

Portrait of a revolutionary

Colin Grant

What's the connection between Malcom X, the radical and electrifying Black nationalist, and slavery? One obvious answer is the throwing off his family's slave name, so that Malcolm Little was reborn as Malcolm X, following his embrace of the Nation of Islam (NOI) in jail in the late 1940s. The other, not so obvious connection, is *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) by Alex Haley.

The television series of the novel was my generation's introduction – well, at least, in my Jamaican migrant household in 1970s Luton – to the charismatic leader who tapped into the dreams and aspirations of black Americans; people who were tired of waiting for change in their racist homeland.

Roots is the painful, landmark, American novel (1976) then TV drama (1977) about Kunta Kinte, an enslaved man abducted from Africa, and of the family who came after him. That family bore the kind of unrecognised, generational trauma which Dr. Joy DeGruy described in her 2005 book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. Alex Haley, the author of

Roots, was one of Kunta Kinte's descendants, and in a late episode of the series in which Haley's character features, the struggling journalist gets a big break: the chance to interview Malcolm X.

As a teenager, I recall my anxiety while watching the episode that focused on Malcolm X as a marked man, hyper-alert to the possible threat of assassins from within the NOI, whom he knew would one day come for him. In one short scene, Malcolm X meets Haley in a café, and insists on sitting with his back to the wall and with one eye on the door as he begins recounting his story. My teenage feeling of vulnerability was underscored by *Roots*: the feeling that I would never as a black person in the UK be clear of danger; that I'd succumb to it or that 'the man' would trip me up, and that feeling has never really left me.

Haley's 1963 interview with Malcolm X, commissioned by Playboy magazine, was the genesis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which Haley co-authored in 1965. The back cover of the first edition quotes Malcolm's haunting words:

When I am dead – I say because from the things I know, I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form – I want you to watch and see if I'm not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with hate.

The book, which sold five million copies in its first twelve years, had a serious and sombre cover; recent editions, with a red X drawn across Malcolm's face, more overtly suggest

defiance. But numerous powerful images of this passionate firebrand have also lent weight to the impression of his cool invincibility or, at least, his indomitability.

In 1960, *Life* magazine assigned the photographer Eve Arnold the task of taking to the road with Malcolm X to record the powerful intervention of the man that *Time* magazine described as a 'thug-turned-devout Muslim' in the movement for civil rights. White Americans, deluded by the fantasy of their innocence in the suppression of their black compatriots, could just about contend with the shaming and nonviolent advocacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. but Malcolm X was off the chain.

Over the course of a year, Arnold travelled with Malcolm and his entourage among the black Muslims from Washington to New York and Chicago and then back to New York. Reflecting on their collaboration, she remembered Malcolm as 'charming and gracious' and 'a passionate orator who could whip a crowd to euphoria.' This was at a time when white America demonised him as a dangerous, hate-spewing villain.

Malcolm's fearless stance was thrilling to me and my peers in 1970s Britain when we considered how we were schooled by our fathers to show deference to authority figures such as the police, no matter their antipathy towards us. The decade previously, in the midst of America's civil rights battles, Malcolm's excoriating judgements were a counterweight to the daily reports of nonviolent black protesters on freedom marches being battered by police.

Perhaps the most striking image that Arnold took of the man who served as the poster boy for the NOI, shows Malcolm X in a cocked hat, with browline glasses, a gold watch and Masonic ring. 'Thanks for making him look like a dude', a group of black photographers once told Arnold.

In several photos, his appeal is immediately apparent; this allegedly scary ogre menacing white America lights up halls full of his black compatriots with the warmth of his unguarded, loving smile. In the NOI, Malcolm X had found his people. And in Arnold's portraits of his audiences, you can hear the laughter at his humour and sense the awe at his daring to say in public those truths that black people only expressed to each other in barber shops, in churches, and as they settled down in bed at night and ran through the audit of transgressions they'd endured that day at the hands of their white compatriots.

After leaving prison in 1952, having served six years for larceny and burglary, Malcolm X maintained he hadn't gained freedom; it was impossible to do so in America. He'd merely swapped solitary confinement for the open-air prison, which for black people was America. 'If you're black you were born in jail,' said Malcolm X in 1964, the year before his assassination. The American dream was a nightmare as far as the black Muslim was concerned but, he argued, there'd be no peace for 'blue-eyed devils' (white people) either, without a reckoning for the sins of slavery and the continued brutalisation of the enslaved's descendants.

In 1992, I excitedly headed to a London cinema with brothers, cousins and uncles (a dozen or more of us, men of the extended family) for an unprecedented event that seemed both epic and sacramental: the screening of Spike Lee's stunning biopic *Malcolm X*. Denzel Washington didn't *play* Malcolm; he *was* Malcolm, and we cheered his every utterance. Soon after the film's release, the star took part in a television interview and was asked provocatively whether he agreed that Malcom X was a man of hate. Washington was unequivocal in his answer:

Is the sheep preaching hate when he says I'm not going to let the wolf eat me any more? The next time the wolf comes in here I'll do whatever I have to do to keep him off my back. Is the sheep violent or is the wolf the violent one? [Malcom X] wasn't preaching hate, he was preaching common sense.

James Baldwin would have concurred. In *No Name in the Street* (1972) Baldwin asserted: 'Malcolm was speaking of the bitter and unanswerable present.' Before Baldwin met Malcolm X, he confessed: 'I was a little afraid of him, as was everyone else.' Baldwin had been giving a lecture in the 1960s in New York and when he looked down from the stage he saw Malcolm X in the front row, 'bending forward at such an angle that his long arms nearly caressed the ankles of his long legs, staring up at me. I very nearly panicked.' Later Baldwin assessed the enigma of their place in American culture:

I was, in some way, in those years, without entirely realizing it, the Great Black Hope of the Great White Father. I was *not* a racist – so I thought; Malcolm *was* a racist, so *he* thought. In fact, we were simply trapped in the same situation.

In the 1965 autobiography, Malcolm characterised himself as a philosophical street-fighter. In 2011, Manning Marable's largely sympathetic *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* cast Malcolm as a self-made American with flaws. Marable portrayed him as an adolescent thief, stealing from his impoverished mother, and a misogynist, an absent father and husband; egregiously for some, he also suggested Malcolm's willingness (in his youth) to indulge the homoerotic fantasies of elderly white men.

The Dead Are Arising (2021) is the most comprehensive biography that I've read by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Les Payne and Tamara, his daughter and principal researcher. Previous works often relied on conjecture and redacted, declassified FBI files, but the Paynes assiduously sought primary sources. Drawing on thousands of hours of first-hand interviews, eye-witness accounts and personal documents, they assembled, in 600 pages, a more holistic picture of Malcolm X's evolution 'from street criminal to devoted moralist and revolutionary' who, through his words, terrified not just white America but eventually, the black Muslim leadership too.

Malcolm's eventual breach with the movement followed its leader Elijah Muhammad's instruction to him in 1961 that he negotiate with the Ku Klux Klan. The exploratory Atlanta

meeting – support for a NOI black state within the US in exchange for helping the Klan fight the ‘scourge of integration’ – is portrayed in cinematic detail, with Malcolm adopting high sarcasm until the Klan’s real objective becomes clear: information on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s movements to help ‘eliminate’ him. No information was proffered, but Malcolm increasingly felt that an alliance with the KKK would be unconscionable. Eventually, it was Elijah Muhammad’s personal immorality – impregnating several young NOI secretaries – that led eventually to an irreversible rupture with his once ardent devotee.

The revelatory testimonies in *The Dead Are Arising* show how, in publicly denouncing Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm incensed former allies, who plotted his murder with the ‘advance knowledge’ of the FBI. Neither this book or any of the others on Malcolm X, though, quite matches the raw excitement and idiosyncrasy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Rereading the autobiography, I was struck by its spirituality, by its focus on the souls of black people, and I was reminded that Malcolm’s father had been a follower of Marcus Garvey, who’d often spoken of the dangerous legacy of mental slavery: others might free the body but none but black people themselves could free their minds. Poring over the text again, I was surprised by Malcolm’s tenderness, his capacity for humour and his willingness to question his previous titanic certainty about the division between black friends and white enemies that I had overlooked in my youth. The book captures his fearlessness and uncompromising clarity that speaks to this moment of 21st century revisionism in the attempt to roll back advances made in addressing the social iniquities of class and race.

The writers in this guest edition, Bonnie Greer, Vayu Naidu, Vanessa Kisuule, Ekow Eshun, Max Farrar, Ella Sinclair, John Siddique and Franklin Nelson, reflect on their own relationship with Malcolm X, offering portraits of how they first saw him and how they picture him today.

Malcolm's extraordinary life is emblematic of the painful truths and sacrifices in the fight for civil rights in the US. At first, he cast his rival Martin Luther King, Jr. as an 'Uncle Tom', but came to realise their goals had been the same, and that either of them 'might personally meet a fatal catastrophe.'

Since his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X's ideas have circled like planes in a holding pattern, dropping down when landing slots are freed up. Embedded in music culture, from Erykah Badu to Wu-Tang Clan, his revolutionary message is manifest on the streets today, emblazoned on the chests of those protesting the violence and hypocrisy of the US; expressed in the continued demands for justice 'by any means necessary'.

Colin Grant is the Director of *WritersMosaic*. His books include *Bageye at the Wheel*, short-listed for the Pen Ackerley Prize, and *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation*, a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week. His latest book is *I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be*. His oral history of migration to Britain, *What We Leave We Carry*, will be published in

2026. Grant is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He also writes for a number of newspapers including the *TLS*, *Guardian*, *Observer* and *The New York Review of Books*.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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