A LIE OF REINVENTION
CORRECTING MANNING MARABLE’S MALCOLM X

edited by Jared Ball Todd Steven Burroughs
An Introduction to a Lie

“We are living in a time when image-making has become a science. Someone can create a certain image and then use that image to twist your mind and lead you right up a blind path.”¹ (Malcolm X)

“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”² (Mark Twain)

Our honor was threefold after receiving a call from Paul Coates asking us to compile a book of critical responses to Manning Marable’s Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention. The first honor, of course, was being invited to work with Black Classic Press, a truly legendary publishing house. The second honor was that we (the editors) had both become involved early on in the debate that arose soon after the publication of Marable’s book, which, unfortunately, was coupled with his untimely death. The third honor was that Paul’s offer gave us an opportunity to take up what we believe is our generational duty: to accept responsibility, at minimum, for editorially defending and extending the legacy of Malcolm X and the ideas with which Malcolm most seriously grappled. The unenviable alternative, as we saw it, was to quietly accept or worse to openly support Marable’s false reinvention of the man and his ideas.

More than merely viewing Marable’s reinvention of Malcolm as false, we have, beginning with our choice of book title, unapologetically laid down our claim that it is a lie. Marable’s book, we contend, is the carefully constructed and intentional political reshaping of a man who was as important a conduit for and exemplar of African American politics as the world has ever seen. As each of our chapter contributors point out, Malcolm X’s political importance, beyond that of the man himself, compels both a need of those in power to distort his memory and our need to respond vigorously to such attacks.

Margo Arnold, for example, maintains that Malcolm is recognized as a revolutionary by what she calls our “Black Radical Collective Consciousness,” and that Marable’s book has given members of that collective “the blues.” She claims that it is that revolutionary consciousness—the consciousness that first
produced Malcolm X—which demands a collective rebuttal to attempts such as Marable’s to deny him and, in turn, to deny all Black people his legacy.

That is why we, the editors and contributors to this volume of critical essays, charge that Manning Marable and Viking Press have produced what is, for them, a *[politically necessary version]* of Malcolm X and his governing radical ideas. By so doing, we allege that their intent was to discredit a Black radical tradition—specifically, Black nationalism—and to set Malcolm up, by the book’s end, as some sort of “race-neutral,” multicultural, mainstream-leaning, liberal Democrat.

This conclusion—and Marable’s seemingly infinite flaws of scholarship, citation, and basic accuracy—has led contributor William Strickland to suggest in his essay that *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* “disqualifies itself as a work of historical scholarship.” Similarly, Marable’s multiple blunders cause contributor Raymond Winbush to describe *A Life of Reinvention* as “speculative non-fiction” at best and leads contributor Patricia Reid-Merrit to ask, and investigate, just “who was Manning Marable,” and what must have been the “perceived social and personal benefits” of his “*[deliberately]* producing a controversial book which casts doubts on the motives, character and sincerity of one of the most revered figures of the Black freedom movement” (emphasis added). As contributor Greg Thomas concludes, what Marable has produced is not a book at all but rather an “operation or a maneuver.”

Compare the dangerous reinvention imposed upon Malcolm X by Marable to what a number of other contributors to this collection suggest is better described as Malcolm’s radical evolution. With nuance and intellectual sleight-of-hand, several of our contributors maintain that Marable’s work serves to diminish the threat that Malcolm posed to the state and to its long- and still-standing hostility toward political radicals. None other than Mumia Abu-Jamal, for example, refers to *A Life of Reinvention* as “tragic,” in large part for its total omission of any serious discussion of the role played in Malcolm’s demise by the FBI’s infamous Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Abu-Jamal has contributed a revision of his earlier views about the Marable book in an essay written exclusively for this volume. As he writes in that essay:

> “Why an historian of Marable’s standing and expertise neither utilizes nor references works which provide us with an inside (i.e., political and functional) view of the role of the FBI and, indeed, the State, in its relationship with Black nationalist and/or Black
liberation organizations…is, to say the least, troubling. For his failure to give this contextual framework—which [may have] required, perhaps, half a chapter to set forth—normalizes the FBI as just another ‘law enforcement agency,’ and misrepresents both their historic, contemporary and continuing role in American society as essentially, race police—or discrete defenders of white supremacy.”

Abu-Jamal further suggests that Marable’s inept portrayal of Malcolm sets forth a course for interpreting the present moment as well. He contends that as people around the world are once again revisiting social-movement building and could in that process potentially re-engage radical politics, a figure like Malcolm X demands a more liberalizing reinvention. Likewise, as increasing numbers begin to question the absence of real change in the American political system and social order (such as was presumably associated with the election of the first Black President), and as they more clearly recognize the worsening inequalities in this country, the kinds of analyses presented by a radical figure such as Malcolm X must also suffer renewed reinventions.

The contributors to this volume maintain that it is the persistence of exploitation in the United States and the world that makes the ideas that produced Malcolm X—and the ideas produced by him—as relevant today as they were in his time. Collectively, we ask: In what world do we live where ideas such as revolutionary nationalism, pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, and the rights of the oppressed to struggle by any means are somehow irrelevant? Increases in mass incarceration, continuing political imprisonment, and worsening conditions of employment, poverty, access to health care and quality education have, in 2012, as much a need for Malcolm X’s analysis and suggested responses as ever.

Indeed, it could be argued (and is, by several essays included herein) that a fundamental turning away from the politics of resistance and revolution has left African America with the kinds of persistent inequality associated with incomplete freedom movements. The suppression of Malcolm X as he really was—politically, ideologically, and programmatically—has been equaled in the contemporary era only by the suppression of his politics within the circles of those claiming to carry on his legacy. The continuity of oppression from Malcolm’s time to now requires both the initial physical assassination of the man and the subsequent re-assassination of his ideas. In truth, those assassinations are what make today’s inequality possible. They are merely the necessary first steps. The danger represented by Malcolm X and his ideas is today as persistent as the
oppression he sought to destroy in his time. It is in this context that the editors and
contributors to this book argue that the lie of reinvention has been applied to
Malcolm X by Manning Marable.

Reinvention conveys a sense of starting anew and totally redefining one’s
position, place, or purpose. In the context of the anti-Black-radical, anti-left
politics of Marable’s book and the “post-racial,” Obama-era setting of its
publication, this reinvention obviously attempts to place Malcolm X in the
ancestral lineage of a modern world falsely defined as advanced, civil, or simply
better than before. Given the massive body of knowledge produced by and about
Malcolm X that clearly identifies an increasingly radical and threatening political
trajectory, this reinvention could not have happened unconsciously.

Hence, the lie. The science of image making that Malcolm X spoke of so
many years ago has hence undergone a process similar to the conditions that
particular science is meant to obscure. The manipulation of consciousness or
public opinion, which Malcolm understood perfectly as being necessary to hide or
justify worsening conditions, continues now at levels commensurate with the
kinds of worsening inequality we see in the world today.

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The editors’ journey toward what has become this particular culminating
volume began years ago as long-time friends and colleagues, now both at Morgan
State University. We were among the many excited anticipants awaiting Manning
Marable’s “masterpiece” and a welcome excuse to re-discuss Malcolm in a
contemporary historical sense. Not since the early 1990s had either of us felt the
kind of mass swell from below that could push, even demand, the return of
Malcolm X to popular consciousness. We felt Marable deserved full credit for his
contribution to that effort, but between his untimely death and some early warning
signs about the nature of his forthcoming book—not the least of which was an
early and scathing critique from Karl Evanzz—we became more than a little
concerned.

Beginning only a few short days after the release of Marable’s book on
April 8, 2011, we co-hosted a series of radio programs on the work.4 We consulted
media critic Richard Prince and his most essential online column, “Journal-isms,”
for the latest news on and responses to the book. Later, we were able, finally, to
delve deeply into the text itself. To our great disappointment, more than the
simple warnings we had received were confirmed. Malcolm X was indeed present, fully developed, in the book’s pages, but his story had been re-told and recast from the many books and other sources that Marable simultaneously borrowed from and dismissed. More troubling was that we found the ideas, the analyses, the fire that Malcolm brought to the scene all gone—worse still, they were attacked and vilified.

Marable’s “definitive masterpiece” was to us a mere tombstone: a 600-page eulogy that laid to permanent rest the Malcolm X that we knew and revered. Indeed, it buried the very ideas that produced Malcolm X and those he made his own, our own. The book attacked the very ideas that made Malcolm X and all Black people then, and now, dangerous. The relative brevity of the book you are now reading vis-à-vis Marable’s is fitting in that it does in far fewer words what Marable’s self-proclaimed “magnum opus” does so little of: it appropriately re-politicizes both Marable’s subject and his ideology.

As several contributors to this volume point out, the continuity of the state’s need to marginalize the “real” Malcolm X requires that mainstream accounts of the man appear exactly as they do in Marable’s book. Marable’s need to reconcile today with a living, breathing Malcolm X forces him to draw impossible conclusions rather than to note, more accurately, that there could be no today as it is without first destroying Malcolm the man and subsequently destroying, in perpetuity, both the ideas that made the man and those which he transformed into the governing ideas of the most radical elements in this society. So powerful were Malcolm X’s contributions to the radical movements that emerged after his assassination that many of that movement’s adherents had to be themselves assassinated, imprisoned, or exiled to this very day.

In their respective essays, Kali Akuno and Kamau Franklin, who are each members of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, take particular note of an issue that Akuno describes as *A Life of Reinvention*’s “ideological polemic... [the] general focus of [which] is Black nationalism, and Black revolutionary nationalism in particular.” Franklin’s own brief role as legal counsel for one of Malcolm X’s accused killers highlights an important difference in historical interpretation that emerges between what he calls “movement” and “non-movement” people and a cause of great concern over what has become a tradition of struggle over the post-assassination interpretation and application of Malcolm’s ideas. According to Franklin,
“[It is] impossible to ignore Malcolm’s positions on Black political struggle. His ideas became the new mainstream political thinking of the movement’s new Black Power direction, and thus began the fight for the political ideas of Malcolm X.”

Franklin contends that if Marable’s attempt to engage in this fight is to criticize and ultimately supplant Alex Haley’s 1965 book on Malcolm with his own newly accepted “definitive” epic, then it is tantamount to an “ivory tower assassination attempt.” As both Akuno and Franklin clarify, however, whatever flaws existed in Haley’s book or the intent behind Haley’s involvement, it unquestionably encourages what Marable’s does not—namely, “radical organization against the state.”

Franklin’s critique of Marable’s class position and state function as an elite academic working with an elite publishing house is echoed by several contributors to this volume, notably William Strickland, Raymond Winbush, Amiri Baraka, and Margo Arnold. Strickland, for one, maintains that the goal of Marable and Viking Press (a subsidiary of Penguin, one of the six largest publishers in the world) was to craft a version of Malcolm X that would appeal to the “broadest audience possible.” Were we to apply the Propaganda Model of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman to Marable’s book, as does Winbush to a certain extent, it becomes difficult to deny Marable and Viking that success. Indeed, what they have done, quite to the point of Chomsky and Herman, is to produce an ideological media product that represents the political perspectives and worldviews of those who rule.

Consider, for example, not only the nomination of *A Life of Reinvention* for a National Book Club Award but also the accolades offered it by so many in the establishment media world. Among the latter is that of Wendy Wolf, a Viking Press editor who worked with Marable on the book and who is an expert on that aspect of psychological warfare often euphemistically referred to as “public relations.” Wolf dubs *A Life of Reinvention* a “comprehensive biography,” asserting that she is somehow qualified, apparently by association with the flawless Marable himself, to claim with confidence that, “little serious, popular work on Malcolm’s life has been published in the years since [Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X*].” Wolf continues her seemingly Marable-inspired dismissal of previous works on Malcolm (from which Marable borrowed extensively) as not only silly but also as mere “idolatry” that does little more than lead to the erection of “barriers to true understanding.”

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To this, we could easily add the full ensemble of establishment press praises of Marable’s book. The Washington Post, for example, hailed it as a “work of art.” The New York Times called it “prodigiously researched,” proclaiming that “[Marable] artfully strips away the layers and layers of myth that have been lacquered onto his subject’s life—first by Malcolm himself in that famous memoir, and later by both supporters and opponents after his assassination in 1965 at the age of 39.”

The accolades were indeed remarkable and plentiful. The Atlantic called the book “a comprehensive portrait.” To the San Francisco Chronicle, it was a “masterpiece.” Newsday dubbed it “prodigious,” and even The Nation defined it as a “definitive biography.” As Bill Strickland explains, such praise can only come from a book on Malcolm X that first develops an “historical narrative subordinated to the marketing strategy” of an elite publisher.

On another score, Raymond Winbush and Rosemari Mealy allege in their essays that part of the flawed narrative Marable developed about Malcolm X is the inexplicable omission of the voices of the women with whom Malcolm X lived and organized. They denounce the ultimately miniscule number of women interviewed for a volume of such magnitude and from a scholar of Marable’s ample resources and time. They question how, given the twenty years Marable is reputed to have worked on A Life of Reinvention, he could not have interviewed or presented substantive commentary from such principle members of Malcolm’s life. Malcolm’s wife Betty Shabazz, for example, appears in the book largely as backdrop and as the subject of unsubstantiated rumors of infidelity. Winbush points out that Shabazz lived in the same city and navigated the same academic professional world as Marable until her death in 1997. Thus, Marable’s failure to conduct an interview or oral history with her, writes Winbush is, “similar to a person living in Atlanta while doing a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., and not interviewing Coretta Scott King living just five miles away.”

Greg Thomas addresses this matter in greater detail in his essay, suggesting that Malcolm X’s sister, Ella Little Collins, seems to exist for Marable only as a target of relentless demonization. Collins too lived until the mid-1990s (she died in 1996), so, like Shabazz, he contends that she could easily have been involved in and interviewed for Marable’s project. Thomas goes on to question the inappropriateness of Marable’s several unsubstantiated inquiries into Malcolm X’s sex life by asking an essential question: what is revealed about the observer by the questions he asks of his subject? He further describes Marable’s work as
part of a “counterrevolutionary backlash” that “reduces sexuality to a matter of accusation.” Moreover, contrary to all the supported, documented evidence, he explains that Marable concocted an entirely baseless distortion of Malcolm as one who viewed all women as “unreliable.”

In his subsequent analysis of Marable’s class-biased interpretation of Malcolm X, Thomas, like Margo Arnold in her essay, later positions the author of *A Life of Reinvention* as a sponsored representative of Columbia University and Penguin Publishing. He posits that this elite stratum of society has an innate need to engage in the type of political destabilization that demands the mischaracterization of radical figures like Malcolm X and countless others.

A. Peter Bailey, as one of the few persons Marable interviewed for the book who had first-hand experience working with Malcolm, adds more depth to that discussion in his essay in this volume. Bailey maintains, for example, that the distortions in Marable’s book are so numerous as to make him even “less determined to trust other scholars.” He goes on to detail several instances where comments he made during his interview were forcibly bent to fit Marable’s biases, so much so that he claims the published remarks bear “no relationship” to what he actually said.

In his criticisms of flaws in Marable’s research, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua offers an important discussion of the role of Black Studies scholars and collectives he calls “genuine research teams” in helping to prevent future and similar intellectual fumbles. By juxtaposing the work of another scholar, Marika Sherwood, against that of Marable in their respective uses of Malcolm X’s recently released travel notebooks, Cha-Jua demonstrates the impact of author bias on conclusions drawn from evidence. Once the record is placed in plain view, he asserts, several of Marable’s conclusions about Malcolm’s sex life and rumored infidelities simply do not stand up.

These and other examples discussed by Cha-Jua raise issues contributor Eugene Puryear describes as Marable’s exposed “reformist vs. revolutionary tendencies.” For instance, Cha-Jua notes that once figures like Malcolm X, his older sister Ella Little-Collins (herself a powerful, pioneering Black nationalist entrepreneur and leader), and Herman Ferguson (a founding member of the Organization of Afro-American Unity whose Republic of New Afrika affiliation and work is never mentioned by Marable), are taken out of their “sociohistorical and discursive contexts,” Marable’s “diagnoses” of Malcolm X—from his psychological state to his political consciousness—become questionable. For
Puryear and Cha-Jua, this is about the politics of the observer imposing himself on and thereby distorting the subject. Marable thus becomes incapable, in their view, of interpreting Malcolm, whose legacy, though perhaps imperfectly defined, is to them clear enough.

Another glaring example of Marable’s struggle to diagnose Malcolm’s real politics is his consistent inability to confront directly his subject’s final mass organizational political act: the establishment of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). In concert with his dismissal of virtually all the work about Malcolm X produced in the 1990s and his diminishment of the political content of that work, Marable dismisses and diminishes the expressed goals of the OAAU as well its potential and continued impact. Unlike the 1991 book, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, edited by Malcolm’s friend, colleague, and OAAU cofounder, the late John Henrik Clarke, or the 1999 publication by William Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity*, Marable says little about the OAAU’s history or its “Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives.” In so doing, the organization becomes barely more than background material for Marable’s cobbled-together and softened conclusions about Malcolm’s ultimate political worldview.

This important omission, though it does little to advance the importance of Malcolm’s analysis in the twenty-first century, is an essential feature of establishment publications in a post-9/11 and post-Obama political climate. The OAAU had to suffer diminution at Marable’s hand in order for him to conclude that Malcolm X “would certainly have condemned the [al-Qaeda] terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001,” or that Malcolm would have “anticipated that the black electorate could potentially be the balance of power in a divided white republic” and the election of Barack Obama in 2008. It had to be dismissed in order for Marable to make assertions about Malcolm’s “race-neutral concepts of Pan-Africanism” and his purported desire to “reject violence for its own sake” so that his “gentle humanism and antiracism could…become a platform for a new kind of radical, global ethnic politics.”

Having thus provided readers with what are clearly his own preferred politics, Marable can and does neatly pose Malcolm X and al-Qaeda as polar political opposites, of necessity cleaning up the radical Muslim for broad publication in a post-9/11 world. He then turns Malcolm’s own analysis against him by ascribing it to the previously dubbed “condemned terrorists” whom Marable feels likewise compelled to turn into political straw men. Marable then relates again how al-Qaeda appropriated Malcolm and used his language to
designate Obama as a “race-traitor,” a “hypocrite,” and, along with Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, “house negroes.” Whether or not these descriptions are accurate or have any validity at all can by then never even be considered, once rendered as the views of the condemned. Thus, by default, Obama, Powell, Rice, and the Black politics they represent stand anew alongside Malcolm X as equally opposing al-Qaeda. Marable therefore cleanses the contemporary by distorting the past and leaves only his own preferred reading of Malcolm as ever-maturing and apart from such hostile radicalism.

Furthermore, although Marable selectively quotes from the OAAU’s objectives, careful to include its positive reference to the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence, he cautiously avoids mention of how those references were included to protect the OAAU’s support of the right of every American citizen to bear arms, to wit: “A man with a rifle or a club can only be stopped by a person who defends himself with a rifle or a club.” William Sales, in comments made while a participant on one of our radio program discussions of Marable’s book, added to this point, reminding us that Ho Chi Minh also quoted from the Declaration of Independence in his 1945 declaration of Vietnamese sovereignty and that this certainly did not mean that Minh looked upon the United States uncritically.

Similarly, and unlike Sales, Marable makes soft political use of his interview with Max Stanford in an attempt to refashion Malcolm’s stance on armed struggle. Stanford was a cofounder of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a militant political organization and the only one that Malcolm X joined before his trip to Mecca in 1964. But despite his important organizational relationship with Malcolm X it is not Stanford’s politics which draws Marable’s attention. In fact, Marable’s mention of Stanford is mostly to support his speculation on Malcolm’s “emotional state.” Sales’ work, on the other hand, describes more fully the OAAU and its historic burgeoning relationship with RAM, according Stanford’s contributions more appropriate meaning. Marable additionally fails to include Stanford’s comments recounted by Sales that the OAAU “was to be the broad front organization and RAM the underground Black Liberation Front of the U.S.A.” Nor does Marable mention that the original name of the OAAU was to be the Afro-American Freedom Fighters—that is, before Malcolm was encouraged to change that name to a less overtly guerrilla warfare-inspired one, hence supporting the notion of the OAAU as RAM’s “front.”

Marable also carefully avoids discussion of the OAAU’s formally stated position on voting, a statement that clearly suggests an Obama presidency would
be demonstrably antithetical to Malcolm’s position on the matter. Marable, shortening the full statement, quotes from it as follows, writing that “the [OAAU] also promised to mobilize the entire African-American community ‘block by block to make the community aware of its power and potential.’”\textsuperscript{19} The complete statement, however, reads thus:

\begin{quote}
…we [the OAAU] will start immediately a voter-registration drive to make an \emph{Independent voter}; we propose to support and/or organize political clubs, to run Independent candidates for office, and to support any Afro-American already in office who answers to and is responsible to the Afro-American community.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Although Sales, among many others, was not interviewed by Marable, he pointed out several other contradictions between Malcolm’s views on the vote during our radio program. He also took issue with Marable’s description of those views as part of an overall attempt to situate Barack Obama within Malcolm’s quite different and radical approach to electoral politics. Among the contradictions, Sales asserted that Malcolm more likely “anticipated” Obama’s refusal to address the specific concerns of Black people. As further evidence of the differences between Malcolm and Obama, he noted the latter’s preferred focus on the middle class as opposed to the worsening crisis of the poor (particularly the Black poor). He also noted the President’s record-breaking Wall Street backing, his aggressive Zionism, his support of U.S./Western imperialism through his backing of AFRICOM (the U.S. Africa Command), and his use of NATO to attack Libya—thus following, rather than breaking, an established pattern of U.S. military aggression and violent intervention in African governance.\textsuperscript{21} On these bases alone, the political use and description of Malcolm X by al-Qaeda, contrasting him against establishment Black figures and politicians, is, despite Marable’s dismissal of this use as turning Malcolm X into a “fiery symbol of ethnic violence and religious hatred,” actually more accurate than Marable’s own.\textsuperscript{22}

Eugene Puryear offers a strong response to Marable’s nuanced but constant attacks on Marxist-Leninist politics in his contributed essay. Puryear’s defense of the meaning behind Malcolm’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech is particularly convincing. As he points out, Marable selectively quotes from that speech, almost consistently critiques it without proper context, and, of course, never examines it in full. He further maintains that Marable construes the speech as proof of Malcolm’s movement away from nationalist politics and of Malcolm’s renewed hope in America’s electoral system. Puryear additionally asserts that
Marable draws a falsely connected political lineage, one that runs from Malcolm X directly to Barack Obama.

According to Puryear, Malcolm’s message in “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech was based on V. I. Lenin’s view of voting, not as a trend toward pragmatism but as part of a revolutionary strategy. Like Kali Akuno and Kamau Franklin (also in this volume), Puryear suggests that although Malcolm may not have left us with a “unified system of thought” or a universal field theory of revolution, he did—contrary to Marable’s reinvented Malcolm—“leave a clear spirit of resistance, militancy and defiance.”

We credit Karl Evanzz—author, Malcolm X researcher, and contributor to this volume, not only with helping us to launch our own critique of Marable’s work but also for engaging us via a radio interview in an important discussion on the nature of Marable’s and his own source material. During that interview, we noted, as do most of the contributors to this book, that Marable, although he dismisses virtually all of the 1990s scholarship on Malcolm, uses that same body of work, with limited referencing, as the basis for his biographical data on Malcolm X and for his description of Malcolm’s assassination. Indeed, to this last point, Evanzz responded that little of Marable’s discussion of Malcolm’s assassination troubled him because it was taken largely from his own work, or, as Evanzz explained, “[Marable] is just quoting me and Zak Kondo.”

Evanzz also characterized Marable, on the radio then and subsequently in his essay republished here, as a “fraudulent” scholar. He faulted/faults Marable specifically for giving Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan a virtual pass for his involvement in Malcolm X’s assassination (a point also made by Franklin). He further cites Marable’s baseless character assassination of Malcolm’s father and his marginalization of the role played by Malcolm’s older sister Ella in Malcolm’s life, along with Marable’s belittling of the Garvey movement and his inappropriate use of Malcolm’s nephew Rodnell Collins as a source for the allegations about his subject’s homosexuality. The latter Evanzz identifies as a mistake he himself once made decades ago, and one that he intends to correct in a forthcoming reissue of his earlier work on Malcolm’s assassination.

We also felt it important to include Amiri Baraka’s essay on Marable’s Malcolm X in this volume. In it, Baraka asks a fundamental yet terribly important question: “What was the consciousness that produced this work?” That inquiry leads to an equally important exploration of the history of the White Left—not as an ideological grounding for an analysis of Malcolm X’s philosophy and ideas but
as an exploration into the mind and politics of Manning Marable. Baraka asserts that Marable’s logic emanates from that of a life-long institutional academic (not a “movement” person) whose Democratic Socialist perspective is debilitatingly anti-Marxist-Leninist. As a result, he maintains, Marable was wholly incapable of interpreting Malcolm X’s Black nationalism, pan-Africanism, or anti-colonialism/imperialism.

In a recent “debate” between Baraka and Michael Eric Dyson, Baraka demonstrated that the particular history of progressive European politics—specifically, the history of Marxism, Leninism, socialism, and communism—remains largely unfamiliar to many of Marable’s defenders. As adroitly as Baraka exposed Dyson’s inexpertise with these radical White traditions, he herein exposes Marable’s ineptness in this regard and holds it up, importantly, for investigation. During the radio discussion with Baraka, however, Dyson foolishly dismissed Baraka’s efforts to explain the essential differences between revolutionary Marxism and social democracy as being grounded in the ideas of “dead White guys.” This, of course, was not then, nor is it in these pages, Baraka’s point. Rather, it was, and is, to save the history and image of once-threatening radical ideas which may again threaten established power if they are not so consistently distorted.

Margo Arnold’s critique offers what may stand as powerful insight into these and other issues related to Marable’s perspective. Her examination of the concept of a Black Radical Collective Consciousness includes an examination—or rather, a juxtapositioning—of Marable, the elite academic, and the formation of his interpretative ideas. She accomplishes this in the manner of historiographer Edward Carr, who, she notes, “warned that belief in hard-core historical facts independent of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy that is hard to eradicate.” Thus, while exposing the necessary history about the relationship of Marable’s “home” and funding institution (Columbia University) and the Harlem community—most specifically, the struggle around the preservation of the Audubon Ballroom, best known as the site where Malcolm X was assassinated—she exposes Marable’s book as a work commissioned by a hostile entity. By so doing, she implicitly calls into question Marable’s anti-radical motives, positing that his book exemplifies the worst of what Malcolm warned against: leadership and spokespeople propped up by “dollarism.” Like others in this volume, Arnold concludes that A Life of Reinvention is ultimately a “fraudulent and demeaning text.”
Chris Tinson’s penultimate essay challenges Marable on a number of similar assumptions, railing specifically against Marable’s posthumous liberalizing of Malcolm X. Tinson too juxtaposes a number of Marable’s conclusions, particularly those that intentionally misinterpret Malcolm’s views on electoral politics, with the nationalism of Harold Cruse’s warnings against all forms of integration, radical or conservative. Tinson contends that Marable’s primary thrust in *A Life of Reinvention* was to alleviate his intended audience’s concerns about how Malcolm X might be read today. He also claims that Marable sought to position Malcolm within a continuum whose conclusion is that of the vote as proof of the American political system’s potential for radical change. Only in that way, Tinson concludes, could Marable present Barack Obama as an extension of Malcolm X’s radical analysis. He reminds us necessarily (as did Malcolm) that support for a particular politician is not support for the overall political system, stressing that Malcolm routinely described the United States as fundamentally an imperial colonizing power that is, as yet, incapable of democracy. He further points out that, to Malcolm, electoral politics, by definition, could never be the sole or even the most heavily emphasized strategy for liberation. As Tinson concludes, Marable “read [Malcolm] in reverse” by projecting all of his shifts in ideology as both immature and trending toward the liberal. By questioning Marable’s own analytic lens Tinson encourages us to challenge any attempt to depict changes in Malcolm X as both linear and liberal in trajectory.

In the coda to this volume, coeditor Todd Steven Burroughs uses his experience at a related panel event to contextualize the struggle against the liberalization of Malcolm X and his radical ideas. Burroughs challenges readers of Marable’s *Malcolm X* to recognize how that author and his academic protégés are weakening the discussion of Black (and actually all) political struggle through what Greg Thomas describes as a process of branding. Both Burroughs and Thomas are correct in that once Malcolm X is branded in association with Marable, Columbia University, and Penguin/Viking Press, it/they become “absolutely unquestionable.” Indeed, the simple fact of the book’s branded status—contrary to the claims made by its defenders—extinguishes debate, further study, and (they hope) contemporary and future political organization around the ideas expressed by Malcolm X.

The branding that Burroughs and Thomas describe is a political act of obfuscation, one meant to distance an image or product from the reality of its
origin or its political, economic, and social function. But their metaphorical reference has also become literal, as evidenced by the as-yet-unsuccessful attempts to engage defenders of Marable’s *Malcolm X* in principled and public debate. Thus, as Burroughs uses an actual panel experience to highlight his point on the matter, so too might the absence of many other such panels—those that never were or apparently never will be—support the point as well. For example, we extended an early summer 2011 invitation to Zaheer Ali and other members of Marable’s Malcolm X Project research team to appear on my radio show, to respond to questions that were to be provided weeks in advance. That invitation was never answered. Similarly, several panels to which I was invited to debate Ali on the veracity of Marable’s book have been cancelled or rescheduled without Ali’s participation. As of the writing of this introduction no such public debate has occurred with any other of Marable’s critics.

The privilege granted by the power of branding is also one of evasion, elusion, and equivocation, such that, like the frightened boxer who avoids serious challenges to retain a fraudulently claimed belt, the establishment-sanctioned brand—Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X*—“wins” by default. Left thus unchallenged, Marable’s Malcolm silences and subdues Malcolm X and his truly revolutionary ideas—the ideas that made, and make him still, our “Black shining prince.”26 That is why we, the editors and contributors to this volume, collectively claim that the Marable-brand Malcolm is a self-negating testament against the man himself and why we have endeavored so mightily to be the negation of the negation. The amassed errors, distortions, omissions, and re-interpretations that accumulate to the lie that is Marable’s *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* need to be demonstrated as such.

*Jared A. Ball*

*Morgan State University, 2012*
A LIE OF REINVENTION: CORRECTING MANNING MARABLE’S MALCOLM X

More than merely viewing Marable’s reinvention of Malcolm as false, we have, beginning with our choice of book title, unapologetically laid down our claim that it is a lie. Marable’s book, we contend, is the carefully constructed and intentional political reshaping of a man who was as important a conduit for and exemplar of African American politics as the world has ever seen. As each of our chapter contributors point out, Malcolm X’s political importance, beyond that of the man himself, compels both a need of those in power to distort his memory and our need to respond vigorously to such attacks.

From the introduction

Distributed to the trade by:
Publisher’s Group West
1700 Fourth Street Berkeley, CA 94710
510.809.3700
wwwpgw.com

Also available from the following book distributors:
Red Sea Distribution 609.695.3200
Afrikan World Books 410.383.2006
Lushena Books 630.238.8708

Published by Black Classic Press
P.O. Box 13414
Baltimore, MD 21203
410.242.6954
www.blackclassicbooks.com

Paperback: $18.95

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ENDNOTES


2 From http://www.twainquotes.com/Lies.html: “This quote has been attributed to Mark Twain, but it has never been verified as originating with Twain. This quote may have originated with Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) who attributed it to an old proverb in a sermon delivered on Sunday morning, April 1, 1855. Spurgeon was a celebrated English fundamentalist Baptist preacher. His words were: “A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.”

3 Please see the latest State of the Dream report (for 2012) from the United for a Fair Economy (UFE) collective. This organization’s research suggests that although the United States will soon witness racial shifts that will position White people as “minorities,” persistent racial wealth divides, income gaps, Black mass incarceration, and inadequate access to housing will create conditions that will mirror South African apartheid by 2042. Accessed February 25, 2012, http://faireconomy.org/dream/2012/executive_summary.

4 Our radio program, then called “The Legacy Edition of We Ourselves,” airs most Fridays now under the name, “The Super Funky Soul Power Hour” on WPFW 89.3 FM Pacifica Radio in Washington, D.C. (The program is audio-archived online at http://www.voxunion.com/category/coupradio/.)


6 Ibid.

7 “Praise,” from the publisher’s website, archived online at: http://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780670022205,00.html?sym=REV.


10 Marable, 487.

11 Ibid, 484.

12 Ibid, 487.

13 Ibid, 485-487.

14 Ibid, 350-351.


17 Marable, 355.

18 Sales, *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation*, 105-106.

19 Marable, 351.


21 Interview with William Sales.

22 Marable, 487.


24 Interview with Karl Evanzz, April 15, 2011.
