

A Review Essay of Malcolm X: A Life Reinvention by Manning Marable

by

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Marable, Manning. *Malcolm X: A Life Reinvention*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011. 487 pp., research notes, notes, glossary, bibliography, and index; ISBN: 978-0-14-312032-2.

When Malcolm X was murdered at the Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965 the majority of the mainstream media in the United States quickly suggested that the bloodshed he experienced was nothing more than what he had sown for many decades. Calling Brother Malcolm an extremist, a demagogue, a racist, and spiritually bankrupt as well as viewing him as an advocate for violence and a staunch believer that all whites were devils became the daily, general description of various media commentators who had apparently held these views for many years despite the transformative status of this charismatic, spiritual leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI). At best, the press praised Malcolm X's outstanding oratorical skills, great intellect, and warm personality but they simultaneously found him to be misguided, viewing him as an opportunist, a religious zealot, or an enigma of the African American-led Freedom struggle who was the total opposite of the supposedly increasingly admired Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Several months later, with the posthumous publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, co-authored by Alex Haley, a more complex man was portrayed and thus a somewhat softened Malcolm X appeared. This classic volume explored the transformation of Malcolm X from a young street hustler to a drug dealer to a jailed prisoner to a member of the NOI and finally to a magnetic activist whose spiritual and political reawakening tragically ended with his untimely death as he sought to move beyond the total influence and teachings of Elijah Muhammad. In general, Manning Marable's captivating and momentous biography of Malcolm X helps us navigate through these different representations of this extremely important but often misunderstood national and international human rights leader.

In *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, the late Marable, who prior to his untimely and surprising death in early 2011, held numerous academic positions at a variety of higher educational institutions, such as Tuskegee Institute, the University of San Francisco, Fisk University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the Ohio State University, Colgate University, Cornell University, and Columbia University, where he created the Center for Research in African-American Studies in 1993, gives us an account of Malcolm X that has never been seen before on such a broad scale. In essence, the author tries to make sense of the world in which Malcolm X lived as well as how that world made him live as he did. More specifically, Marable's central point "is to go beyond the legend: to recount what actually occurred in Malcolm's life" and also "present the facts that Malcolm himself could not have known, such as the extent of illegal FBI and New York Police Department surveillance and acts of disruption against him, the truth about those among his supporters who betrayed him politically and personally, and the identification of those responsible for Malcolm's assassination" (p. 12). Also crucial is the author's attempt to illustrate "how Malcolm's resurrection occurred, first among African Americans and later throughout America" at-large (p.14).

In the first three chapters, Marable discusses both familiar and unknown aspects of Malcolm's childhood which range from the background of his biracial parents who both separately and as a couple became members of the Garvey movement to the relocation of Malcolm's family from state-to-state for a short period of time to the internal struggles of his family after the controversial death of Malcolm's father at the hands of the Klan to the mental instability of his mother several months after she became a single parent to the ultimate dismantlement of the entire family itself. According to the author, Malcolm's tumultuous and unpredictable upbringing led him to a life of crime and eventually to a long prison sentence in the state of Massachusetts which ultimately led him to convert to and join the Nation of Islam (NOI), which was spearheaded by his "anxiously writing [of] letters to Elijah [Muhammad] on an almost daily basis" (p. 90).

In the next six chapters the author explores the life of Malcolm X as a married man and his seemingly meteorite rise to prominence as a stalwart minister within the NOI locally, regionally, and nationally. At the same time Malcolm also began to question some of the ideological, philosophical, and tactical stances of his organization, particularly after he witnessed the inactivity of the NOI soon-after the unnecessary shooting of his close friend and Nation brother Ronald Stokes by members of the Los Angeles Police Department in 1962, as well as the growing rumors of Elijah Muhammad's various extra-marriageable affairs. Malcolm was especially bewildered by "his muzzling by Elijah Muhammad" on his ability to speak publicly on the Stokes issue. Nevertheless, he continued to privately express his views very intensely to several key members of the Nation of Islam. However, unknown to Malcolm, according to Marable, these actions gave his critics within the organization the proof they needed to illustrate that Malcolm "had become mesmerized by the media, diverting his attention from religious matters into the dangerous realm of politics" (p. 211).

Eventually, this situation led to a one-on-one meeting between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad in 1963. The end result, however, was that the two grew further and further apart, particularly after Malcolm decided to continue to speak openly on various political issues, which was totally against the directive of Muhammad.

In the next few chapters Marable turns to a detailed exploration of Malcolm's continuous public speaking on political issues, his ultimate break from the Nation of Islam, his relationship with Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, his pilgrimage to Mecca, and the intensifying efforts of many individuals and organizations to silence him for good. Within these pages, the author contends that the final reason for Malcolm's exile from the Nation of Islam was his "chickens coming home to roost" comments soon after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas in 1963. Several months after he made these comments Malcolm left the United States for an international speaking tour which lasted several months and took him into numerous African countries. While traveling the continent, Malcolm again began to question the teachings and philosophies of the Nation of Islam. Once he returned to the United States he began to develop a more inclusive persona and developed a more progressive ideological framework that was not only different from the Nation of Islam but at times openly challenged the fundamental principles of his former organization. Marable concludes that this transformation eventually led Malcolm and several of his close friends to creation Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). More importantly, however, Malcolm began to put "his own physical safety" below "his political objectives" (p. 358).

Marable's next five chapters discuss Malcolm's return to the United States from Africa, his continued transformation as both a national and international leader, the first initial, real attack on his life (and family), and his ultimate and untimely assassination on February 21, 1965 by several former members of the Nation of Islam. In very intimate details, the author illustrates how almost every move Malcolm made from November 1964 to February 1965 was like a ticking time-bomb in the life of this former NOI spiritual leader. At the same time, the author concludes that Malcolm was evolving "toward tolerance and pluralism along racial and religious lines" (p. 427). As a result of his murder, however, which continues today to be wrapped in a series of conspiracies which includes the Nation of Islam, the New York Police Department, and even the FBI, Malcolm X still has an enormous impact on a nation which has not come to grips with its impact and legacy on persons of color in the United States and internationally rests on his notion of "radical humanism" (p. 487).

Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life Reinvention* is a very demanding but highly readable book that goes deeper than any other volume on this topic. It gives the reader a more complete picture of a brilliant, controversial, and complex man who died for his belief in freedom, social justice, and dignity. Also unlike previous books on Malcolm X, the author tries to present a comprehensive biography which seeks to separate facts from myths through meticulous research and potent prose. For these points alone the author should be commended. However, there are a number of shortcomings and highly questionable claims the author makes in his five hundred page book.

First, Marable never adequately explores the history, impact, and legacy of the Black Nationalism on persons of color nationally or internally, which clearly influence the consciousness and activities of Malcolm X. Without question such a powerful ideological and philosophical framework has shaped the views and activities of numerous individuals of African descent, from Paul Cuffee to Henry Highland Garnet to Huey P. Newton to Franz Fanon. Not one of these individuals appeared in Marable's book. Obviously more analysis is needed in this area. Second, it seems that at times the author tends to make various claims about various aspects of Malcolm's life based on some questionable sources. For example, Marable claims that Malcolm had at least one "homosexual" encounter as a young man (p. 66). Such an assertion rests upon very little historical sources. Furthermore, the author contends that there is little doubt that several former members of the Nation of Islam developed a detailed plan and ultimately killed Malcolm. However, Marable also notes that there is creditable evidence that both the New York Police Department and even the FBI might have been involved in the execution of Malcolm, especially since both organizations had paid informants in the NOI for many years. Finally, the author claims that Malcolm had at least one affair while he was still married to his wife Betty. Again, such an accusation is based on mostly one source. In the end, however, despite these weaknesses, Marable's momentous biography is a must read for anyone interested in the life and legacy of Malcolm X.