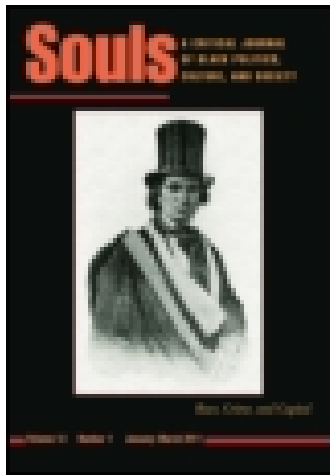


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Malcolm X: The New Scholarship

“A Writer Is What I Want, Not an Interpreter”

Alex Haley and Malcolm X—Conceiving the Autobiographical Self and the Struggle for Authorship

Garrett A. Felber

This essay examines The Autobiography of Malcolm X and the competing conceptions of authorship and voice between its subject and co-author, Alex Haley. The first section outlines Alex Haley's political framework by giving a close reading of his publications prior to the Autobiography, including several Reader's Digest articles, his co-authored piece for the Saturday Evening Post on which he worked closely with white author Alfred Balk and the FBI, and finally the Playboy interview. The second portion traces the production of the book and the often antagonistic relationship between the book's two authors through correspondence between Malcolm X, Alex Haley, and his literary agent, Paul Reynolds, as well as legal documents from Doubleday Publishing and president Kenneth McCormick's letters. Finally, the third section examines the effects of Haley's ideology on consequent understandings of the Autobiography by exploring the external dictates of the genre and interrogating the larger political implications of representations of Malcolm X through quintessential American images.

Keywords: Alex Haley, autobiography, Doubleday, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Nation of Islam

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, a collective—if not cooperative—effort by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, has been claimed as a classic of twentieth-century American literature and as an established formula for African American autobiographies to follow. Its immediate legacy was as an international best-seller that sold more than six million copies worldwide within ten years; however, its lasting impact has been its overwhelmingly dominant influence in shaping both public and scholastic understandings of Malcolm X. Acting as the primary source for Spike Lee's 1992 biopic, which reified the *Autobiography's* representation of Malcolm X in the American imagination, the text is shaped by the underlying tensions of its two competing authorial voices. Mark Sanders writes that the "pragmatic operation of Haley's text is to deliver a life which represents a set of values or concepts perpetually operational . . . in the day-to-day process of American culture."¹ In this way, Haley's influence takes the politically and socially alien subject, a Muslim, revolutionary black nationalist, and Pan-Africanist, and transforms him into something domestic and unthreatening through quintessential American images. "As the self-reliant, self-made man, as a latter day exemplar of 'original' American myths of individuality, access, and possibility," Sanders writes, "Malcolm X is not only familiar but extremely comforting."²

Haley's political framework, as a conservative and an integrationist, informed both his structural decisions and the nature of his writing. Furthermore, the tension between the two authors' conceptions of the autobiographical self differed dramatically—Malcolm's as communal, shifting, and fluid; Haley's as individual, personal, and departing from a fully conceived point arrived at through a series of transformative epiphanies. More than the disparate political, social, and artistic agendas of the two men, the nature of the autobiographical genre itself posed difficulties by traditionally demanding a fully formed subject to which the narrative can ultimately fuse. Further muddling the picture, the dictated autobiography offered its own set of challenges. Though the dictator, Malcolm X, maintained ultimate control over the substance of the text and the way in which those accounts are retold, the scribe, Alex Haley, assumed control over the structure and the shape the content eventually took, thus "often creating meaning at odds with the overt intent of the dictator."³ All these tensions combined to produce the *Autobiography* and leave the reader to unpack Malcolm's terse statement to Haley at the project's beginning, with which Haley ultimately ends: "A writer is what I want, not an interpreter."⁴

Alex Haley, living in San Francisco after retiring from twenty years of service in the U.S. Coast Guard as a cook and journalist, began his career as a full-time freelance writer in 1959. His first article on the

Nation of Islam appeared in March of the following year for *Reader's Digest*, entitled, "Mr. Muhammad Speaks," a heading under which Elijah Muhammad had been publishing columns in both the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Crusader* since 1956.⁵ However, far from the radical racial prerogatives of the Nation of Islam's weekly publication, the article reflected both its audience and author's conservative leanings.

Though the article did not paint an inaccurate portrait of the Nation's rhetoric, influence, or intents, Haley's final authoritative word—like the one he would later employ in the *Autobiography's* lengthy epilogue—revealed his greater social and political framework. First using an image of great wealth, one that would be revisited in a photograph of Malcolm X waving a wad of bills in Haley's 1963 article "Black Merchants of Hate," the article struck fear into the reader by articulating the growing ubiquity of Black Muslims. "Among every 300 Negroes," Haley wrote, "there is one registered Muslim—anti-white, anti-Christian, resentful, militant, disciplined. . . . How far can he go?"⁶ Far from offering the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad's teachings as a potential solution, Haley ultimately attributed such movements to greater structural failings and the shortcomings of liberal integration initiatives: "As long as inequity persists in our democratic system, Elijah Muhammad—or some variation of him—will be able to solicit among the Negro population enough followers to justify the title, the most powerful black man in America."⁷ Furthermore, he urged "Christianity and democracy" to "remove the Negro's honest grievances and thus eliminate the appeal of such a potent racist cult."⁸ Despite the article's resolution, Haley later claimed in his epilogue that both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X contacted him following the piece to note their appreciation of objectivity.⁹

Haley's follow-up piece to the *Reader's Digest* article was a joint project with a white journalist, Alfred Balk, commissioned by the *Saturday Evening Post*. The article, "Black Merchants of Hate," was significantly tampered with by the FBI, whom Balk had contacted in October of 1962 and would send a federal agent from the Crime and Research Section to interview the writer that same month. According to Malcolm X biographer Manning Marable, Balk stated that the goal of the article would be to provide an "accurate and realistic appraisal of the Nation of Islam [emphasizing] that many of the statements about the successes of the organization among the Negro people are also exaggerated."¹⁰ Though it cannot be proven that Haley had specific contact with the bureau regarding the article, Marable concluded in a 2005 interview that it was highly likely: "There is no direct evidence that Haley sat down with the FBI.

Nevertheless, since Balk was the co-author of the piece and it was Balk who talked directly with the FBI... One can assume that Haley [knew] because Haley and Balk coauthored the piece, traveled throughout the United States together, and collected material together to form an article that they coauthored. It would be highly unlikely that Haley did not know.”¹¹ More importantly, “Black Merchants of Hate” would both structurally and ideologically anticipate the framework of the *Autobiography* several years later.

The article began with the now iconographic scene of Johnson X Hinton’s police beating, and the subsequent swelling mob of Black Muslims and other Harlemites, which was subdued and dispersed only by the silent command of Malcolm X. The first few pages of the piece largely regurgitated the basic tenants and rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, which had been done sufficiently earlier by Mike Wallace’s 1959 telecast “The Hate That Hate Produced” and Haley’s *Digest* article. The second half of the article, however, provided the dry run for Malcolm X’s autobiography. A brief family history is given, introducing Malcolm as one child of eleven born to an “uneducated Baptist preacher,” neglecting to mention his Garveyite ties. Just as the *Autobiography* would later remain reticent regarding Louise Little’s role in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the article swiftly moved past Earl Little’s gruesome death and into the life of “Big Red” who reportedly satisfied police bribes by “peel[ing] from the \$1,000 bankroll he always carried.”¹² This image of Malcolm X, reaffirmed by the aforementioned photograph of Malcolm waving a fist full of bills before a rally, served as an early indication of the fictive quality and disproportional weight that would later be given to “Detroit Red” in the *Autobiography*.

In addition to foreshadowing the structure of the *Autobiography*, the article subtly but effectively reinforced the prerogatives of the federal authorities while still ultimately delivering a piece that satisfied the Nation of Islam. “While Muhammad appears to be training his son Wallace to succeed him when he retires or dies,” the article stated, “many Muslims feel that Malcolm is too powerful to be denied leadership if he wants it.”¹³ More than a year before his break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, this article had already planted the seeds of divisiveness, implying that usurpation was not only possible but also perhaps imminent. Finally, the article concluded almost identically to Haley’s earlier piece by asserting that the movement is a by-product of failings by middle-class Black and white integrationist initiatives; it ended with the question posed by Harry S. Ashmore: “Will the change come through men and women working together regardless of race or will the field be left to extremists? . . . Let us hope that responsible Americans will begin working for another.”¹⁴

While the degree to which the piece is influenced and shaped by misinformation of the FBI can only be projected, there are several subtle indications that imply federal meddling. The first incongruity is the claims of involvement the “biracial team” purports to having with the Nation. “We gained admission to Muslim [*sic*] temple services and mass rallies,” the article states. Although this may have simply been an erroneous pronoun, it is widely known that the white Alfred Balk would likely have not had access to such services or public speeches, but that the FBI had planted agents within the organization to monitor such events. It is more likely that this information was gathered through sources that the article calls “civic, governmental and law-enforcement officials.”¹⁵ There are also several other references to unnamed sources of information: “Equally insidious, we were told repeatedly, are the results of Muslim teachings about violence,” the article recounts. In estimating the membership, which had been claimed in various places as widely as 100,000 to 250,000, the authors write that these figures, “authoritative sources told us, [are] vastly exaggerated.”¹⁶

These two articles, along with the *Playboy* interview in 1963, are the most significant of Haley’s pre-*Autobiography* writings, for they lay the structural groundwork for the *Autobiography*; in essence, “Black Merchants of Hate” became a sort of dress rehearsal, which, after piqued public interest by his *Playboy* interview with Malcolm X, provided the framework for the project. Second, both articles are useful in establishing the social and political context from which Alex Haley wrote—a conservative racial and political sensibility that would be reflected in his epilogue as well as M. S. Handler’s introduction, sandwiching the true radicalism of Malcolm X’s ideology. In addition to these two early texts, though, several of Haley’s other articles give helpful nuggets in recreating the somewhat obscured writing process of the *Autobiography*.

A short exposé by Haley on Mahalia Jackson in November 1961 offers an interesting insight into the later writing of the *Autobiography*. Haley ended the brief article by noting that whenever she can, Jackson finds a “little rundown church like her father’s, and she may sing until well beyond midnight,” then adds: “‘Those humble churches are my filling stations,’ she says. ‘If I didn’t get in one every time I can, I would run empty.’”¹⁷ Those familiar with the *Autobiography* will recall that Haley, in the voice of Malcolm X, notes in Chapter 15: “Anyway, I know that somewhere I once read that Mahalia said that every time she can, she will slip unannounced into some ghetto storefront church and sing with her people. She calls that ‘my filling station.’”¹⁸ There is no way to tell if Malcolm had indeed read Haley’s article, but given the depths of his involvement in the

Nation in 1961 and Haley's participation in the *Autobiography*, it seems likely that this was added by the coauthor as an act of narrative ventriloquism in the voice of Malcolm X. To what degree this small parallel thread can shed light on Haley's involvement in the larger narrative is open for debate. However, it does cast doubts on an already suspect first person narrative and provide an insight toward Haley's manipulation of Malcolm X's autobiographical self.

Another provocative early *Digest* article is Haley's March 1961 piece, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met." In itself, the article is little more than anecdotal satire on Haley's life in the Coast Guard working under a dictatorial steward named Scotty. "My ambition was to be a writer," he wrote. "Nights, off duty, I typed stories in the officers' wardroom pantry."¹⁹ The same way that Malcolm X would later dictate for his autobiography, Scotty—an "old sea dog" and "ungrammatical clown"—would pour over a dictionary, learning new words, which would "crop up in his talk Every night, after dictating and studying new words, Scotty left me to write stories."²⁰ Haley's caricature of Scotty should also make readers skeptical of his personification of Malcolm X in the epilogue. Finally, Haley's article notes that Scotty wrote him in 1954 congratulating him and mentioning that he had become a chief steward but had retired in 1945: "Reeding your name folowed by story a grate thrill Knowed you'd make good was how come I help you out."²¹ Not only does Scotty's being a retired Coast Guard steward make one wonder if the quoted steward in Haley's 1961 "Mr. Muhammad Speaks" could in fact be the "old sea dog" himself, but Haley's contempt for his subject and his lack of education also casts an interesting net of questions upon the relationship that would later produce the *Autobiography*.

The final collaboration between Alex Haley and Malcolm X before the *Autobiography* was the 1963 *Playboy* interview. The article, like "Black Merchants of Hate," acted as a microcosm for the form of the *Autobiography* and pejoratively casts the Nation of Islam alongside white supremacists as the primary threats to integration. Prefacing the interview, which is a device later used to sandwich the text of Malcolm's autobiography, Haley writes that "the militant American Negro has become an increasingly active combatant in the struggle for civil rights. Espousing the goals of unqualified equality and integration . . . they face opposition from not one, but two inimical exponents of racism and segregation: the white supremacists and the Black Muslims."²² By identifying integrationists as "militant," and therefore, by implication, the "Black Muslims" as extremists, one can identify the locus of Haley's political sphere. Also, there are subtle seeds of sedition again planted in the text. In his introduction, Haley

refers to Malcolm as the “heir apparent” to the Nation of Islam—despite a consistent denial of this characterization—and later, he noted, “Many observers predict that when this day comes [Muhammad retiring from leadership], the new Messenger of Allah in America—a role which you have called the most powerful of any black man in the world—will be Malcolm X.”²³

Again, despite being construed as a “black-supremacy version of Hitler’s Aryan racial theor[y],” Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam were generally pleased with the article. Haley noted in the first pages of his epilogue that after Malcolm had repeatedly expressed his belief that “the devil’s not going to print that,” he was surprised and pleased when the interview appeared verbatim.²⁴ Haley also reported that shortly after the article, Malcolm began to “warm up to me somewhat.” Proposed by Haley’s agent, Paul Reynolds, the article provided the last sketch before the *Autobiography* by both laying out a brief biographical sketch of Malcolm’s life but, more importantly, displaying a concerted effort on Malcolm X’s part to ingratiate himself to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Although Malcolm had been moving away rhetorically from the Nation’s espousals since the late 1950s, the interview stands in stark contrast. He constantly reaffirmed the influence of Elijah Muhammad on his transformation; “whatever I am that is good, it is through what I have been taught by Mr. Muhammad,” he told Haley. Later, despite his growing awareness of African liberation movements, he claimed that the “Honorable Elijah Muhammad has had a greater impact on the world than the rise of the African nations.”²⁵ Besides ensuring greater trust for Haley by Malcolm and the Nation, the lasting legacy of the *Playboy* interview is that it sketched the final blueprint for Malcolm X’s attempt to regain the favor of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, which would prove to be his early motivation in the writing of the *Autobiography*.

In early 1963, Alex Haley approached Malcolm X about the possibility of writing an autobiography, a request about which Malcolm was both reluctant and skeptical. Haley recalled that “it was one of the few times I have ever seen him uncertain.”²⁶ Malcolm’s eventual agreement was conditional upon Muhammad’s approval; he told Haley, “I think my life story may help people to appreciate better how Mr. Muhammad salvages black people. But I don’t want my motives for this misinterpreted by anybody—the Nation of Islam must get every penny that might come to me.”²⁷ *Muhammad Speaks* featured a running testimony entitled “What Islam Has Done For Me,” and it was in this way that Malcolm X first conceived of his autobiographical self—as proof of the transformative power of Elijah Muhammad’s teachings. Hence, the *Autobiography* is constructed by Malcolm to

hyperbolize the depths of Detroit Red's moral and spiritual depravity in an effort to construct a parable that would give personal evidence valorizing Muhammad's teachings.

Knowing that Haley did not share his political and spiritual sentiments, Malcolm stipulated that he would retain full control over what was and was not included in the text. The author/collaborator letter of agreement signed June 1, 1963, stated: "It is understood that nothing can be in the manuscript, whether a sentence, a paragraph, or a chapter, or more that you do not completely approve of. It is further understood that anything must be in the manuscript that you want in the manuscript."²⁸ Haley would play liberally within this agreement, though, by publishing comments that Malcolm had wished to remain outside the book within his unmitigated epilogue. When Malcolm told a man that he wished he could "have a white chapter [within the Nation] of the people I meet like you," Haley recorded the chance meeting in his epilogue, despite Malcolm's appeal: "Not only don't write that, never repeat it."²⁹

Perhaps more violent than any of these unwanted additions were Haley's omissions. Three "essay" chapters, entitled "The Negro," "The End of Christianity," and "Twenty Million Black Muslims," written by Malcolm outlining his political plan for Pan-African unity, were surreptitiously removed less than a month after his death. The book, whose original publisher, Doubleday, had recently opted out of its contract, needed "to be severely cut," according to another potential publisher, McGraw-Hill. Haley, fearing an "excision of some major 'shock' parts of the book," wrote his agent of the potential problems with Malcolm's recent widow, Betty Shabazz:

She has long lived in an atmosphere of suspicion that the "double cross" lurks at every hand. She trusts me (after reading of the manuscript) and she trusts you because Malcolm X. [sic] had conveyed to her that he did, so I was able to get her signatures without any great trouble . . . and, as I say, if a publisher wants any deletions of any magnitude that she would detect (and she would be quick to, I think), she would give us trouble.³⁰

The resulting cuts, therefore, were Malcolm's three essays. The final, "Twenty Million Potential Black Muslims," envisioned the conversion of all Black Americans to Islam and a Black united front constructed around civil rights groups, fraternities and sororities, and a wide breadth of political allegiances surrounding central issues such as improved housing and education in the Black community. Both Haley's willingness to remove the most recent ideological content of the late Malcolm X, and perhaps Betty Shabazz's complicity in this editing, remains one of the greatest mysteries of the *Autobiography's* production.

Haley further noted that he was pleased when M. S. Handler agreed to write the introduction to the *Autobiography*, writing,

“Malcolm X would have liked that.”³¹ Although Malcolm reportedly agreed to Haley’s unchecked epilogue (he likely could not have imagined its disproportionate length), it seems that Handler’s introduction was another unauthorized change by Haley. Malcolm did have a working relationship with Handler, writing him several letters from his travels abroad; however, it must be noted that Handler, who wrote for the *New York Times*, represented the best media outlet available to Malcolm after he had left the Nation.³² Thus, Malcolm’s relationship with Handler was very much a pragmatic one. Mark Sanders argues that Haley’s epilogue attempts, as does his narrative, to codify Malcolm X for posterity, noting that, “while informative, metaphorically speaking Haley’s epilogue is redundant yet revealing, as it makes overt the relatively covert operations of his structure.”³³ In both support and contrast to Haley’s participation in the signifying of Malcolm’s image for posterity, Haley’s notes for the outline of the book end cryptically with two phrases that place him seemingly outside historical participation and, in a sense, leave Malcolm for dead: “Leave for historians” and “Greater in death than life.”³⁴

Early in the writing of the *Autobiography*, Haley had made a small, but substantial, distinction in his authorial role. In an August 1963 letter to Oliver Swan, of Paul Reynolds’s office, Haley asked that the book be amended to read “as told to” rather than “co-authored by,” noting that “‘Co-authoring’ with Malcolm X. [*sic*] would, to me, imply sharing his views—when mine are almost a complete antithesis of his.”³⁵ The blurred reality of Haley’s delineation between the “as told to” format and coauthorship remained problematic well into the book’s construction, as the author clearly maintained his points of ideological contention in a letter from February 1964: “I plan to look at American and at the society which has produced the Black Muslims, I plan to hit very hard, speaking from the point of view of the Negro who has tried to do all of the things that are held up as the pathway to enjoying the American Dream. . . . And I am going to try and set forth in my humble way, in, I hope, some new ways, why America and democracy and Christianity need pretty desperately to meet the present challenge.”³⁶

As Haley noted in his epilogue, during the period directly following the *Playboy* interview, his editor contacted him requesting the potential highlights of a possible autobiography of Malcolm X. The editor, Murray Fisher of *Playboy*, received a brief sketch from Haley in 1963 regarding Malcolm’s potential as a subject:

First, I recommend Malcolm over Elijah Muhammad, his leader, on the basis of previous interview experiences with both. Muhammad will certainly grow indignant and clam up with queries that get sticky; he probably would dismiss me if I really dig into some of the areas of queries you want. He is vague, ambiguous, and

“preachy” when talking freely. But Malcolm, the cult’s practised [*sic*] spokesman maintains a relative ease before a microphone, camera, panel, or notebook. He will grapple just about any question and if irritated or in a crack, he keeps talking. No Muslim I’ve met as ably expresses the cult’s perspectives and allegations.³⁷

While Haley would later recall realizing that he knew very little of Malcolm’s personal life except for the occasional hint at his Detroit Red persona, his final statement to Fisher would reveal his transparent motivations in authoring the book: “Murray, this has been just a spontaneous sampling of Malcolm, but it will give you some idea. I can assure that he will tackle any queries, that I will obviously be able to pin him in half-truths and contradictions at places, but that his blunt replies will evoke strong reaction among just about every reader, black, white, integrationist, segregationist, or whatever.”³⁸ Not only did Haley’s message contain an element of antagonism towards his subject, but at its core was also the sheer potential the book held as tool for controversy and reaction.

The writing process began with Malcolm visiting Haley at his Greenwich Village studio, for two- and three-hour sessions, often late into the evening after Malcolm’s strenuous ten-hour workdays and travel engagements. An early letter from Haley in late September 1963 revealed both the frustration of working around Malcolm’s schedule and also Haley’s strategy in constructing the narrative. “To make more gripping your catharsis of decision involving Reginald,” Haley wrote, “I must build up your regard and respect for [him] when the two of you were earlier in Harlem.”³⁹ He then pleaded that Malcolm meet for three consecutive days that week, noting that “night sessions here, such as we had, will be the most productive... [to do] justice to what the book can do for the Muslims needs it.”⁴⁰ Haley described Malcolm during these visits as an extremely paranoid character convinced that he was being followed and bugged by the FBI, even implicating Haley himself as a willing participant at times. Despite the author’s editorializing of these exchanges as peculiarities of character on Malcolm’s part, the evidence of FBI participation in “Black Merchants of Hate” and Haley’s own letter to the FBI director on November 19, 1963, of which he sent Malcolm a carbon copy, persuade us now that Malcolm was in fact responding quite flippantly to a real and dangerous threat. In these sessions, Haley acquired material through interviews as well as surreptitious collections of Malcolm’s cryptic scribbles on nearby napkins after their time had ended, constructing chapters based on the roughly chronological form of his questioning.

In November, Haley had moved to a home in the upstate New York town of Rome. His letters from this period continue to emphasize the

dramatic transformations Malcolm underwent, and despite pressure from editors, Haley seemed comfortable with the slow progress of the book. He wrote, “[I] am being careful, careful in developing the nuances as it unfolds, each stage, because viewed overall, your whole life is so incredible that no stage, especially in the early developing stages, may the reader be left with gaps, for if so it would strain the plausibility, believability, of the truly fantastic ‘Detroit Red’—and, then, the galvanic, absolute conversion.”⁴¹ By this point, Haley had clearly worked through the main thrust of what he then perceived to be Malcolm’s concretized self, addressing the letter to “Mascot, Homeboy, Detroit Red, Satan—Saved, thence Minister Malcolm.” He would again reiterate in a letter five days later: “the book is coming along slowly, but beautifully—the only way that a great drama can be written.”⁴² Haley, days after President Kennedy’s assassination, also took a step back from his claimed position of “dispassionate chronicler” to a more didactic footing, writing: “I’ve come to feel that this book has among its other potential missions, one to hold up a clear, dramatic mirror of the distortions of human values which may be induced by climates which our society lets exist.”⁴³

During the latter portion of the following month, in which Malcolm and Haley had begun meeting in room 1936 of the Americana Hotel on Lexington Avenue, Haley decided to divide the Detroit Red section into smaller phases, noting that “it could so well be book a book in itself. Just the Harlem years.”⁴⁴ Despite Malcolm’s silencing by Elijah Muhammad in December of 1963 for what Haley called his “wise stand on the assassination of President Kennedy,” Haley still envisioned the narrative structure according to his original outline: “Saved,” “Savior,” and “Minister Malcolm X” were to be the “highest drama of the whole book,” and a final chapter, “The Messenger’s Advocate” was to establish Malcolm in the present, or in Haley’s words, be the “pay-off chapter, in that it is the fantastic, the incredible, the man today, in light of what you have been.”⁴⁵ Of course, during the turbulent early months of 1964 in which Malcolm accompanied Cassius Clay to Miami and eventually left the Nation of Islam to form his new organization, Muslim Mosque, Inc., Haley would have to rework his narrative scope drastically and develop a new “pay-off” chapter with a far less cohesive resolution. Always the salesman, Haley still saw Malcolm’s new international endeavors as a chance to gain a wider readership. With Malcolm X designated as the official representative of the World Muslim League, Haley wrote Reynolds: “One thing I’ll do is heavily play up this new role, which should increase heavily the Moslem countries sales. Then, with the book wrapped up, at last, we can all rest easy and derive the revenues.”⁴⁶

In June 1964, as Malcolm traveled abroad, Haley struggled against the pressing of both Reynolds and Doubleday for a November publication date. Sifting through a “wealth of material,” Haley argued that the book still needed “careful, successive re-writings, distilling, aligning, [and] balancing . . . to get it *right*. And this is the book’s all important *end*, ‘fixing’ Malcolm X. From foetus in Nebraska to now on the *world stage*.”⁴⁷ As Haley pushed for a spring release date, the difficulty in “fixing” Malcolm X to something as concrete as he had formulated six months prior became increasingly problematic. It was during this period as well that Haley urged Malcolm to take his family and spend time abroad, out of the spotlight and the threat of the Nation of Islam. Citing Malcolm’s article before the 1964 election, “Why I Am for Goldwater,” and his tour diary, which he described as a “soupcon of even fissionable international religious and political concerns,” Haley sought to create enough publishable material to financially support Malcolm’s family and maintain his high-profile political position while they were away—even offering to loan him a few thousand dollars.⁴⁸ The same day that Haley wrote Reynolds of these possibilities, he also wrote a seven-page letter to Malcolm, using the *Autobiography*’s potential to implore Malcolm to exert caution:

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 have to be *alive*? Not somewhere in a box with the peppermint candy in Sister Betty’s mouth briny with weeping. And for the rest of her life, trying to explain to your and her four children what a man you *were*.⁴⁹

In a final effort to alleviate pressures for the completion of the *Autobiography* and the increasing uneasiness of Doubleday’s president, Ken McCormick, Haley emphasized the publicizing of the book, which had just been sold in an abridged form to the *Saturday Evening Post*, appearing on September 12, 1964, under the title: “I’m Talking to You, White Man.”

The book in its condensed form followed the subtitle: “The explosive Black Muslim rebel who defies both white and Negro leadership tells a story that swings from violence and degradation to religion and racism.” Essentially reproducing earlier narratives by Haley on Malcolm X, now equipped with a surprise twist in which Malcolm splits from his “savior,” the text proportionally mirrors both its predecessors and the book which would follow by dedicating the first nine of its fourteen pages to Malcolm’s childhood and the formation of his “Detroit Red” persona. However, by September 1964, Malcolm was no longer concerned with ingratiating himself again to Elijah Muhammad, but rather had performed the Hajj and just recently

formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in late June. The remaining five pages of the article cover Malcolm's prison term through his travels to Africa, all at a torrid pace, allowing for little reflection on the tensions within the Nation or the ensuing break between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad. Haley's narrative structure, like the subsequent book, frames the autobiographical self in a snapshot of peaks and valleys, "from violence and degradation to religion and racism,"⁵⁰ focusing primarily on the dramatic transformations at their most radical points but ultimately offering a portrait that is not a radical sum of its pieces, but a moderate and diluted average.

The piece has myriad similarities to the *Autobiography*, but it differs in its conclusion in several significant ways. While both conclude with the phrase, "all credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine," in the *Post* article, Malcolm is quoted in the paragraph preceding: "At the same time, however, I can't think of any subject involving human beings today that you can divorce from the race issue."⁵¹ Though Haley does allow for Malcolm's politicization within the article, it is only in the white political arena regarding Johnson and Goldwater. Furthermore, Haley's response to Malcolm in October 1964 indicates that Malcolm had taken significant exception to some of the misrepresentations within the piece:

Your reactions to some aspects of the *Post* condensation I understand, in view of the changes which have occurred in your perspectives. And I have to say to you that I am personally happy that you have arrived at these changes . . . your caliber of capabilities are needed in positive directions and perspectives, which you are now in, rather than the previous role you had, which was, for all its iconoclastic truths and virtues, fundamentally negative—which you have expressed very beautifully, I think, in the letters which Handler of the NYT has sent to me at your request.⁵²

Haley's retort to Malcolm's criticism reveals not only the certain misgivings that Malcolm held, but also the larger lens through which Haley viewed Malcolm's "changes"—from a "negative" iconoclasm, to "positive directions and perspectives" clearly more in line with Haley's own sociopolitical framework. Ultimately, Malcolm's openness during this period allowed more than ever for projections to be cast upon him.

In one of the letters from September 1964 to M. S. Handler, to which Haley referred, Malcolm wrote:

I declare emphatically that I am no longer in Elijah Muhammad's "straight-jacket," and I don't intend to replace his with one woven by someone else. I am a Muslim in the most orthodox sense; my religion is Islam as it is believed in and practised [*sic*] by the Muslims here in the Holy City of Mecca—This religion recognizes all men as brothers. It accepts all human beings as equals before God, and as equal members in the Human Family of Mankind.⁵³

Haley, into whose hands the letter ultimately fell, chose Islamic universalism, thereby eschewing the potentially radical subject that sought to extricate the faults of existing economic and social structures and create a new one that integrated not merely people, but also would take the “*assets* from all, and put the *liabilities* from all aside,” into a new religious and cultural paradigm that would foster racial equality. Haley enacted this choice by naming the chapter in which Malcolm travels abroad, “El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz,” as opposed to his Pan-Africanist identity, “Omowale,” or, “the son who has come home.” By choosing to limit to racial and political emphases of Malcolm’s ideas during this final stage in his life and deal primarily with the universally Islamic self, one must interrogate whether Haley himself had begun weaving yet another “straight-jacket” for the recently liberated Malcolm to don.

Despite Haley’s best efforts to finish the *Autobiography*, less than a month following Malcolm’s assassination, Ken McCormick wrote Haley expressing his regret that “in a policy decision at Doubleday, where I was a minor, contrary vote, it was decided that we could not publish the Malcolm X book.”⁵⁴ McCormick and company owner Nelson Doubleday had anxiously contacted former Doubleday editor Walter Bradbury, who responded that the manuscript is full of “potential libel” but did not believe “any repercussion would be perpetrated from either faction, against Doubleday, Doubleday Book Shops, or any aspect of the publication apparatus If Elijah is as smart as he’s supposed to be he will try to restrain his followers from any action, official or otherwise, that could be traced to his Muslim’s door.”⁵⁵ The publisher had also submitted the manuscript to lawyer William O. Dwyer for vetting, for which Alex Haley had given “blanket permission to change any material [deemed] libelous.” However, despite these precautions and assurances, in the aftermath of Malcolm X’s murder and the subsequent burning of Mosque 7, Doubleday had decided that the book was simply too provocative to carry.⁵⁶

I. F. Stone’s review, “The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X,” written for the *New York Review of Books* in November 1965, marked an early criticism of the *Autobiography*’s crude political understanding of Malcolm in his final year. However, although Stone implied that Haley’s “conventional” political interpretations permitted Malcolm’s “most important message to his people [to be] muted in the *Autobiography*,” his own spiritual and political understandings of Malcolm X appear flat and overly influenced by the one-dimensionality of the Haley’s construction. Stone wrote that the visit to Mecca marked a second conversion in Malcolm’s life in which he turned Muslim “in the true sense of the word” but emphasized that “how indelibly he also remained an American go-getter is deliciously reflected.” Stone

determined that Malcolm had “become a Hajj but remained in some ways a Babbjtt [*sic*], the salesman, archtype [*sic*] of our American society.” While Stone’s critique constitutes an early denouncement of Haley’s influence, it also provides one of the earliest attempts at diffusing Malcolm X’s racial character by casting him in the image of proto-American archetypes such as the confidence man and the “American go-getter.” Stone hereby turned what constituted a profound personal religious transformation into a bit of salesmanship and reconstructed the radical persona of Malcolm X in his final year from one who challenged reified American structures into precisely the opposite—a cunning, religious trickster. “Allah, the Merciful,” Stone concluded, “needed better merchandising.”⁵⁷

By 1967, less than two full years since Malcolm X’s assassination and the publishing of the *Autobiography*, the writer whom Stone gives credit with presenting a more fully conceived political understanding, George Breitman, had engaged the Reverend Albert Cleage in a rhetorical skirmish over Malcolm’s legacy. Though Breitman disagreed with Cleage’s assertion that Malcolm never attempted to “internationalize the black man’s struggle,” both vehemently opposed the already prevalent myth that Malcolm had become an “integrationist.”⁵⁸ Cleage argued that Malcolm’s essential contribution was that “integration is impossible and undesirable . . . [b]ecause white people never wanted it in the first place, and were determined that it would never come to pass in the second place.”⁵⁹ Breitman asserted that Cleage’s understanding, as a Black Nationalist, is one that favors the aspects of Malcolm’s rhetoric which mirror Elijah Muhammad’s and the Nation of Islam; indeed, Cleage contends that the “basic contribution which he made, the basic philosophy which he taught, stems directly from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the ‘Black Muslims.’”⁶⁰ This perspective, according to Breitman’s critique, comes at the expense of Malcolm’s rhetoric during his final year, which Cleage partially dismissed as a time of confusion and personal distress. Breitman explained Malcolm’s shift:

[It was] not that Malcolm embraced “integration” as a solution, but that he saw the cause of racial oppression in a new light. He saw it as rooted not in merely racial or color differences, but as rooted in economic, political, social and cultural exploitation. From this he began to conclude, not that “integration” is the answer, but that racial conflict might be eliminated by eliminating exploitation; that racial enmity is not inherent in human beings or immutable or necessarily ordained to last for all time But, and he always qualified this though immediately, it can’t happen until the blacks first organize themselves independently and create their own movement, their own power.⁶¹

Although Cleage and Breitman both offer sufficient correctives to the myth of Malcolm’s integrationism, neither interrogates the

dramatization of his “second conversion” that those such as I. F. Stone and Haley would portray as Malcolm’s radical rethinking of racial politics. Elementally, Malcolm did not go from abhorrence to acceptance of whites following his trip to Mecca, but rather simply dropped the phenotypic racial essentialism of the Nation in favor of a historical condemnation of race. Even this, however, is a hyperbolizing of Malcolm’s shift, for during the period as a minister and national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm would state that “white devils” were condemned not for their color but for their actions. He wrote in the *Autobiography*, “Unless we call one white man, by name, a ‘devil,’ we are not speaking of any *individual* white man. We are speaking of the *collective* white man’s *historical* record. We are speaking of the collective white man’s cruelties, and evils, and greeds, that have seen him *act* like a devil toward the non-white man.”⁶² This stance within the Nation differs little, if at all, from his later comments abroad on February 9, 1965: “I myself do not judge a man by the color of his skin. The yardstick that I use to judge a man is his deeds, his behavior, his intentions.”⁶³ The apparent ease with which Malcolm makes the perceived dramatic “shift” from the racial politics of the Nation to the rhetoric of his final year should make observers chary. In fact, Malcolm’s later ideological framework, which journalists such as M. S. Handler and Alex Haley would portray as fantastically new and refreshing, had already been sufficiently conceived and reported upon by Malcolm himself in his trip to Africa and the Middle East in 1959. As his article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* recounts, “There is no color prejudice among Moslems, for Islam teaches that all mortals are equal and brothers. Whereas the white Christians in the Western world teach this same thing without practicing it. Here in the Moslem world not only is it taught, it is actually ‘a way of life.’”⁶⁴

Though articles would appear throughout the final year of Malcolm’s life with headlines such as “Malcolm X Hails Whites in Mecca” and “Malcolm Rejects Race Separation,” his public statements support Breitman’s interpretation. “Separation is not the goal of the Afro-American,” Malcolm told a Chicago Opera House crowd of 1,500, “Nor is integration his goal. They are merely methods toward his real end—respect and recognition as a human being.”⁶⁵ Malcolm would further condemn the entire American economic and social system, stating in May 1964 that “people will realize that it’s impossible for a chicken to produce a duck egg It can only produce according to what that particular system was constructed to produce. The system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American.”⁶⁶ However, as civil rights leaders and journalists continued to diminish his radicalism—Louis Lomax would comment, “I hate to admit this

Malcolm, but you've become a moderate"⁶⁷—it became clear that not only was the current American system deficient, but it also could not adequately describe in political terms the revolutionary aspects of Malcolm X's new program of Pan-African unity and the shift from *civil* to *human* rights.

If Malcolm's image had been distorted by 1967, the representations by present-day scholars have largely magnified and reproduced the flat political understanding and hyperbolized epiphanies of Haley's conception of Malcolm X in the *Autobiography*. Carol Ohmann's article, "*The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition*," in some respects seeks a more fully conceived understanding of Malcolm's final year by building upon George Breitman's work. However, Ohmann's larger project aims to place the *Autobiography* within a more universal canon as a "traditionally American work" and, in doing so, takes up the earlier task of I. F. Stone's review and fails to interrogate Haley's participation within the text. In fact, Ohmann footnotes her opening page, writing that "[e]vidence both internal and external to the *Autobiography* suggests that Haley kept to the agreement he made with Malcolm—to include nothing Malcolm had not said and to say everything Malcolm wanted included," after which there is no mention of the book's coauthor.⁶⁸

Although scholarship like Ohmann's does not see itself in line with Haley's aims or political understanding, attempts to recast Malcolm X in an American literary tradition serve to further undermine and dilute his racial agenda. Malcolm, speaking in Detroit the day after his home in East Elmhurst was firebombed, addressed a largely Black audience: "You'd be surprised, we discovered that deep within the subconscious of the Black man in this country, he's still more African than American. He thinks that he's more American than African, because the man is jiving him, the man is brainwashing him every day. He's telling, 'You're an American, you're an American.'"⁶⁹ Like Haley, Ohmann chooses the universal Muslim self over the racially particular, and concludes that the similarities of Franklin and Malcolm point to "common areas of experience and suggests that, black and white, we share a common problem: to render human or humane the ideas by which we have traditionally shaped ourselves and our programs or institutions."⁷⁰

Part of the tension within the *Autobiography* comes not merely from Haley's political framework or conception of the autobiographical self, but from the external dictates of the genre itself. Bashir El-Beshti writes that the autobiography as a genre is characterized by a "double focus," between the life recounted and the voice recounting it, in which the "historical moment" actively catches up to the "act of composition" in an eventual fusion that culminates in the fully

constituted autobiographical self.⁷¹ Of course, at the end of both the *Autobiography* and Malcolm's life, Malcolm X is not this static figure, but rather "points to the shifting, protean, nature of the self [that] cannot be fixed."⁷² Paul Eakin adds that in the end, "Malcolm X came to reject the traditional autobiographical fiction that the life comes first, and then the writing of the life; that the life is in some sense complete and that the autobiographical process simply records the final achieved shape."⁷³ If Malcolm ultimately rejected this traditional autobiographical form, however, Alex Haley continued to work from a position in which the "historical moment" had finally caught the "act of composition"; or, as El-Beshti writes, "autobiography gives way to biography."⁷⁴

Malcolm noted the difficulty of his changing circumstances and shifting self on several occasions during the writing of the *Autobiography*. A much-cited passage from his March 19, 1964, letter to Alex Haley asked, "How is it possible to write one's autobiography in a world so fast-changing as this?"⁷⁵ Later, in an interview with *New York Times* writer Theodore Jones just three days before his assassination, Malcolm would state: "I won't deny I don't know where I'm at But by the same token, how many of us put the finger down on one point and say, 'I'm here.'"⁷⁶ What is significant is that despite the emphases of both Haley and Malcolm X on the almost symptomatic changes in Malcolm's life, these shifts are fluid and broadening, rather than epiphanic "conversions." The image of the "second conversion," which has been taken up almost unanimously by writers following in the tradition of the *Autobiography*, is more of a rebirth, or in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, a coming into self. In the same *Times* interview, Malcolm noted, "I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control. . . . Now I think with my own mind, sir."⁷⁷ El-Beshti emphasizes that though "Malcolm might seem like a different man in each of his incarnations . . . his essence—of fluidity, of emergence, of growth—always remain intact. Like a word traced by the science of philology that intrigued him so much, Malcolm's life 'can lose its shape, but . . . keeps its identity.'"⁷⁸

Despite Haley's final claim that he attempted to be a "dispassionate chronicler," the political tensions, differing concepts of selfhood, and antagonistic power play between dictator and recorder, all pronounce themselves in the final work. Mark Sanders concludes that "as Haley and Malcolm X struggle over the central issues of authorial and ideological control, Haley becomes the agent of national mythology, subverting the self-determination implicit in Malcolm X's historical vision of selfhood."⁷⁹ Malcolm is in many ways equally responsible for the narrative's hyperbolized transformations, both in

an attempt to emphasize the regenerative qualities of the Nation of Islam, and later to distance himself as an orthodox Muslim from that earlier construction. However, at one point in the production of the *Autobiography*, Alex Haley would beseech Malcolm to not rewrite the earlier portions of the book that glorified Elijah Muhammad and the teachings of the Nation of Islam; a frustrated Malcolm X asked, “Whose book is this?” to which Haley responded, “yours of course.”⁸⁰ This critical question, and whether Haley acted primarily as the “writer” he claimed to be, or rather as the “interpreter” Malcolm feared him to be, remains vitally important in the constant task of differentiating the mythical Malcolm from that which he sought to construct himself.

Notes

1. Mark A. Sanders, “Theorizing the Collaborative Self: The Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography,” *New Literary History* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 454.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 446.

4. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 1965), 523.

5. It was not until 1961 that the Nation’s newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, began circulating nationally.

6. Alex Haley, “Mr. Muhammad Speaks,” *Readers Digest*, March 1960, 104.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 442–443.

10. Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 150.

11. Manning Marable, “Malcolm X Interview: Manning Marable Interviewed by Amy Goodman,” *Democracy Now*, February 24, 2005, <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=7302>.

12. Alex Haley and Alfred Balk, “Black Merchants of Hate,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 26, 1963, 74.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 71.

16. *Ibid.*, 74.

17. Alex Haley, “She Makes a Joyful Music,” *Reader’s Digest*, November 1961, 202.

18. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 252.

19. Alex Haley, “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met,” *Reader’s Digest*, March 1961, 74.

20. *Ibid.*, 75.

21. *Ibid.*, 77.

22. Alex Haley, “Malcolm X Interview,” *Playboy*, May 1963, 53.

23. *Ibid.*, 60.

24. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 443.

25. Haley, “Malcolm X Interview,” 60.

26. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 422.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Author/Collaborator Letter of Agreement, 1 June 1963, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

29. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 465.

30. Letter from Alex Haley to Paul Reynolds, 21 March 1965, Anne Romaine Collection, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 24, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.

31. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 460.

32. *Muhammad Speaks* stopped publishing almost anything relating to Malcolm X several years before their break.

33. Sanders, "Theorizing the Collaborative Self," 454.
34. Outline for Autobiography, Undated, Alex Haley Papers, Box 3, Folder 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
35. Letter from Alex Haley to Oliver Swan, 5 August 1963, Anne Romaine Collection, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 24, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.
36. Letter from Alex Haley to Ken McCormick and Paul Reynolds, 18 February 1964, Anne Romaine Collection, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 24, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.
37. Letter from Alex Haley to Murray Fisher, Alex Haley Papers, Box 1a. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
38. Ibid.
39. Letter from Alex Haley to Malcolm X, 25 September 1963, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
40. Ibid.
41. Letter from Alex Haley to Malcolm X, 14 November 1963, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
42. Letter from Alex Haley to Malcolm X, 19 November 1963, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
43. Letter from Alex Haley to Paul Reynolds, 26 November 1963, Anne Romaine Collection, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 24, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.
44. Letter from Alex Haley to Malcolm X, 3 December 1963, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
45. Ibid.
46. Letter from Alex Haley to Paul Reynolds, 15 October 1964, Anne Romaine Collection, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 24, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library.
47. Letter from Alex Haley to Paul Reynolds, 21 June 1964, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Malcolm X, "I'm Talking to You, White Man," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 12, 1964, 31.
51. Ibid., 53.
52. Letter from Alex Haley to Malcolm X, 14 October 1964, Malcolm X Collection, Box 3, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
53. Letter from Malcolm X to M.S. Handler, 22 September 1964, Alex Haley Papers, Box 3, Folder 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
54. Letter from Ken McCormick to Alex Haley, 16 March 1965, Ken McCormick Collection of the Records of Doubleday and Company, Folder 2, Library of Congress, 1.
55. Walter Bradbury, Memo to Nelson Doubleday and Ken McCormick, 5 March 1965. Ken McCormick Collection, Folder 2, Library of Congress.
56. In a letter to Malcolm Reiss dated 27 May 1966, Ken McCormick expressed regret at not publishing the book: "It still rankles me when I think of hthe [sic] fact that we didn't publish that book. It was a bitter disappointment, but you know the circumstances."
57. I. F. Stone, "The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X." *New York Review of Books*, November 11, 1965.
58. Reverend Albert Cleage and George Breitman, "Myths About Malcolm X: Two Views," *International Socialist Review* (September–October 1967), 36.
59. Ibid., 40.
60. Ibid., 37.
61. Ibid., 46.
62. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 306.
63. Steve Clark, editor, *February 1965: The Final Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 38.
64. Malcolm X, "Arabs Send Warm Greetings to 'Our Brothers' of Color in the U.S.A.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1959.
65. "Malcolm Rejects Race Separation," *New York Times*, May 24, 1964.
66. George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 68–69.
67. "Malcolm Rejects Race Separation."
68. Carol Ohmann, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1970): 131.
69. Clark, *February 1965*, 98.
70. Ohmann, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," 148.
71. Bashir M. El-Beshti, "The Semiotics of Salvation: Malcolm X and the Autobiographical Self," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 359.
72. Ibid., 360.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 361.

75. Letter from Malcolm X to Alex Haley, 19 March 1964, Alex Haley Papers, Box 3, Folder 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

76. Clark, *February 1965*, 179.

77. Ibid.

78. El-Beshti, "The Semiotics of Salvation," 363.

79. Sanders, "Theorizing the Collaborative Self," 455.

80. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 476.