



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

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

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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