

Learning to Read

MALCOLM X



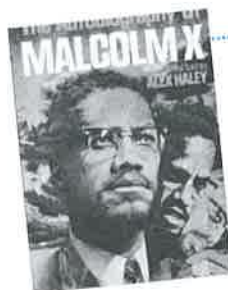
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Framing the Reading

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925. Essentially orphaned as a child, he lived in a series of foster homes, became involved in criminal activity, and dropped out of school in eighth grade after a teacher told him his race would prevent him from being a lawyer. In 1945, he was sentenced to prison, where he read voraciously. After joining the Nation of Islam, he changed his last name to "X," explaining in his autobiography that "my 'X' replaced the white slavemaster name of 'Little.'" A strong advocate for the rights of African Americans, Malcolm X became an influential leader in the Nation of Islam but left the organization in 1964, becoming a Sunni Muslim and founding an organization dedicated to African American unity. Less than a year later, he was assassinated.

In this chapter we excerpt a piece from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which he narrated to Alex Haley shortly before his death. We see Malcolm X's account as exemplifying many of the principles that Deborah Brandt introduces in "Sponsors of Literacy" (p. 68). For example, Malcolm X's account of how he came to reading is remarkable for how clearly it shows the role of motivation in literacy and learning: When he had a reason to read, he read, and reading fed his motivation to read further. His account also demonstrates the extent to which literacies shape the worlds available to people and the experiences they can have, as well as how literacy sponsors affect the kinds of literacy we eventually master.

We expect that reading Malcolm X's experiences in coming to reading will bring up your own memories of this stage in your life, which should set you thinking about what worlds your literacies give you access to and whether there are worlds in which you would be considered "illiterate." We think you'll find a comparison of your experiences and Malcolm X's provocative and telling.



X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Edited by Alex Haley, Ballantine Books, 1965.

Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do at least one of the following activities:

- Do some reading online about Malcolm X and his biography.
- Start a discussion with friends, roommates, family, or classmates about whether, and how, “knowledge is power.”

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How would Malcolm X’s life have been different if his literacy experiences had been different?
- How was Malcolm X’s literacy inextricably entangled with his life experiences, his race, and the religion he chose?
- How do Malcolm X’s early literacy experiences and literacy sponsors compare with your own?

IT WAS BECAUSE OF MY LETTERS that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education. 1

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would *say* it, something such as “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad—” 2

Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I’ve said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies. 3

It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn’t contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did. 4

In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional.

I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to 5
learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve
my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both
ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets
and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd 6
never realized so many words existed! I didn't know *which* words I needed to
learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet 7
everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks.

I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything 8
I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own
handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—immensely proud 9
to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words
that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could
remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose mean-
ings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now,
that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-
tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught
by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

I was so fascinated that I went on—I copied the dictionary's next page. And 10
the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I
also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictio-
nary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled
a whole tablet—and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying
what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much
practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my
tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I
wrote a million words.

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for 11
the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the
book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world
that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in
every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on
my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between
Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors—usually Ella and
Reginald—and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking
about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in
my life.

The Norfolk Prison Colony's library was in the school building. A variety of
classes was taught there by instructors who came from such places as Harvard

and Boston universities. The weekly debates between inmate teams were also held in the school building. You would be astonished to know how worked up convict debaters and audiences would get over subjects like “Should Babies Be Fed Milk?”

Available on the prison library’s shelves were books on just about every general subject. Much of the big private collection that Parkhurst had willed to the prison was still in crates and boxes in the back of the library—thousands of old books. Some of them looked ancient: covers faded, old-time parchment-looking binding. Parkhurst, I’ve mentioned, seemed to have been principally interested in history and religion. He had the money and the special interest to have a lot of books that you wouldn’t have in general circulation. Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection.

As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and *understand*.

I read more in my room than in the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum number of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten P.M. I would be outraged with the “lights out.” It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.

Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when “lights out” came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approaching footsteps, I jumped into bed and feigned sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes—until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets I had slept less than that.

The teachings of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been “whitened”—when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out. Mr. Muhammad couldn’t have said anything that would have struck me much harder. I had never forgotten how when my class, me and all of those whites, had studied seventh-grade United States history back in Mason,

the history of the Negro had been covered in one paragraph, and the teacher had gotten a big laugh with his joke, "Negroes' feet are so big that when they walk, they leave a hole in the ground."

This is one reason why Mr. Muhammad's teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among *all* Negroes, whether or not they became followers of Mr. Muhammad. The teachings ring true—to every Negro. You can hardly show me a black adult in America—or a white one, for that matter—who knows from the history books anything like the truth about the black man's role. In my own case, once I heard of the "glorious history of the black man," I took special pains to hunt in the library for books that would inform me on details about black history.

I can remember accurately the very first set of books that really impressed me. I have since bought that set of books and have it at home for my children to read as they grow up. It's called *Wonders of the World*. It's full of pictures of archeological finds, statues that depict, usually, non-European people.

I found books like Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. I read H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*. *Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois gave me a glimpse into the black people's history before they came to this country. Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History* opened my eyes about black empires before the black slave was brought to the United States, and the early Negro struggles for freedom.

J. A. Rogers' three volumes of *Sex and Race* told about race-mixing before Christ's time; about Aesop being a black man who told fables; about Egypt's Pharaohs; about the great Coptic Christian Empires; about Ethiopia, the earth's oldest continuous black civilization, as China is the oldest continuous civilization.

Mr. Muhammad's teaching about how the white man had been created led me to *Findings in Genetics* by Gregor Mendel. (The dictionary's G section was where I had learned what "genetics" meant.) I really studied this book by the Austrian monk. Reading it over and over, especially certain sections, helped me to understand that if you started with a black man, a white man could be produced; but starting with a white man, you never could produce a black man—because the white gene is recessive. And since no one disputes that there was but one Original Man, the conclusion is clear.

During the last year or so, in the *New York Times*, Arnold Toynbee used the word "bleached" in describing the white man. (His words were: "White (i.e., bleached) human beings of North European origin. . . .") Toynbee also referred to the European geographic area as only a peninsula of Asia. He said there is no such thing as Europe. And if you look at the globe, you will see for yourself that America is only an extension of Asia. (But at the same time Toynbee is among those who have helped to bleach history. He has written that Africa was the only continent that produced no history. He won't write that again. Every day now, the truth is coming to light.)

I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror. It made such an impact upon me that it later became one of my favorite subjects when I became a minister of Mr. Muhammad's. The world's most monstrous crime, the sin and the blood on the white man's hands, are almost impossible to believe. Books like the one by Frederick Olmstead opened my eyes to the horrors suffered when the slave was landed in the United States. The European woman, Fannie Kimball, who had married a Southern white slave-owner, described how human beings were degraded. Of course I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In fact, I believe that's the only novel I have ever read since I started serious reading. 26

Parkhurst's collection also contained some bound pamphlets of the Abolitionist Anti-Slavery Society of New England. I read descriptions of atrocities, saw those illustrations of black slave women tied up and flogged with whips; of black mothers watching their babies being dragged off, never to be seen by their mothers again; of dogs after slaves, and of the fugitive slave catchers, evil white men with whips and clubs and chains and guns. I read about the slave preacher Nat Turner, who put the fear of God into the white slavemaster. Nat Turner wasn't going around preaching pie-in-the-sky and "non-violent" freedom for the black man. There in Virginia one night in 1831, Nat and seven other slaves started out at his master's home and through the night they went from one plantation "big house" to the next, killing, until by the next morning 57 white people were dead and Nat had about 70 slaves following him. White people, terrified for their lives, fled from their homes, locked themselves up in public buildings, hid in the woods, and some even left the state. A small army of soldiers took two months to catch and hang Nat Turner. Somewhere I have read where Nat Turner's example is said to have inspired John Brown to invade Virginia and attack Harper's Ferry nearly thirty years later, with thirteen white men and five Negroes. 27

I read Herodotus, "the father of History," or, rather, I read about him. And I read the histories of various nations, which opened my eyes gradually, then wider and wider, to how the whole world's white men had indeed acted like devils, pillaging and raping and bleeding and draining the whole world's non-white people. I remember, for instance, books such as Will Durant's story of Oriental civilization, and Mahatma Gandhi's accounts of the struggle to drive the British out of India. 28

Book after book showed me how the white man had brought upon the world's black, brown, red, and yellow peoples every variety of the sufferings of exploitation. I saw how since the sixteenth century, the so-called "Christian trader" white man began to ply the seas in his lust for Asian and African empires, and plunder, and power. I read, I saw, how the white man never has gone among the non-white peoples bearing the Cross in the true manner and spirit of Christ's teachings—meek, humble, and Christ-like. 29

I perceived, as I read, how the collective white man had been actually nothing but a piratical opportunist who used Faustian machinations to make his own Christianity his initial wedge in criminal conquests. First, always “religiously,” he branded “heathen” and “pagan” labels upon ancient non-white cultures and civilizations. The stage thus set, he then turned upon his non-white victims his weapons of war. 30

I read how, entering India—half a *billion* deeply religious brown people—the British white man, by 1759, through promises, trickery and manipulations, controlled much of India through Great Britain’s East India Company. The parasitical British administration kept tentacles out to half of the subcontinent. In 1857, some of the desperate people of India finally mutinied—and, excepting the African slave trade, nowhere has history recorded any more unnecessary bestial and ruthless human carnage than the British suppression of the non-white Indian people. 31

Over 115 million African blacks—close to the 1930s population of the United States—were murdered or enslaved during the slave trade. And I read how when the slave market was glutted, the cannibalistic white powers of Europe next carved up, as their colonies, the richest areas of the black continent. And Europe’s chancelleries for the next century played a chess game of naked exploitation and power from Cape Horn to Cairo. 32

Ten guards and the warden couldn’t have torn me out of those books. Not even Elijah Muhammad could have been more eloquent than those books were in providing indisputable proof that the collective white man had acted like a devil in virtually every contact he had with the world’s collective non-white man. I listen today to the radio, and watch television, and read the headlines about the collective white man’s fear and tension concerning China. When the white man professes ignorance about why the Chinese hate him so, my mind can’t help flashing back to what I read, there in prison, about how the bloodforebears of this same white man raped China at a time when China was trusting and helpless. Those original white “Christian traders” sent into China millions of pounds of opium. By 1839, so many of the Chinese were addicts that China’s desperate government destroyed twenty thousand chests of opium. The first Opium War was promptly declared by the white man. Imagine! Declaring *war* upon someone who objects to being narcotized! The Chinese were severely beaten, with Chinese-invented gunpowder. 33

The Treaty of Nanking made China pay the British white man for the destroyed opium; forced open China’s major ports to British trade; forced China to abandon Hong Kong; fixed China’s import tariffs so low that cheap British articles soon flooded in, maiming China’s industrial development. 34

After a second Opium War, the Tientsin Treaties legalized the ravaging opium trade, legalized a British-French-American control of China’s customs. China tried delaying that Treaty’s ratification; Peking was looted and burned. 35

"Kill the foreign white devils!" was the 1901 Chinese war cry in the Boxer 36
Rebellion. Losing again, this time the Chinese were driven from Peking's choic-
est areas. The vicious, arrogant white man put up the famous signs, "Chinese
and dogs not allowed."

Red China after World War II closed its doors to the Western white world. 37
Massive Chinese agricultural, scientific, and industrial efforts are described in a
book that *Life* magazine recently published. Some observers inside Red China
have reported that the world never has known such a hate-white campaign as is
now going on in this non-white country where, present birth-rates continuing,
in fifty more years Chinese will be half the earth's population. And it seems that
some Chinese chickens will soon come home to roost, with China's recent suc-
cessful nuclear tests.

Let us face reality. We can see in the United Nations a new world order 38
being shaped, along color lines—an alliance among the non-white nations.
America's U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson complained not long ago that in
the United Nations "a skin game" was being played. He was right. He was facing
reality. A "skin game" *is* being played. But Ambassador Stevenson sounded like
Jesse James accusing the marshal of carrying a gun. Because who in the world's
history ever has played a worse "skin game" than the white man?

Mr. Muhammad, to whom I was writing daily, had no idea of what a new 39
world had opened up to me through my efforts to document his teachings in
books.

When I discovered philosophy, I tried to touch all the landmarks of philo- 40
sophical development. Gradually, I read most of the old philosophers, Occidental
and Oriental. The Oriental philosophers were the ones I came to prefer; finally,
my impression was that most Occidental philosophy had largely been borrowed
from the Oriental thinkers. Socrates, for instance, traveled in Egypt. Some
sources even say that Socrates was initiated into some of the Egyptian mysteries.
Obviously Socrates got some of his wisdom among the East's wise men.

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew 41
right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I
see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be
mentally alive. I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a sta-
tus symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every addi-
tional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and
blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. Not long ago, an English
writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, "What's your alma
mater?" I told him, "Books." You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes
in which I'm not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man.

Yesterday I spoke in London, and both ways on the plane across the Atlantic 42
I was studying a document about how the United Nations proposes to insure

the human rights of the oppressed minorities of the world. The American black man is the world's most shameful case of minority oppression. What makes the black man think of himself as only an internal United States issue is just a catch-phrase, two words, "civil rights." How is the black man going to get "civil rights" before first he wins his *human* rights? If the American black man will start thinking about his *human* rights, and then start thinking of himself as part of one of the world's great peoples, he will see he has a case for the United Nations.

I can't think of a better case! Four hundred years of black blood and sweat invested here in America, and the white man still has the black man begging for what every immigrant fresh off the ship can take for granted the minute he walks down the gangplank. ⁴³

But I'm digressing. I told the Englishman that my alma mater was books, a good library. Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read—and that's a lot of books these days. If I weren't out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity—because you can hardly mention anything I'm not curious about. I don't think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did. In fact, prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college. I imagine that one of the biggest troubles with colleges is there are too many distractions, too much party-raiding, fraternities, and boola-boola and all of that. Where else but in a prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day? ⁴⁴

Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. Who seems to be Malcolm X's intended audience? How do you know?
2. How does Malcolm X define *literacy*? How does this definition compare with school-based literacy?
3. Drawing on Deborah Brandt's definition of *literacy sponsor*, list as many of Malcolm X's literacy sponsors as you can find. (Remember that sponsors don't have to be people; they can also be ideas or institutions, which can withhold literacy as well as provide it.) Which sponsors were most influential? What were their motivations?
4. Brandt explains that people often subvert or misappropriate the intentions of their sponsors (see paras. 7 and 27). Was this ever the case with Malcolm X? If so, how?
5. Like Malcolm X, many readers have memories in which a reference work like a dictionary or an encyclopedia figures significantly. Did his account bring back any such memories for you? If so, what were they?