The Legacy of Malcolm X
WHY HIS VISION LIVES ON IN BARACK OBAMA
By Ta-Nehisi Coates

HEN MY MOTHER was 12, she walked from the projects of West Baltimore to the beauty shop at North Avenue and Druid Hill, and for the first time in her life, was relaxed. It was 1962. Black, bespectacled, skinny, and buck-toothed, Ma was also considered to have the worst head of hair in her family. Her tales of home cosmetology are surreal. They feature a hot metal comb, the kitchen stove, my grandmother, much sizzling, the occasional nervous flinch, and screaming and scabbing. In the ongoing quest for the locks of Lena Horne, a chemical relaxer was an agent of perfection. It held longer than hot combs, and with more aggression—virtually every strand could be subdued, and would remain so for weeks. Relying on chemistry instead of torque and heat, the relaxer seemed more worldly, more civilized and refined.

That day, the hairdresser donned rubber gloves, applied petroleum jelly to protect Ma's scalp, stroked in a clump of lye, and told my mother to hold on for as long as she could bear. Ma endured this ritual every three to four weeks for the rest of her childhood. Sometimes, the beautician would grow careless with the jelly, and Ma's scalp would simmer for days. But on the long walk home, black boys would turn, gawk, and smile at my mother's hair made good.

Ma went off to college, leaving the house of my grandmother, a onetime domestic from Maryland's Eastern Shore who had studied nursing in night school and owned her own home. This was 1969. Martin Luther King Jr. was dead. Baltimore had exploded in riots. Ma hung a poster of Huey Newton in her dorm room. She donated clothes at the Baltimore office of the Black Panthers. There, she met my father, a dissident of strong opinions, modest pedigree, and ill repute. In the eyes of my grandmother, their entanglement was heretical, a rejection of the workhorse ethos of colored people, which had lifted my grandmother out of the projects and delivered her kids to college. The impiety was summed up in a final preposterous act that a decade earlier would have been inconceivable—my mother, at 20, let her relaxer grow out, and cultivated her own natural, nappy hair.

The community of my youth was populated by women of similar ilk. They wore their hair in manifold ways—dreadlocks and Nubian twists, Afros as wide as planets or low and tapered from the temple. They braided it, invested it with beads and yarn, pulled the whole of it back into a crown, or wrapped it in yards of African fabric. But in a rejection aimed at something greater than follicles and roots, all of them repudiated straighteners.

The women belonged, as did I, to a particular tribe of America, one holding that we, as black people, were born to a country that hated us and that at all
I was a cannibal continent. Its pundits injected the agents of deceit—their reliqued our noses, and relaxed our hair. Blackface, Little Sambo, and Tarzan of the Apes. Its historians held that Africa was a cannibal continent. Its pundits argued that we should be happy for our enslavement. Its uniformed thugs beat us in Selma and shot us down in northern streets. So potent was this hate that even we, the despised, were enlisted into its cause. So we bleached our skin, jobbed our noses, and relaxed our hair.

To reject hatred, to awaken to the ugly around us and the original beauty within, to be aware, to be "conscious," to be dogmatically religious one moment, and then broadly open-minded the next; who in the last year of his life espoused capitalism and socialism, leaving both conservatives and communists struggling to lay their claims?

Gripping and inconsistent myths swirl about him. In one telling, Malcolm is a hate-filled bigot, who through religion came to see the kinship of all. In another he is the self-redeemer, a lowly pimp become an exemplar of black chivalry. In still another he is an avatar of collective revenge, a gangster whose greatest insight lay in changing not his ways, but his targets. The layers, the contradictions, the sheer profusion of Malcolm X's public pronouncements have been a gift to seemingly every contemporary black artist and intellectual from Kanye and Corneli West.

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Witnessed Malcolm X's revival in the late 1980s and early '90s, bracketed by the rapper KRS-One's appropriation of Malcolm's famous pose by the window and Spike Lee's sprawling biopic. For those who'd grown up in hardscrabble inner cities, Malcolm X offered the promise of transcending the street. For those who'd been the only black kids in their classes, Malcolm's early and troubled interactions with his own white classmates provided comfort. For me, he embodied the notion of an individual made anew through his greater commitment to a broad black collective. When I first lived alone, at the age of 20, I purchased a giant black-and-white poster of Malcolm with the phrase No Sellout! scrawled at the top.

But my life grew in ways that did not adhere to slogans. Raised in de facto segregation, I was carried by my work into the mostly white world, and then to the blasphemies of having white friends and howling white music. In 2004, I moved to Malcolm's adopted home of Harlem, and though I occasionally marveled at Malcolm's old mosque at 116th and Lenox, or the YMCA where he roamed as an aspiring Harlem hustler, my years there passed without note. I declined to hang my giant Malcolm poster in my new digs, stuffing him and all my conscious days in the closet.

I spent Election Night 2008 with my partner and our son, at the home of two dear friends and their young son. That they were an interracial couple is both beside the point, and the point itself. By then, my friends were so varied in hue, and more varied still in their pairings, that I'd stopped thinking in ways I once took as elemental. I joined in the spectacle of America—a country that had incorporated the fact of African slavery into its Constitution—handing its standard to a black man of thin résumé and fantastical mien.

And the next day, I saw black people smiling. And some conscious part of me died with their smiles. I thought back on the debate running from Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass through Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and I knew a final verdict had been reached. Who could look on a black family that had won the votes, if not the hearts, of Virginia, Colorado, and North Carolina, waving to their country and bound for the White House, and seriously claim, as Malcolm once did, that blacks were not American?

The opportunity for crowing was not missed. Writing three weeks after the election in the New York Daily News, Stanley Crouch, the pupilist and contrarian who'd earlier argued that Obama was not black, dismissed Malcolm X as "one of the naysayers to American possibility whose vision was permanently crushed beneath the heel of Obama's victory on Nov. 4." Last year, offering up on The New Republic's Web site a listicle of those whose impact on black people he wished he could erase, John McWhorter gave Malcolm X the top spot.

But from the shadows, still he looms.
2008. Now I see its amazing doom in ways both absurd and replete—Will Smith's conquest of cinema, his son as the new Karate Kid, the wild utterings of Michael Steele, the kids holding out for Lauryn Hill's mythical return. As surely as 2008 was made possible by black people's long fight to be publicly American, it was also made possible by those same Americans' long fight to be publicly black. That latter fight belongs especially to one man, as does the sight of a first family bearing an African name. Barack Obama is the president. But it's Malcolm X's America.

In the spring of 1950, the Springfield Union, in Massachusetts, ran the following headline: "Local Criminals, in Prison, Claim Moslem Faith Now: Grow Beards, Won't Eat Pork, Demand East-Facing Cells to Facilitate 'Prayers to Allah.'" The leader of the protest was an incarcerated and recently converted Malcolm X. Having converted several other prisoners, Malcolm began lobbying the warden for cells and food befitting his band's religious beliefs. He threatened to write the Egyptian consulate in protest. Prison cooks retaliated by serving Malcolm's food with utensils they'd used to prepare pork. Malcolm countered by spending his last two years in prison on a diet of bread and cheese.

The incident, as recounted in Manning Marable's new biography, Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention, set the stage for Malcolm's political career, his split from the Nation of Islam, and ultimately the course of action that led to his death. The goal of his prison protest was to advance the kind of inner reform that first drew Malcolm to the Nation, with thousands to follow. But Malcolm's methods were protest and agitation, tools that the Nation rejected. Unlike Bruce Perry's 1991 biography, Malcolm, which entertained the most outlandish stories in an attempt to present a comprehensive portrait, Marable's biography judiciously sifts fact from myth. Marable's Malcolm is trapped in an unhappy marriage, cuckolded by one of his lieutenants. His indignation at Elijah Muhammad's womanizing is fueled by his morals, and by his resentment that one of the women involved is an old flame. He can be impatient and petulant. And his behavior, in his last days, casts a shadow over his reputation as an ascetic. He is at times anti-Semitic, sexist, and, without the structure of the Nation, inefficient.

Still, the broad strokes of Malcolm's life—the family terrorized by white supremacists, the murdered father, the turn from criminal to race man—remain intact, and Marable's book is at its best in drawing out its subject's shifting politics. Marable reveals Malcolm to be, in many ways, an awkward fit for the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad's Nation combined the black separatism of Marcus Garvey with Booker T. Washington's disdain for protest. In practice, its members were conservative, stressing moral reform, individual uplift, and entrepreneurship. Malcolm was equally devoted to reform, but he believed that true reform ultimately had radical implications.

Coming out of prison, Malcolm was shocked by the small membership of the Nation, which was seriously active only in Chicago and Detroit. He soon became the sect's most effective recruiter, organizing or reinvigorating mosques in Philadelphia, Boston, Atlanta, and New York. That dynamism was not confined to growing the Nation, but aimed to make it a force in the civil-rights movement.

His energy left him with a sprawling web of ties, ranging from the deeply personal (Louis Farrakhan) to the deeply cynical (George Lincoln Rockwell). He allied with A. Philip Randolph and Fannie Lou Hamer, romanced the Saudi royal family, and effectively transformed himself into black America's ambassador to the developing world.

It is tempting to say that Malcolm's politics did not age particularly well. Even after rejecting black supremacy, Malcolm was deeply skeptical of white America and believed its intentions could best be divined from the actions of its zealots. Malcolm had little patience for the politicking of moderates and preferred stark choices. A Manichean worldview extends from his days denouncing whites as devils up through his more nuanced speeches like "The Ballot or the Bullet."

But Marable complicates the case for firmly fixing Malcolm's ideology.
by recounting how, as Malcolm tried to move away from Nation dogma, the sect made a concerted effort to rein him in. Officials demanded that Malcolm and the other ministers tape all their lectures and submit them for approval, to make sure they were pushing Nation ideology as opposed to political appeals on behalf of a broader black America. They repeatedly reprimanded him for going off-script, including, finally, when he seemed to rebel in John F. Kennedy's murder. Muhammad's subsequent response suspending Malcolm reveals much about the group's aims and politics: "The president of the country is our president too."

To Marable's credit, he does not judge Malcolm's significance by his seeming failure to forge a coherent philosophy. As Malcolm traveled to Africa and the Middle East, as he debated at Oxford and Harvard, he encountered a torrent of new ideas, new ways of thinking that batted him back and forth. He never fully gave up his cynical take on white Americans, but he did broaden his views, endorsing interracial marriage and ruing the personal coldness he'd shown toward whites. Yet Malcolm's political vision was never complete like that of Martin Luther King, who hewed faithfully to his central principle, the one he is known for today—his commitment to nonviolence.

For all of Malcolm's prodigious intellect, he was ultimately more an expression of black America's heart than of its brain. Malcolm was the voice of a black America whose parents had borne the slights of second-class citizenship, who had seen protesters beaten by cops and bitten by dogs, and children bombed in churches, and could only sit at home and stew. He preferred to illuminate the bitter calculus of oppression, one in which a people had been forced to hand over their right to self-defense, a right enshrined in Western law and morality and taken as essential to American citizenship, in return for the civil rights that they had been promised a century earlier. The fact and wisdom of nonviolence may be beyond dispute—the civil-rights movement profoundly transformed the country. Yet the movement demanded of African Americans a superhuman capacity for forgiveness.

Dick Gregory summed up the dilemma well. "I committed to nonviolence," Marable quotes him as saying. "But I'm sort of embarrassed by it."

But the enduring appeal of Malcolm's message, the portion that reaches out from the Audubon Ballroom to the South Lawn, asserts the right of a people to protect and improve themselves by their own hand. In Malcolm's time, that message rejected the surrender of the right to secure your own body. But it also rejected black criminals' preying on black innocents. And, perhaps most significantly, it rejected the beauty standard of others and erected a new one. In a 1962 rally, Malcolm said:

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin?... Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind?

The implicit jab was not at some specific white person, but at a systemic force that compelled black people toward self-loathing. To my mother, a poor black girl, Malcolm X said, "It's okay. And you're okay." To embrace Malcolm X was to be okay, it was to be relieved of the mythical curse of Ham, and reborn as a full human being.

Virtually all of black America has been, in some shape or form, touched by that rebirth. Before Malcolm X, the very handle we now embrace—black—was an insult. We were coloreds or Negroes, and to call someone "black" was to invite a fistfight. But Malcolm remade the menace inherent in that name into something mystical—Black Power; Black Is Beautiful; It's a black thing; you wouldn't understand.

Hip-hop, with its focus on the assertion of self, the freedom to be who you are, and entrepreneurship, is an obvious child of black consciousness. One of the most popular music forms today, it is also the first form of pop music truly to bear the imprint of post-'60s America, with a fan base that is young and integrated. Indeed, the coalition of youth that helped Barack Obama ride to the presidency was first assembled by hip-hop record execs. And the stars that the music has produced wear their hair however they please.

For all of Malcolm's invective, his most seductive notion was that of collective self-creation: the idea that black people could, through force of will, remake themselves. Toward the end of his book, Marable tells the story of Gerry Fulcher, a white police officer, who—almost against his will—fell under Malcolm's sway. Assigned to wiretap Malcolm's phone, Fulcher believed Malcolm to be "one of the bad guys," interested in killing cops and overthrowing the government. But his views changed. "What I heard was nothing like I expected," said Fulcher. "I remember saying to myself, 'Let's see, he's right about that... He wants [blacks] to get jobs. He wants them to get education. He wants them to get into the system. What's wrong with that?'" For black people who were never given much of an opportunity to create themselves apart from a mass image of shufflers and mammies, that vision had compelling appeal.

What gave it added valence was Malcolm's own story, his incandescent transformation from an amoral wanderer to a hyper-moral zealot. "He had a brilliant mind. He was disciplined," Louis Farrakhan said in a speech in 1990, and went on:

I never saw Malcolm smoke. I never saw Malcolm take a drink... He ate one meal a day. He got up at 5 o'clock in the morning to say his prayers... I never heard Malcolm cuss. I never saw Malcolm wink at a woman... Malcolm was like a clock.

Farrakhan's sentiments are echoed by an FBI informant, one of many who, by the late 1950s, had infiltrated the Nation of Islam at the highest levels:

Brother Malcolm... is an expert organizer and an untiring worker... He is fearless and cannot be intimidated... He has most of the answers at his fingertips and should be carefully dealt with. He is not likely to violate any ordinances or laws. He neither smokes nor drinks and is of high moral character.

In fact, Marable details how Malcolm was, by the end of his life, perhaps
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 escaped away from his hyper-moral persona. He drinks a rum and Coke and allows himself a second meal a day. Marable suspects he carried out an affair or two, one with an 18-year-old convert to the Nation. But in the public mind, Malcolm rebirthed himself as a paragon of righteousness, and even in Marable's retelling he is obsessed with the pursuit of self-creation. That pursuit ended when Malcolm was killed by the very Muslims from whom he once demanded fealty.

But the self-created, martially disciplined Malcolm is the man who lives on. The past 40 years have presented black America through the distorting prism of crack, crime, unemployment, and skyrocketing rates of incarceration. Some of its most prominent public faces—Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, O. J. Simpson—have in varying degrees proved themselves all too human. Against that backdrop, there is Malcolm. Tall, gaunt, and handsome, clear and direct, Malcolm was what you wanted your son to be. Malcolm was, as Joe Biden would say, clean, and he took it as his solemn, unspoken duty never to embarrass you.

Among organic black conservatives, this moral leadership still gives Malcolm sway. It's his abiding advocacy for blackness, not as a reason for failure, but as a mandate for personal, and ultimately collective, improvement that makes him compelling. Always lurking among Malcolm's condemnations of white racism was a subtler, and more inspiring, notion—"You're better than you think you are," he seemed to say to us. "Now act like it."

Ossie Davis famously eulogized Malcolm X as "our living, black manhood" and "our own black shining prince." Only one man today could bear those twin honorifics: Barack Obama. Progressives who always enjoyed Malcolm's thundering denunciations more than his moral appeals are unimpressed by that message. But among blacks, Obama's moral appeals are warmly received, not because the listeners believe racism has been defeated, but because cutting off your son's PlayStation speaks to something deep and American in black people—a belief that, by their own hand, they can be made better, they can be made anew.
Like Malcolm, Obama was a wanderer who found himself in the politics of the black community, who was rooted in a nationalist church that he ultimately outgrew. Like Malcolm’s, his speeches to black audiences are filled with exhortations to self-creation, and draw deeply from his own biography. In his memoir, Barack Obama cites Malcolm’s influence on his own life:

His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me; the blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will. All the other stuff, the talk of blue-eyed devils and apocalypse, was incidental to that program, I decided, religious baggage that Malcolm himself seemed to have safely abandoned toward the end of his life.

Last summer, I moved from Harlem to Morningside Heights, a neighborhood around Columbia. It was the first neighborhood I’d ever lived in that was not majority black, and one of the few that could not properly be termed a “hood.” It has bars and restaurants on every corner, two different farmers’ markets, and a supermarket that’s open 24 hours and stays stocked with fresh vegetables. The neighborhood represents my new, fully cosmopolitan life.

I had spent the past two years in voracious reading about the Civil War. Repeatedly, I found myself confronting the kind of white Americans—Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, Adelbert Ames—that black consciousness, with some merit, would have dismissed. And yet I found myself admiring Lincoln, despite his diatribes against Negro equality; respecting Grant, despite his once owning a slave and his advocacy of shipping African Americans out of the country. If I could see the complexity in Grant or Lincoln, what could I see in Malcolm X?

And then I thought about the luxuries that I, and black people write large, today enjoy. In his Autobiography, Malcolm harks back to his time in middle school, when he was one of the top students in his school and made the mistake of telling his teacher he wanted to be a lawyer. “That’s no realistic goal for a nigger,” Malcolm’s teacher told him. Thinking back on that, Malcolm says,

My greatest lack has been, I believe, that I don’t have the kind of academic education I wish I had been able to get... I do believe that I might have made a good lawyer.

What animated Malcolm’s rage was that for all his intellect, and all his ability, and all his reinventions, as a black man in America, he found his ambitions ultimately capped. The right of self-creation had its limits then. But not anymore. Obama became a lawyer, and created himself as president, out of a single-parent home and illicit drug use.

And so it is for the more modest of us. I am, at my heart, a college dropout, twice kicked out of high school. Born out of wedlock, I, in turn, had my own son out of wedlock. But my parents do not find me blasphemous, and my mother is the first image of beauty I ever knew. Now no one questions my dark partner’s right to her natural hair. No one questions our right to self-creation. It takes a particular arrogance to fail to honor that, and instead to hold, as his most pertinent feature, the prejudices of a man whose earliest memories were of being terrorized by white supremacists, whose ambitions were dashed by actual racists, who was called “nigger” as a child so often that he thought it was his name.

When I finished unpacking my new apartment, I made one immediate change. I took my old Malcolm X poster out of the bubble wrap and affixed it to my living room’s western wall.

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