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Collecting to the Core: Malcolm X

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Malcolm X (1925-65) is an iconic political figure in African American history. At the time of his death, fifty years ago this month, he was widely reviled by the mainstream media and the general public as a purveyor of hate and violence, adored by a small following of activists, and largely alienated from a maturing civil rights movement. Yet within a few years of his death he was lionized by the growing Black Power movement, which belatedly recognized him as a prophet. In 1992 he was the subject of a Spike Lee film, and by 1999 he was honored by having his image placed on a U.S. postage stamp. Together, he has left a compelling and complex legacy.

Malcolm was born in the Midwest and moved to the East Coast as a young adult, where he lived the life of a low-level criminal. He spent six years in prison, where he converted to Islam as taught by Elijah Muhammad and joined the Nation of Islam ( NOI), which preached a version of Islam that was rooted in the African American experience and demonized whites, advocating for the separation of African Americans from white society. Released in 1952, he began his public ministry and quickly rose to prominence as the most well-known spokesperson of the NOI. During Malcolm's tenure the NOI grew exponentially, and he came to some prominence in the mainstream and African American press. His public activities and debates with civil rights leaders increasingly led him toward a political form of black nationalism and his decision to establish new religious and political organizations. The Autobiography was released shortly after Malcolm's death, with Alex Haley's final editing. Decades after Malcolm's assassination, a diary he kept chronicling his travels abroad in 1964 was found in a surviving family member's possession. The diary, which was published in 2013, provides an interesting chronicle of his trips, contacts, and public events while in Africa and the Middle East.

The first substantial biography was Peter Goldman's The Death and Life of Malcolm X. Goldman, a liberal journalist, reported on Malcolm during his life and had interviewed him several times. Goldman's book fills many gaps in the latter section of the Autobiography, using interviews to add depth and detail, particularly in the areas of Malcolm's relationships within the NOI, his travels abroad, his attempts to change political direction, and his assassination. The next significant biography was Bruce Perry's Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America. Through original research, Perry exposed numerous inconsistencies in the Autobiography, especially concerning Malcolm's youth and young adulthood. Perry also relied extensively on interview sources, including over 400 accounts. While thoroughly researched, Perry's biography was also criticized for some controversial conclusions, including speculations about Malcolm's sexual behavior. The third major biography of Malcolm X, which will likely remain unsurpassed for many years, is Manning Marable's Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention. Marable's work, which won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in history, was the result of more than thirty years of research. He used the Autobiography, previous biographies, an exhaustive list of interviews, government investigative reports, and Malcolm's diary — which had just become available but not yet published. Importantly, Marable placed Malcolm's life narrative in context with the democratic struggle of African Americans. Despite wide praise, Marable's posthumous work raised criticism from some scholars and activists. However, Marable's detailed research on Malcolm's life leaves little room for another complete biography — short of some unknown archive becoming available. Finally, PBS broadcast an “American Experience” episode on Malcolm's life, Malcolm X — Make It Plain, which is the most useful video on this topic, although it doesn't provide many details on his assassination, discuss the discrepancies of the Autobiography, or address subsequent research. Because Malcolm wrote very little, much of his political thought is examined through transcribed public speeches. The first collection, Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements, was published shortly after his assassination. It contains one interesting speech from his time in the NOI (“Message to the Grassroots”), which signals Malcolm's evolution from religion-based ideology to a philosophy aligned more with black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. It also includes the text from the press conference announcing his departure from the NOI; letters from his travels abroad; his first post-NOI speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” wherein he states his political claim to black nationalism and Pan-Africanism; and various speeches from his weekly OAAU meetings. The second major collection, published as Malcolm X: The Last Speeches, includes several speeches at predominately white universities, a few interviews, and two speeches during the last week of his life — one at an OAAU meeting and another at an African American church in Rochester, New York. Finally, there is February 1965: The Final Speeches. This collection attempts
to uncover all of Malcolm’s public events during the last month of his life. It includes speeches, press conferences, and interviews, together presenting the most complete picture of Malcolm’s evolving beliefs.

Two excellent analyses of Malcolm’s life and thought are found in Joe Wood’s Malcolm X: In Our Own Image and Robert Terrill’s Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X. Wood’s collection includes essays by Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, Cornel West, and John Edgar Wideman and covers topics such as the Autobiography, sexuality, black nationalism, and cultural politics. Terrill’s compilation includes more prominent scholars on topics including conservatism, the Black Arts movement, masculinity, feminism, and Afrocriticality. James Cone’s Martin and Malcolm and America was the first substantive attempt to provide a serious analysis of Malcolm’s political thought. Cone’s work compares Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr., concluding that although they are often counterposed, they are actually complementary in their vision for racial justice. William Sales’ From Civil Rights to Black Revolution is the only book-length study of the OAAU. Sales locates the OAAU in the context of a new type of civil rights organization and also examines Malcolm’s political thought.

For quick reference, the Malcolm X Encyclopedia contains short entries on nearly all aspects of Malcolm’s life and political activities. Each signed entry contains short bibliographies, and the encyclopedia also includes a chronology of Malcolm’s life and several introductory essays on his main speeches, relation to the NOI, and his assassination.

Malcolm X: A Research Site endeavors to be a comprehensive site on the life and legacy of Malcolm X. Launched by Abdul Alkalimat, professor of African American studies at the University of Illinois, it includes the text of two out-of-print bibliographies on Malcolm and listings of books, articles, dissertations, films, a weblog, and photos.

Malcolm X remains a captivating public figure, perhaps due in part to his polarizing and complex history. Works covering his experiences and ideological output may be found in collections supporting history, American studies, African American studies, literature, politics, and more. For students and readers seeking primary and secondary materials, the titles discussed here represent some of the most significant works on Malcolm X and provide insight into his life, thoughts, and legacy.

Endnotes

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.

A Website Review — The World Bank eLibrary
by Brandon James Lewter (College of Charleston) <lewterbj@cofc.edu>

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