

FIVE MALCOLMS, ONE ARCHIVE:
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S MALCOLM X PROJECT AND A HISTORY OF
NARRATIVE CO-OPTATION

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A THESIS

Submitted to Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Rhetoric and Writing

2011

ABSTRACT

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February 21, 2011 marked the 46th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X. Despite an almost incomprehensible amount of cross-disciplinary scholarship designed to analyze the monumental impact of the slain leader, recent work by Dr. Manning Marable suggests that it is actually only now, in the twenty-first century, that we can begin to conduct an honest assessment. The cause: a combination of critical and discursive narrative interventions on behalf of stakeholders vying for control over Malcolm X's legacy. In this thesis, I theorize deeply entrenched narrative constructions of Malcolm X *through* Dr. Marable's Malcolm X Project (a digital archive housed at Columbia University). As I argue throughout, the rhetorical power of co-opting narrative accounts of the life and legacy of Malcolm X holds the power to directly impact the public's perception of American race relations.

This thesis is a thought experiment geared toward two primary goals: 1) marking the multiple "Malcolms" in discursive practices manifested in material objects such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and 2) theorizing the relationships between them. What I want people to see in this exploration is what it was that changed me, and how interacting with multiple narrative constructions of Malcolm X produces radically different realities; multiplicitous stories of contemporary America that all seem to exist at the same time, antagonistically woven together. As such, this thesis is a collection of essays ruminating on the power of collective memory and its roles in making the present — as well as the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project represents an important transition for me. In the Spring of 2010 I committed myself to a (r)evolution of both my thinking and my writing. What you see here is the physical manifestation of this process. There is absolutely no way I could have done this alone. I would like to take this moment to recognize those who not only facilitated my transition, but also those who supported me intellectually and emotionally along the way.

First and foremost I would like to thank my committee, Malea Powell, Bill Hart-Davidson, and Julie Lindquist. Not only were you incredibly patient with me, you pushed and encouraged me to grow and hone my craft as a scholar. Without your expertise, guidance, and mentorship, I would not be evolving into the scholar I plan to be. Many of the strengths of this project stem from your teachings. I am the owner of all of it's shortcomings. Thank you.

Because I made this project, then made it again, and then again ad nauseam, I would also like to acknowledge the colleagues who helped me find my way along this journey. Madhu Narayan and Michael Wojcik, thank you both for reviewing drafts and pushing on my writing so much, so often, and so thoroughly. Douglas Walls, your mentorship and friendship means a great deal to me, and working/talking with you allowed me to make this project more times than I can count. And to all those in the MSU Rhetoric & Writing community who had to listen to me work through these ideas across four semesters in numerous classes, I appreciate the myriad ways you model good scholarship. I've learned so much just watching.

And finally, I want to thank my mother and father. Without your unconditional love and encouragement I would not be where I am, when I am, and how I am. You, above all, inspired me to walk this path.

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Introduction: Meeting Malcolm X

"When they want to suppress and oppress the Black community, what do they do? They take the statistics, and through the press, they feed them to the public. They make it appear that the role of crime in the Black community is higher than it is anywhere else..."

This is skill. This skill is called—this is a science that's called 'image making.' They hold you in check through this science of imagery" (Perry 162).

- Malcolm X, February 16, 1965

My memories of meeting Malcolm X are contained in two images. The first, a picture memorializing the slain leader. The second, a textual, two-paragraph account of his impact on America. Both of these images held me in check for a long time.

I met Malcolm X when I was 16 years old on a wall in my high school in Mason, Michigan. High school administrators paid an art student to paint a reproduced picture, which the school described as a mural, of the human rights activist. This image was powerful to me at first simply because I didn't understand why it was there. Why would the school put Malcolm X on this wall? The painting just seemed to materialize one day as I walked to lunch. I thought to myself, "why would a rural, mostly white town in the Midwest United States memorialize a person who fought for the rights of African Americans?" Other students shared this question, yet we did not receive a clear answer from our teachers other than "Malcolm had a large impact during the time of the civil rights legislation."

That same year I took the school's required U.S. history class for juniors. In the course textbook I recall the section describing the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.¹ I remember no more than a few paragraphs dedicated to telling the stories of the Montgomery Bus Boycott,

¹ My high school history education promptly stopped at the Vietnam War. I find this compelling considering I graduated high school in 2005. I've had to struggle to construct an understanding of the American social and political landscape for the last forty years: something I've come to recognize as fairly common in folks my age in college.

Rosa Parks, and the differences between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. The instructor made a point to dichotomize the philosophical differences of Martin and Malcolm: the good Reverend was a man of peace, and he helped the nation see reason in making more equality while Malcolm was just too violent. The textbook concluded peacefully that finally, after a long battle, African-Americans got their rights and now they have more constitutional protections.²

As Roland Barthes theorized, “myth is a language” (11). Myths function as language in that they provide a lens through which we interpret historical memory. We create them in order to convey interpretations of the present and past to others through story. I learned of Malcolm X for the first time through narrative constructions; both of which were evacuated of historical and social context by the authors who produced them. They were ‘images:’ in other words, representations. These representations remained with me until I met other “Malcolms;” moments of interaction where I was forced to negotiate the distance between multiple, varied narratives all describing the same context — “Malcolm X” — in radically different ways.

To this end I am interested in the processes by which Malcolm X has been made and remade in the service of stakeholder groups vying for control of Malcolm’s legacy in order to define race relations in the United States. Few, if any individuals in American history impacted race relations to the extent Malcolm X did through his words and leadership: let alone his life-after-death. With each “Malcolm” shaping the present for different ends and different people, the challenge lies in navigating the web of stories.

This thesis is a thought experiment geared toward two primary goals: 1) marking the multiple “Malcolms” in discursive practices manifested in material objects such as *The*

² Narrative historical accounts such as this are quite common in literature produced after the 1960s in America. A detailed account of this can be found in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* on page 40.

Autobiography of Malcolm X, and 2) theorizing the relationships between them. What I want people to see in this exploration is what it was that changed me, and how interacting with multiple narrative constructions of Malcolm X produce different realities; multiplicitous stories of contemporary America that all seem to exist at the same time, antagonistically woven together. This project is a collection of essays ruminating on the power of collective memory and its roles in making the present – as well as the future. I locate the processes of Malcolm X myth-making in deeply entrenched narrative constructions, spread across time.

The Origins of This Project

I like to think that this research chose me. It didn't; but it certainly *feels* that way. My work here is the culmination of six years of experiences misrecognized, then reinterpreted through one location: The Malcolm X Project (MXP), a digital archive housed at Columbia University in New York City. I first started considering working with the Malcolm X Project in the Spring of 2010. In the first year of my MA degree in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing at Michigan State University, I spent a lot of time considering what type of project I would like to approach for a thesis.

I learned of Marable's online project a year prior while in an undergraduate capstone seminar focused on socialism and race in American politics and thought. I initially chose the MXP for two primary reasons: 1) Malcolm X's legacy was foundational to the vast majority of Black radical projects after his assassination, and 2) Dr. Marable's work/vision for the archive serves as a unique example of the affordances of interactivity in digital archival spaces. I thought to myself, what better way to combine my interests in politics, cultural rhetorics, and digital rhetorics than to examine Manning Marable's groundbreaking digital archive project and its contributions almost a decade after its creation?

In the summer of 2010 I began critically assessing the MXP in a graduate seminar exploring historical methodologies in rhetoric studies. I quickly noticed that my working knowledge of African American radical projects and their relationships to institutionalization — a common theme in traditions of resistance — was not only represented in the archive, but presented to me in a new way. This is because I couldn't escape the foundational tension I saw inherent in a story of Malcolm X, a radical Black activist critical of institutional powers and white supremacy, existing as the primary focus of an institutionally funded/supported/maintained preservation project at Columbia University. What could explain this contradiction? How might the MXP impact our understanding of African American politics and history in light of that contradiction? As I know now, I was asking the wrong questions, looking for something that wasn't quite there.

Theoretical Framework

My work in examining narrative constructions of Malcolm X through the MXP at Columbia University reflects a deeply introspective, yet socio-historically situated investigation. The methodology for this investigation, which I describe as a “pedagogy of self,” features a variety of methods geared toward navigating the distance between my lived experience and the scholarly assessment of the histories from which I draw my analysis. Thus, I conduct an external assessment of large, operationalized systems of thought *through* my experience, theorizing ideological persuasion enacted by the former.

A Pedagogy of Self

I understand this thesis as the story of how my own story taught me to look in such a way that could teach other people. Drawing this conclusion about my own research and work is the result of being asked and deeply considering the question, “why are *you* interested in Malcolm

X?” I’ve had to answer questions like this in many different contexts over the years, but considering it next to my site of research for the thesis, The Malcolm X Project, begged me to think of my story in a new way. The structure and content of the essays that follow this introduction reflect the interplay and slippage between a chronological charting of my engagement with Malcolm X in the twenty-first century and my analysis of the archive, which inevitably shaped the way I tell the stories now. This has been no easy task.

Through story I share my insights into histories of Malcolm X’s narrative co-optation. I use two primary strategies to assemble my story, or research “myself.” The first strategy I employ is a systematic recounting of when/how I met multiple “Malcolms.” I derived the structure of this thesis from this process. I write introspectively to this end in order to provide the foundation to see *how* narrative constructions of Malcolm X actively shaped my own thinking as I encountered them. From here I identify what in the story indicates my being persuaded by one/all narrative “Malcolms” at a given moment in my life. And through my rhetorical reading of the MXP archive, which I describe in detail shortly, I trace that persuasion to a historical source in the form of one of five narrativised “Malcolms.”

The second strategy I use involves assessing all available traces of information at my disposal indicative of my intellectual trajectory since entering college. I do this to evidence the effects of encountering multiple, varied accounts of Malcolm X’s legacy and impact depending on whose narrative you encounter. To achieve this in the essays that follow, I poured over my personal records of course syllabi, my writing from the previous six years, instructor comments, research notes from previous projects, and organizational documents and presentations from the student groups I was involved in. From these documents I offer you insight into how my thinking and performance changed over time as I met new “Malcolms.”

Radical pedagogy is defined by the request for a students' self reflection on the effects/locations of ideological persuasion in their inner lives (Giroux 150). Using the previous two strategies built from my construction of self, I engage in a dialogic between critical self reflection and my rhetorical reading of the Malcolm X Project.

“Reading” the MXP

In this thesis I identify five primary narrative constructions of Malcolm X. I chose these five “Malcolms” in relation to key historical moments in African American history. All are presented in the archive itself. I developed a heuristic diagram out of my historical analysis, presented here:

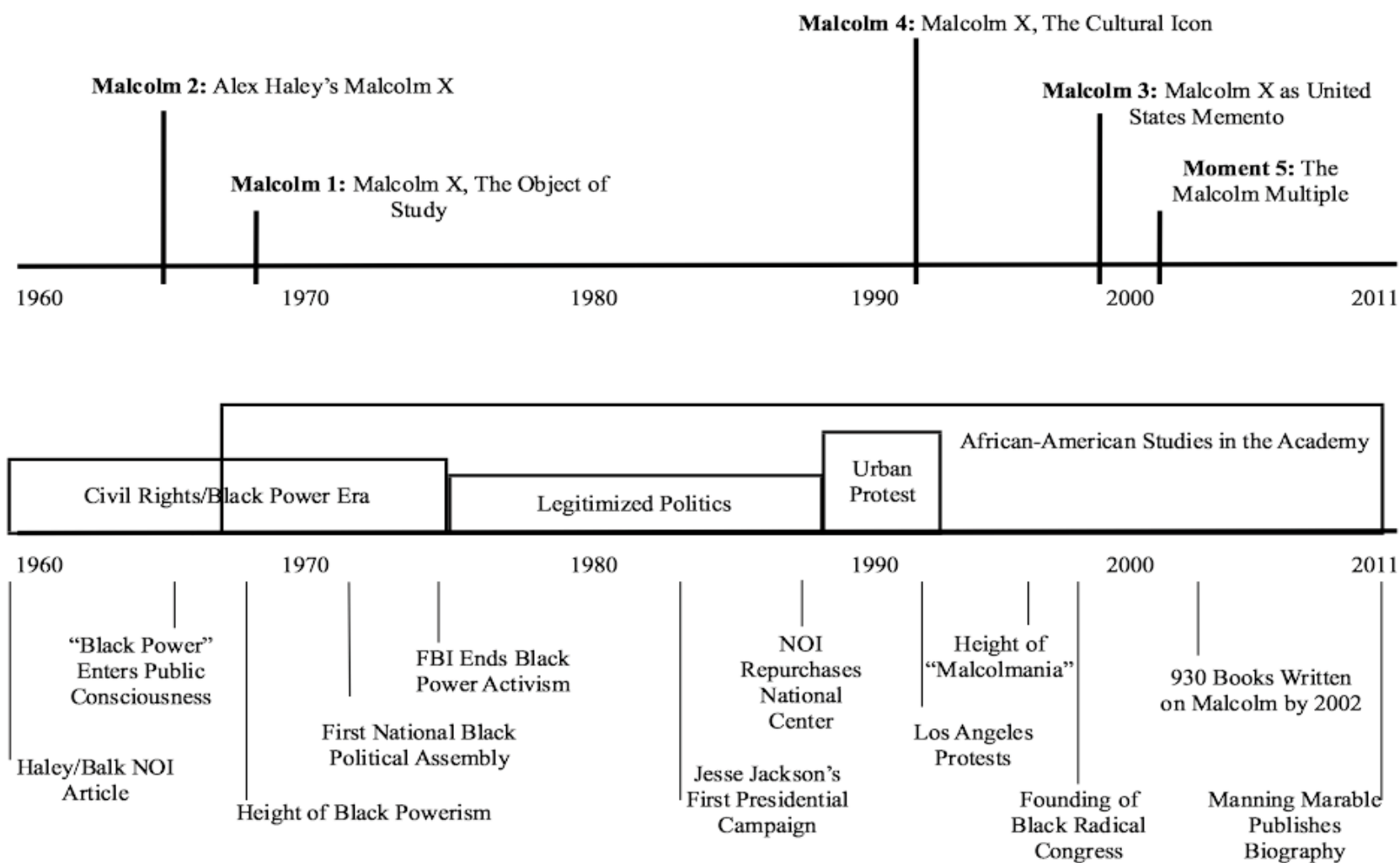


Figure 1: Historiographical Chart of Malcolm X Narratives

This diagram features two levels of analysis. Across the bottom part of the diagram, you will notice I present a chronological chart detailing historical moments relevant to Malcolm X from the original Haley & Balk article in 1960 to the publication of Marable's biography in 2011. Atop these singular moments are "blocked" eras commonly identified in political analyses in African American Studies, including the eras of protest, legitimate politics, urban unrest, and the historical trajectory of African American Studies itself. I orient this bottom half of the chart with the top half, which features the five "Malcolms" whose narratives I trace in this project.

You should observe quickly that the numerical ordering does not follow the same left to right pattern as the chronological charting. I chose this ordering because, as I argue throughout the text, the multiple narrative constructions of Malcolm X intertwine in ways that invite a cyclical, or recursive ordering. For example, Malcolm 1 and Malcolm 2 (Malcolm, the Object of Study and Alex Haley's Malcolm) evidence a complicated relationship in the history of narrative co-optation of Malcolm X. The birth of African American Studies in 1968, which I mark as the origin of "Malcolm 2," comes before "Malcolm 1," or the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, because there is no legitimate study of Malcolm X if there is no African American Studies to explore it. The media's portrayal of Malcolm X immediately following his assassination deeply impacted the American public's perception of the leader, painting him as a demagogue and racist.¹

Malcolm 3 and Malcolm 4, however, are more difficult to suss out. Malcolm 3, whom I identify alongside the United States Postal Service's 1999 commemorative stamp, is a narrative construction fought for by the United States government dating back to the political history of Haley's first article on Malcolm in 1960. Even before Malcolm was murdered, the United States government actively sought to commandeer the public image of Malcolm X. I locate Malcolm 3

¹ See Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* pp. 451-456 for a comprehensive discussion of the media's treatment of Malcolm post-assassination.

alongside the stamp because this was the first time the United States government officially recognized Malcolm X as a civil rights hero: an initiative that many activists and scholars of Malcolm's life are suspicious of. Yet Malcolm 3 seems to emerge in relation to, but ultimately *through* the big cultural production push of the late 1980s into the 1990s: marked most importantly in Spike Lee's 1992 film, *Malcolm X*. Both of these "Malcolms" represent strategic narrative constructions of Malcolm X designed to do work for stakeholder groups, whether it be the U.S. government desiring a collective story of healing and progress or revolutionists/capitalists taking up Malcolm's image in a commodification of the leader.

The Malcolm X Project, or the presentation of the "Malcolm Multiple" (Malcolm 5), provides the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue surrounding the many mythological creations of multiple "Malcolms," not to mention how these interwoven narratives conceal the deepest, most destabilizing power in the rhetorics of Malcolm X. This is where the weight of my project lies, for it is the space from which I came to understand the constellation of multiple "Malcolms."

To explore this complex set of relationships in the archive, I conduct a rhetorical reading of the Malcolm X Project. This component of my thesis, performed in the fifth essay to follow, features a "user analysis" from the perspective of someone engaging with multiple "Malcolms" simultaneously within the MXP. I walk through the steps of exploring the digital archival space feature by feature. In relation to my Pedagogy of Self, I read the archive *through* my own stories by identifying how the components evidence the relationships I identify between/among narrative constructions of Malcolm X. The "Malcolm Multimedia" component, for example, suggests a relationship between government documentation of surveilling Malcolm alongside video interviews of scholars and friends of Malcolm X. In this way, the MXP invites users to

challenge interpretations of Malcolm X's legacy/impact in one space.

On Narratives

Through the archive / I theorize *narrative*. To create a narrative is to accumulate a collection of stories designed for a predetermined purpose. The five "Malcolms" I've chosen all carry a contested, political weight even today as scholarship on Malcolm X continues to accumulate. Within three months of the publication of Marable's biography, hundreds of book reviews appeared in publications ranging from the New York Times all the way to informal email listservs such as H-Net Afro-American Studies, edited by Abdul Alkalimat. Clearly the struggle over interpreting/manipulating Malcolm X's life-after-death is far from over, and Manning Marable's Malcolm X Project presents us with an opportunity to engage the multiple interpretations/narrative constructions in one place.

In 2001, Peniel Joseph, a historian of African America, published a widely discussed article examining an increase in scholarly and activist re-conceptualizations of the Black Power era. Joseph theorizes that the newly focused inquiry into the Civil Rights/Black Power era is a result of the fact that until "only recently have important papers of key activists been archived and made accessible" (2). For Marable's case, much of the research he sought to answer some of his most pressing questions remained on hold, leaving him waiting for the government to release surveillance records and files on Malcolm X, which did not occur until the early twenty-first century. Such a historical omission has without question deeply impacted narrative constructions of Malcolm X across the last fifty years. Thus, the areas Marable isolated for scholarly exploration to make sense of manipulations of Malcolm X fall into four categories: 1) the organizations in which Malcolm played a major role, 2) government documents detailing their surveillance of the slain leader, 3) protected documents belonging to Alex Haley regarding the

Autobiography, and 4) the family of Malcolm X, who still hold a number of his personal and legal documents/effects (Marable “Rediscovering” 29). Culminating his more than two decades of research, Manning Marable constructed the Malcolm X Project to serve as a publicly accessible house for the materials Dr. Marable and his team could compile. Thus I recognize the digital archive as an essential evolution in the narrative creation of Malcolm X. With that said, let us now move on to explore multiple “Malcolms” and the impact of the Malcolm X Project, an environment that encourages the assemblage of those multiple narratives in one place.

Chapter 1: Malcolm X, the Object of Study

“African American Studies ought to be of interest to anyone seeking to understand the world’s most powerful nation. In order to fully understand the United States, it is imperative that we also comprehend the political and cultural traditions created by a population that has consistently challenged it to live up to its democratic ideals and principles, while at the same time offering the world a vision of hope and freedom through a dynamic culture that is universal” (Griffin ix).
- Ford Foundation Statement, 2006

The authority in telling the complicated story of Malcolm's life and death primarily falls in the hands of scholars working within American universities over the last fifty years. As of 2002, scholars produced more than 900 books, 360 films/educational resources, and 350 sound recordings focused on the life and impact of Malcolm X (Marable “Rediscovering” 26). The point here is that there is no “legitimated” Malcolm X without a field of study *in* the academy where scholars can assess multiple understandings of Malcolm; but also there is no “legitimated” field of African American Studies without the foundations and corporations who sponsored its birth in the 1960s. Between these two realities is a contested, hotly debated history of the meaning/impact of the origins of African American Studies.² Deeply entrenched in the politics of this history, I heard Malcolm for the first time.

The First Time I Heard Malcolm X

The first time I *heard* Malcolm X was in the very first year of my college experience at Michigan State University. I was 18 years old in a required freshman writing class. The teacher builds a course focused on race, rhetoric, and American culture. I feel captivated, particularly when we started reading Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I remember thinking back immediately to when I saw that mural in high school because it was powerful for me to enter this

² For an introduction to this debate, see the works of Noliwe Rooks in *White Money/Black Power* (2006), Fabio Rojas in *Black Power to Black Studies* (2007), And the works of Manning Marable and Ron Karenga in the *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (June 1988).

class in college, where I am studying these academic texts and feeling the need to impress the teacher. I decide I want to deal with big social issues. I start reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and notice the first few chapters are all focused on Malcolm's words talking about growing up in the Midwest. He was born in Omaha, Nebraska, but he spent a significant amount of time in Lansing and Mason (two cities in central Michigan). I think it was reading his words in this autobiography that made me realize, "somebody came from Mason?!" Nobody ever told me. So I developed an early attachment to him partially because, geographically speaking, we have an intriguing commonality.

But hearing him for the first time was powerful for me because it was different to hear him argue, as opposed to listening to what people *think* about what he said. Malcolm didn't speak like I thought he would. My high school textbook explained to me that he was a violent man, a threat to equality in America. He didn't even tell the stories about Mason I thought he would. Instead, the first few chapters now remind me of Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*; Malcolm X is lifting a veil between the experiences he had as an Afro-American man in Lansing/Mason and those that I have as a white male. He speaks to me out of what I see as reasonable critiques of power in the U.S. Even when he is talking about white devils throughout the book, I realize that I have my own stories where I met white devils.³

Malcolm talks extensively about his early experiences of being othered: talked about as a nigger by the very white people taking care of him. I read these words and think back to my childhood. Even now when I go to the bar, or when I'm around some of my family/extended family, I hear how white people talk *about* African-Americans. I hear people hating President

³ I am aware of two primary experiences I've heard white people describe when learning about Malcolm. The first is Malcolm coming across as a racist, a demagogue, and a danger to America. The second is of Malcolm X, a man who spoke out against inequality and was assassinated for speaking truth to power. In my own experience, the first perception is much more common.

Obama for being Black. I hear people telling stories about the "bad parts" of Lansing using coded, racialized language. Race seems so central to the ways people think despite the countless narratives that try to convince me otherwise. So I understand what Malcolm X was saying in the *Autobiography* not because I experienced institutional racism in my body, but because I can see it, just as Malcolm described it. I grew up seeing the effects of institutional racism; I just didn't understand until I developed a language to describe it.

But the fact of the matter is that I heard Malcolm for the first time *in college*, in the academy, where Malcolm exists as an Object of study. I am fascinated by this narrative because my exposure to African American radicalisms in particular germinated in the safety of academe's walls. Violence and protest birthed African American radicalism into the university system to begin with, and that story begins more than forty-five years *before* I enter college (Rojas 1).

Institutionalizing a Narrative

In the academy, Malcolm is something to be studied. We can look *at* him to understand many aspects of the American social and political landscape since his death. For example, in returning to Figure 1 on page 7, we can draw connections between the moment African American Studies begins in the late 1960s and the end of grass-roots Black Power radicalism.

In 1966, one year after Malcolm's assassination, the first public utterance of the slogan "Black Power" leaves the lips of Willie Ricks and Stokely Carmichael, organizers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (Ogbar 62). Demanding that Black people "abandon pleas for white acceptance" and adopt a more radical strategy, the organizers encourage the crowd attending the rally to chant "Black Power." This makes national news, just as Malcolm's inflammatory remarks often did. On the west coast, at approximately the same

time, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton are building the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Two years later, at the height of Black Powerism across the country, the Ford Foundation begins constructing a plan to fund a “complication-free birth and life of African American Studies on college campuses” under the guidance of McGeorge Bundy, the former national security advisor of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (Rooks 1). American universities start to address public and activist pressure to establish African American Studies by building programs using Ford Foundation money. By 1969, all major funding institutions prohibit the distribution of money to any separatist Black Power entity (Rooks 95). Within six years Black Power radicalism effectively disappears as a result of governmental pressure, violence, and incarceration.

This series of moments initiates a trend of legitimized, institutionally supported study of Malcolm X and race relations/radicalism in the United States. While Black Power activists engineer organizations and movements to carry on the legacy of Malcolm X’s radicalism, the Ford Foundation controls the ideological “engineering” of Black radicalism in the university, where it can grow as a field of study instead of a practical project. However, as Marable noted in his 2005 *Souls* article, the vast majority of scholarship on Malcolm X has been written with a treatment of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a central document (26). This raises serious concern, particularly considering the extensive criticism of Haley's troubling relationship with the authorship of the book. Alex Haley’s “Malcolm X” functions in relation to, but still separate from, the narrative construction of “Malcolm X, the Object of Study.”

Chapter 2: Alex Haley's Malcolm X

“And in no time can you understand the problems between Black and white people here in Rochester or Black and white people in Mississippi or Black and white people in California, unless you understand the basic problem that exists between Black and white people—not confined to the local level, but confined to the international, global level on this earth today.

When you look at look at it in that context, you'll understand. But if you only try to look at it in the local context, you'll never understand. You have to see the trend that is taking place on this earth. And my purpose for coming here tonight is to try and give you as up-to-date an understanding of it all as possible” (Perry 95).

- Malcolm X, February 16, 1965

I don't believe that what Malcolm X argues about America and global oppression is very different from what other people in the long history of Black radicalism have argued. What is different about Malcolm specifically is the level of impact he had both nationally and internationally as an intellectual and an activist. His status as a representative is related to the power of his rhetoric. His rhetorical command is what persuaded me the first time I encountered it. There is just something powerful about *how* he said things. It wasn't because he was the leader of the United States' largest, most outspoken Black nationalist organization in the 1950s and 1960s. He was a leader in the Nation of Islam, and later in the Organization for Afro-American Unity and Muslim Mosque, Inc. *because* he practiced powerful, dangerous, destabilizing rhetorics. However, some of the most potent demonstrations of this remain inaccessible/hidden as a result of Alex Haley's making of Malcolm X.

The First Time I Understood Malcolm X: Part I

At roughly the same moment I chose my scholarly focus on race and identity as an undergraduate, I understood Malcolm for the first time. When I related with his critiques and saw them as powerful, I felt compelled to learn more and do more about such an obviously (to me) overlooked rift in American society. Structural racism had been around me my whole life, and I was even implicated in it to some degree as a white person NOT combating it. I recognized, as a

sophomore in college, a growing critical awareness of power structures in the United States: the very structures that Malcolm X, Howard Zinn, and Assata Shakur described to me through their stories in my first year writing class. Stories like these persuaded me that institutional racism is a primary factor in creating a common experience for groups of people throughout American history. I got interested in studying identity politics around this time because I was persuaded that people *make* identities, often times in relation to the actions of the powerful.⁴ I saw this happen across stories, across narratives. The patterns seemed to be everywhere.

I see Malcolm's critiques most in the final chapters of the *Autobiography*. He's being wire tapped illegally? The government can do that? And nobody is really concerned? Is it right because he actually *was* threatening to the functionality of American democracy in the 1960s? Or is there a deep fundamental problem in the fabric of American democracy, evidenced in Malcolm's stories, born out of *illegally* conducting violence against citizens to *maintain* public stability? That is the story of Black Power, isn't it? The FBI's Counter Intelligence Program and illegal police involvement. How can people not see this implicates most of the American population? Why aren't we dealing with these contradictions?! These are the questions writhing in my head to this day.

When I first *understood* Malcolm I changed the way I thought about the *Autobiography* and those stories. I went to see the instructor of my first year writing class regularly outside of class. I remember one time he asked, "why are you here in college?" I told him, "for personal growth. I am interested in philosophy and politics." I was shocked when he laughed because I

⁴ Here I am talking about identity construction as resistance. Institutional racism, for example, sparked identities of resistance among people of color and women, as they shared a common oppressor (consciously or not). But institutional racism *also* sparked a culture of colorblindness for those who did/do not resist such power structures, no matter the race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

think he was poking at me to locate a purpose in the work I was doing. "You came here for personal growth," he tells me, "but you're not talking about things related to your personal growth. You might understand oppression better, but what are you doing IN this world?" Never before had I been asked a question like this.

And so at the same moment that I'm starting to understand Malcolm for the first time I changed my understanding of what it means to get an education. Perhaps more importantly, *why* I'm getting this education. I asked this of myself for the first time *in* college, not before. I've tried for years to untangle where I locate the origins of the oversight to deeply question the nature of the work I would do in the world prior to college. On one hand I inhabit a white, male body, which gives me access to a number of privileges so long as I don't question them too deeply. But on the other, I moved through a public education system where teachers tracked⁵ me for college: I remember being placed in advanced reading groups, given extra help and encouragement where I noticed some of my peers weren't. This question of practical *use* for an education bothered me because it implied an expectation to mark myself ideologically. How could I "just go out and get a job" when a complicated systematic matrix of oppression — to borrow Patricia Hill Collins' phrase — swirled around me at every level of imagination and reality? I feel and see racism all around me because of the stories I encountered: stories like Malcolm's.

The Powers In/Of the Autobiography of Malcolm X

I shifted from *reading* Malcolm X's words to *exploring* what it means for me to recognize AND side with his story. This process is what made me want to reproduce my experience in the world. This is precisely where the power of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* lies: in a process

⁵ By this I mean to connote the practice of charting trajectories for students. Vocational vs. academic, career center vs. college, etc. I see this as a practice of structural determinism — to borrow a term from Critical Race Theory — meaning structural mechanisms in society have a deep role in determining one's life chances. The question here, then, would be *HOW*.

of mediation between reader's experiences and Malcolm's. Just "touching" Malcolm's worldview is contagious for countless people around the world, regardless of race. And Alex Haley was more than aware of this power in Malcolm's rhetoric. In June of 1964, roughly eight months before Malcolm's assassination, Haley implored Malcolm to exercise caution. In a letter, Haley writes, "I sometimes think that you do not really understand what will be the effect of this book. There has never been, at least not in our time, any other book like it. Do you realize that to do these things you will have to be *alive*?" (Marable *Life* 352). Haley was clearly very concerned about Malcolm's safety as excerpts from the autobiography appeared in editorials and magazines prior to the final publication.

The co-authored *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is in many ways **the** definitive narrative account of Malcolm's life and legacy, supposedly written in Malcolm's own words. This book sold millions of copies worldwide. And Alex Haley published the final manuscript *after* Malcolm's assassination, without the Subject's consent, omitting three chapters detailing Malcolm's ideology and vision at the end of his life. With this in mind, key scholars, including Marable in his 2011 biography, push back on the *Autobiography's* legitimacy now.⁶ If there is contention surrounding the authenticity of Malcolm's stories and voice in the *Autobiography*, and there is growing evidence that Haley shaped the work more than both scholars and activists previously considered, then what does this say about ways that Malcolm's image has been taken up *from* the "co-authored" text?

To question the validity of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* entails destabilizing THE

⁶ In 2010, the journal *Souls* produced an entire issue release on Malcolm X. See Garret A. Felber's article, "'A Writer is What I Want, Not an Interpreter': Alex Haley and Malcolm X—Conceiving the Autobiographical Self and the Struggle for Authorship," *Souls*, vol. 12, issue 1, pp. 33-53 (2010). Alternatively, consult Manning Marable's 2011 biography, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* pp. 1-14.

public record and perception of the life and legacy of Malcolm X. Once again, the vast majority (with only a few exceptions) of the scholarship on Malcolm X was written with a treatment of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a central, primary document. That's myriad debates/discussions/lectures all based on a narrative construction of Malcolm X that is highly unstable, and questionably accurate. When we magnify that to consider all the readers, including myself, who initially took this book at face value as an autobiography, we can begin to see the rippling effect of this image of Malcolm X constructed in narrative. But scholars are not the only community engaging in (re)presentations of Malcolm X. Haley's "Malcolm" is but one of many.

As we move to the following "Malcolms," pay close attention to the ways in which each narrative interacts with and relies upon others.

Chapter 3: Malcolm X as United States Memento

“Excellence: Believe in It.”

*- Excerpt from United States Postal Service
Commemorative Malcolm X Poster*

I often think back to my experience reading the narrativized account of Malcolm X in my high school history class. I think of it every time I teach writing, where I often ask students to engage themes such as Critical Race Theory and African American radicalism. Ever since I encountered these themes myself as a freshman in college I have grown more aware of the ideological power of (re)producing narratives of Malcolm’s life and impact. The reproductions I encountered in my experience alone reflect a variety of re-purposed rhetorical narrative accounts of Malcolm X, including the mural on the wall at Mason High School. But the ideologically defanged “Malcolm” Alex Haley created in the *Autobiography*, and the Objectified “Malcolm” produced in the academy are only part of the bigger picture. Through both of these narratives, national and public memory constructs yet another, differently mobile “Malcolm.” Malcolm as United States Memento. I’ll begin with a story.

The United States Postal Service introduces a commemorative stamp dedicated to Malcolm X on January 20, 1999. The event, held at Harlem's Apollo Theatre, features approximately 1,500 public officials, celebrities, and specially invited guests (Marable *Living* 147).⁷ This moment is crucial because it is the first time the United States government officially emblemizes the slain leader for his contributions to American society. Unless of course you count Black History Month, which happens to occur in the same month that commemorates the assassination.

⁷ At the event, Ossie Davis, in a tongue-in-cheek criticism, characterized the commemoration in stating, “We in this community look upon this commemorative stamp finally as America’s stamp of approval” (Marable *Living* 147).

A moment such as this hints at a larger narrative trend of memorializing (or not) Malcolm X's life and impact. It implies *how* Malcolm is re-assembled in the present to shape collective understandings of the past. What better way to discourage and demonize radical dreams — such as those dreamt by Malcolm — than to co-opt/commandeer Malcolm's narrative in the service of incremental change? Malcolm is much less of a threat to the public imagination of democratic equality when he is but a story *within* a narrative of progress: a story of how “the nation” fixed the race problem in the 1960s. But that narrative unfolds in a different way if we assume a radical Black perspective on the issue: one where a commemorative stamp represents a continuing political battle over Malcolm's impact into the twenty-first century.

The difference between these two perspectives could mean the difference between *feeling* content with America's progress today and *seeing* the continued validity of Malcolm X's critiques a half century after his death. The latter is my perspective, but I don't deny that is a product of my experiences in and between narrative constructions of Malcolm X. What I am concerned about here is the effect of only knowing/learning one narrative construction of Malcolm X without an awareness of multiple “Malcolms” out doing work in the world.

For example, Mason, Michigan's commemoration of Malcolm X — a nationally recognized leader and civil rights advocate — lives on a wall in the town's high school in the form of student artwork. Omaha, Nebraska commemorated Malcolm's national significance by placing a historical marker at the Little family's home from the few years they lived there prior to coming to Michigan. The only other major memorial dedicated to Malcolm X lives at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, where Malcolm was murdered. And that was *almost* a lost opportunity for the nation, had it not been for Manning Marable, the Shabazz family, community activists, and Columbia University students and faculty in their efforts two decades ago.

According to Marable in *Living Black History*, Columbia University and the City of New York reached an agreement in 1983 to demolish the historic Audubon in order to construct a medical research facility (125-126). Here politicians, community activists, scholars, and investors battled over the future of the spatial politics of Northern Manhattan during a time of economic strife for New York City's underrepresented groups. Despite plans in 1995 for the Chase Manhattan Bank — housed on the first floor of the Audubon — to pay the rent for the memorial center, the city stalled plans to complete construction and permit the center to open.⁸ Finally, in May of 2005, after decades of struggle, the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial Center officially opened.

Critical race theorists would characterize this story as a classic case of interest convergence: the city and local power structure would not acknowledge the legitimacy of a memorial for Malcolm X unless it directly benefitted them. From 1983 to 2005, this was a story about economic and industrial development. After May 19, 2005, this became a triumph of African America's racial legacy. Look once again at our charting of "Malcolms" in Figure 1 on page 7. Notice the central role that narratives of Malcolm X play in a case such as this. Between the chronological mapping on the bottom of the diagram and the "Malcolm" narratives on top, we can see relationships between stakeholder creations of Malcolm X and social/political events in American history; relationships such as the "height of Malcolmania" and the U.S. Postal Service's co-optation of Malcolm as a civil rights hero.

Even though activists eventually achieved their goal of opening the memorial center, New York City can claim the Audubon as a remembrance of a slain civil rights activist. Which Malcolm lives on from this context? In this I see a heavy interaction between more than one

⁸ Manning Marable was not aware of the battle over the Audubon until 1999, when Ilyasah Shabazz, Malcolm and Betty's third oldest daughter, came to him asking for institutional help.

narrative of “Malcolm” when it comes to formally memorializing him. Yet, mirroring the United States government’s selective and limited perspective on Malcolm, cultural productions on behalf of scholars and activists also generate a problematic figure: “Malcolm X, the Cultural Icon.” He is a figure who is taken up in similarly troubling ways, but for different purposes.

Chapter 4: Malcolm X, the Cultural Icon

“The book that the script was based on for Spike Lee’s film Malcolm X, a major motion picture from Warner Bros.”

- Book Cover Advertisement from the 1992 Edition of The Autobiography of Malcolm X

In *Stirring the Jug* (1999), Adolph Reed, Jr. articulates a growing (re)discovery of Malcolm X present in the 1990s: a re-visitation observed among those who were alive during the 1960s cycle of protest as well as those born decades after Malcolm’s assassination. This “Malcolmania,” as Reed phrases it, is highly emblematic and representative of a larger historical trend to preserve, or reproduce images of African American rebellion *after* the struggles of “symbolic politics” in the 1980s. Much of this production, coupled with the large-scale historical events of the time, indicate a heightened generation of narrative “Malcolms” emerging in the 1990s. This tradition, where Malcolm X is a cultural icon emblematic of revolution and resistance, is the tradition I first emulated as an activist. As I mentioned previously, when I first *understood* Malcolm (in the twenty-first century, mind you) I changed the way I thought about the *Autobiography* and those stories. But I didn’t only change my thinking, I also changed the way I *acted*.

The First Time I Understood Malcolm: Part II

It is the junior year of my Bachelor’s degree. I am reading countless materials from radical Black and Marxist authors as a method of impacting the classes I’m in. Few of my student peers, let alone teachers, entertain the questions I have about what to me are glaring contradictions in narratives of American history. I feel compelled to educate myself further so that I may show others what I see using theoretical critiques accompanied by my knowledge of historical events. My chosen vehicle to both learn and teach this: student activism.

I remember joining Michigan State University's student chapter of the W. E. B. Du Bois Society that same year. As an organization geared toward reshaping the political landscape of our college/university in the tradition of Du Bois, we engaged in a number of public demonstrations and educational events. As a panelist for an event contemplating "Passive Resistance vs. Armed Self-Defense," I delivered a presentation on the Black Panther Party. I quoted Malcolm. I quoted Panthers. I showed images of resistance and radical identity building. I showed narrative account of the United States from what I learned from the eyes of oppressed peoples; eyes I encountered in books. I made my case from my perspective, a white, working class male in college during the twenty-first century.

I look back on this and see something crucial in my participation that I didn't see then: evidence of reproducing a narrative of Malcolm X. Not only reproducing, but *furthering* an image of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, born from Haley's "Malcolm," uprooted and repurposed as an emblem of activist resistance: of radical action performed in the relative comfort of the academy. A place where many ideas can come together. Not the place where radical bodies are literally brutalized for reproducing ideology. I was appropriating, with good intention, an image of Malcolm X to inspire the people around me to share my perspective.

The tendency for me to pick up Malcolm X in this way is strong, because to *claim* Malcolm X, as the radical Black organizations did, as the United States government did, as too many scholars did, is to claim some level of rhetorical/ethical prowess in Malcolm's wake. His life-after-death is *made* to work for causes, as he himself worked through re-inventions in life. But the tendency to pick him up as a reaction, or impulse, is perhaps represented best in the era of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*.

Cultural Production of Malcolm X

As is advertised on the cover of the latest publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley's book is the basis for the script of Spike Lee's famous 1992 biographical film, "X." On this cover alone live two Malcolms: Haley's "Malcolm" and the "Malcolm" of cultural production. That is, Malcolm X in "his own words" and the Malcolm X shown to the American public in Hollywood cinema. The movie is powerful within the moments of narrative co-optation because of its portability and power to impact large audiences, but also for its strong basis on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. If, as scholars began seriously arguing in the twenty-first century, the *Autobiography* was indeed manipulated by Haley without Malcolm's consent, then this raises tough questions about *who* the American public really knows as Malcolm X, and why they know *him* instead of other Malcolms.

Within the time frame that Spike Lee released his film *X*, many African Americans were protesting racial discrimination. The Rodney King beating and Watts protests, for example, coincide with the release of Lee's film. Lee's film fits into a series of revitalizations of Malcolm X present in the 1990s, including hip-hop activism as well as corporate profit-making ("Malcolmania"). Jesse Jackson failed to win the presidential ticket, and the same realities fought by activists during the 1960s — including police brutality, racial profiling, infant mortality rates, and economic exploitation — saw little progress. Nevertheless, Lee's film emerges in a moment of hip-hop radicalism,⁹ urban protest, and increased scholarly interest.¹⁰

⁹ In 1988, KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions release the album "By All Means Necessary." The album cover features a reproduced image of Malcolm X looking out his window, rifle in hand. The only difference is, in place of Malcolm X is KRS-One in the photo holding an automatic weapon. The album's content features highly political themes and a call to radicalism as a solution.

¹⁰ Black Power Studies, a field established in 2001 by historian Peniel Joseph, cites a number of influential books published during this time examining the Civil Rights/Black Power era in a new light. See Van Deburg, 1992; McCartney, 1992; Woodard, 1999; Joseph, 2001; Ogbar,

Following Lee's movie, images of Malcolm X made their way onto t-shirts, posters, hats, street signs, magazines, television, movies, and even that famous postage stamp. When an individual impacts as many people's imaginations as Malcolm did, it seems there is always a battle over how that individual's memory informs the present. For Malcolm X, a flood of narrative constructions geared toward a variety of purposes ranging from cultural revolution to commodification to national healing. I am personally shocked with how many complex, layered representations of Malcolm X specifically are used for a host of purposes, often times having nothing to do with struggles for social justice. One week ago I began searching for my best options for a do-it-yourself publication venue for my essays. On the "getting started" page for the blog service, my eyes immediately gravitated toward the famous words of Malcolm's, "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today." The words of one of the most potent figures that challenged oppression in the United States, appropriated to advertise a service.

But because I see these images everywhere, and I recognize that there is a lot at stake in the manipulation of Malcolm's image, I am supremely interested in the process by which this happens. What does such a "commandeering" of an identity tell us about the actual impact of a figure such as Malcolm vs. the work the image of that figure does through the intentions of others? My suspicion is that the institutional response to Malcolm X, by which I mean the systematic attacks coming from media conglomerates as well as the United States government, is highly related to the ways in which his narrative as well as other narratives of Black rebellion in the 1960s have been co-opted into a tale of incremental change and "inevitable" justice in America. These co-opted stories are the ones that I was taught as a high school student in history class, where I learned about the "more appropriate," nonviolent tactics of Martin as opposed to

2004; Joseph, 2006; Wendt, 2006; and Williams 2006 for a comprehensive discussion.

the “violence and hatred” of Malcolm. They are the stories I hear from the students in my writing classrooms about how “things are getting better because racism is going away.” Certainly, these are stories that serve a purpose. But I find it fascinating that more often than not the raw statistical data regarding social stratification disagrees with these new narratives of progress.

Perhaps this is an indication of just how powerful the manipulation of historical narratives really can be, and how much material impact such practices can make. Just as Malcolm’s image and legacy was claimed by radical Black movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Malcolm’s image and legacy also holds the power to *quell* public perceptions of inequality and oppression. We can put his *Autobiography* on TIME magazine’s list of the 10 most important books of the twentieth century so at least it will be recognized that there was a time (in the past) when things weren’t so good for people of color in the United States. And this is important because now we recognize the problem and celebrate “our” progress. Just think: In this way, it is possible to acknowledge the existence of Malcolm and his work without actually engaging his words, actions, and observations in his time; all of which coincidentally remain painfully relevant today.

Chapter 5: The Malcolm Multiple

“A biography maps the social architecture of an individual’s life. The biographer charts the evolution of a subject over time, and the various challenges and tests that the individual endures provide insights into the person’s character. But the biographer has an additional burden: to explain events and the perspectives and actions of others that the subject could not possibly know, that nevertheless had a direct bearing on the individual’s life” (Marable Malcolm X: Life 479).

- Manning Marable on his role in making Malcolm’s image(s)

Once again, I ask that you recall Malcolm's words presented at the beginning of this thesis: "...this is a science that's called 'image making.' They hold you in check through this science of imagery" (Perry 162). Up to this point I traced multiple images, or narrative constructions of “Malcolms,” as they interact in a cyclical set of historical trajectories. I see an important tension between the chronological chart and my analysis of the multiple “Malcolms:” there is a great distance between the historical record and the stories Malcolm X has been used to tell. The Malcolm X Project digital archive catches my attention because I recognize it to reflect what made Malcolm so potent in his rhetorical constructions: constellated narratives. Marable, through the organization and structure of the MXP, invites users to engage with multiple “Malcolms” simultaneously, thus meeting what I call the “Malcolm Multiple.”

The Malcolm X Project at Columbia University is one location where multiple narrative accounts of Malcolm X’s life, impact, and legacy can coexist and interact with one another. This explains precisely my interest in the project. In partnership with Columbia University during the Spring of 2001, Manning Marable launched the first version of the Malcolm X Project (MXP): a digital archive and interactive study environment housed within the university’s Center for New Media Teaching and Learning’s (CCNMTL) digital environment. This digital space performs two jobs at the same time: it houses a multimedia, web-based version of *The Autobiography of*

Malcolm X AND presents an aggregation of Dr. Marable’s research and findings after almost two decades of study.



Figure 2: Navigation Bar¹¹

There are three primary components that make up the structure of the digital environment. The first, titled “The Life of Malcolm X,” acts as a biographical charting of Malcolm’s life demarcated by time period and/or dominant theme, such as “The Epiphany of Mecca.” The second component of the MXP’s interface, titled “Malcolm Media,” is a digital “house” specifically designed for multimedia data. The third main section is labeled as “About the MXP,” but contains digital components beyond simple information *about* the project; it also features the interactive “Malcolm X Project Multimedia Study Environment.” In an exploration of each of the three main components we will begin to see *how* the MXP constellates Malcolm’s multiple narrative identities. From there, I will theorize the relationships and impact of the interactions between them in Marable’s pedagogical construction.

Mirroring the structure and content of Dr. Marable’s 2011 biography of Malcolm, the “Life of Malcolm” feature of the MXP provides users with both summative descriptions of eras in Malcolm’s life and bibliographic data. This seems to indicate for visitors an expectation to engage,

¹¹ For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis.

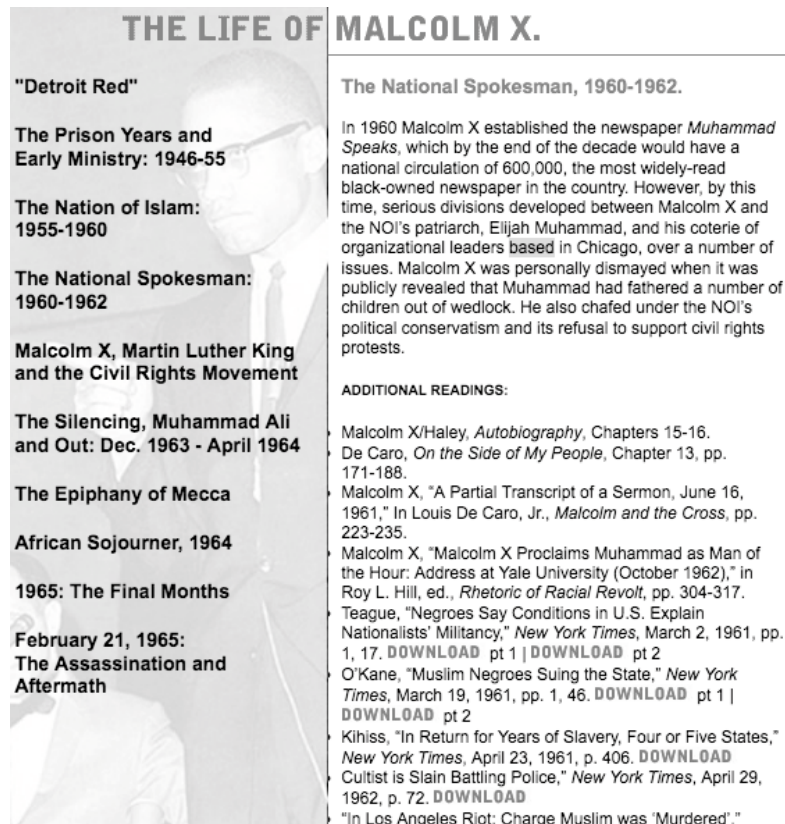


Figure 3: Life of Malcolm X - Main

perhaps even participate in current knowledge making surrounding the historical record. While this information is geared toward scholarly pursuits, the links to the “Multimedia” on the right hand side of the display demonstrate accommodations for multiple audiences and multiple purposes.

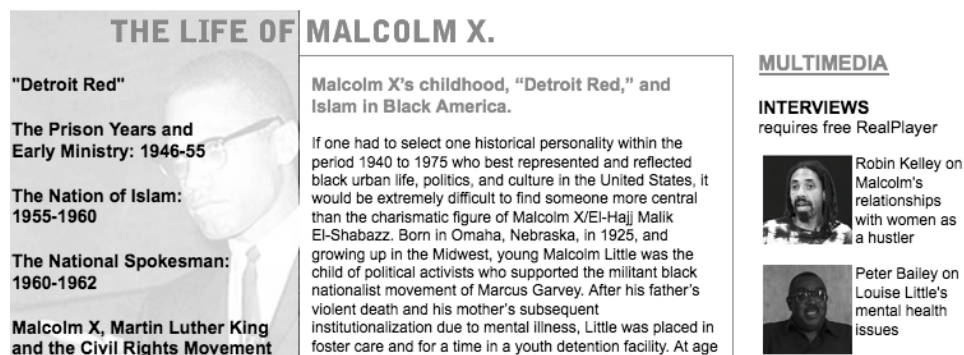


Figure 4: Life of Malcolm X - Link View

However, the digital archive begins demonstrating the depth of its rhetorical power as users navigate to the “Malcolm Multimedia” section. Located here are contemporary interviews

assessing Malcolm's legacy/life/impact, archival footage related to Malcolm X, primary government documents, and multimedia scholarly information. If you notice, between these information categories live multiple "Malcolms," evidenced in the

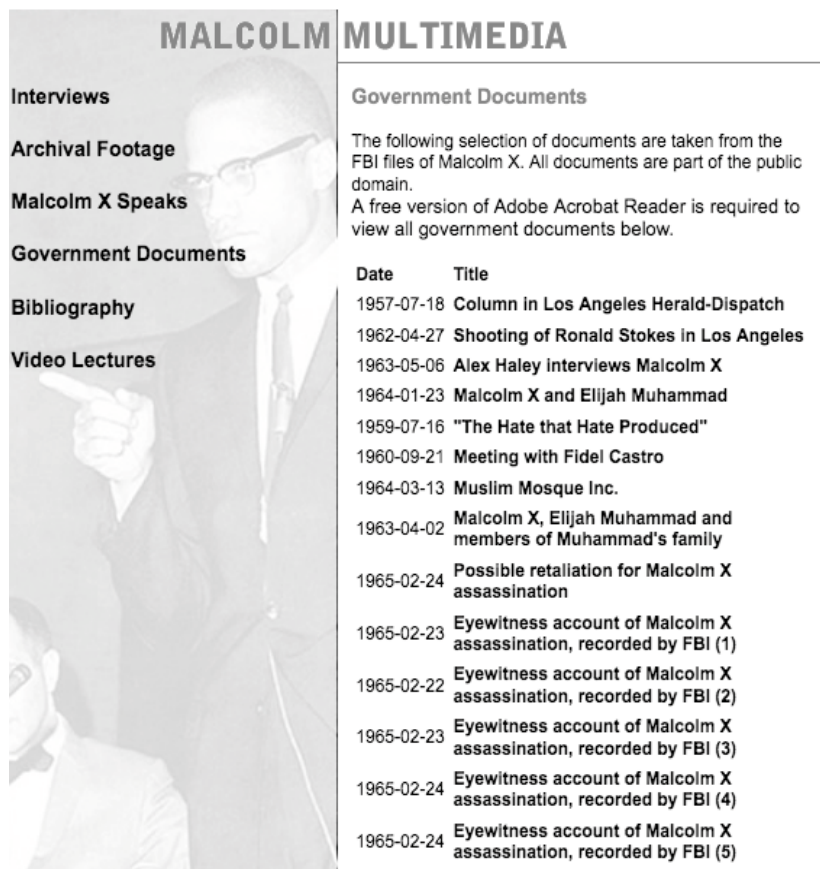


Figure 5: Malcolm Multimedia - Government Documents

variety of perspectives presented in each. For example, the government documents, pictured above, offer MXP users the version of Malcolm the Federal Bureau of Investigation understood and interacted with. We can see how far back the government understood him to be a threat: which, oddly enough, is before he was in any major leadership role in the Nation of Islam.

When combined with the "Malcolm" presented in the contemporary interviews, a visitor to the website must negotiate the radically different perspectives on exactly *what* Malcolm X was doing to/for America. Considering that some of those interviewed actually *knew* Malcolm X, such as his close-friend Ossie Davis, we are presented with

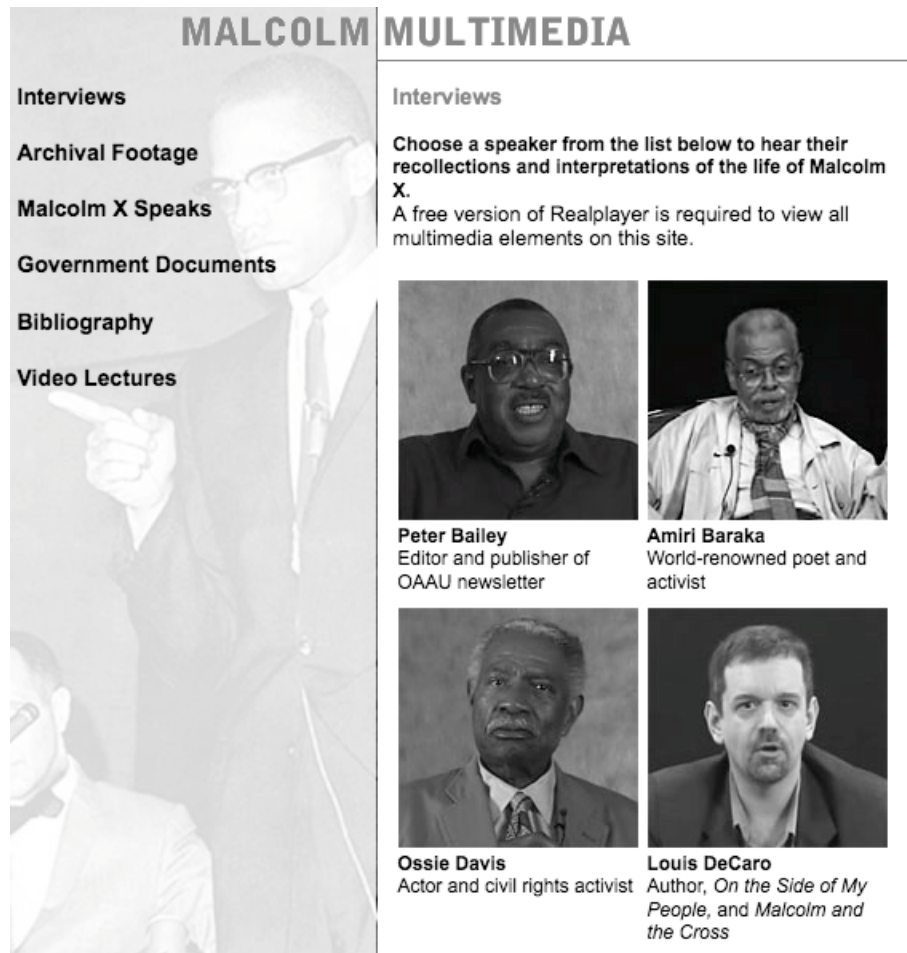


Figure 6: Malcolm Multimedia - Interviews

moments across time, mediated by their own relationships to the Subject, Malcolm. When I encounter this in the MXP, I cannot help but contemplate the fact that I did not *see* any of the television interviews with Malcolm X when they aired in the 1960s. Nor did my elementary school classroom come to a stop as the teacher asked us to watch every major news organization's coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination.

I grew up in a time when stories such as this actually do more to feed dominant narratives/ideologies of collective healing and national identity. This is the story of my high school encounters with Malcolm X. He was, for me then, *in service of* another goal; one that narrates a shared present and future in America. But here in the MXP, between the Multiple Malcolms, I feel compelled to assess the processes by which Malcolm's life and legacy have

been co-opted through narrative constructions, evidenced in the tensions and contradictions between the differing accounts. The MXP concurrently presents them to users in this digital space.

I see this especially as I move to the “About the MXP” section, where one feature takes primacy over much of the rest of the archive. Dr. Marable created the MXP under the assumption that the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* represents a contested history over the authorship of and content excluded from the book. In this way, the relationships between Haley’s “Malcolm” and the other Malcolms in the MXP seem to evidence a

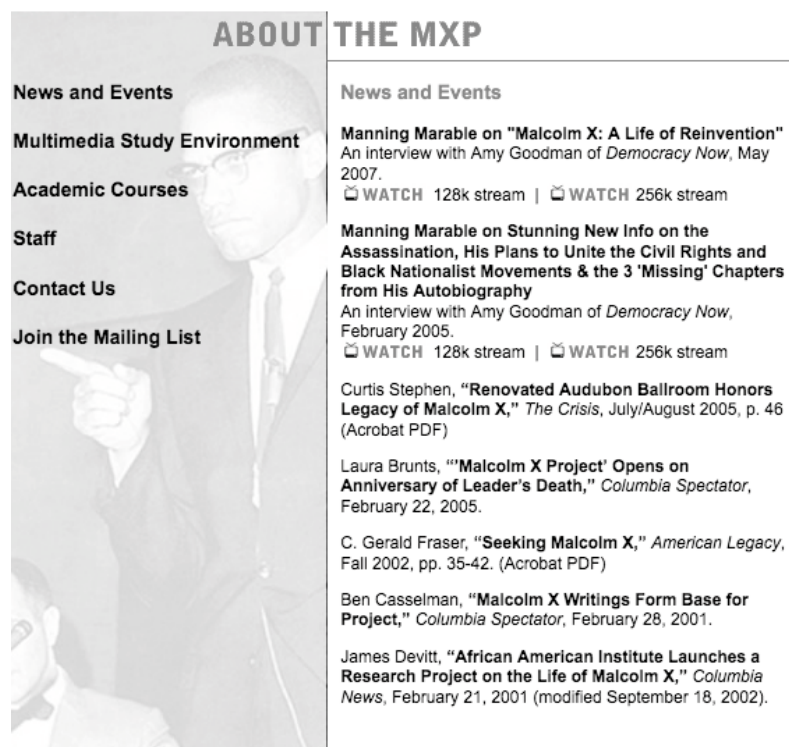


Figure 7: About the MXP

productive tension. Users can learn of the *Autobiography*’s history specifically by watching interviews with Marable, pictured above. But in the navigation bar on the left side of the screen you will also notice a link to a “Multimedia Study Environment” (MSE). The Malcolm X Project

MSE is perhaps the most innovative and generative component of the online archive at present. Designed for use among Columbia students and faculty, the MSE is a digital presentation of the well-known autobiography of Malcolm X; complete with as much information as Marable and his team could render between the documents surrounding the *Autobiography* and the text itself.

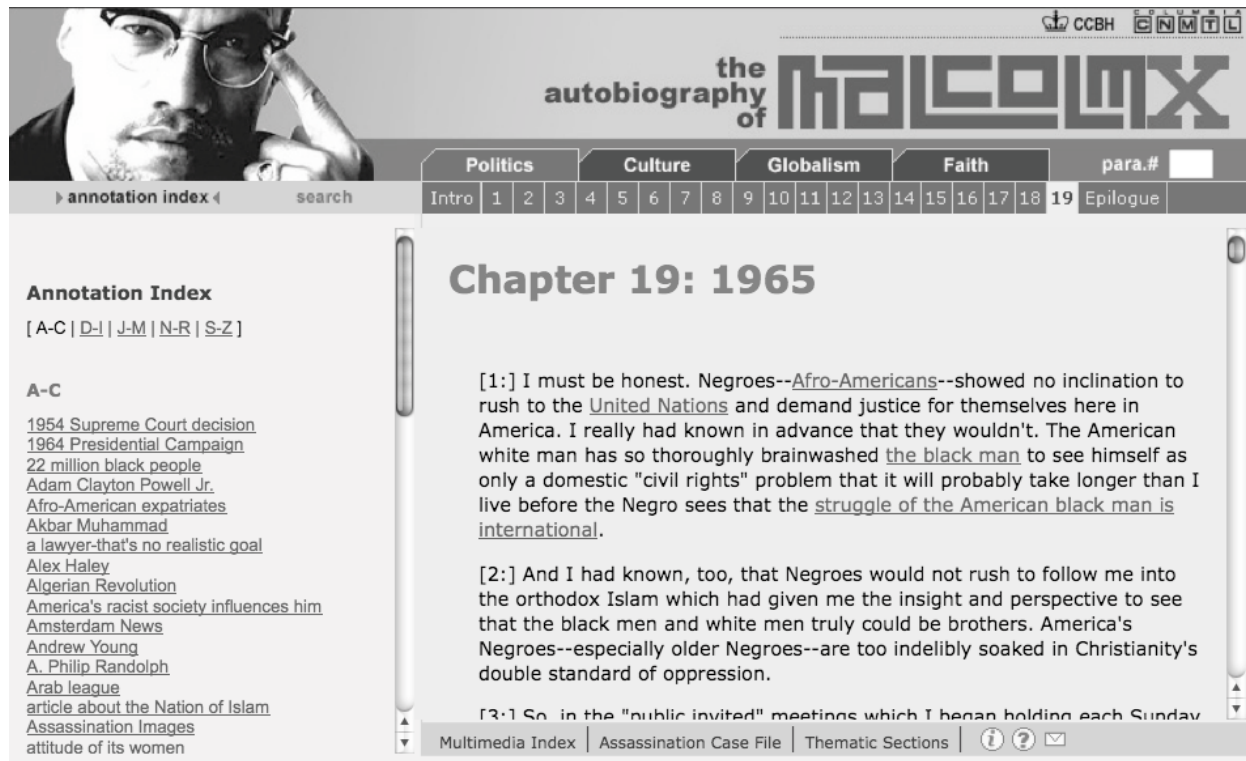


Figure 8: MXP Multimedia Study Environment - Main View (1)

This aspect of the overall project is not simply a (re)presentation of the original, published work. Instead, by giving users options to change the archival presentation of information (multiple views), one set of data (the text) becomes instantly more accessible to users approaching the archive for different purposes. The online presentation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is organized by chapters horizontally across the top of the main viewing window, permitting a structured reading with numbered paragraphs.

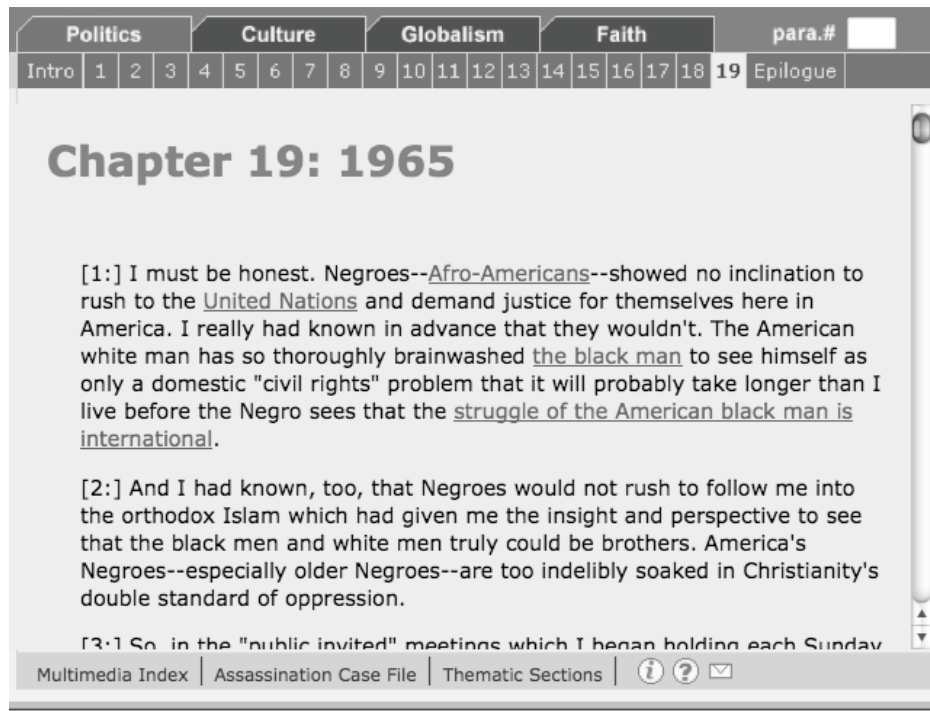


Figure 9: MXP Multimedia Study Environment - Chapter View

But on the left side of the user view there is also a second, attached window – an “annotation index” – that features hyperlinked annotations visibly associated with key phrases, concepts, places, and individuals within the autobiography itself (pictured below).

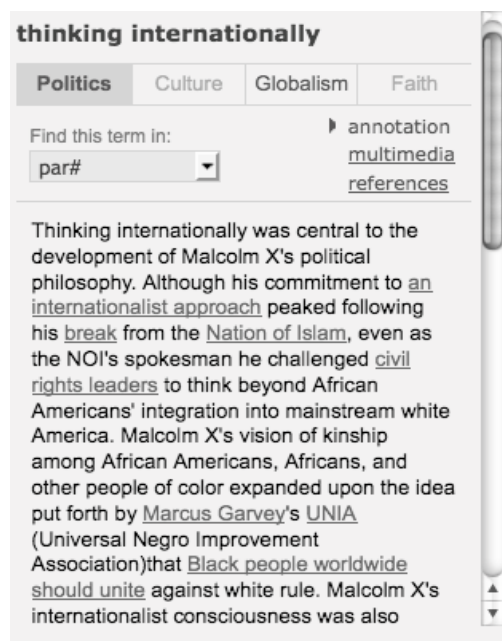


Figure 10: MXP Multimedia Study Environment - Annotation Index

In other words, the multimedia presentation of this text functions as an archive itself, interacting with the original published piece by offering multiple layers of information and context beyond, or “behind” the transcribed words from the famous conversations between Malcolm X and Alex Haley during the 1960s.

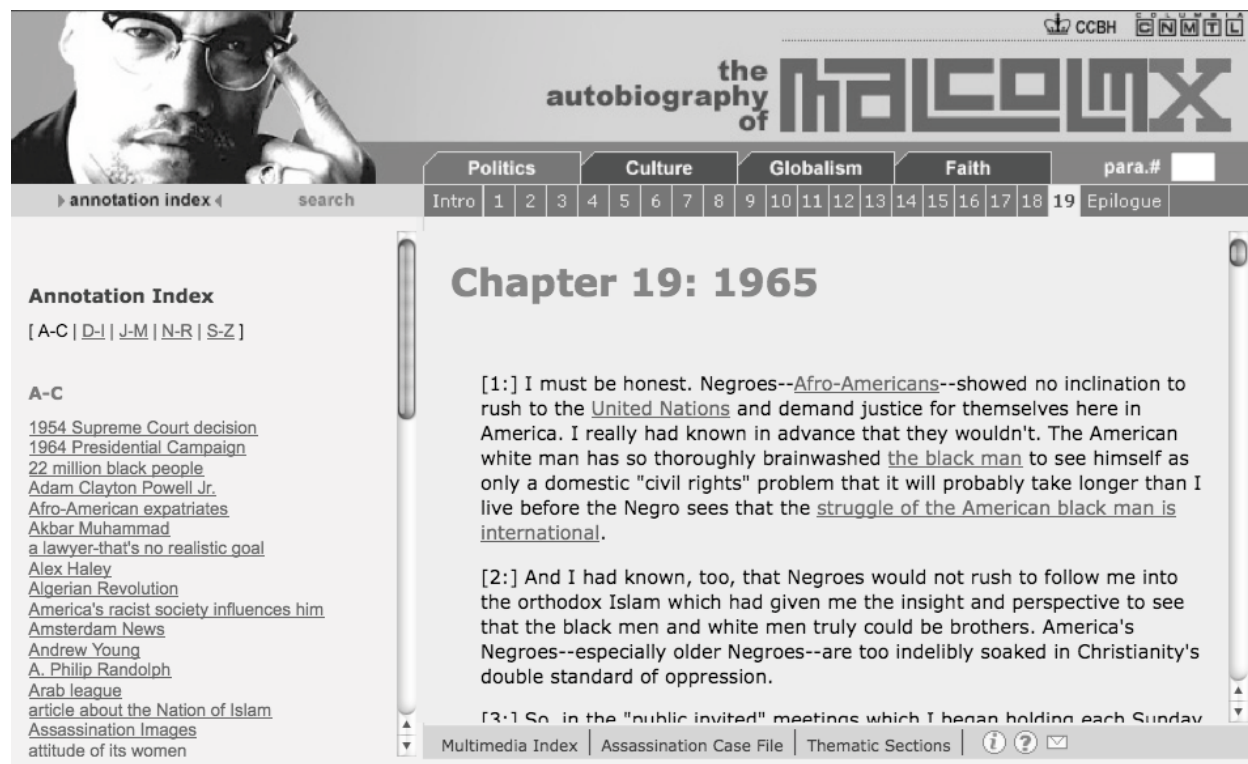


Figure 11: MXP Multimedia Study Environment - Main View (2)

From the general layout and systemic ordering of information it is clear that the project is geared toward an academic audience looking to either access the autobiography as a site of in-depth research *or* for pedagogical purposes. There are four thematic categories that highlight different, but interrelated aspects of the book. The four themes are Politics, Culture, Globalism, and Faith, and each lays the foundation for contemplating the multifaceted life and work of the iconic figure. But I’m not convinced that *only* scholars will access these features. Because of the popularity of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, coupled with an increased public presence of his history, I predict users from many backgrounds will utilize this additional information and

context.

New Considerations and New Possibilities

Constellating narrative accounts of Malcolm with all of these Malcolms living in the same environment locates users in a productive mediation. When I look at the MXP I cannot avoid drawing connections to historical trends/trajectories that influenced everything up to even the very possibility of the digital archive's existence within the academy. The histories that led to the very creation of Black Studies programs are marred with state-sponsored violence, making professionalization one of the few safe havens for those individuals and groups working toward projects oriented around what Robin D. G. Kelley refers to as "freedom dreams" (xii). Malcolm X was assassinated in the 1960s literally working on projects designed to reimagine and restructure race relations and oppression in the United States. In the 21st century it seems the battle is now largely centered on combating the problematic cooptation of narrative histories such as Malcolm X's; working against the projects that instead used them toward narratives of incremental change and racial healing. In this way, Dr. Marable's project provides a strong case for further developing mechanisms to combat narrative cooptation of movements/projects oriented toward social justice.

The Malcolm X Project at Columbia University has the potential to facilitate a move beyond imperial models of the archival experience, where only highly trained, institutionally affiliated professionals access knowledges on a one-to-one basis, thus maintaining their authority. Digital environments in many ways aren't built on the same archaeological principals as brick-and-mortar archives in that there are levels of interaction not present in traditional spaces. For the Malcolm X Project specifically, we can see attempts to create interactive, living historical tellings predicated upon user interaction and inquiry.

Chapter 6: A Conclusion

"It's not an accident that in the United Nations during this present session, for the first time during the nineteen or twenty years that the UN has been in existence, we find African foreign ministers who are openly accusing the United States of being an imperialist power and of practicing racism. In the past, these labels were always confined to the European colonial powers. But never was the United States itself singled out and labeled, identified as an imperialist power" (Perry 95).

-Malcolm X, December 27, 1964

In 2009, the United States boycotted the United Nations Durban Review Conference, a gathering of heads of state to discuss and combat international racism within nation's borders. This isn't to say that those few countries that did attend were surprised. In fact, as Naomi Klein reported from the conference location in Switzerland, "the U.S. boycott had been long expected" (53). Even before the time of Malcolm X's influence at national and international levels, the United States has struggled with its own "image" as a multicultural democratic project. But the boycott in 2009 is special; America's first Black president made the decision not to attend. And President Obama's decision also came despite an overwhelming international pressure for the U.S. to attend in an age of third-world economic exploitation and rising anti-Islamic sentiments played out in America's "War on Terror."

Today the wealth gap in the United States is growing between the rich and poor. This trend, as has always been the case in America, is highly stratified by race. After the 2010 census, the PEW research center reports that the median net worth of white households is approximately twenty times that of African-American households and eighteen times that of Hispanic households (PEW np). And all of this is happening after an age when the United States *supposedly* triumphed over its troubled past with slavery and systematic racial oppression. The narrative histories of martyrs such as Malcolm X (or even Martin Luther King, Jr.) are inappropriately used today as evidence of the United States' growth and success. Yet, again,

basic facts and statistics regarding the nation's socioeconomic trends tell a different story. Which narrative accounts individuals have access to has a strong impact on collective worldview, and therefore action.

This Moment

Narratives are powerful. Narratives seem to come from everywhere at once, even when people use them to tell the same story. They overlap and weave together to constitute collective memory among individuals and groups of people. The power of narratives is incredible. These are premises on which my project rests. It is my understanding that rhetorical study lends itself to the examination of the collaboration between discourse and power.

I write this thesis in a historical moment when national discourse on race is convoluted, racial disparities are increasing exponentially, and academic study of Black Powerism is on the rise. The stability of narratives of progress in the post-Civil Rights Movement era wanes as the fundamental conditions for racial equality remain unseen. However, the narratives of progress are not gone, but are instead growing stronger in spite of their clear instability. Projects like the MXP present us with the opportunity to render these seeming contradictions productive in twenty-first century America.

The power of Malcolm X's rhetoric, even today, comes from his ability to constellate large-scale narrative perspectives in a "make-plain" style. This is the strategy that launched him into a widespread public awareness in America: he toured the country, appeared on television, and actively built organizational infrastructure all *through* a practice of constructing and deconstructing narratives of power. For many oppressed peoples and their allies, Malcolm's rhetoric opened up possibilities in the battle for self-determination and civil rights. For many oppressive peoples and *their* allies, Malcolm's rhetoric was a source of concern because it

destabilized the very stories that keep the power-full in charge of the power-less.

As a scholar of rhetoric I gravitate toward Malcolm X and the discursive "battles" swirling around his life because they tell me something about stories: narrative/story co-optation is *a* mechanism by which dominant narratives are both invented AND challenged. The Malcolm X Project, as I have argued throughout this thesis, holds a great deal of power as a result of the way Manning Marable and his team designed it to constellate multiple, layered narratives surrounding the life of Malcolm X and the realities of America's "problem" with race. While it is not a perfect example of digital archivization and is most definitely not completed, there are important implications that arise from the strengths in Dr. Marable's work with the MXP.

Meeting Malcolms

Throughout the preceding essays I theorize my own experiences meeting multiple "Malcolms" and the impact it had on me. What I see in the MXP, a digital archive in the twenty-first century, is the opportunity to meet the Malcolm I know now in one place, at one time. In other words, many Malcolms converging and how they came to be, have been used, and exist in the present. Naming these stakeholders and tracing their influence on Malcolm's legacy through the archive reveals the ideological persuasion inherent in each narrative account, for each construction relies on others. It is in between them that we see precisely the impact of manipulating his image.

Perhaps more important, though, is the potential impact my research could have on the current debates surrounding Marable's contested 2011 biography of Malcolm X. I recognize Marable's *Life of Reinvention* to be a beginning, not a definitive end. For more than forty-six years, scholars, government officials, teachers, activists, and media conglomerates have produced and reproduced narrative accounts of Malcolm X *in the service of* various political

agendas. Very few of these accounts recognize the disparities, inconsistencies, or strategic omissions of verifiable facts surrounding Malcolm's life and death. This is a practical political question at this point. It is time now to work toward a more complete assessment of a leader who has been used and misused to shape macro-level perceptions of American society in the present in order to prepare for the future.

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