

Malcom X - Leaving Shabazz

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LEAVING SHABAZZ

The rich repertoire of songs and music that African-Americans have produced over the last century has to a large extent been recorded. Its value is recognized all over the world. The same cannot be said for black oratory, which shared the same roots and reflected similar emotions: slavery, segregation and imprisonment produced resistance, anger, bitterness and, often, resignation. Very few speeches were written, leave alone recorded, until the mid-20th century; and yet they had a huge cultural and historical impact.

W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey were amongst the greatest orators during the early twentieth century. A generation later, Adam Clayton Powell, the independent Congressman elected from Harlem, could electrify an audience. This is the tradition within which the 1960s activist Malcolm X should be situated. It was his ability to articulate political ideas instinctively that won him an audience far beyond the ranks of the converted. First and foremost, he was one of the greatest orators that North America has ever produced.

Malcolm X embodied all the strengths and many of the contradictions of the black political condition in mid 20th-century America. Towards the end of his tragically short life he understood, better than most, that it was structural and systemic barriers that had kept the majority of African-Americans below the poverty line and denied them political and racial equality, a hundred years after a civil war supposedly fought to liberate their ancestors from slavery. In a speech of April 1964, he pointed out that if Lincoln—sardonically: ‘that great shining liberal’—had freed the Afro-American, ‘we wouldn’t need civil-rights legislation today’. Malcolm X’s political philosophy and approach, as well as his religious beliefs, were in transition over the last five years of a life cut short, in February 1965, by assassins from the Nation of Islam. They had acted on the orders of their Prophet and the National Secretary who was, in all likelihood, an FBI plant.

Manning Marable’s new, deconstructive biography demonstrates all this in vivid detail. Marable, a social-democratic essayist and historian who died in April this year, a few days before the book was published, was a muchrespected voice within the African-American intelligentsia and later within

the academy as a whole. In his earlier books and essays on black liberation, especially in the sharply analytical *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983), he deployed many a weapon from the Marxist armoury. The tone is somewhat different in *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. 'From an early age', Marable writes, 'Malcolm Little had constructed multiple masks that distanced his inner self from the outside world . . . He acquired the subtle tools of an ethnographer, crafting his language to fit the cultural contexts of his diverse audiences'. Noting the various identities he adopted during his lifetime—from Detroit Red to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz—Marable asserts that 'no single personality ever captured him fully. In this sense his narrative is a brilliant series of reinventions, "Malcolm X" being just the best known.'

Marable is not, of course, the first to chronicle the life of Malcolm X. The latter's autobiography, co-written with Alex Haley, came out in late 1965, only months after its subject's death. Since then there have been half a dozen biographies, not to mention a film by Spike Lee. But Marable's is the first account to benefit from access to the personal correspondence, photographs and texts of speeches held by Malcolm X's estate. Marable worked on the book for almost two decades, and was only able to complete it, as he generously acknowledges, with help from his partner Leith Mullings, a scholar in anthropology; a project manager, coincidentally a Muslim; and a team of dedicated researchers and post-graduate students at Columbia. The end product is sprawling and under-edited, but much of the information it collates has not previously appeared in book form. Some of it is, frankly, extraneous; but some of it sheds new light on the killing as well as providing details of Malcolm's personal life that he carefully omitted from his own autobiography, and which were also absent from Lee's movie based on that work.

The basic facts of Malcolm's life are by now well known. He was born in Omaha, Nebraska in May 1925, but spent most of his childhood in Lansing, Michigan. At the age of six he lost his father, Earl Little Sr—killed in a streetcar accident that many at the time found suspicious, and which Marable suggests may have been the work of local white supremacists. Malcolm's mixed-race Grenadian mother struggled to feed and clothe her seven children; in 1939, she had a nervous breakdown and was sent to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent the next quarter-century. Malcolm and his siblings were forced to depend on each other. In 1941, after being expelled from school, he moved to Boston to live with his half-sister. He spent the war years shuttling between Boston and Harlem, alternating between a series of menial jobs and a zoot-suited life peddling drugs, thieving and pimping. Unsurprisingly, he ended up in prison, receiving an eight-year sentence for a string of burglaries. He spent the years from 1946 to 52 in the Massachusetts penal system. It was here, in 1948, that he discovered the true faith as espoused by a politico-religious sect, the Nation of Islam. This changed his life-style in many ways: it meant farewell to pork and alcohol, drugs and cigarettes. Moreover, as Marable explains, the Nation of Islam 'required converts to reject their slave surnames, replacing them with the letter X'. An autodidact, Malcolm acquired the reading habit in prison and it never left him. His choices were eclectic: the Koran became an important reference point, but he also dipped into Hegel, Nietzsche, Kant, as well as

the history of his people and of the Africa whence they had originally come.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that his road to politics started in prison. In later years he recalled snatches of conversation he had overheard at home, and when he accompanied his father to political gatherings. Earl Little Sr was born in Georgia in 1890; memories of the Civil War, and of what had been promised but never given, remained strong in African-American communities in the South. Moreover, as Marable points out, the 1920s and 30s were a period of resurgence for white supremacism. Originally consisting of little more than violent gangs of embittered vigilantes, the Ku Klux Klan was reborn after the First World War amid rising unemployment and waves of xenophobia directed against not only blacks but also 'non-European' immigrants, Catholics, Jews, anarchists and communists. By 1923 the re-invented Klan had a membership of at least two and a half million, with millions more sympathizers and a base in both Republican and Democratic Parties.

Many black citizens, observing these developments with trepidation, were drawn to black separatist and nationalist movements. Others preferred to work with the gradualist National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a staunchly integrationist organization led by the conservative Booker T. Washington. Offered these choices, Earl Little Sr opted for separatism, joining Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' movement. Garvey, a Jamaican, had migrated to the United States, witnessed the racism and the Jim Crow laws and decided to fight back by creating the Universal Negro Improvement Association (unia) and the African Communities League. He espoused an inventive theology, and proclaimed himself provisional president of Africa, bestowing ludicrous titles on his acolytes: Dukes of Uganda, Knights of the Nile and so on. According to Marable, central to Garvey's success was his 'enthusiastic embrace of capitalism' and free enterprise.

The problem was that material success had been reserved for whites, which was why black Americans should 'return' to their own continent and create their version of the white American dream; to facilitate the process, Garvey created a shipping company, Black Star Line. On the political front he held that, since the KKK was the 'invisible government of the United States' and represented the real views of 'white America', the unia should open direct negotiations with them—after all, both were opposed to social and sexual intercourse between blacks and whites (a tradition that would be continued by the Nation of Islam). The summit between Garvey and Grand Wizard Clarke enraged some of his own supporters, many of whom left the organization. Garvey's security apparatchiks tracked down and killed the leader of the dissidents.

Malcolm's parents, who had met through Garveyist circles in Montreal, remained loyal, moving from Omaha to Milwaukee and then Lansing to organize unia chapters. They suffered for their activism: in 1929, when Malcolm was four, the family house was firebombed. The fire department refused to come to their aid and the house was burnt to the ground. By this time Garveyism was in decline: in 1927 its leader had left the States not for Africa but Jamaica, before later moving to Britain, where he died in 1940. In his obituary C. L. R. James, who loathed Garvey's politics, sought to explain his appeal to the black masses:

"So deep was the sense of wrong and humiliation among the Negroes and so high did he lift them up that they gave him all that they did, year after year, expecting Garvey to perform some miracle. No revolution is ever made except when the masses have reached this pitch of exaltation, when they see a vision of a new society. That is what Garvey gave them."

James stressed Garvey's qualities as a speaker, judging him 'one of the great orators of his time': 'ill-educated, but with the rhythms of Shakespeare and the Bible in his head, he was a master of rhetoric and invective, capable of great emotional appeals and dramatic intensity.' James continued: Every two-cent revolutionary who has talked to Negroes in cafeterias and therefore knows the Negro question points out Garvey's errors and absurdities and thinks that thereby a contribution has been made to knowledge. More than in all the theses of the Comintern, a basis for the building of a real mass movement among the Negroes lies in a thorough study of this first great eruption of the Negro people.

With the collapse of Garveyism, many within the movement changed tack. Some became labour organizers, socialists and communists. Others shifted to the naacp, which had itself moved in a more radical direction since Washington's death. The more religious amongst Garvey's followers drifted towards the Muslim sects that were becoming active in the country and winning recruits by arguing that Christianity was the religion of slave-owners. The fact that most of the churches were segregated underscored their message.

When Malcolm first encountered the Nation of Islam in prison, then, much of what he discovered was familiar territory. The theology was, however, even more inventive than Garvey's. Marable's account of the Muslim sects and their impact on the African-American community is the most comprehensive to date, allotted almost 250 pages here. The history of the Nation of Islam, so vital to the formation of Malcolm, can be summarized as follows. The inspirer of the movement was an eccentric fantasist named Wallace D. Fard—he later added Muhammad to his name—who revealed himself to audiences as a prophet in the late 1920s. The founding myth he supplied for the cult is risible, but deadly serious in its purpose: to encourage black pride. In the 'Secret Ritual of the Nation of Islam' and other texts, Fard asserted that African-Americans belonged to the 'lost tribe of Shabazz', which had been sold into slavery by Meccan traders in the seventeenth century. They should therefore 'recover' their original Muslim religion, learn Arabic and so on. The white race, meanwhile, were 'devils', the product of a chemical experiment conducted by the imaginary Shabazz scientist Yacub. Centuries ago these white devils escaped Yacub's control and conquered the world; the 'Asiatic' blacks had gone into a deep sleep, but the Nation of Islam would awaken them and restore their pride. The fact that such tales could be taken at all seriously by intelligent human beings underlines the desperate straits in which African-Americans found themselves at the time. In August 1931 Fard gave a lecture in Detroit. Attending it was Elijah Poole, a brick-kiln labourer from Georgia. Mesmerized by the preacher's performance, Poole went up to him and expressed his appreciation: 'I know who you are, you're God himself.' 'That's right,' was the modest

response, 'but don't tell it now. It is not yet time for me to be known.' This was the real founding moment of the Nation of Islam. After Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad became his Prophet, and after a few inevitable splits found himself the unchallenged leader of the sect.

After his release from prison, Malcolm's dynamism and natural gifts as an orator propelled him rapidly to the top of the organization; within a year, he had his own ministry in Harlem. He became Elijah's leading lieutenant and was widely viewed as his successor. Malcolm's organizational skills matched his oratory, and the Nation of Islam expanded from a small sect to a proper movement with branches in most of the major cities. In 1947, according to Marable, it had no more than 400 members, and less than 1,000 in 1953; but it could claim 6,000 adherents by the mid-50s, and by 1961, in a huge leap, as many as 75,000. However, it could never match the naacp, which by 1939 had grown to a mass organization with a quarter of a million members; by 1943 it had half a million, and double that by 1947, when the black population as a whole numbered 15 million. This growth reflected the social ferment of a period that witnessed the largest working-class mobilizations in us history. The rise of the Nation of Islam, by contrast, took place during the 1950s—a period of affluence, near full-employment but also of defeat for African-Americans, who remained socially and politically deprived. A conservative white-separatist political order created the conditions for a conservative black separatism from below. Like Garvey before him, Elijah Mohammed encouraged black capitalism to create a black commercial realm, and also, of course, profits for his organization and his family.

As he grew and travelled, Malcolm's views began to change. Harlem was the most cosmopolitan of America's black enclaves, and people there were deeply sceptical of the mumbo-jumbo that constituted the Nation of Islam's explanation of the world. Increasingly embarrassed about it himself, Malcolm became aware that Islam itself is a universalist religion; any version of it that excluded anybody on the basis of colour existed only in the fevered imaginations of Nation of Islam converts. Malcolm was developing his own explanations for divisions within the African-American community; these appealed to the poor, who were tired of seeing their more traditional leaders kow-tow to the White House. In January 1963, he made a devastating speech to over a thousand students at Michigan State University in which he drew a distinction between 'the house Negro and the field Negro':

"The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He wore his master's second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table . . . When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with the master, he'd say, 'What's the matter, boss, we sick?' . . . The house Negro was in a minority. The field Negroes were the masses. They were in the majority. When the master got sick, they prayed that he'd die. If his house caught on fire, they'd pray for a wind to come along and fan the breeze."

As Marable points out, this was an important speech in many respects, marking a public break with the nonsense of the lost tribe of Shabazz and the Arab origins of African-Americans. The Negro, Malcolm now asserted, was an African, pure and simple. This speech laid the basis for the pan-Africanism that was to become more and more prominent over the

remaining years of his life.

He was turning away from the Nation of Islam, yet still he remained loyal to Elijah, even though the latter's sycophants fumed at the liberties Malcolm was permitted. The Kennedy assassination was the occasion of the first public breach. At a public meeting in New York, Malcolm spoke of the killings the us administration had organized, including those of its own allies in South Vietnam. Kennedy's shooting, he explained to a cheering audience, was 'the chickens coming home to roost', adding: 'Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad. They've always made me glad.' At Nation of Islam headquarters in Chicago, Elijah and John Ali, the fbi plant who was the National Secretary, issued a public retraction, expressed their grief and shock at Kennedy's death, and temporarily suspended Malcolm from the organization. He would never be let back in. While angered by the suspension, he must also have been relieved: he was finding it difficult to justify Nation of Islam policies while debating other militant black leaders. It was one thing to denounce open collaborationists as Uncle Toms, but the Nation of Islam's refusal to participate in the civil-rights movement and its denunciations of Martin Luther King and other activists were indefensible.

In March 1964, Malcolm announced his break with the Nation of Islam, and his intention to set up his own organization. In fact, he set up two: Muslim Mosque Inc.—a direct alternative to the Nation of Islam—and then, in June, a second body with a wider remit called the Organization of Afro-American Unity. The choice of name for the latter was clearly influenced by the month-long trip to Africa and the Middle East Malcolm had made that spring. In April he had completed the hajj; according to Marable, the egalitarianism among pilgrims of all colours brought an 'epiphany', suggesting black separatism was not the only solution to the problems of race. What Malcolm had witnessed in Africa, meanwhile, gave more substance to his changing political views. Soon after his return, he gave a speech drawing parallels between European colonial rule and institutionalized racism in the us: the police in Harlem were like the French in Algeria, 'like an occupying army'. As Marable notes, 'for the first time he publicly made the connection between racial oppression and capitalism'. African-Americans should, he said, emulate the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, also observing that 'all of the countries that are emerging today from under colonialism are turning towards socialism. I don't think it's an accident.'

Malcolm made a second, longer African trip from July to November 1964, visiting a string of countries where he met a range of intellectuals and political figures. In Egypt, he spoke at the oau conference and talked with Nasser; in Ghana, he met Shirley DuBois and Maya Angelou; in Tanzania, Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu and Julius Nyerere; in Kenya, Oginga Odinga and Jomo Kenyatta. The international dimension was crucial to his thinking in the final months. In mid-December, he invited Che Guevara—in New York for the celebrated un General Assembly speech—to address an oaau rally; Guevara did not attend, but sent a message of solidarity. 'We're living in a revolutionary world and in a revolutionary age', Malcolm told the audience. He continued:

"I, for one, would like to impress, especially upon those who call themselves leaders, the importance of realizing the direct connection between the struggle of the Afro-American in this country and the struggle of our people all over the world. As long as we think—as one of my good brothers mentioned out of the side of his mouth here a couple of Sundays ago—that we should get Mississippi straightened out before we worry about the Congo, you'll never get Mississippi straightened out."

The fact that many of the initial recruits to the OAAU had come from the Nation of Islam was used by Elijah Mohammed and Malcolm's numerous enemies within the Nation of Islam to depict him as a 'traitor'. They decided to execute him, as he knew they would. In December 1964 he came to speak at Oxford. Afterwards, I walked him back to the Randolph Hotel, where we sat and spoke for over an hour. On parting I expressed the hope that we would meet again. He shook his head: 'I don't think we will.' Why? 'I think they'll kill me very soon', he said calmly. 'Who will kill you?' Here he had no doubts: it would be the Nation of Islam or the FBI, or both together. He explained how his break with separatism and moves to build alliances with progressive white groups made him a dangerous figure. In February 1965, three assassins from the Nation of Islam gunned him down at an oaaau meeting in New York. Three years later, Martin Luther King, too, was killed soon after he broke with the Democrats and decided to stand as an independent Presidential candidate. And in the years that followed the FBI systematically organized the assassinations of Black Panther leaders and activists.

The strength of Marable's account is the huge amount of information he provides. Everything is in here, but it comes at a cost, often disrupting the narrative. Details of Malcolm's personal life—his unhappy marriage, his male lovers in prison—crowd what is essentially a political biography. The emphasis on the Nation of Islam is not totally misplaced, but it is accorded far too much space, at the expense of any discussion of the overall social and political contexts, both us and global, within which Malcolm operated. The result is seriously unbalanced: the events that shaped his continuing intellectual evolution—the killing of Lumumba and the ensuing crisis in Congo; the Vietnam War; the rise of a new generation of black and white activists in the us, of which Marable was one—are mentioned only in passing. This is a great pity, because in historical terms their significance far outweighs that of the audience sizes of various Nation of Islam meetings or the sectarian infighting which Marable discusses at length. Marable also makes some nonsensical comparisons between the Nation of Islam and Shia Muslims as well as other clumsy references to Islam that it might have been better to exclude.

Conversely, the book might have benefited from a comparative survey of the different sects, black and white, that proliferated in the US in the interwar years; the Nation of Islam were not the only game in town—Mormons, Scientologists, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses all gained large followings at the time, and remain influential now.

In an Epilogue, Marable sums up Malcolm's legacy, seeking to counter 'revisionist' ideas that in his final years he had been 'evolving into an integrationist, liberal reformer'. Correctly he argues that Malcolm would have had nothing to do with affirmative action—what he sought was 'a fundamental

restructuring of wealth and power in the United States'. He always demanded that middle-class blacks be accountable to the masses of poor and working-class African Americans. Marable contrasts the posthumous fates of Malcolm and Martin Luther King Jr: the latter sanctified by the political establishment as a martyr to a 'colour-blind America', celebrated by an official annual holiday, while Malcolm was pilloried and stereotyped by the mass media, albeit as 'an icon of black encouragement' to African American youth. Marable then tries to elide King with Obama, differentiating Malcolm from both of them. This is both sad and grotesque. King was killed for his opposition to the Vietnam War. He never turned his back on the plight of African-Americans. The reason why he broke from the Democratic Party was to unite blacks and whites against war and for social justice. Obama's record speaks for itself. Malcolm would have lambasted him for escalating the war in Afghanistan and extending it to Pakistan, where thousands of civilians have been killed by 'targeted' drone attacks. He would have pilloried Obama's role as Wall Street's handmaiden, even as working-class America, black and white, suffers from rising levels of unemployment and social deprivation. His words at Michigan State University in 1963 are all too applicable today, as many are coming to realize.

Marable suggests that Obama's election means that Malcolm's vision would have to be 'radically redefined', for a political environment that appears to be 'post-racial'. In that case, Malcolm might have asked, why is it that in 2011 the number of African-Americans incarcerated in US prisons is the same as the slave population in 1860? And why, despite the ascent of such figures as Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Obama, do blacks remain on the lowest rung of the social ladder? Malcolm was not such a prisoner of the American dream as to think that getting a dark-skinned man in the White House need necessarily do anything to change the fundamental structures of wealth, race and power.

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P.S.

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