

Malcolm X (and James Baldwin) changed me

Max Farrar

I can still feel the shock, as a febrile teenager at a boarding school in the mid-1960s, when my friend revealed he was Black, and was subjected to racism during the school holidays. We plunged into newspaper accounts of the civil rights struggle in the USA and up popped James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956). There began my lifetime's campaign for equality, whatever your 'race', class, gender or sexuality.

It was a short step to Baldwin's other novels, and then his essays propelled me towards the Black Power branch of the civil rights movement. We gobbled up Alex Haley's riveting biography of Malcolm X, in the 1968 Penguin edition, and we thought we should join the armed wing of the African National Congress after we graduated.

Many years later, one of our grandkids pulled Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962) from the shelves and I took that as a sign that I should re-read it. I saw that reading about Elijah Muhammad through Baldwin's surprisingly sympathetic eyes had prepared me for

Malcolm Little's conversion to the Nation of Islam (NoI), just as Alex Haley's carefully curated book prepared me for his subsequent break from them.

As a bookish undergraduate browsing Pelican Originals in the 1960s, I found E.U. Essien-Udom's thoroughly researched book about the Nation of Islam – it showed me their main enthusiasm was for capitalism with a Black face. It reinforced Malcolm's exposé of the NoI's mumbo jumbo and its utterly bogus version of Islam.

It was fitting, now we are celebrating the centenaries of both Malcolm and Baldwin, that I should read Baldwin's 1961 debate with Malcolm. It brought home to me how prescient Baldwin was in asking us to think about the consequences of the 'racial' violence that he and Malcolm both saw as inevitable and imminent. He acutely questioned Malcolm's masculinist call for Black Americans to fight 'like men', and he gently rejected theology of all types. And, more than 60 years ago, there was Baldwin clearly opposing the racialised essentialism that underpinned Malcolm's Black Nationalism.

Recently re-reading chunks of *The Autobiography*, I found myself more gripped by his early life than I was by his life in the NoI. In his excellent Foreword, Haley hints that, as Malcolm was perpetually genuflecting to Wallace Fard Muhammad, there was a bad smell in the air. The book's account of Malcolm's conversion at Mecca is a consummate example of how learning from experience is often far more significant than learning from oratory and books.

Browsing yet again *The Fire Next Time* helped me understand why I prefer the little boy and the hustler Malcolm to the Nol Malcolm. I had thought it was that I couldn't take reading about myself as a 'white devil', because this reminded me of actually being called a 'white devil' in Chapeltown, Leeds, in the 1970s. (Nowadays, when some kindly call me an 'ally', I know it was my school friend, Jimmy Baldwin and Malcolm who put me on that path.)

It's one bit, from Baldwin's reflections on the self-proclaimed Elijah Muhammad (which includes some good words about Malcolm), that showed me what had really grabbed me about the young Malcolm. It's where Baldwin was listening to the blues. He highlighted Big Bill Broonzy's songs.

(As it happens, I had absorbed Broonzy in the mid-1960s because a fellow pupil brought in his records from Brian Epstein's NEMS shop in Liverpool. Our posse admired Epstein not just for managing the Beatles, but for being expelled from the school we hated.)

Baldwin said that white Americans (surely this goes for us white English too) do not understand the 'ironic tenacity' revealed in blues songs, because they are 'terrified' of the sensuality that underlies it. 'Being sensual', he wrote, involves 'respect[ing] and rejoice[ing] in the force of life, of life itself, and [being] *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread'.

This, for me, so many years later, is why the first half of *The Autobiography* remains so compelling. Quite rightly, Malcolm has no shame in his past, which he narrated perhaps to heighten his credibility among the Black working class, as well as to provide a cautionary tale. What I find more striking, however, is the pure force of his nefarious life, as he tells it. He vividly recalls episodes even when his body is suffused with industrial quantities of booze, coke and weed because he is so utterly and admirably *present* throughout.

(I was not too impressed with Spike Lee's film of Haley's book, partly because it glamourised what Malcolm described in its mercenary banality, and partly because it lacked the sensuality you feel in the book.)

The Autobiography lived on for me for another reason. In the late 1980s I began to hear from Chapeltown's young men and women of Caribbean heritage about their conversion to Islam. They were elated and inspired by shedding their Christian upbringing and finding a 'true faith'.

These sincere young people tried to draw me in, but I was too committed Marx's idea that religion is the 'sigh of the oppressed creature', the 'heart of a heartless world', and I had adopted the response that he advocated. Nevertheless, I thought this was a significant moment in the story of Black Britain and I tried (and failed) to get the story published.

When, in 2005, three men of South Asian and one of Caribbean descent bombed London in the name of Allah, I researched political Islam, and the absence of Malcolm X was glaring. Instead, Al Qaeda had totally distorted a potentially radical religion and developed a strategy gleaned from the violent strands in Western revolutionary praxis. Its agents had drilled an ideology far worse than the Nol's into the minds of those three young men from Leeds (and one from Huddersfield).

Had the Nol and the FBI not killed Malcolm, Osama bin Laden might not have gained such prominence. Malcolm's Organisation of Afro-American Unity, utilising Sunni Islam, might have made such a difference.

His legacy remains disputed. Y. N. Key insisted his 'true political philosophy' is for *jihad* (struggle), based on the precepts laid down by the (actual) Prophet Muhammed, for self-determination – by which he means an autonomous American State for Afro-Americans.

George Breitman claimed that, in the last year of his life, Malcolm became a 'black nationalist plus social revolutionist', and was beginning to doubt the nationalist part. He provided evidence, including a late interview Malcolm did with the American *Young Socialist* magazine, where he predicted the collapse of capitalism and praised the young white radicals he had recently met.

I am most persuaded, however, by the words of Malcolm's daughter Ilyasah Shabazz. In her autobiography she positioned herself as a much-loved child in a 'mainstream and privileged and integrated and utterly American' home – a beautiful young Muslim who learned to 'hustle' in clubs in Mount Vernon, the Bronx and White Plains. (She means 'disco dance'; her term holds no irony.)

While her story is more a praise-song for her mother than an appraisal of her dad, she's very clear that Malcom's 'by any means necessary' strategy – forever impressed in my mind as the poster where he holds an M1 carbine – is not a call to violence, but a commitment to self defence, alongside a 'comprehensive' set of tactics for redressing the systemic oppression and exploitation of African Americans.

The implication throughout, stemming from her mother's own climb to academic seniority and her father's continuous self education, which started long before his time in prison and never stopped, is that education is a major component of those tactics.

There's also a hint of economic nationalism when she adds a clarion call for the expansion of black-owned businesses, but the cornerstones of the strategy are an accurate understanding of world history and a new colour-blind humanism. These will eradicate self-loathing and instil self-respect among African Americans, Shabazz argues.

And of course that would change white people, too, just as Jimmy and Malcolm have changed me.

Max Farrar is a writer, academic, photographer, and activist based in Leeds. He worked as a cultural sociologist at Leeds Metropolitan University, where he is now an Emeritus Professor. His latest book, *Big Flame: New Movements, New Politics*, was published by Merlin Press in 2024. He has authored and co-authored seven other books, and his writing has been featured in *Open Democracy*, *Red Pepper*, *New Statesman* and numerous academic journals. His photography has also been widely published. Farrar is co-secretary to the Board of the David Oluwale Memorial Association charity in Leeds.

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

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