



**REINVENTING MALCOLM WITH MARABLE:  
PURSUING PATHOLOGY BY ANOTHER NAME**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 04-21-11, p.A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

Every work reflects, consciously or unconsciously, a philosophical framework within which it is rooted, conceived and carried out, no matter what claims are made about objectivity and detached critical analysis, and Manning Marable's recent, posthumously published and problematic book on the life of Min. Malcolm X, *El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz*, is not exempt from this rule or reality. Indeed, Marable's work and the subsequent controversy of denunciation and praise which surrounds it, raises larger questions beyond the book about how we understand, interpret and write history. It also raises interrelated questions of how we address the tendency of so many Black intellectuals to embrace the deconstructionist approach to history and humanities writing, pursuing criticism as an act of faith and revelation of the unseemly as proof of progress toward "humanizing" persons thought to be in need of it.

Clearly, deconstructive writing as critical analysis is to be embraced and encouraged, but deconstructionism in its most negative forms can easily degenerate into collecting and musing over trivia, trash and other extraneous information whose sensationalist character becomes a substitute for things relevant and more intellectually rewarding. Indeed, it becomes little more than the passionate pursuit of racialized pathology by another name. And, at its worst, it takes the form of "scavenger history," the constant search for stench and stain, bottom feeding on the salacious, unseemly and sensational. This leads to pretensions and claims of revealing new material and offering original insights into things found earlier by others and rejected as uninformative and unuseful to a more disciplined and rigorous scholarship.

It is Malcolm, himself, who affirmed that "of all our studies, history is best prepared to

reward our research." But this, in the Malcolmian critical thinking tradition, assumes a mind receptive to discovery, not one determined to prove preconceptions. And it presupposes an emancipatory intent in pursuit of knowledge, not one that binds the mind in ever-tighter conceptual chains forged and offered as liberational tools by the established order. As Malcolm noted in a lecture at Harvard, the logic of the oppressed cannot be the logic of the oppressor, if they seek liberation.

Marable embraced a deconstructionist approach to the life of Malcolm X as one of repeated re-invention as the title of his book, *Malcolm X: A Life of Re-Invention*, indicates. It is this academically faddish and popular culture category that informs and problematizes Marable's work, for it can be understood as an expression of agency or indictment. Thus, it can reflect creative and constructive change or manipulative masking and shape-shifting of the most indictable kind.

It is also Malcolm in his *Autobiography* who defined the positive self-constructive changes of his life. He said, "my whole life has been a chronology of changes." Moreover, he states that "despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts and to accept the reality of life as new experiences and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand and hand with every intelligent search for truth."

This is salutary change and self-transformation that the *Odu Ifa* (245:1) teaches when it says, "If we are given birth, we should bring ourselves into being again." This is self-creation in the most positive sense, not the negative deconstructionist conception of invention as a deliberate disguising, a constant change of costumes and character in

**REINVENTING MALCOLM WITH MARABLE:  
PURSUING PATHOLOGY BY ANOTHER NAME**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 04-21-11, p.A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

manipulative ways. Unfortunately, Marable's reinvention of Malcolm is too often portrayed in negative and diminishing ways, depriving Malcolm of one of his most definitive characteristics, an audacious agency reflective of the awesome history and expansive humanity of his people.

Conceptually imprisoned by the philosophical framework he has chosen and the presuppositions it invites and imposes, Malcolm is portrayed as a wily wearer of "multiple masks" with an astute ability "to package himself." Moreover, it is said he lined his life with "layers of personality," "manipulated" his voice, told tales and was "consciously a performer."

Pursuing the deconstructionist popular culture path, Marable situates Malcolm in "the folk tradition of Black outlaws and dissidents," not in the Black cultural tradition of master teacher and moral leader. He assigns to this list Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Stagger Lee, blues guitarist Robert Johnson, and catering to the hip-hop constituency, rapper Tupac Shakur. A few lines down we discover he is not talking about Malcolm, but rather Detroit Red. This, too, is a problem of his portrayal of Malcolm, the collapsing of Detroit Red with Malcolm X, refusing to accept the radical rupture Malcolm makes to reconstruct himself as a more worthy and world-historical person and a continuously unfolding human possibility. This is the audacious agency that appealed even to President Obama in his search for an African anchor for his identity, purpose and direction, and is the basis of Malcolm's durability as a model of African and human excellence and achievement among his people.

Marable tells us that he and his researchers and perhaps, co-writers of sections, wanted to "humanize" Malcolm, a

kind of saving him from his "manufactured" self and from the alleged mythological conceptions of him hosted and harbored by those too appreciative of Malcolm to see his flaws. But it is important to know what these "humanizers" really mean by this self-assigned and sanctimonious sounding mission of "humanizing" Malcolm. In such a conception, the flaws are the defining feature of Malcolm's being human and his excellence assumes a secondary role and relevance.

Malcolm, himself, expressed a myriad of flaws, but Marable believes he exaggerated some and left out others, and he must set the historical record straight, assigning Malcolm flaws which cater to or coincide with current tastes and talk, disrobing and redressing him in costumes of assumed audience and publisher and PR preference. Thus, Marable dismisses Malcolm's pre-Muslim serious juvenile and adult lumpen life, downgrading it to a kind of *lumpen lite*. He pursues his deconstructive argument against available evidence by characterizing Malcolm's pre-Muslim life of crime as a thief, robber, numbers runner, dope-dealer, pimp, panderer and burglar by terming it "amateurish," "clumsy," and "ridiculous," and calling his crime partners "a motley crew."

In addition, he tells us that pre-Muslim Malcolm's efforts to shield his younger brother from lumpen life, "suggests he was never himself a hardened criminal." It's like arguing a mafia member, shielding his son from his business or a pimp protecting his daughter from prostitution makes them less lumpen, i.e., less committed to crime. It is such specious speculation and repeated misreading of Malcolm in too many places that calls to mind a diligent but mistaken scholar trying to translate a Swahili text with a Zulu dictionary. (TO BE CONTINUED)

---

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).