unfortunate, are not sufficient excuses, particularly for an Ivy League university professor with extended resources and contacts. (With all the prominent, skilled Black writers Marable knew over decades of intellectual work and political struggle, why couldn't he have drafted a co-author to bat cleanup?) For instance, Marable and his graduate students lean on Malcolm's diary and newspaper articles and books to document his travels abroad. Obtaining the use of Malcolm's travel diary is a significant accomplishment, but which resident of Marable's Camp Biography traveled to the places Malcolm went to, meeting with and interviewing those people still alive there? Apparently, no one. This is inexcusable. A book needs to be written just on Malcolm's trips to Africa and Saudi Arabia by scholars who care enough to actually go to those places for an extended length of time to get more than just Malcolm's account. That would require getting travel-research grants that Marable and his graduate students did not have.

Malcolm X deserves better—a full, rich biography that brings his life and work further. This book carries some understanding of Malcolm forward, but not definitively. It could have come close with much more time and primary source research, but time tragically ran out for its author. Ultimately he, like his subject, stood alone, facing the abyss with an almost-finished book and an unseen-but-hoped-for big mainstream payday.

It's not up to Marable's heirs or his graduate students to set up the next biography. It is up to those of Malcolm's soldiers still alive to tell the tale to set up a Malcolm X Oral History Project and keep the flame alive until more documents are released from offices and attics. More books, then, will be written and published by people physically able and mentally willing to do the hard, unglamorous, time-consuming work of a biographer, like a brilliant young scholar and Black press columnist named Manning Marable did once upon a time with the political life of W.E.B. Du Bois.

Ultimately, this flawed book does a dual service to African-American letters and history. It permanently blasts *The Autobiography* into the fictional realm of Spike Lee's epic and *begins* a new era of Malcolm X scholarship for those who seek competing truths from as many voices as possible, not (just) lucrative book contracts or top listings on Amazon.com.