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Black Feminisms and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Kevin Everod Quashie

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As a narrative, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* reflects Black feminist textualities on two levels: one, in the temperament of its collaborative authorship; and two, in its engagement of what I will call interior tropes of activism.[1] This is a shocking statement, especially considering the well-documented sexism of *Autobiography*'s subject, Malcolm X,[2] which at the very best reflects immaturity and his untimely death,[3] and which at worst reflects his participation in the maintenance of a system of gender oppression that undermined his own revolutionary practice. Cultural criticism of *Autobiography* rarely anticipates connections between the text and Black women's political realities; thus, this essay operates on a leap of faith, and its central aim is to contribute to a re-figuration of how *Autobiography* is read, understood, and engaged. It argues that *Autobiography* is inflected with and earns from the contributions Black women have made to Black resistance and living. As a leap of faith, it asks, even invites, the reader momentarily to suspend familiar critical readings of *Autobiography* for the possibility of engaging an/other underexplored textuality that I believe firmly undergirds the power, volatility, and contradictions of this now classic narrative.

My choice to use *Autobiography* as my text of critique may raise concern because the text has been long understood as unreliable, heavily constructed, and controversial. Malcolm's most noted biographer, Bruce Perry, for example, argues that the transformations in his life were not nearly as dramatic as portrayed in *Autobiography*, and that the text is largely

exaggerated.[4] Perry may be correct, but it is equally true that the convention of autobiography itself depends on dramatization and exaggeration.

In using *Autobiography*, I am working with a text that has many gaps, that is neither highly reliable nor comprehensive. Yet it serves my purposes here well, because even in its indeterminacy, ambiguity, and playfulness, it is still the most stable and referential signifier of Malcolm as a cultural sign. It is, quite honestly and somewhat unfortunately, *the* work by which most people "know" Malcolm, and therefore it is worthy of attention. Furthermore, the text is a "lieu de memoire," a literal site of memory in African-American historical, social, and psychic context. Like Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Autobiography* has and is a life of its own, a life that is timely and timeless, extending beyond its writer(s), subjects, or moment. The text is not only a cultural commodity but, literally, an icon.[5] For these reasons, I will largely refer to *Autobiography* itself as my subject, and where direct references to Malcolm offer greater elegance, I still refer to the persona of Malcolm as presented by this text.

Autobiography, Collaboration, and Girlfriends on a Sitting Porch

One way that Black feminist textualities manifest themselves in *Autobiography* is via the particular form of the narrative — an autobiography written as a collaboration — and the dynamic coupling that the text facilitates between (even demands of) Malcolm X and Alex Haley. Noted scholars of the genre have successfully argued that it is inventive, is a making of a self as much as the presentation of a made self.[6] An autobiographical text is, according to Albert Stone, overdetermined, for it is an "occasion, . . . [a] performance" (164), or an occasion *to* and *for* performance. Autobiography, then, holds the potential to be transgressive, especially in its invitation to play and its predisposition to instability.[7]

Part of this play, Julia Swindells notes, is the genre's mediation "between subject and author" (1), a mediation through which autobiography confers a mask.[8] This autobiographical mediation is often textually embodied in one person or persona, with the mask as a layer over the body of the author-subject. Yet with *Autobiography*, a collaboration between Haley and Malcolm, the masked persona is not readily attributable to either collaborator. The collaborative relationship here heightens the genre's performative and ludic qualities. Hence, Swindells' suggestion of a mediation between subject and author literally and materially exists and is manifested in the negotiations between Malcolm's self and (public) persona and Haley's self and (public) persona. This negotiation is phenomenal, especially considering the contemporary public profiles of both men. Albert Stone, who has most thoroughly explored collaborative autobiographies, argues that the resultant text of collaboration exists in a place "in-between two minds" and is a blurring of the autobiographical processes of self-authentication and self-identification, because the "self" in question is not materially singular (154-5). In fact, it is hard to name definitively all the bodies that constitute this particular collaborative negotiation: Malcolm's and

Alex's public personae, their private, personal, non-public selves, and, most significantly, the persona of the text that they create but do not ultimately or entirely control. These various personae participate in the negotiation of the text: Malcolm tells Alex that "[n]othing can be in this book's manuscript that I didn't say and nothing can be left out that I want in" (387), which seemingly declares *Autobiography* to be Malcolm's text. But, as Stone points out, "Haley won an equally significant concession: 'I asked for — and he gave — his permission that at the end of the book I could write comments of my own about him which would not be subject to his review'" (Stone 160). Negotiations like these, so evident under *Autobiography*'s surfaces, lead Stone correctly to reject Malcolm's assertion that "a writer is what I want, not an interpreter" (456), calling the distinction "illusory" (A. Stone 160).

Stone's comments are in reference to passages from the Epilogue written by Haley after Malcolm's death. The Epilogue is the most revelatory section of *Autobiography* but is also deceptive because it aims to put a face on the writer, Haley, and thereby to maintain the authenticity of the text's singular voice. Readers are encouraged to think of Malcolm's voice as prominent and distinct (and distinguishable) from Haley's, and also to attribute the shifts in textual voice exclusively to Malcolm's maturation, to his growing pains. As John Edgar Wideman argues, "the peculiar absence of [certain] . . . narrative strategies . . . presents a 'talking head,' first-person narration recorded from the fixed perspective of a single video camera" (104). What Haley achieves is a deception, with "little fuss . . . [and] a quiet mastery of the medium," that allows him to disappear as author, to be seamlessly self-effaced from the text (104, 106).

The Epilogue, as Wideman notes, introduces "the process of constructing the book . . . [and] the relationship between writer and subject" (105). In one way, the Epilogue reminds us that the text is a collaboration and thus confounds the gesture of singularity that is so central to an autobiography's veracity and power; still, the Epilogue affirms that singularity by assuring the reader that, except for these 74 pages, the rest of the text is brother Malcolm's. In this way, the Epilogue is an indeterminate, multiple textuality and in its indeterminacy perhaps best represents the playful and roaming quality of Malcolm's and Alex's collaborative voice.

It is in this voice, a voice that characterizes the dynamic and collaborative relationship between Malcolm and Alex, that a Black feminist textuality emerges. On the basis of this collaboration, I want to read Malcolm and Alex as two men engaging a Black feminist and womanist practice of sharing, talking, and creating story, like girlfriends on a sitting porch,[9] like Pheoby and Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* I am using the term "girlfriends" in order to invoke a signal trope in Black women's writings: particular and material friendships that exist between women and that hint at a larger tradition of being girls with and for each other. This model of friendship foregrounds issues of self and other in a dialectic where each woman identifies with and as the other. The identification is a loving, dynamic process of political, psychic, and physical engagement and urgency.[10] There is evidence in *Autobiography* that the relationship between Alex and Malcolm was like this: dynamic, volatile, a collaboration as a journey of love, with each man becoming

more intimately committed to the other's life. *Autobiography* is created in a space of earned mutuality, in which two men learn from each other and shape their actions and needs in relation to the other. Theirs is, as Stone writes, an "intricate interaction . . . [in which] Malcolm's passionate desire to historicize his existence . . . is not bypassed but actually sharpened by Haley's psychological probings" (161).

I am claiming this relationship as Black feminist because images of the particular camaraderie I am describing are especially prevalent in the works of Black women. In offering this reading, I am suggesting that there are strong resonances of Black women's cultural and political productions readily accessible in Black traditions. These resonances are often unattributed specifically to Black women and hence engaged without conscious intent of "acting in a Black woman way." It is possible, then, that two men such as Alex and Malcolm could engage a trope of Black feminism — girlfriending each other — that they encountered in and adapted from Black culture in general.

This claim requires a bit of explanation, and is made clearer in Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which explores the seeming invisibility of Black women's artistry in spite of other evidence of their talents. Walker argues that, historically, Black women were "artist[s] who left [their] mark in the only materials [they] could afford" and, "more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" (238, 239). Walker notes the anonymity that is inherent in Black women's creative processes, where proper acknowledgment for either process or product is rarely made or even possible.[11] And yet the impact of these processes and products, and hence of Black women as cultural producers, is undeniable: in talking about her mother's garden work, Walker writes,

> Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms. . . . She has handed down respect for the possibilities — and the will to grasp them. . . . For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time. (241-2)

Walker's mother, a woman "who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers" (242), is a consummate artist, one whose response to living in oppressed conditions is to hold on and to create. Hers is a creative and a *political* response, one that Walker identifies as a womanist way of living.

The quiet quality that Walker identifies in her mother's (and other Black women's) production partly contributes to the invisibility that production has in public spaces. The creative process is interiorized yet yields exterior and public results. Walker describes the creativity as "that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" (239). Coupled with the char-

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acteristic quietness is the largely unassuming way in which this tradition of creation is passed from Black woman to Black children, female *and* male. Walker explains that

> no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories — like her — must be recorded. (240)

These stories, which came from her mother's "lips as naturally as breathing," are fairly common gestures of survival and liberation that are part of the immense contribution of Black women to their communities and to history. Walker's use of "absorb" reflects the unassuming way in which this transfer of ideology occurs, and she emphasizes that it was not just the stories but also the "manner" that was transmitted to her; not just the "what" but also the "how" of it. Walker's exploration of her mother's garden offers a framework for understanding some of the dynamics of the textual and ideological contributions that Black women make to Black culture. Ironically, while this pooling of Black cultural resources makes Black women's contributions widely accessible, it also serves symbolically to separate Black women from their contributions: that is, while Black women's work and thoughts are highly influential in public spaces, it is mostly Black male voices and bodies that are rendered visible in those same spaces (for example, in "the Black Church" or the Civil Rights Movement). Hence, Black women's ideological presence in Black culture often manifests itself in hidden or submerged textualities. My argument, then, engages this notion of an abundant pool of Black women's cultural and political contributions — a reservoir that is Black public domain and can be accessed sub- and unconsciously — to assert the influence of Black women's "gardens" on the rhetorical designs of *Autobiography*, most specifically in the relationship between Alex and Malcolm. In fact, Haley is noted for a predisposition toward Black women's culture, having grown up in the company of his grandmother and other women, and for a gift of and interest in inhabiting a persona.[12]

The relationship between Alex and Malcolm is a striking one: these two Black men were public figures in their own right, each significantly different from the other in politics and interests. Yet their task, the production of a text, necessitated a coming together, so that each man had to become interested in the other. "Who is this man, this man Malcolm," Haley must have asked, with a piqued and imaginative heart still beating from their *Playboy* interview a few years earlier. Considering Malcolm's deep interest in Black people, he must also have wondered, "This man, the one who writes for *Reader's Digest* and *Playboy*, who is he?" Historically, not much has been made of the relationship between the two men: Perry's *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* fails to address the nature of their relationship, while Mary Seibert McCauley's *Alex Haley, A Southern Griot: A Literary Biography* summarizes the plot of *Autobiography* without discussing the relationship between her subject

and Malcolm. Such oversights are in fact very common. Most of the reviews of *Autobiography* and later interviews with Haley give the collaboration moderate treatment at best. The oversight is best represented by I. F. Stone's lengthy review of *Autobiography* for the *New York Review of Books*; his only comment on Haley reads, "From tape-recorded conversations, a Negro writer, Alex Haley, put together the *Autobiography*; he did his job with sensitivity and devotion" (4). The outstanding exception of the twenty reviews I read is Truman Nelson's for *The Nation*, which acknowledges the import and revelatory quality of *Autobiography*'s Epilogue. Additionally, biographical pieces on Haley tend to privilege his work on *Roots*; in fact, Haley was not acknowledged on the cover of the first edition of *Autobiography*, for though he was a writer of some repute, he was not the public figure that Malcolm was at the time of the text's publication.[13]

The relationship between Alex and Malcolm began when Alex interviewed Malcolm for *Playboy* magazine in 1962. Prior to that interview, Haley was little more than a struggling writer. He had been assigned to a specially created journalist post while in service with the Coast Guard, where he wrote sea stories and had a few small publishing successes. In 1959, upon retiring from the Guard, Haley started freelancing his essays and in early 1962 scored big with an interview of jazz great Miles Davis for *Playboy*, a piece that led to the Malcolm X interview a few months later. An editor at Doubleday, having read the interview, approached Haley about writing a book on Malcolm, and though Malcolm was initially reluctant, he changed his mind two days later. After getting the blessing and approval of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm and Alex agreed to terms — Malcolm noting that the book would be dedicated to Muhammad and all funds would go to the Nation of Islam, while outlining what time he could commit. These negotiations and the first few interview sessions were businesslike, dispassionate, even as both men were dazzled by and anxious about each other. In spite of the absence of critical attention to their relationship, it is clear that the two men did develop a relationship with each other; this relationship would be a critical one, for it cemented Malcolm's legacy as a historical figure and catapulted Alex to the ranks of major American writers.

The nature and quality of this relationship, both in what is presented in the (literal) margins of the text and in what I can actively and reasonably imagine, calls to mind two sisterfriends on the porch, sharing and weaving the magic of story, the way Black women talk with each other as girlfriends. The production of the text necessitated a kind of trust and love and *tenderness* between these two men that is not commonly imagined or represented in interactions between heterosexual Black men. At one point in the text, Malcolm comments on trust and gender in a way that bears significance here:

> I [Haley] somehow raised the subject of women. Suddenly, between sips of coffee and further scribbling and doodling, he vented his criticisms and skepticisms of women. "You never can fully trust any woman," he said. "I've got the only one I ever met whom I would trust seventy-five per cent. . . . I don't *completely* trust anyone," he went on, "not even myself. I have seen too many men destroy themselves. . . . You I trust about twenty-five percent." (389)

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The small amount of trust he initially ascribes to Haley develops into a sweet relationship that Haley later describes as a "mutual camaraderie that, although it was never verbally expressed, was a warm one" (399). In fact, Malcolm later revises his assessment of Haley, cementing their (unarticulated) brothership:

> One call that I [Haley] never will forget came at close to four A.M., waking me; he must have just gotten up in Los Angeles. His voice said, "Alex Haley?" I said, sleepily, "Yes? Oh, hey, Malcolm!" His voice said, "I trust you seventy per cent" — and then he hung up. I lay a short time thinking about him and I went back to sleep feeling warmed by that call, as I still am warmed to remember it. Neither of us ever mentioned it. (400)

This warmth, as Haley repeatedly describes it, is the sharing of story, and like Betty Shabazz's speeches and books that have served to remember and memorialize her husband, Haley's Epilogue serves to remember and celebrate a man he knew and loved. And Haley did love him, learned to love and admire him not only as a public figure — the Malcolm who was an icon of Black nationalist power for Black America, or the face of fear for so much of white America — but especially as Malcolm, a brother man sitting across the way, or on the other end of the telephone, whose precious steps toward liberation were warming, scary, funny . . . and a mirror to Haley's own living. As Malcolm's love and trust for Haley grew, one can be sure that Haley's love and trust for Malcolm also grew. The successful co-authorship is reflective of a Black feminist aspect of the text; it is the product of one Black man loving and talking with another, developing a trust that matches the trust (and mistrust) he had of his own wife.

The presence of this Black feminist textuality is not uncomplicated, for it exists alongside Malcolm's comments on trust and *gender*, which vividly reflect his and perhaps Alex's sexism, and it partially results in the limited representation of Betty in the text. In fact, this situation is emblematic of how Black feminist textualities manifest themselves in *Autobiography*: as if corroborating Walker's account of the invisibility of Black women's cultural contributions, the presence of Black feminist gestures in the text often coincides with and runs up against manifestations of sexism that serve to erase and violate the gestures themselves. A central example of this tendency can be seen in the text's depiction of Malcolm's mother, Louise Little, and in the function she serves in the development of the relationship between Malcolm and Haley. In the epilogue, Haley tells us that a previously hesitant and uncooperative Malcolm unexpectedly opened up when asked about his mother:

> Then one night, Malcolm X arrived nearly out on his feet from fatigue. For two hours, he paced the floor delivering a tirade against Negro leaders who were attacking Elijah Muhammad and himself. I don't know what gave me the inspiration to say once when he paused for breath, "I wonder if you'd tell me something about your mother?"
>
> Abruptly he quit pacing, and the look he shot at me made me sense that somehow the chance question had hit him. When I look back at it now, I

> believe I must have caught him so physically weak that his defenses were vulnerable.
>
> Slowly, Malcolm X began to talk, now walking in a tight circle. "She was always standing over the stove, trying to stretch whatever we had to eat. We stayed so hungry that we were dizzy. I remember the color of dresses she used to wear — they were a kind of faded-out gray. . . ." And he kept on talking until dawn, so tired that the big feet would often almost stumble in their pacing. From this stream-of-consciousness reminiscing, I finally got out of him the foundation for this book's beginning chapters. . . . After that night, he never again hesitated to tell me even the most intimate details of his personal life . . . (390)

This moment is crucial because it introduces Louise Little's politics of survival as resonant in Malcolm's memory and perhaps influential in his own political development, but also because it is this memory that triggers the sharing that cemented a dynamic collaborative relationship between Haley and Malcolm. In one way, the text that we have is largely the result of Malcolm's memory of his mother, since it is she who facilitates the relationship between her son and Haley. Malcolm later on realizes the power of this memory and its influence on his politics:

> "It [Haley's question] made me face something about myself," Malcolm X said. "My mind had closed about our mother. I simply didn't feel the problem [his mother's being in a mental hospital] could be solved, so I had to shut it out. I had built up subconscious defenses. The white man does this. He shuts out of his mind, and he builds up subconscious defenses against anything he doesn't want to face up to. I've just become aware how closed my mind was now that I've opened it up again. That's one of the characteristics I don't like about myself. If I meet a problem I feel I can't solve, I shut it out. I make believe that it doesn't exist. But it exists." (393)

What is most stunning about all this is the indelible presence Louise Little has in *Autobiography* and her simultaneous absence from many parts of the text. Her influence is far-reaching: the text later narrates Malcolm's efforts with his siblings to remove his mother from a mental institution as another signal moment in his life; moreover, during Malcolm's outrageous "harlemite" days, "[t]he only thing that brought [him] down to earth was the visit to the state hospital" where his mother was (79). One wonders if the picture we do get of Louise Little, marginal as it is, is not further evidence of the collaborative nature of the text, especially considering Haley's interest in women and their influence on the lives of the children they raise; it seems that Haley teases out this memory via his questions to Malcolm. Still, it is ironic at best, and damning at worst, that Louise Little's contributions to Alex's and Malcolm's textual reverie become a barely present backdrop in the landscape that is *Autobiography*.[14]

Even as the result of Malcolm's and Alex's love — the text — fulfills Marlon Riggs's proclamation of the revolutionary potential in Black men loving

each other,[15] then the liberation of this revolutionary act is undercut by what is presumably the merged and perhaps subconscious sexism of the Haley-Malcolm collaboration. Their homosocial connection, because it lacks a commitment to feminist practice, also serves to affirm sexism, particularly the erasure of women from textual spaces that they, women, help to make possible. This is one of the tensions of *Autobiography*.

I would argue that it is in (or because of) the volatile play of making this autobiography that some of the hidden textualities of Black feminism surface. In the merging of Alex's voice with Malcolm's; in the revealing of previously untold secrets — wishes, fears, longings, revealed layer by layer as sweet furtiveness; in the coming together that makes closeness a dangerous but inevitable thing, each man eventually whispering "you mine, you mine" like characters in *Beloved*; in the voyeurism where each man's wanting to look in on another Black man's public living becomes his wanting to *become* that other living — in all of this we see pieces of the made-up, written-down journey that becomes *Autobiography*. Within the dynamic of self-making and collaboration is a third space, where yet other voices exist and can be heard, including Black feminist textualities . . . and where we confront the unbelievable truth that part of what is appealing about *Autobiography* is rooted in Black women's ways of living.

Journey, Activism, and Interiority

Bearing in mind that any comment about the content of *Autobiography* is informed by this collaborative dynamic, I want to explore the formulation of a self's journey that the narrative foregrounds. Malcolm X's status as an African-American cultural icon is determined largely by his autobiography's engagement of personal self as the location of public political rhetoric. The narrative creates a persona that is public but that also possesses an unusual sense of being real and common, familiar and unsettled. This sense of realness enhanced Malcolm's appeal during his life and is the source of his posthumous persistence as a folk hero, including his cultural resurgence in the 90s. In her essay, "Sitting at the Feet of the Messenger: Remembering Malcolm X," bell hooks describes this realness as Malcolm's power to engage his readers/audience through his own committed and personal engagement with issues of racial self-love: "His *awakening* to critical consciousness . . . stimulated our awakening. As readers we witnessed his struggles to throw off the yoke of racism, *following him through various stages of self-recovery*. . . . Most readers of *The Autobiography* are moved by his quest for self-realization" (*Yearning* 79; emphasis added). Like many readers, hooks identifies with *Autobiography's* presentation of Malcolm as openly struggling, an openness that is often uncharacteristic of leaders of such prominence.

The "quest for self-realization" that hooks describes is commonly the subject of autobiography, a genre that frequently dramatizes an individual's journey to a point of completion. But Malcolm's autobiography resists a trajectory of completion. Paul John Eakin asserts that the text undercuts the construct of the "autobiographical fiction of the completed self" (156),[16] highlighting a

familiar claim of critical discourse about Malcolm X: that he was a person whose life and politics resisted easy codification. Even in the face of attempts to define his positions narrowly — including the well-known CBS news story "The Hate that Hate Produced" — Malcolm's life retained an elusive quality.[17] This elusiveness, central to the rhetorical success and social popularity of his autobiography, is manifested as a negotiation of multiplicity and fragmentation, a manifestation that I interpret as evidence of another borrowing from Black feminist contributions to political paradigms.

The specific contributions of Black women to the Black emancipatory traditions I want to explore here can be cumulatively termed interior tropes of activism. I want to be quite clear that I am not suggesting that Black women's *only* contributions to liberation ideology involve the interior. In fact, I think it is more accurate to suggest that Black feminisms have proposed that the interior and exterior be merged in the struggle for self-decolonization and liberation, that they are mutually supportive of each other, are necessary counterparts. Neither does this merged interior and exterior landscape, dynamic and multiple in itself, foreclose a sense of the specific experience of interiority as distinct from exteriority. The result, then, is a radical and multivalent reformulation of the self, with an abundance of surfaces (as in a diamond[18]) on which acts of decolonization can occur.

Significantly, Black women activists have helped to reconceptualize liberation as a highly *personal* process.[19] Personal transformation, writers such as Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis tell us, is not only a vehicle that facilitates (mass) liberation; it is also liberation itself.[20] In the foreword to *Body & Soul: The Black Woman's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being*, Davis and June Jordan offer a comment that highlights this view of liberation:

> We cannot conceptualize healthy bodies, psyches, and communities without addressing problems that have always been taboo. This means we must go beyond the Civil Rights framework that privileges men over women and the public sphere over the private. (xi)

It was Farah Jasmine Griffin, in her essay "Textual Healing," who reminded me of Davis's and Jordan's foreword; in fact, Griffin offers an insightful reading of this passage. "Note the movement," she writes,

> from individual bodies to psyches to communities. The imagined black woman reader posited in this foreword is one who sees herself as part of a community in struggle. Davis and Jordan encourage readers to challenge the sexism that causes them to believe that issues of emotional and physical well-being are "private" and therefore not political. According to Davis and Jordan, attention to the taboo, to the private, leads to radical redefinition of wellness and health. (523)

Griffin, along with Davis, Jordan, and others, is working to reconsider liberation as multifaceted, so as to acknowledge and engage the various levels of indi-

vidual and collective selfhood on which colonization occurs; at the same time, they are working to suggest the fusion of these locales of liberation. This multivalent liberation construct is particular to writings by contemporary Black women and is evident historically in Black women's cultural responses and living: the blues of Nina Simone, the actions of Sojourner Truth, the stories and garden of Walker's mother. In her essay, "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," Michelle Russell helps to make this point clear in relation to blues singer Simone: "In the 1960s, Nina Simone used her music to revive our roots, to internationalize the terms of our self-determination, and to develop the cultural dimension of armed struggle" (136). While Simone's songs, including "Washerwoman Blues" and "One More Sunday in Savannah," "cultivated our folk memory," they also challenged common ways of perceiving spheres of influence as binaries (private and public, individual and collective, personal and political). Like Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" or Sojourner Truth baring her upper arm before the women's convention in Akron, Ohio, Simone's words refuse to privilege any one sphere or act of liberation, and instead suggest responses that are specific and multiple, particular and communal.

This view of liberation is significant because it is an alternative to constructions that dominate Black male contributions to liberation ideology. In his "Introduction" to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. hints at some of these differences between Black masculine and Black feminine conceptions of the world. He argues that Black feminists have "never been obsessed with arriving at any singular self-image; or legislating who may or may not speak on the subject. . . . [R]ather than attempt to construct a monolith of 'the' black woman's experience, black feminists have sought to chart the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives" (8). Gates, in summarizing a point that Black women have articulated many times before, quotes Mary Helen Washington, in particular, to hone his comment; of the Black feminist literary tradition, Washington argues,

> There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility; there are no women dismembering the bodies or crushing the skulls of either women or men; and few, if any, women in the literature of black women succeed in heroic quests without the support of other women or men in their communities. Women talk to other women in this tradition. (Quoted in Gates 7)

Washington here is signifying on Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and other Black male writers who seemed primarily to be locked in battles of selfhood (narrowly equated with manhood) with white America.

These contemporary literary distinctions are readily applicable to the larger world of Black liberation and cultural production. That is, historically, Black women's experiences and liberation theories — as represented in song, oratory, text, folklore, or the covering of holes in a wall with sunflowers — have served not only to refocus the attention of liberation on the Black self (individually and communally) but also to permit and engage multiplicity in the identity formation/negotiation process. Situated at the invisibilizing intersection of race

and gender — where "all the women are white and all the Blacks are men" — Black women have formulated emancipatory trajectories that resist exclusion and monolithism (a good example being Walker's articulation of "womanism").

One impact of Black women's contribution to liberation is the reclamation of healing for the domain of revolution and decolonization.[21] Contemporary critic bell hooks provides a useful comment: "decolonization refers to breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of . . . reality, of our own experience. . . . Healing occurs through testimony, through gathering together everything available to you and reconciling. . . . [H]ealing takes place within us as we speak the truth of ourselves" (*Sisters* 2, 17, 19). Here hooks describes a decolonization process that legitimizes self and healing. Decolonization as healing, she suggests, directs the mediating force of truth toward overcoming the implied and imposed fragmentation of self that is concomitant with oppression. This mediation, a kind of "shifting," is often described in Black narratives as a journey. In the context of Black feminist emphases on the value of interior landscapes in revolutionary processes, then, the journey is in part a *medi(t)ation*, an interior travel.

Meditation and mediation are integral parts of the journey trope in Black narrative. In Black women activists' records of their experiences, the journey has been redefined to account for what Patricia Hill Collins calls "the interior space of activism" (*Black Feminist Thought* 142). In this redefinition, "interior" and "exterior" activism are at the same time distinct and merged spheres, like contiguous surfaces that also partially overlap, creating a third space. Again, I am not suggesting that Black women have engaged activism only on interior self-scapes. In fact, Black women from Celia, the slave who until recently was the last woman executed in Florida (1746, for helping to set the master's house on fire), to Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and Maxine Waters have historically been "exterior" or public activists. The binary of private and public does not work as a description of the experiences or theoretical formualtions of Black women, whose lives are both invisible and hypervisible.[22] What I am asserting here is a claim that Davis herself makes: because of manifestations of class, gender and race, what our society knows of Black women — what has been published or documented or permitted to become "public" and part of the record of official histories — is often only a small representation of what Black women are thinking, feeling, and doing on the inside.[23] Alice Walker makes a parallel claim in her essay on her mother. Black women's emphasis, whatever the impetus, on the interior as a creative and productive space has radical implications for liberation politics, for it resists patriarchical overemphasis on the exterior and the public by complicating the spheres of influence, and it also introduces healing into the rhetoric of liberation. The Black feminist liberation ideologies that I am speaking of here construct the journey as a radical, shifting, dynamic process, one that offers many possibilites for liberation. It is not a journey with a mythic end, a singular hero, and a mass of followers. Instead, this journey conceptualizes change as always possible, always imminent, and always *changing*.

Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, articulates the specificity of the journey trope in Black feminine expression:

> While the theme of the journey also appears in the work of Black men, African-American women writers and musicians explore this journey toward freedom in ways that are characteristically female. Black women's journeys, though at times embracing political and social issues, basically take personal and psychological forms and rarely reflect the freedom of movement of Black men who hop "trains," "hit the road," or in other ways physically travel in order to find that elusive sphere of freedom from racial oppression. *Instead, Black women's journeys often involve "the transformation of silence into language and action."* (105, citing Audre Lorde; emphasis added)

Not to be missed in Collins's articulation is Lorde's model of transforming silence into action. Collins, Lorde, and others place considerable emphasis on the movement from silence, an experience that is especially acute among Black women, to articulation in text and action. The silence here is both literal and figurative (for example, think of Walker's mother and her garden) and always exists alongside the particularly strong voice that most Black women literally and figuratively possess in Black and non-Black communities.[24] Within this Black feminist journey construct, freedom, on one important level, is determined by the attainment and engagement of (literal and figurative) voice. Coming-to-voice is the achievement of consciousness and reveals possibilities for freedom; that is, "consciousness . . . [is] a sphere of freedom" (103) and self-knowledge is an instigator of change.[25]

In revising the journey to liberation and citing healing as an essential element of freedom from economic, social, and psychological oppression,[26] Black feminists have asserted the personal not only as political and revolutionary but also as theoretical. If healing is as much a personal concern of Black liberation as it is a collective one, then the personal is also in conversation with the theoretical (insofar as theory implies a collective quality). In effect, as Barbara Christian argues in her essay, "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," Eurocentric models of thought that present and validate theory as removed and depersonalized fail to capture and reflect the lives of marginalized people; theory exists in dynamic relation to individual life ways and to the languages of people on the margins.[27]

Aspects of the journey as fashioned by Black feminist cultural productions — specifically the personal self as a site of decolonizing change — form a framework of tropes of interiorization that aids one's reading of *Autobiography.* The text calls to mind bell hooks' mantra in *Sisters of the Yams*, "revolution begins in the self."[28] The collaborative presentation of Malcolm's life in *Autobiography* suggests that the personal is a political, philosophical, and revolutionary rhetoric (in the sense that rhetoric is a process of constructing meaning, identity, and context). This rhetoric destabilizes *truth* as unitary and monolithic and argues that it is only in negotiating *truths* through constant personal shifts — what Amiri Baraka described as "groping" and "stumbling" (33) — that liberation is possible. These personal changes or shifts become a central site of *Autobiography*'s effectiveness, reemphasizing the notion of personal change as a mode of revolution.[29]

The text narrates a journey through three tropes of interior activism: reclamation of the body, negotiation of fragmented reality, and silence in/as activism.

The Body as a Knowing Place

In Black feminist reclamation of the self as an epic and revolutionary landscape resides a concomitant reclamation of the body as a legitimate source of knowing. Historian and theorist Paula Giddings effectively explains the intricate damage that the Cartesian division and hierarchization of body and mind in Western ideology perpetrate and perpetuate in the lives of Black women in particular, who are marked as "body" along both race and gender lines.[30] Black feminist thought questions this presentation of body and mind as distinct and separate. Instead, Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, who envisions the erotic as psychic and political power, present body and mind as mutually informing. Patricia Williams reminds us of the political urgency of this reclamation work, for it was a body-mind dichotomy that informed theories of will and anti-will in relation to Black American slaves (219-20); that is, Blacks were viewed in white philosophical and legal discourses as without will and therefore without agency. For these reasons, refuting a dichotomous construct of body-mind is critical to enacting any liberation process.[31]

Many Black women writers construct images of bodies as sites of knowing, starting as early as the 1800s, with religious leaders such as Jarena Lee and Rebecca Cox Jackson.[32] Whole histories are written upon these bodies and must be engaged if liberation is to occur. The body, then, is a source of liberation.[33] In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* Malcolm's physical body is repeatedly presented as a site of the philosophical; his experience of transformation is in fact often written on his body, reinforcing the idea that the personal physical landscape is a site of ideology, philosophy, and hence of power. Examples include his tales of "conking" his hair; the description of the Muslim rules of eating; his ablution after his release from prison; his beard as a prominent feature of his face after his return from Mecca (a change that is noted both in his narration and in the Epilogue); and his skin color, which he only minimally engages as a text of rape and slavery (see Handler x; and Malcolm X 52-5, 193, 221). In fact, Malcolm's physical self — his height, his hair and skin color, his gait, his bodily aura — often impressed itself upon others; for example, his ability to be soft in demeanor contradicted and challenged the "popular" image of him as hard, aggressive, and unapproachable.[34]

Malcolm's personal, physical self becomes a site for political and philosophical rhetoric. At the end of the chapter titled "Homeboy" and an extensive narration of his experiences of conking, the text offers this comment:

> [W]hen I [Malcolm] say all of this I'm talking first of all about myself — because you can't show me any Negro who ever conked more faithfully than I did. I'm speaking from personal experience when I say of any black man who conks today, or any white-wigged black woman, that if they gave the

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brains in their heads just half as much attention as they do their hair, they would be a thousand times better off. (55)

Not only is hair a political site but the text claims Malcolm's *personal* experience as a political one. It presents Malcolm as unafraid to engage his own self — his body and his experiences — in this political statement. This is a quintessential characteristic of his text: it easily shifts between individual and communal, between the "personal" and the "political."

In one of the central emotional moments of the text, when Malcolm's betrayal by the Nation of Islam and specifically Elijah Muhammad is described, *Autobiography* articulates the crisis as a body-experience: "My [Malcolm's] head felt like it was bleeding inside. I felt like my brain was damaged" (303). The words and metaphor used here are very much body-centered and are eerily similar to images of wounding and other forms of bodily mutilation that Jarena Lee and Rebecca Cox Jackson describe in their works.[35] In using the physical as rhetorical construct, the text, like its Black feminist counterparts, asserts that the personal is political and also rhetorical. Furthermore, the conversion that is (re)presented in *Autobiography* occurs on psychic/spiritual/emotional, intellectual/mental, and physical levels, in an intersection of wounding and healing that is also characteristically Black feminist.

Multiple Sensibility

There is another parallel Black feminist claim at work here — the idea of Black women's multiple sensibility. "Ella Surrey"[36] in John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso* says, "Black women have always had to live two lives, one for them and one for ourselves" (240). This comment highlights the potential for fragmentation that Collins describes: "Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other" (*Black Feminist Thought* 94). The sense of a bifurcated (yet symbiotic) interior consciousness that addresses both internal and external "selves" is central to Black feminist thought and reality and is readily present in Gates's argument cited above about Black women's literature.[37] *Autobiography*'s use of the physical as a metaphor seems to engage this duality of consciousness, for the physical is both personal (in that there are ways in which what is experienced physically is only knowable by the self) and public (via, for example, the body as political). The ways in which Malcolm's personality often contradicted the expectations of others seem to reflect this intersection of personal and public physical selves. When change is written on the physical (on the body), the body becomes both symbolic space and material/existential space, a literal body politic. This formulation of the body reflects the negotiation of selves referenced in Collins's comment on fragmentation and self-image.

The negotiation of fragmentation, necessary in part because of the separation of interior self from exterior, is central to decolonization. In the text, Malcolm's philosophy encourages Black people to shift their gaze from an exterior

and white one to an interior Black one. The interior self of his philosophy seems to have two parts, just as it does in "Ella Surrey's" construction: an internal self (as in the individual, personal self) and an external self (as in the collective Black masses). The recognition and engagement of these divisions, which at the same time are also overlappings, result in a construction of the self that is multiple and radical, individual and collective. Consider the way that *Autobiography* speaks of the ghetto in the following passage from chapter 15:

> The American black man [sic] should be focusing his every effort toward building his *own* businesses, and decent homes for himself. As other ethnic groups have done, let black people, wherever possible, however possible, patronize their own kind, and start in those ways to *build up the black race's ability to do for itself.* That's the only way the American black man is ever going to get respect. One thing the white man never can give the black man is self-respect! The black man can never become independent and recognized as a human being who is truly equal with other human beings until he has what they have, and until he is doing for himself what others are doing for themselves.
>
> The black man in the ghettoes, for instance, has to start *self-correcting* his own *material, moral and spiritual defects and evils.* (275-6; emphasis added except in the first case)

"Self-respect" is equated here with "building [one's] own businesses and homes." The easy movement between signs of economic success (business), psychic and physical safety (homes), and psychic well-being (self-respect), as well as the use of singular nominatives (for example, "black man") to represent a larger group, reveals the fluidity of the boundaries between terms such as "personal" and "political," "private" and "public," "interior" and "exterior," and even "individual" and "collective." The expansiveness and fluidity of the self here — evident also in Malcolm's commentary on conking — reminds me of a similar expansiveness suggested in Toni Morrison's characterization of Beloved as multiple selves.

But here also lies one of the uneasy tensions of my project: the ideas here suggest a monolithic Black response (even as the language can be teased to reveal a multiplicity), which is counter to Black feminists' contributions to Black liberation ideologies. The only resolution to this tension may come later in the essay, when I consider the text's changing ideology as a "changing same," a trope that is in fact Black feminist. Nonetheless, the notion of "self first" in this passage is a tenet of masculine-centered Black nationalist ideology. Even as Malcolm broadened his philosophy to include committed white people as allies, he still maintained the need for Black people to organize (at least in the beginning) separately because it was a way to "instill within black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the black race needs today to get up off its knees, and to get on its feet, and get rid of its scars, and to take a stand for itself" (374). As an ideological stance, "self first" (as articulated in Black nationalisms) was crucial to decolonization politics, yet it also reveals the second tension of this passage and my critical investigation: "self first" here is

equated with "Black first," excluding gender as important to or coexistent with Black liberation, and demanding that Black women who might want to support such an ideology self-fragment. In fact, the presentation of this *male* self as fluid — its easy movement from individual to communal — is arguably a central manifestation of sexism and the patriarchical trajectory of Black nationalist politics, because the Black male self is universalized in a process that renders Black selfhood synonymous with Black manhood. The difficulty with critically reading this passage is not only a problem of Malcolm's unrevised sexism at work even as *Autobiography* is engaging ways of formulating the self that I understand to be Black feminist; it is also a result of my attempt to liberate the text. This passage, then, is a microcosm of the whole tenor of my argument, in which *Autobiography*'s maleness undercuts the radical multiplicity of the self (as a site of collective and individual change) that can be inferred from this passage and others like it via a Black feminist critical frame.

Silence as Activism

Another example of the ambiguity of boundaries of "self" is evident on Malcolm's trip to Mecca, itself an interior exploration of a Black selfscape. This journey, full of confrontations, experiences of inadequacy, and Malcolm's own ignorance (of languages and customs), is fruitful because of its personal, exploratory nature. Yet this journey is also an important marker in Malcolm's public/political life. In this way, it becomes another metaphor for the shifting rhetoric of the personal as political and philosophical.

Lorde's characterization of a progression from "silence to language and action" serves as a useful frame for the Malcolm who emerges after his journey to Mecca.[38] The trip, a signal moment of conversion or transformation, was healing, like the application of a salve to a deep and festering wound. The continuity suggested in Lorde's model of revolutionary transformation parallels Malcolm's journey, which moves him from meditation (silence) to renaming (in language) and action.

The ultimate chapter of the narrative, "1965," is lyrical, prophetic, and panoramic; it gives readers the best narrative view of Malcolm "in action" (post-Mecca). The chapter's title firmly cements Malcolm's ideology in the Black liberation movement, and the year reference identifies him with a decade of change. In this chapter, Malcolm reflects on the high esteem he once held for Elijah Muhammad and claims that it is "dangerous . . . for people to hold any human being in such esteem, especially to consider anyone some sort of 'divinely guided' and 'protected' person" (365). His soul- and self-searching in Mecca encouraged him to hold his own self in high esteem, which is parallel to the self-respect articulated in his nationalist and economic ideologies. He describes his experience of feeling "like a complete human being" in Mecca (365), suggesting a reconciliation of previous fragmentation. What *Autobiography* codifies in this chapter is an example of self-definition as described in Collins's text, calling to mind her notion that "consciousness . . . [is] a sphere of freedom" (*Black Feminist Thought* 103). In fact, Malcolm's desire for consciousness is the

point of his contention with the notion of civil rights; when he says that Black people want *human* rights (not civil rights), he is making a distinction between civil rights as legal, political, and social freedoms, and his own desire/struggle for comprehensive human liberation including but not limited to the legal and political freedoms of civil rights. Like many Black women before him, Malcolm realized that liberation would be limited unless it was achieved by, through, and in the decolonized and decolonizing self.

Yet the chapter "1965" hardly provides the "action" that my interpretation of Lorde suggests. Likewise, late in his life, Malcolm describes (and Haley confirms) criticisms that he was not doing anything. This perceived "inaction" might be best understood in the context of a comment that Malcolm makes about meditation: speaking to Haley about his prison life, Malcolm says, "In the hectic pace of the world, today, there is no time for meditation, or for deep thought. A prisoner has that time he can put to good use" (391). Malcolm's appreciation of meditation suggests a connection between the external volatility of 1965 and internal volatility. Not only is the correlation between exterior and interior radical and resonant with Black feminist political ideologies, there is a further reenvisioning of stillness here, of the quiet but moving interior also described in Black women's works. Malcolm's embrace of meditation resists the masculinist definition of liberation as *only* exterior action and validates the (interior) turmoil that came after his break from the Nation of Islam. Writer Marita Bonner provides a description of feminine stillness that is relevant to the point I am making here:

> So — being a woman — you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden — and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha — who brown like I am — sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing. . . . Motionless on the outside. But inside? (7)

Bonner's description, which is echoed by many Black women thinkers/writers (including Zora Neale Hurston, whose women characters are often at a very active standstill,[39] and Toni Morrison, whose evocative use of "quiet as it's kept" opens *The Bluest Eye*), also speaks to Malcolm's stillness. Motionless on the outside, but inside? *Autobiography* gives us a view of the inside, a view of the motion and action of the inside, of Malcolm doing the quiet and revolutionary work of self.[40]

Black feminisms' stress on self-definition and the negotiation of fragmented selves stresses meditative action as an integral part of the journey to liberation. Again, the interior space of self is acknowledged as having a significant role in individual and collective decolonization. While autobiography as a genre possesses an inherent meditative quality, there are other examples of this characteristic that are particular to *Autobiography*. For example, the narrative collaboration, designed to read like an unpolished and transcribed oral history, conveys a strong sense of interiority and reflection, foregrounded in the journey to Mecca, especially its unsettling aspects.

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The rhetorical quality of *Autobiography* that I am highlighting here is actually two merged concepts: mediation and meditation. *Mediation* is characteristic of African-American discourse, as Gates claims in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates asserts that communication and knowledge are the result of the interplay between figures (or constructs) of discourse (see especially 44-88), a claim that resonates with hooks's notion of the "mediation of truth" cited earlier. *Meditation* is an African-American narrative and cultural trope, as my colleague Ruth Ellen Kocher has noted.[41] While meditation commonly implies interiority, mediation suggests exteriority, but neither term is exclusively representative of a particular sphere. The meditation on figures of discourse is concomitant with mediating those figures toward relevant meaning and can occur on any of the surfaces of the self. It is in this sense that I consider *Autobiography*'s rhetoric as a mediation of the insights of meditation.

Haley describes two complaints that other Blacks had about Malcolm X: that he only talked and did not do, and that he was "himself too confused to be seriously followed any longer" (420). I think these criticisms reflect Malcolm's search for self as a search for truth. In fact, mediation of meditation is inherent in the form of *Autobiography*: it is a story constructed from memory and meant as a reflection on a past; and it is told to and recorded by a writer who also may be engaged in his own process of mediating meditation.[42]

At Malcolm's death, the doctor announces that "the man you knew as Malcolm X is now dead." What is striking about this wording is that it reflects not only the shifting nature of Malcolm's self but also how a man who was so personal still could be so symbolically distant: the man *we knew* as Malcolm X.[43] The comment might reveal that the Malcolm we know, though perhaps a rhetorical construction, is much more the Messiah-in-the-making than the Messiah-already-made (if he is any Messiah at all).[44] Theologian James Cone, in a statement about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, argues that "it is important to emphasize that . . . Malcolm . . . [was] not a messiah. [He showed] us what ordinary people can accomplish through intelligence and sincere commitment to the cause of justice and freedom" (315). As presented in *Autobiography*, Malcolm seemed "bent on *discovering* and *expanding* himself to his fullest limits" (Demarest 187; emphasis added), stimulating us to acknowledge and engage our own ordinary power for extraordinary change. His autobiography, constructed to mirror his emergent persona, not only reveals "the intensely social character of . . . interior lives" (A. Davis, *Women* 200) but also exhibits Collins's "interior space of activism"; it performs a Black feminist weaving of the interior of selfhood, the power of self-definition, and the quest for social emancipation.

The Failure of an Autobiography?

One of the failures, then, of *Autobiography* is that it maintained sexist and patriarchical views of women in conjunction with its unconscious engagement of Black feminist emancipatory traditions. Angela Davis attempts to recontextualize how we understand Malcolm X in relation to this issue. Davis cites Patri-

cia Robinson as "contend[ing] that after Malcolm's disillusionment with the Nation of Islam, he began to turn toward and to listen to Black women in a way that had not been possible as long as he functioned under the ideological tutelage of a man [Elijah Muhammad] . . . whose political/religious vision and whose personal life were thoroughly shaped by male supremacy" ("Meditations" 36-7). Davis continues, "because Malcolm was in the process of articulating the pitfalls and limitations of nationalism, I want to suggest that implied in that critical revisiting of Black nationalist philosophy might be a similar revisiting of the male supremacist ramifications of Black nationalism" (39). The basis for Davis's plausible though generous meditation on Malcolm is his shifting and personal political ideology: "even at a mature stage of development of his philosophical position, Malcolm did not hesitate to reexamine his ideas and consider the possibility of radical shifts in that position" (40). She writes her meditation to contest the "one-dimensional iconization of Malcolm X, because the iconization tends to close out possibilities of exploring other implications of Malcolm's legacy that are not heroic, nationalist, and masculinist" (41). And yet even outside of spaces of iconization, it is starkly evident in *Autobiography* that gender is not engaged in an emancipatory way for men or women; as Collins argues, the women in the text are presented in negative and constricting/constricted ways (as Eves or Madonnas). Collins describes the women in *Autobiography* as weak, fragile, untrustworthy, sacrificing and sacrificial constructions that reflect an authorial "conflation of Blackness, masculinity, and political astuteness" ("Learning" 76). Further, if I am correct to assert that the text's ideological strategies are intimately connected to Black women's emancipatory traditions, then the textual manifestations that Collins outlines serve as an erasure of the very people who were a critical source of the narrative's power.

As noted earlier, what is further problematic about the text — and also serves to mirror its interesting "silence" about gender — is its literal erasure of Malcolm's mother from the story. Collins notes that the mother's self is subsumed by the heroic description of Malcolm's father (62). Hilton Als, in a creative and moving (though sometimes compromising) essay, explores this erasure further, giving textual life to the ghostly presence of Malcolm's Grenadian, almost-white mother. Als's essay "Philosopher or Dog" is a ponderous musing on who Mrs. Louise Little was, a woman "who exists in *The Autobiography* to give birth to Malcolm, go mad, and look nearly colorless" (90).[45] "Who is this woman?" Als asks, a question that all readers should ask.

Als suggests that Malcolm's connection to his father was enhanced not only by the presence (as absence) of his mother but by his mother's connection to her white father: "Earl and Malcolm attached themselves to Louise's male, noncolored half. Louise did not have to meet her father. Earl and Malcolm lived him by competing with his ghost at every turn" (92). This leads me to think that there may have been an issue of homosociality — as a site of male power struggle[46] — at the center of Louise's presence in both men's lives and her erasure from the narrative of Malcolm's life. In fact, the tender and dynamic relationship between Haley and Malcolm that I described earlier results in part from Malcolm's own static and limited relationship with his mother (whose memory brings the two men together) and his wife, Betty (who only has five per cent on Haley, and is also erased from the text).

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Though *Autobiography* engages Black feminist strategies and situates Louise Little as a pivotal force, it also erases her; she is most present in the Epilogue written by Haley. Malcolm's half-sister Ella, equally powerful and central in his life — funding his trip to Mecca, for example — fares a little better in the text but still lacks a textual presence adequate to the role she played in his journey of self-realization. In their (mis)representations in the narrative — the shallow deification of his mother and the limiting image of Ella as a "good wife"[47] — these two dynamic women are practically erased, lumped with the sexist and static imagery of women generally in *Autobiography*.[48] I say "practically" erased not only because Louise and Ella are written (about) in the text to some degree and not simply erased wholesale but also (and more importantly) because they are present in the very philosophy of the narrative, which draws heavily on the liberation acts and theories of Black women. These two women highlight both the feminine presence that is left out of the content of the narrative and the writers' sexism that is left unrevised.

As *Autobiography* taps into the reservoir of liberation ideologies present in Black communities and Black cultural production, it (perhaps) unconsciously engages specific Black feminist contributions to such ideologies. Like the memory of Louise Little stretching food that offers Malcolm another response to seemingly impossible situations, Black women's traditions and practices as Haley and Malcolm experienced and engaged them feed *Autobiography*.

Epilogue

I have attempted here to unlock the unconscious of the text, to make evident the Black feminist textualities that undergird *Autobiography* and our reading of it. But I want to close on a more personal note. In his essay, Wideman observes, "For me writing about Malcolm is entering a space of myth and mourning" (102). In rereading this comment, I am reminded of the passion that hooks, West, Davis, and others exhibit as they write about Malcolm. I am reminded of my own passion, and of a later comment that Wideman makes: that we fashion and imagine Malcolm "in our own image" (116).[49] In my own image: for me, writing about Malcolm is also entering a space of myth. He is, for me, shimmering and brilliant, black and beautiful. He is like a river, sending silver water drops, like little bits of velvet to kiss my ankles. I love him, love all of me that he so captivates but also reveals; I too am engaged in a "you mine, you mine" reverie with Malcolm.

I also want him to be better, want for his politics better to reflect a liberation ideology that I have come to understand as healing. I will take him with me on this journey through Black feminist practices. The two of us, together, will see what it means for us to become Black men committed to feminism. Because he is mine, and I am his, and we both want to live.

This is the journey I take in reading *Autobiography*.

Notes

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1. There has been much debate over the terms "Black feminist" and "womanist." Collins's essay, "What's in a Name?" is a useful summary of the various positions, although Collins herself seems to favor "Black feminism" if her 1989 book title is any indication. Many African-American women theologians have taken up the issue (including Katie Cannon and Cheryl Gilkes). For me, the struggle is that even as I make specific and extensive reference to Alice Walker and to her definition of "womanism," I also engage Collins from her signal *Black Feminist Thought*. Even as in my daily life I may switch between the two terms *and* also use "womanism" to specify a spiritual component, I choose for sake of clarity in the essay to use "Black feminist/feminism" to speak about the specific experiences and cultural productions of Black women. When I do use the term "womanism" here, it will be meant as a particular reference to Walker's definition, in contradistinction (not contradiction) to my use of "Black feminism." For me, as for Collins and others, the heterogeneity of terms is only reflective of the dynamism of studies about Black women.

2. Key to my argument is the idea of *Autobiography* as a collaborative text. In this way, I hesitate during the essay to speak of Malcolm X, and instead mostly speak of Malcolm's and Alex (Haley)'s collaboration. Haley's life does not have the same well-documented markers of sexism, even as he is accountable, though differently than Malcolm, for the way the text (re)presents gender.

3. As Angela Davis generously claims in her essay, "Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X."

4. In all fairness to Malcolm's legacy, Perry's biography seems intent on every page to unearth a previously untold truth.

5. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was a phenomenon, selling over six million US copies in its first ten years; it was also widely translated internationally. Evidence of its incredible life exists in the numerous resurgence of Malcolm X-ism, most recently in Spike Lee's film version of the text. My use of "lieu de memoire," as well as my suggestion that the text is an icon, is indebted to O'Meally and Fabre, who argue that sites of memory exist when "individual or group memory selects certain landmarks of the past — places, artworks, dates; persons, public or private, well known or obscure, real or imagined — and invests them with symbolic and political significance. . . . [A lieu] de memoire (site of memory) . . . is material, symbolic, and functional" (7). This formulation helps to describe the potency that *Autobiography* carries in African-American cultural contexts.

6. Particularly, I am referring to Andrews; Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses* and "The Face of Autobiography"; Olney; and A. Stone. I am also

thinking of Bakhtin's account of the novel as a mixed form (heteroglossia), which resonates with autobiographical form.

7. See Marcus, "The Face of Autobiography," especially 14-15.

8. See de Man, to whom Marcus's essay referred me.

9. In a biocritical essay on Haley, M. Davis also uses the description of "porch-sitters," but this time to describe Haley's affinity for Black women's culture. She writes: "As a child, Haley listened to women storytellers reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston's porch-sitters: his maternal grandmother, his aunts, and other female relatives" (203).

10. Some central references for this idea are Canaan's poem "Girlfriends"; Walker's definition of "womanism"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought;* hooks, *Sisters*; or Toni Morrison's *Sula*. It is the idea of being "in the company of my sisters" that I am borrowing from Boyd.

11. Walker's argument (as well as my own) is not necessarily asserting individual recognition for Black women as much as decrying the individual and collective erasure of Black women's contributions — of their brilliance — as a result of the intersection of racial and gender hierarchies. I want to be especially clear here, as there is much evidence that rightly suggests a dynamic interaction between individual and communal in Black communities, a dynamic that is not in conflict with the trajectory of Walker's argument or my own.

12. See M. Davis, especially 202-3.

13. See Johnson (especially 113) and Baye.

14. Perry's biography raises many questions about the representation of Louise Little. It would be too distracting here to engage his claims, but I will say that as much as Perry and others note that autobiography (especially this one) is an art of exaggeration, *biography* seems to be the art of revision and discovery. Both genres are differently unreliable.

15. Riggs, in *Tongues Untied*, famously proclaimed that "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act." I think Riggs is echoing Beam, who wrote, "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties" (240).

16. Eakin also argues that Malcolm's original intent was to compose a more traditional conversion narrative of a completed self, a critical trajectory that Demarest also supports. While this argument is contested and contestable, it is not fundamental to my central arguments here.

17. Amiri Baraka writes, "Malcolm is also . . . a figure of ideological development and change" (18). Baraka goes on to describe "Malcolm's very ideological movement [as] . . . groping and seeking, [a] stumbling and continuous rising from confusion to *partial* clarity and on" (33). Furthermore, Wood, in his moving essay, writes, "Malcolm, in the end, gave us no coherent ideology, but he did leave us a site for Black political discourse" (15).

18. I am called to use this image in remembering Toni Morrison's comment to Gloria Naylor in a *Southern Review* interview: "You work with one facet of a prism, you know, just one side, or maybe this side, and it has millions of sides, and then you read a book and there is somebody who is a black woman who has this sensibility and this power and this talent and she's over here writing about that side of this huge sort of diamond thing that I see . . . all of these planes and all of these facets. But it's all one diamond, it's all one diamond. . . . This

fantastic jewel that throws back light constantly and is constantly changing" (Naylor 590).

19. I am making a distinction in using the word "personal" as opposed to "individual." In emphasizing the self, Black women thinkers have not rejected the intricate interdependency of communal and individual in Black American life; in fact, the idea of the personal embraces the communal.

20. This subtle difference is evident in Black feminist writers who emphasize healing as essential to decolonization. This emphasis on the personal, which also highlights the interior of the self as an active and liberating space, is a fundamental idea of feminism. Black feminists, responding to attacks on race, gender and class, have aimed even more radically to describe the interior as a place of serious activism. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* is a critical text in this regard, as is Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, which aims to return the spiritual to the political (see especially the chapter, "Uses of the Erotic").

21. The earlier passage cited from *Body & Soul* makes this connection.

22. Hurtado successfully articulates how the binary of private-public used so effectively in white feminist discourses becomes irrelevant for women of Color: "Yet the public/private distinction is relevant only for the white middle and upper classes since historically the American state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class. Women of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction. Instead the political consciousness of women of Color stems from an awareness that the public is *personally* political. Welfare programs and policies have discouraged family life, sterilization programs have restructured reproduction rights, government has drafted and armed disproportionate numbers of people of Color to fight its wars overseas, and locally, police forces and the criminal justice system arrest and incarcerate disproportionate numbers of people of Color. There is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment" (849). See also Mohanty, who works from Hurtado's points to delineate differences between mainstream feminist ideologies and feminist politics of Third World women (see especially 8-15).

23. A. Davis describes the highly social character of interior lives (*Women* 200).

24. This seeming contradiction, a parallel to the issue of invisibility and hypervisibility, is discussed at length in hooks, *Talking*.

25. Many Black feminist writers, critics, and scholars have noted this trope of the individual and psychic self as a landscape of collective or even national change, what I am referring to as an "epic landscape." For further reading, see McDowell; Tate; hooks, *Sisters* and *Talking;* Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*; and Mohanty, Russo and Torres, especially Mohanty's introduction.

26. Not only is this intersection explored in contemporary texts such as hooks, *Sisters*; White; Walker; Anzaldua and Moraga; and Anzaldua. It is also explored via blues songs (see Russell's "Slave Codes"), slave narratives (for example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*), and early speeches and manifestos by Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper.

27. Though this argument is commonly made today, it was first and most widely used by women of color in feminist movements during the 1970s. See the essays in section 7 of Anzaldua (especially Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory"), and Anzaldua and Moraga, especially 23. Gwaltney offers an excellent example of the way that Black Americans theorize (in) their daily living.

28. Langston Hughes's poem "Good Morning Revolution" also famously personalizes revolution as "the very best friend / I ever had."

29. West claims that Malcolm's philosophy was one of "psychic conversion that *attempted* to engage rage and self-love" (132). It is interesting to think of this conversion in a spiritual sense, much like the conversions that Rebecca Cox Jackson and Jarena Lee described in their spiritual narratives in the 1800s. Both Jackson and Lee not only experienced conversions that were liberating personally — affirming their right to preach — but also engaged those conversions rhetorically to challenge sexism in the Black religious hierarchy and racism in general. To a lesser extent, Elaw also exhibits this trope of spiritual and personal conversion as philosophical and revolutionary rhetorical imperative. hooks helps to facilitate my connection; of Malcolm's autobiography she writes, "Like nineteenth-century slave narratives, [Malcolm's] story stands as a living testimony of the movement from slavery to freedom" (*Yearning* 79). It is this sense of conversion — of the possibility of physical, political and psychic transformation — that contributes to Malcolm's contemporary appeal. Another dilemma of my attempt to link Malcolm X to Black feminist traditions is that many of these traditions were engaged temporally before his life but written about mainly after his life in the explosion of Black women's studies in the 1970s. I am trying, then, in this essay to connect Black women's political ideologies from before and after Malcolm's life to the rhetoric in *Autobiography*.

30. Also see Crenshaw. This reclamation of the body as a source of knowledge is a major part of what women of color have been working for in the past twenty years and is readily evident in contemporary fiction.

31. The work that Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Kaja Silverman, Trinh T. Minh-ha, bell hooks, and others have done to question how well we can know the actual body (which is historically imbedded in sign systems that move it farther and farther from being readily accessible and knowable) is important here also. In the context of Black women's experiences, then, the critique of the body-mind construct combines two related insights: one, that is it important to reclaim the body as a source of knowledge perhaps on a par with the mind, and to reject that body and mind exist distinctly; two, that it is also important, especially in relation to the notion of a fused body-mind consciousness, to question how knowable (and in what ways) this fused consciousness is, which means asking if it is really "consciousness." Griffin offers a useful commentary: "healing does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject. The body is not a 'given concrete one can call on or return to in order to recover a truer self.' . . . [H]ealing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends" (524). Grosz's work, particularly her notion of body volatility, is important here.

32. Lee and Jackson described incidents of psychic conversion that were events of the body as well as acts of spirit, and in this way both women were asserting that the body could know.

33. Two wonderful narrative examples of bodies as historical texts are Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* and the title character in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*.

34. See the example described in the sometimes disconcerting introduction to the text by Handler. The power of Malcolm's physical self (as perceived by others) recalls the way that Sojourner Truth engaged her body as a site for liberation. Her provocative gesture of baring her upper arm during her "Ain't I a Woman" speech is an excellent example not only of the degradation that Black women's bodies endured but also of the physical body as a location of philosophical discourse (though this engagement of the body was sometimes a response to detrimental and oppressive constructions of her physicality).

35. In her narrative, Jackson dreams that she is being slaughtered, which is an allegory of her liberation efforts. She writes, "the skin and blood covered me like a veil from my head to my lap" (94). There are many other examples of mutilation in her work, and to a lesser extent in Lee's and Elaw's narratives of the same time period.

36. I put her name in quotation marks because it is a name that Gwaltney gives to her in his ethnographic work as a way to maintain a sense of confidentiality.

37. Again, hooks, *Sisters*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Tate; Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*; and D. White all present cogent discussions of this idea.

38. Lorde's "model" is also descriptive of Lee's and Jackson's spiritual narratives.

39. See particularly her story "Sweat."

40. Benson's excellent reading of *Autobiography* in the context of a definition of rhetoric as knowing, being, and doing supports my reading of Malcolm's perceived inaction as action in fact.

41. From personal conversation, April 1997.

42. The issues of self-definition and authorship are complicated here: the text is a palimpsest of sorts, with Haley's voices, Malcolm's voices (personal, political, contrived, authentic), and Malcolm's life all vying for space on the page within a process of memory-making. This has been the subject of much scholarship. Demarest convincingly argues that dual authorship encouraged Malcolm to be less polemical, to use the text as a statement not of a particular political self (reality) but (as much as possible) of his own self (184-6). Eakin, however, would attribute this less to co-authorship than to the "tumultuous . . . and steadily accelerated" pace of Malcolm's life between 1963 and 1965 (156). To engage Demarest's argument completely would mean exploring other texts about Malcolm's life, which I am not able to do in this essay. Nonetheless, the factors that Demarest and Eakin describe contribute to *Autobiography*'s presentation of the achievement of clarity through uncertainty. Furthermore, the issue of collaborative authorship affects how one can interpret features such as the chapter titles and the shifts in the register of the language. For two impor-

tant essays that look at Haley's role in constructing the text in relation to concepts of Black autobiography, see Rampersad and Wideman, who offers a brilliant and complete investigation of "the art of autobiography" in the dual authorial relationship. Also see A. Stone.

43. Racism, particularly in the way that it informed media representation of Black leaders, also affected the way Malcolm was perceived as a "symbol" by whites and (differently) by Blacks.

44. My use of "construction" here is in response to some critics, particularly Benson and Perry, who have asserted that there are a number of inconsistencies between *Autobiography* and other (more reliable) accounts of Malcolm's life. This, they conclude, reveals the high level of rhetorical play in *Autobiography* and is an attempt to manipulate the reader of the text. I am not attempting here to claim *Autobiography* as a "clean" representation of Malcolm's life; instead, I am interested in the rhetorical play — if that is what it is — that he and Haley chose to use. That is, if certain constructions in the narrative (which I am suggesting were accounts of real lived experiences of struggle) were really engagements of pathos, then it is still interesting to explore what it means that Malcolm and Haley chose pathos as a central mode of expression for their narrative. Furthermore, I do think that the inconsistencies might also be an attempt to mirror the reality of our lived lives, which are often riddled with contradictions and incongruities.

45. The description of Louise Little as "almost white" reaffirms Collins's comment cited earlier that the text conflates Blackness, masculinity, and political astuteness. It is also itself a commentary on the (historical) role of color as a gendered construct in Black America.

46. Though she fails to address race effectively, Sedgwick offers a wonderful explication of her notion of homosociality; see in particular her chapter on Henry James ("Beast in the Closet"). Also see Rubin and Irigaray.

47. I am grateful to Nicole Lanson, whose careful reading of these pages suggested key areas of emphasis.

48. The chapters "Detroit Red," "Minister Malcolm X," and "El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz" contain an abundance of this imagery.

49. This phrase is also the title of Wood's edited collection, where Wideman's essay is published.

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