

Angry Black Males and the Tales They Tell:

African-American Autobiographies

Represented by

Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

and

Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

By

Anette Chapman

*This Master Thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the University of Agder and is therefore approved as a part of this education. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.*

University of Agder, 2010

Faculty of Humanities and Education

Department of Foreign Languages and Translation

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements .....	3
Chapter One: Introduction - The Angry Black Males in Autobiographies .....	4
Chapter Two: Malcolm X – The Angriest Black Male in America .....	22
Chapter Three: Barack Obama – The Angry Black Male in Transition.....	43
Chapter Four: Conclusion – Angry Black Males Changing the World.....	66
Works Cited.....	70

## ***Acknowledgements***

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful children, Arielle Helena and Nicolas Isaiah. In spite of your young age you have shown an amazing strength in supporting me and cheering me on. Thank you for your tremendous patience and love. You are the stars in my life. I love you both very much.

To my parents Torill and Olav, my brother Nils Petter, and my grandmother Nelly. Thank you so much for everything. You have encouraged me and helped me in every possible way. I could not have done this without you. I am forever grateful. I love you.

To my mother-in-law, Helen. Your encouragement, support and guidance from the beginning to the final level enabled me to achieve a greater understanding of the subject. You are my inspiration and my guiding light. I love you.

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Michael J. Prince. Thank you for guiding me through every step of this journey. Your excellent advice and your ability to turn my frustrations into something productive are greatly appreciated.

To my friends and fellow students. Thank you for the ride! It would not have been the same without you. I will cherish the memories forever. A special thank you to Gry, for all your help and support. You were always able to give me excellent feedback and to calm me down.

## ***Chapter One: Introduction - The Angry Black Males in Autobiographies***

During the week of 13<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> of July in 1959, the American public was introduced to a television documentary called “The Hate That Hate Produced.” The show was produced by the journalists Mike Wallace, later of *60 Minutes* fame, and Louis Lomax, the well-known black journalist.<sup>1</sup> The documentary gave in many people’s view a highly propagandist view of the dangers of the Nation of Islam and the Black Nationalists. Before the program aired very few white people had heard about the Nation of Islam and were shocked that black people could express that amount of hate and rage toward them. It has become a historically important document in the history of the black movement and an emblem of the expression “angry black male,” represented by Malcolm X through his powerful speaking style and oratory skills. His anger was predominant and obvious when he spoke of the atrocities done to the black population. He expressed fearlessness while representing an angry black male.

The broadcast aired five consecutive nights and created both fear and interest in black and white people. The first night Mike Wallace’s booming voice introduced the program with the following narrative: “Tonight we begin a five part series which we call ‘The Hate that Hate Produced’; a story of the rise of Black racism, of a call for black supremacy among a growing segment of American Negroes. While city officials, state agencies, white liberals and sober-minded Negroes stand idly by, a group of Negro dissenters are taking to street corner step ladders, church pulpits, sports arenas and ballroom platforms across the nation to preach the gospel of hate that would set off a federal investigation if it were to be preached by

---

<sup>1</sup> Plez Joyner, 2007 "The Hate That Hate Produced," <http://pajoyner.blogspot.com/2007/09/hate-that-hate-produced-1959-html>.

Southern whites. What are they saying? Listen."<sup>2</sup> The program continues with inflammatory rhetoric from Malcolm X where he, among other things, charges the white man with being the biggest liar and the biggest murderer on earth. This was taken from a morality play the Nation of Islam called "The Trial" where the sentence was death for the white man. This was the price the white world had to pay for all the atrocities done to the black population and other minorities.<sup>3</sup> Later Lomax would interview the leader of the New York Muslims: Minister Malcolm X, the Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad and James Lawson, the President of the United African Nationalist Movement, who all expressed the belief that white people collectively were evil and the black man was divine. In a sense, the program created the angry black male as a feared cultural icon. And only history could explain why black people were angry.

Historically, the white European man has treated its own minorities in inhuman ways and through slavery, colonialism and imperialism, mistreatment of the majority were perpetrated by the white man. But to hear such rage from black people took the white population by surprise. They were more used to the non-violent movement of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who worked towards integration and a peaceful existence between the races, and here the people of the United States were introduced to a group of angry black males who had no desire to integrate any more than the politicians of Jim Crow South.<sup>4</sup> The Nation of Islam advocated complete separation from the white race. The possibility of living next to the white man without being treated as the inferior race was viewed as a utopian idea.

Mike Wallace by all accounts put fright in the white population, by skipping the fact that the Nation of Islam was also a group which promoted black pride, self-determination and self-empowerment, not just a militant group. And the series had its critics. One of the first

---

<sup>2</sup> Government United States, 1959 "Office Memorandum," <http://columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/pdf/071659hthp-transcript.pdf>. Page 2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Page 2a

<sup>4</sup> Joyner, "The Hate That Hate Produced."

things Mike Wallace emphasized was the fact that Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad had both spent time in prison, which put into question their abilities as leaders. Expressions like “gospel of hate,” “black supremacy” and “black racism” without any effort to give a balanced view triggered fear in the white population.<sup>5</sup> The author Herbert Shapiro criticized the opening comments of the show in his book *White Violence and Black Response* from 1988. When Mike Wallace claims that the Nation of Islam’s hate would lead to a federal investigation if white people were doing the same thing in the South, Herbert Shapiro claimed that this was simply not true. Southern white people did in fact preach a “gospel of hate” toward the black population, but the federal government had done close to nothing to stop it.<sup>6</sup>

“The Hate That Hate Produced” undoubtedly changed the way mainstream America viewed African-Americans. The stereotypical masks the black population had to wear “to stay in their place” to avoid trouble were replaced by a no-excuse attitude. The African-American population was not accepting their situation anymore. The inferiority complex in the black people was challenged and a significant number of them would applaud because the leaders would “tell it like it was” and promote black pride before “it was fashionable to do so.”<sup>7</sup> White people were taken aback by the fact that there was a radical alternative to the Civil Rights Movement. The Nation of Islam also had black charismatic leaders who actually demanded changes and refused to accept the stamp of inferiority. This gave way to the notion of the angry black male who represented the flip-side of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s policy of non-violence. A good example is the protest marches in Selma, Alabama in 1965.<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. went to a deep South where the black population was marked by apathy and fear and where they were denied the right to vote on ridiculous grounds, such as forgetting to

---

<sup>5</sup> United States, "Office Memorandum." Pages 2-4

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Shapiro, 1988. Page 468

<sup>7</sup> Joyner, "The Hate That Hate Produced."

<sup>8</sup> Stephen B. Oates, 1998. Pages 325-364

“cross a ‘t’ on the registration form.”<sup>9</sup> The non-violent marches proved to be effective for the voting rights for the black population. In Stephen B. Oates book from 1994, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King*, he describes an incident which happened during a demonstration on January the 25<sup>th</sup> 1965 in Selma: “Several black men started to interfere, but King stopped them. ‘Don’t do it, men. I know how you feel because I know how I feel. But hold your peace.’ In truth, King was as furious as they were. But he was determined that Selma Negroes adhere to his philosophy and tactics of nonviolence, something he and his staff had been drilling into them since the movement had begun. As James Bevel told them, any man who had the urge to hit white officers was a fool. ‘That is just what they want you to do. Then they can call you a mob and beat you to death.’”<sup>10</sup>

White America was to a large extent ignorant of the implications slavery had had on the black population. “The Hate That Hate Produced” highlighted that oppressed people do not become tolerant, but angry. The angry black male protested against a society in which they were expected to function in whilst being silenced and devalued of their existence. They were never seen as good enough. Black people were living a life where the majority of decisions would have to be carefully planned to avoid racism and defend discrimination. The term “double consciousness,” coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folks* from 1903, explains how black people had to wear masks in different situations to try to find an identity in a society which did not *see* you. He spoke of “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”.<sup>11</sup> A need to tell their own stories in the form of autobiographies was becoming more important as a way to be heard, to claim an identity and to be *seen*. The stereotypical view of the black population was to be challenged through autobiographies and it was also a tool in educating the whole population about the history of

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Page 327

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Pages 336-337

<sup>11</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, 2003. Page 1705

the black population. It was done to create an understanding of the present situation at the time in which an autobiography was published.

There is a need to understand the past and the historical facts to understand newer history and the present. Black males' anger comes from their historical journeys in life, from slavery up until today. They were taken from Africa against their will and found themselves in a situation of not being able to protect their women and children, which was a way of emasculating African men and to strip them of power and dignity. The way their manhood and pride were stolen from them in horrific ways laid the foundation for the problems African-Americans males have today. The transfer as slaves to North America meant the loss of familiarity and habit, loss of family and friends and loss of history and identity. Individual slaves were judged by their monetary value and families were separated. This had terrible effects on men, women and children. Men, who traditionally were supposed to be the protector and patriarch of the family, were stripped of their right to take care of their loved ones. The white man's total control over the black man's manhood during slavery was through the slave owners' total sexual access to his female slaves. The black man's access to his woman was controlled by his owner. At the same time white women were completely off limits for the black man, another way to emphasize his inferior status in society and to trample on his manhood.<sup>12</sup> African-Americans were, through slavery, legally excluded from the mainstream and to wrench themselves out of that situation would literally take blood, sweat and tears.

Slavery was undeniably a significant factor in the Civil War which lasted from 1861 to 1865, which eventually led to the emancipation of the slaves. During the Reconstruction, which took place between 1865 and 1877, the Union knew it needed to include the black population in the mainstream of America in order to survive. The North knew changes had to

---

<sup>12</sup> Don Belton, 1995. Pages 146-147



be introduced in a rapid fashion before the South took the opportunity to introduce new ways of racial oppression.<sup>13</sup> However, the change for the black man moved rapidly in the direction of segregation when the mood and attitude towards black voting rights changed. Generally it was said that the Negroes had been given a chance to prove themselves, but had failed. They had been given a taste of power, independence and responsibility before it was ripped away from them.<sup>14</sup> The dehumanizing consequences were substantial when the country entered into the Jim Crow era.

The segregation laws continued to embrace all parts of society in the South. Jim Crow South was systematizing social, educational and economic disadvantages for the black population. Propaganda against the black race appeared in literature and amongst public speakers and educators. The numerous laws and continuous changes for the worst for black Americans pushed them further towards the abyss of degradation. The uncertainty of their daily lives made them even more paranoid, insecure and increasingly angry which triggered an “enough is enough” mentality. C. Vann Woodward explains in his book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow South*: “The Jim Crow laws, unlike feudal laws, did not assign the subordinate group a fixed status in society. They were constantly pushing the Negro farther down.”<sup>15</sup> The brutal and harsh treatment of black people was not only protected under a legally authorized violence, but to challenge the system could be disastrous. Even when African-Americans survived the humiliation and pain from being treated cruelly, there was the fact that the brutal treatment further diminished them as human beings.

In the crusade for the Negro one of the biggest obstacles was to pass an anti-lynching law.<sup>16</sup> One of the reasons why lynching became an accepted form of civil arrest was that the white man had to prove their manhood whilst taking the manhood from the black man, by

---

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Brogan, 2001. Pages 346-348

<sup>14</sup> Melvin Drimmer, 1968. Pages 300-307

<sup>15</sup> C. Vann Woodward and William S. McFeely, 2002. Page 108

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Page 143

humiliating him in the most terrible ways. According to Grace Elizabeth Hale insecurity had risen in the white man due to the sudden lack of power and control over the black man. In her book, *Making Whiteness* she explains: “White violence against southern blacks was not limited only to lynchings – white men continued in more private settings to rape black women and assault African Americans for ‘reasons’ ranging from black resistance and economic success to white hatred, jealousy, and fear.”<sup>17</sup> At the same time white men could no longer take their sexual desires to the slave quarters and had to express their sexual powers in other ways. Lynching was an expression of the white man’s power over the black man. White men were hiding behind the notion that they were protecting the white women from the “black beast rapist.”<sup>18</sup> The stereotypical view of the black man as a person with limitless sexual desire was contributing to portraying the black man as a man unable to control his desires and thus was dangerous. The Emmett Till case from 1955 is a prime example of a naïve young man who visited from the North and whistled at a shop owner’s wife as he and his cousins left the store. It was a decision which ended in his death. His barely identifiable body was found in the Tallahatchie River a few days after the incident.<sup>19</sup> The pictures of his mutilated body circulated around the world and the incident was a great motivator for the Civil Rights movement.

The lynching of Claude Neal in Marianna, Florida in 1934 was witnessed by a large crowd of people. The story was later retold by the NAACP, represented by Howard Kester of the Committee on Economic and Racial Justice, who was a white liberal Southerner who went undercover for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It shows the pattern of increased aggressiveness by the white population who used sexual mutilation as an expression of emasculation:

---

<sup>17</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, 1998. Page 201

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pages 232-235

<sup>19</sup> Borgna Brunner, 2007 "The Murder of Emmett Till," <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmjustice5.html>.

Though the torturing of lynch mob victims had been described before, no other report surpassed the NAACP's unblinking account of Neal's castration, framed as the words of a bragging eyewitness: 'They cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat it and say he liked it.' And Kester's arrangement of the Neal story fully utilized these details, transforming the eye-for-an-eye narrative structure in which one violated body demanded another more violated one, a black man's body for a white woman's contaminated soul, into a tale of competing truths.<sup>20</sup>

Not only were people in general made more aware of the atrocities done to the black population, but the technological advancement also furthered the cause of the Civil Rights movement. The protests of especially younger African-Americans took even the NAACP by surprise. "More than a black revolt against whites, it was in part a generational rebellion, an uprising of youth against the older generation, against the parental 'Uncle Toms' and their inhibitions."<sup>21</sup> Violence and riots erupted in major cities all over the United States during the 60s. Around a hundred years after emancipation black people's freedom was still limited. When better opportunities were sought through political redress and lawsuits and still did not happen at the pace they hoped for and expected, black residents got tired of the inequalities in their societies. The continued denial to what they viewed as their legitimate rights increased their anger towards the white man. If white America did not start treating black people as human beings, riots would continue to increase. Oppressed people do not become tolerant, but angry.

There was also an increasing need to express their situation in writing and let their voices be heard. White America had mostly been prepared to see black America from white America's point of view. That was what white America accepted as fact. It was important to express the black population's experience from their own vantage point, not just to create

---

<sup>20</sup> Hale. Page 224

<sup>21</sup> Woodward and McFeely. Page 170

better understanding between the races but also an important tool in the black population's journey away from the stigma of being second class citizens. It was an attempt to wring out a meaning of their lives and generations of suffering, and a modern way of writing themselves into their own identities. Black autobiographies became testimonies of lives lived through suffering and hope. Henry Louis Gates explained in his book *Loose Canons* how the slaves used language to further their cause: "The slave narratives, taken together, represent the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being* [emphasis in original]. What a curious idea: Through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could posit a full and sufficient self, as an act of self-creation through the medium of language. Accused of having no collective history by Hegel, blacks effectively responded by publishing hundreds of individual stories which functioned as the part standing for the whole."<sup>22</sup>

After emancipation in 1865 the way narratives were written changed.<sup>23</sup> If we compare Frederick Douglass (1845), Booker T. Washington (1901) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) we can see the differences. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass* became a bestseller and Douglass' writing is bitter and unapologetic and he makes absolutely no excuses for the institution of slavery or the behavior of the slave masters. Washington's approach towards race relations reads a lot more mild-mannered than Douglass and the fact that Washington was a free man when his book was written will of course also change the style. A free black man did not have to write to promote freedom, but to promote how to live side by side in the best possible way. Before emancipation the opposition was "slave" and "free human being" and afterwards it was "black" and "white."<sup>24</sup>

While Douglass is uncompromising regarding the state of slavery, Washington explains and excuses his situation: "My life had its beginning in the midst of the most

---

<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates, 1992. Page 57

<sup>23</sup> Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, 1985. Pages xii-xiii

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Page xiii

miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings.”<sup>25</sup> This could just as well have been written by Douglass, had Washington not qualified it with the following sentence: “This was not so, however, not because my owners were especially cruel, for they were not, as compared to many others.”<sup>26</sup> Held up against one another, Washington is the compromising writer while Douglass makes no excuses for the slave owners in his writing, even though he understands that the nicest owner would be corrupted by the institution of slavery and in that sense also a victim: “Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.”<sup>27</sup> Du Bois on the other hand wrote to create outrage amongst both blacks and whites. He criticized Washington for being of a servile caste and for his ideas of the status for the African-Americans.<sup>28</sup> Washington believed that the best way for the black population to succeed in life was to try to fit in and assimilate into the established American culture while Du Bois believed that black people should question and challenge the white population from every angle. Nevertheless, Douglass, Washington and Du Bois all play a big part in the legacy of the struggles of the black population and from their individual experiences grew their dialogues about freedom, dialogues which continue to this day. Numerous African-Americans have continued in the tradition of writing their personal stories in the genre of autobiography.

According to Stephen Butterfield black autobiographies are divided into three periods; “The Slave-narrative Period ca. 1831-1898,”<sup>29</sup> “The Period of Search ca. 1901-1961”<sup>30</sup> and “The Period of Rebirth Since 1961.”<sup>31</sup> All three periods express stories which tell the reader how it is to live life as an oppressed person in a white society, which has a different

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Page xiii

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Page xiii

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Douglass, 2003. Page 947

<sup>28</sup> DuBois. Page 1715

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Butterfield, 1974. Page 9

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Page 91

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Page 181

perception of history and society than the black population. The different periods in history changed mainstream America and thus the way black autobiographies were written changed. The periods have a connection to whenever race became political issues such as during the abolitionist movement in the 1840s and 50s, during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30s and “The organization of the CIO, and the zenith of the Communist party; or the 1960s and ’70s, during the great urban rebellions and the emergence of Black Power.”<sup>32</sup> Black political and historical evolution helped shape the periods. The first period was more than anything voices in bids for freedom and a part in the crusade of the anti-slavery movement. The second period was more introspective and in many ways carried a more alienated individualism in the writings. But in the third period the writing became more political again and represented a mass voice for the black population. All three periods have characteristics which remain close to unchanged. Characteristics such as feelings and expressions which were used to reclaim their black identities and to disclaim the masks they had to wear and the roles they were given.<sup>33</sup> The black autobiographies represented the angry black males and their lives in a world which had disrespected and denied their manhood. According to Sidonie Smith a reoccurring trait in African-American autobiographies is a breakdown of sorts before resurrecting as a new man. In her book *Where I’m Bound* from 1974 she explains: “psychological slavery precipitates a nervous breakdown, a characteristic moment in black autobiographies, which in turn precipitates a radical revision of his thought.”<sup>34</sup> It is after a breakdown the black male has to recreate himself in his further search for an identity which might still be a stranger to him. Smith also explains the importance of writing for African-Americans in search of their identities:

This tradition in black American autobiographical writing is really at the center of its impulse. In society where blackness is met with implicit and explicit forms of racism,

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Page 5

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Page 7

<sup>34</sup> Sidonie Smith, 1974. Page 105

the understanding of that very racism, its motivations, its effects upon the self and the society at large, is tantamount to the understanding of one's identity. In the process of imposing the order of an analysis upon the complex manifestations of American racism, Cleaver and other black Americans impose order on the chaos engulfing them and, as a result, come to understand themselves; They know who they are and why they are who they are. In fact, this tradition goes back to the slave narratives.<sup>35</sup>

Hundreds of years of suffering had created the identity crisis for the black man and writers therefore sought to influence the consciousness of the black population by their own individual voices to create a mass voice to express the black population's plight. Butterfield describes the third period of writing black autobiographies, which started with James Baldwin's book *Nobody Knows My Name* with its selection of essays with commentaries regarding cultural and racial issues : "The year 1961 was a dividing line in American history, a time when all the race issues left unsettled by Reconstruction were coming back to the surface. Black organizations had once more begun to attack racism frontally with mass, militant action. The autobiographies written after *Nobody Knows My Name* belong to this new period of reawakened political commitment. It was no longer a time of middle class alienation and introspection; the black masses took the initiative, forcing the middle class to respond to their militance one way or the other."<sup>36</sup>

Baldwin was a typical example of the black man struggling to find wholeness in his life. Like Du Bois he views the black population's identity crisis as a crisis for the whole country.<sup>37</sup> White Americans who were ignorant of black identity were ignorant of their own identity and to create a better understanding between the races the written word proved to be efficient. Baldwin's novel broke ground for a new type of autobiography, stories about black self-awareness which was "entering the state of rapid ferment and would no longer be the

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Pages 119-120

<sup>36</sup> Butterfield. Page 183

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Page 187

same.”<sup>38</sup> As writing had become freedom of minds for the slaves it continued being an important tool for the black population in a society which teased you with the thought that you could be a full partner and participant, but then turned around and thwarted every move. It was a society which led the black population into an angry state of being.

After the program “The Hate That Hate produced” in 1959 and the growth of the Civil Rights movement in the early sixties a wave of black pride emerged. The Black Panther Party first got started in 1966 in Oakland, California. It was a revolutionary movement “stemming directly from what Malcolm X was teaching.”<sup>39</sup> Malcolm X symbolized transformation, that is, to move from an awareness of being oppressed to arriving at “the height of consciousness: the point where they’re willing to fight for their freedom.”<sup>40</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, the author of *Soul of Ice* and a prominent representative of the Black Panthers, did not believe the United States was willing to modify her society and the only way to fight the development was “open warfare against the system.”<sup>41</sup> Eldridge Cleaver wrote about the fate of black people in the United States and how he committed crimes to defy the white society. The impact of slavery on African-American men was still lingering and as revenge, Eldridge attacked where it would hurt the most, he raped white women.<sup>42</sup> Shockingly open and honest, *Soul on Ice* reveals a view of white women and white people as a whole, which is so bad it leaves many readers shocked and disgusted. He was a rebel motivated by anger and hate according to Sidonie Smith.<sup>43</sup> The book reveals the anger many black men felt during the Civil Rights movement. Cleaver’s autobiography *Soul on Ice* has by all accounts contributed to the intensely stereotypical notion of an angry black male in America.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Page 200

<sup>39</sup> Lee Lockwood, 1970. Page 86

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Pages 90-91

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Page 56

<sup>42</sup> Eldridge Cleaver and Maxwell Geismar, 1968. Pages 14-15

<sup>43</sup> Smith. Page 110



An autobiography can be described as a book of a person's life, written by the person himself. Philippe Lejeune has the following definition in his book *On Autobiography*: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”<sup>44</sup> But the autobiography, in Lejeune's opinion, also demands certain characteristics such as language, story and the position of the narrator. The narrator and the main character must be the same person. These requirements are not met in memoirs, biographies and diaries. The different requirements are at the same time not totally restrictive. The story is mainly introspective and about an individual life, but political or social history can also be embedded in a text to set it in context. Some transition with other genres such as memoirs and journals is acceptable to emphasize certain aspects of the autobiographer's life.<sup>45</sup> In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* Alex Haley included Malcolm X's letter<sup>46</sup> and note<sup>47</sup> from Mecca to emphasize the many changes in his life. In *Dreams from My Father* Barack Obama lets his grandmother narrate and tell about his African family's past in his quest for identity.<sup>48</sup>

Autobiography is a popular genre in the literary world because another person's experiences can mirror and justify our own. When reading an autobiography, the reader gets the opportunity to move into another person's psychological frame of mind to better understand them as well as oneself. Jill Ker Conway explains: “We want to know how the world looks from inside another person's experience, and when that craving is met by a convincing narrative, we find it deeply satisfying.”<sup>49</sup> The significant factor surrounding the notion that a person can make a text out of his or her life is the ability to metaphorically enter into another person's mind to enable us to start thinking about our own lives in a different

---

<sup>44</sup> Philippe Lejeune and Paul John Eakin, 1989. Page 4

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Pages 4-5

<sup>46</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 2007. Pages 454-456

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Page 447-448

<sup>48</sup> Barack Obama, 2008. Pages 394-424

<sup>49</sup> Jill K. Conway, 1998. Page 6

way and from a different vantage point. An autobiography can provide both hope and despair, more so than in fiction.

Autobiography also has its critics. To write about a long life is not easy, as one's memory can be selective and the lack of authentic recollection can threaten the truthfulness of the story. Experience and the memory of it might be altered due to new experiences and cultural and social changes. How consciousness will play a role in a person's memory is impossible to measure. James Olney expresses his views in the following way: "Is there such a thing as design in one's experience that is not an unjustifiable imposition after the fact? Or is it not perhaps more relevant to say that the autobiographer half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to?"<sup>50</sup> We have to be aware of the possibility of false or idealized memories, but at the same time acknowledge that the autobiography has a power a degree stronger than fiction because it is putatively true. In a country like the United States, which is composed of a population of great diversity, there are an endless number of stories to be told. It was a way to validate a background and a history and a way to identify a past to explain the present in a new country, which had to be shared with many ethnic groups.

Between 1890 and 1914 around 15 million immigrants came to the United States. The third-wave immigrants came to a country in the midst of urbanization and industrialization and did not at once melt in, but to a great extent created their own communities within the cities. "We the People of the United States" were due for introspection facing the new reality.<sup>51</sup> Ethnic autobiographies were voices in the conversion of American identity, an expression of the modern self. "The shift, therefore, that was taking place in American Culture in the period between 1880 and 1910 had found in ethnic autobiography its corresponding new text-type, which proved to be not only the most suitable vehicle for

---

<sup>50</sup> James Olney, 1980. Page 11

<sup>51</sup> Paul John Eakin, 1991. Page 124

presenting new and exquisitely modern versions of the American self, but also a lens for interpreting the complex structural tensions that would lead to the closing of the golden doors in 1924.”<sup>52</sup>

Ethnic autobiographies are descriptions of loss of familiarity and identity in a world where the author lives as the other in a dominant culture.<sup>53</sup> For African-Americans the transition from slave narratives to black autobiographies continued into the 60s and emerged in a time where there was a general emphasis on ethnic roots with all groups in the United States but the black consciousness may have been the strongest. African-Americans were also different from the other ethnic groups as the majority had arrived in the United States not as immigrants but as slaves. The black autobiography is personal but also a mass voice. It is an attempt to remove the white veil, which had been placed over African-Americans and to let the black population tell their own story. As Stephen Butterfield explains: “Black writers offer a model of the self which is different from white models, created in response to a different perception of history and revealing divergent, often completely opposite meanings to human actions. These meanings are accessible to Western man, because they are molded and articulated in response to his society, framed and to a certain extent distorted by his language and culture.”<sup>54</sup> To write black autobiographies were a way to tear down the walls of traditionally stereotypical views of the black population and a way to prove that they were not inferior, but strong and proud men willing to fight for their rights, even if it contributed to creating a new stereotype, the angry black male. Black autobiography was also a way to prove that the black population had intellect enough to deserve equal treatment and to prove that they shared intellectual capacities with Europeans and Americans.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Page 139

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Pages 124-125

<sup>54</sup> Butterfield. Page 2

<sup>55</sup> Davis and Gates. Page 3

In the mid-sixties they stopped calling themselves Negroes, black was the new identity. There was also a change in writing. Ghetto speech rhythms became the norm and writers like Cleaver, Seale, Lester and Malcolm X emerged.<sup>56</sup> They were writing differently from what white people expected as they wanted to accurately describe the black male to the white reader and destroy the stereotype of the black male as subservient. In addition they demonstrated the lie of the American dream where the theory of life in the United States is freedom, but the reality for black people is *unfreedom* and flight from suffering. Black male autobiographies were used to tell stories as political utensils to create awareness and give advice about the state of the black man.

This thesis will look at the black experience through two autobiographies which represent the angry black male and two distinct varieties of blackness over the past fifty years: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X and *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama. The African-American male perception of their own anger in white society can be found in numerous autobiographies. I have chosen two books that I believe represent black male anger in a reflective and informative way. Malcolm X and Barack Obama have different vantage points but regardless of which time and place they come from, they both suffer from one of America's enduring stereotypes: the angry black male. It was largely through his association with Nation of Islam and the television documentary "The Hate That Hate Produced" that Malcolm X became the quintessential poster boy for the angry black male. Obama's search for himself was more a search for identity and belonging than a search to justify his anger in a racist society.

The conventional wisdom that Obama is not angry enough and that Malcolm X was called the angriest man in America will be challenged through the next chapters of this thesis. Their personal stories are expressed in different ways and styles but eloquently tell the reader

---

<sup>56</sup> Butterfield. Pages 218-221

stories from reality. Their stories differ from for instance George S. Schuyler. If the reader takes into account that he was from the state of New York and must have known there was a different world in the South he nevertheless expresses a romanticized picture when it comes to living as a black individual in the United States in his autobiography *Black and Conservative*: “It mattered not what color the parties were. Indeed, people thought of each other as individuals and families rather than as colors and races. They visited each other’s homes and the children played together and, of course, went to school together.”<sup>57</sup>

This thesis will focus on two autobiographies separated by thirty years. I will illustrate Malcolm X’s and Barack Obama’s life journeys from bewildered young men to powerful leaders; my thesis is a comparison and contrast between two black male autobiographies. Through their narrative voices I will discuss their differences and similarities in growing up as African-Americans in white America, including taking into account that they grew up in different times and places. They were both angry black young males but expressed themselves in different ways. I will illustrate this with excerpts from both books which will show which means they used to get their point across.

---

<sup>57</sup> George S. Schuyler, 1966. Page 7

## ***Chapter Two: Malcolm X – The Angriest Black Male in America***

During 1959 a friend of Alex Haley told him about the show “The Hate That Hate Produced” and “the black man’s religion.”<sup>58</sup> Triggered by curiosity and the belief in a good story, he approached The Nation of Islam and proposed an article about their movement, an interview with their leader Elijah Muhammad which would be printed in the *Reader’s Digest*. Haley’s article pleased both Muhammad and Malcolm and Malcolm proceeded by giving an interview to Haley for Playboy Magazine.<sup>59</sup> Out of the Playboy interview grew the idea of an autobiography. Malcolm agreed on the grounds that the world needed to hear the truth about the Nation of Islam.<sup>60</sup> The more personal sides of Malcolm were expressed later as his trust towards Alex Haley increased.

Already in the title of the book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley* there is a problem considering this book as an autobiography. It is written as a first person narrative, but the first person is Malcolm and the writer is Haley. According to Philippe Lejeune this does not qualify the book under the “the autobiographical pact,” which states: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”<sup>61</sup> In Lejeune’s opinion *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* would, as a result from “the autobiographical pact”, be read in an ambiguous manner where the reader would not take it serious enough and digest the book more as a novel than that of an autobiography.<sup>62</sup> Albert Stone, on the other hand, includes a variety of narratives as a type of autobiography: “These accounts appear now in a variety of conventional forms and new narrative modes: memoirs and confessions, testaments and apologies, diaries and journals, collaborations and collection of letters.”<sup>63</sup> It was the fact

---

<sup>58</sup> X and Haley. Page 11

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Pages 11-12

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Pages 13-14

<sup>61</sup> Lejeune and Eakin. Page Page 4

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Pages 18-19

<sup>63</sup> Eakin. Page 98

that Malcolm was the orator and Haley the actual writer of the autobiography which contributed greatly to the book's success, in Stone's opinion. Their indisputable talents in the respective fields created a successful collaboration. The period during which it was written, plus the unfortunate historical event of Malcolm's assassination also lead to high sales numbers. In Stone's words:

As a powerful political and spiritual message, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* rapidly assumed the status of a sixties and seventies monument. It is possible that the most important act of the Black Muslim preacher's life was telling his story to Alex Haley. Its fame and force derive from a concatenation of circumstances. These included Malcolm X's tragic assassination, paperback publication at a key juncture in racial politics, early critical reception by white critics who, like Warner Berthoff, hailed it a 'contemporary classic', and, most pertinent factor of all, the raw energy and honesty of Malcolm X's oral performance as stimulated and recorded by Alex Haley.<sup>64</sup>

Malcolm and Haley's relationship started on a hostile level. According to Haley, Malcolm "could be as acid toward Negroes who angered him as he was against whites in general."<sup>65</sup> And Haley certainly fit the stereotype of a subservient black man, with his Christian persuasion and as a retired soldier. The autobiography is detailing Malcolm's rise from being a hustler to a charismatic leader and is "a kind of black synoptic gospel, the words and deeds of a man who symbolizes the terrible racial division of our society,"<sup>66</sup> according to the psychoanalyst Eugene Victor Wolfenstein in his book *The Victims of Democracy, Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*. The book is also a journey through Haley's and Malcolm's growing trust and friendship in a turbulent time of dramatic transitions in terms of race relations, where Malcolm was tired of soft-spoken Civil Rights leaders struggling in an ongoing current of unwillingness from white America for rapid changes in society. To tell his

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Page 101

<sup>65</sup> X and Haley. Page 15

<sup>66</sup> Eugen Victor Wolfenstein, 1989. Page 3

story, Malcolm accepted Alex Haley as the author, undoubtedly because he believed Haley could deliver his story “as a dispassionate chronicler.”<sup>67</sup> Malcolm himself said “a writer is what I want, not an interpreter”<sup>68</sup> after he had signed the contract for the book. Haley succeeded in portraying Malcolm’s life, from childhood to an angry black adult through his time in the Nation of Islam and to the stage where Malcolm felt an “increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking.”<sup>69</sup>

A childhood will influence the final or still evolving result of one’s personality as an adult. Malcolm was no exception, and there were a number of incidents in his early years which led to his actions as an adolescent and later a grown man. The first chapter in Malcolm’s autobiography is appropriately called “Nightmare.”<sup>70</sup> He grew up under oppressive social pressures that were typical for blacks at the time with the constant reminder of the white man’s supremacy and the helplessness and anger which were felt by the black population. When Malcolm was six years old, his father died. It was believed to be murder, but the courts ruled it accidental. Institutional racism is eloquently described in the autobiography in the accounts of how the state social agency got involved after the death of Malcolm’s father. The checks the family received gave the Welfare representatives an excuse to come to their house whenever they pleased. Malcolm describes the uncomfortable feeling when they were there, the underlying notion that they did not look at the family as individual human beings but rather as things which awakened their curiosity. In Malcolm’s words:

I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family it destroyed ours. We wanted and tried to stay together. Our home did not have to be destroyed. But the Welfare, the courts, and their doctor, gave us the one-two-three punch. And ours was not the only case of this kind. I knew I wouldn’t be back to see my mother again

---

<sup>67</sup> X and Haley. Page 78

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Page 78

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Page 453

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Page 79-102



because it could make me a very vicious and dangerous person – knowing how they had looked at us as numbers and as a case in their book, not as human beings. And knowing that my mother in there was a statistic that didn't have to be, that existed because of a society's failure, hypocrisy, greed, and lack of mercy and compassion. Hence I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight.<sup>71</sup>

The suspicious business relationship between Haley and Malcolm changed when Haley asked Malcolm to talk about his mother. It triggered affectionate and angry memories in Malcolm, affection for his mother and anger at society. After this incident, Malcolm never hesitated to tell intimate details about his life.<sup>72</sup> This is a factor which is of utmost importance when writing an autobiography. The problem with *the Autobiography of Malcolm X* is that Malcolm is not actually writing it himself. According to Philippe Lejeune two people will never interpret the same situation exactly the same way. When the author and the narrator are two different people, as in the case of Malcolm and Alex Haley, it is autobiographical and fictional at the same time.<sup>73</sup> But the fact that Haley and Malcolm were about the same age and both African-Americans certainly must have helped in a similar interpretation of the situation for the black population in the 1960s in the United States.

Apart from Malcolm's father's death and his mother's mental illness, there were a couple of incidents in his childhood which were to change the direction Malcolm's life took. In 1937 Malcolm wanted to become a boxer like his brother Philbert. Sports was the field where black people were able and accepted to excel, and the boxing ring was, in Malcolm's words: "the only place a Negro could whip a white man and not be lynched."<sup>74</sup> Joe Louis, "the Brown Bomber" had just won the heavyweight boxing title and the black neighborhoods

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Page 102

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Pages 17-18

<sup>73</sup> Lejeune and Eakin. Pages 45-51

<sup>74</sup> X and Haley. Page 104

exploded in racial pride.<sup>75</sup> Due to Philbert's success in the boxing ring, Malcolm was losing his status as the tough guy in the family and the status as a hero in his younger brother Reginald's eyes. Malcolm fought a white boy called Bill Peterson twice and lost both times. Malcolm was expected to uplift his race. Black masculinity, both then and now is connected to physical superiority in race ideologies. Therefore Malcolm's masculinity was questionable after the loss. The humiliation he felt when his pride was hurt led to actions to try to regain recognition amongst his peers. Wolfenstein explains: "Unable to defeat a white boy in the ring, Malcolm attacked a white man in the classroom. Defiance, punishment, again defiance. But the white authorities were the stronger party, both morally and rationally."<sup>76</sup>

The other incident came after Malcolm had been sent to a foster family. He went to the Gohannas family and later on to the Swerlins and the Lyons families. All three families treated him nicely, but the feeling of being looked upon as a mascot or a pet was always floating on the surface. They would talk about "niggers" as if Malcolm was not in the room: "What I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn't a pet, but a human being. They didn't give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position. But it has historically been the case with white people, in their regard for black people, that even though we might be *with* them, we weren't considered *of* them. Even though they appeared to have opened the door, it was still closed. Thus they never did really see *me*" [emphasis in original].<sup>77</sup> While in foster care Malcolm continued to do well in school and he was one of the top students in his class. For any white young man it was a right to dream big and demonstrate one's plan for a future career. For Malcolm it was not so and when he realized that, it was the end of his academic career. He was basically told his options were limited due to his skin color, even though his grades were better than most

---

<sup>75</sup> Wolfenstein. Page 137

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Page 139

<sup>77</sup> X and Haley. Page 107

others in class. The statement from his teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, was an eye-opener for Malcolm: “But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* [emphasis in original] be. You’re good with your hands – making things. Everybody admires your carpentry work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person – you’d get all kinds of work.”<sup>78</sup> At the same time he would listen in on the advice Mr. Ostrowski gave to his white students. These were students, who had lower grades than Malcolm but still had what seemed like limitless opportunities. In spite of Malcolm’s young age at the time, this was an epiphany of great significance to him. According to Sidonie Smith the incident changed Malcolm instantly with a feeling of hopelessness and spiritual torment: “In fact, Malcolm’s very mascotry is only another form of dehumanization, for a mascot is a thing, not an individual. Hence, this term accurately describes the naïve boy’s status in his social environment and becomes a synonym for ‘nigger,’ the only identity possible for him in the provincial white society, one symbolic of his real invisibility. Malcolm’s early attempt at finding a place within the white community is abortive. In response, he runs to Boston, which promises to be a new, ‘free’ home.”<sup>79</sup> By the fate of his misfortune of being born a black boy he realized the cruelty of living in white America. The world had not gone further than this, over a hundred years after Frederick Douglass experienced his master Mr. Auld forbidding him to learn how to read and write. In Mr. Auld’s own words: “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world.”<sup>80</sup>

Malcolm’s move to Boston was of great importance to him. If he had stayed in Michigan he believed he would have ended up like any other brainwashed African-American male:

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. Page 118

<sup>79</sup> Smith. Pages 84-85

<sup>80</sup> Douglass. Pages 945-946

If I had stayed on in Michigan, I would probably have married one of those Negro girls I knew and liked in Lansing. I might have become one of those state capital building shoeshine boys, or a Lansing Country Club waiter, or gotten one of the other menial jobs, which, in those days, among Lansing Negroes, would have been considered 'successful' – or even become a carpenter. Whatever I have done since then, I have driven myself to become a success at it. I've often thought that if Mr. Ostrowski had encouraged me to become a lawyer, I would today probably be among some city's professional black bourgeoisie, sipping cocktails and palming myself off as a community spokesman for and leader of the suffering black masses, while my primary concern would be to grab a few more crumbs from the groaning board of the two-faced whites with whom they're begging to 'integrate'. All praise is due to Allah that I went to Boston when I did. If I hadn't, I'd probably still be a brainwashed black Christian.<sup>81</sup>

We can read from the last quote that everything Malcolm experienced before he found his religion was in hindsight a blessing in disguise. He considered his experiences to be Allah's tool to make him see how unfair and unjust the world was. Malcolm was in other words the chosen one, a man who could survive all the cruelty and afterwards enlighten the rest of his sisters and brothers about the state of being for African-Americans in white America. He was an angry black male who turned his anger to good use by teaching his fellow citizens, in his eyes, the truth.

His time in Lansing, Michigan was just the forerunner to experience more racism and prejudice in Boston and New York City, where he found black people even more brain washed, imitating the white man. When Malcolm first came to Boston he was impressed by the beautiful houses and the, by all accounts, successful black people, wandering around in

---

<sup>81</sup> X and Haley. Page 120

their immaculate suits on their way to their jobs in banking or in government. He soon found out they were victims of self-delusion, having maybe a job as a janitor in a bank and hence called their profession to be “in banking.”<sup>82</sup> His time in Boston also started a period of which he spiraled into a loss of identity, an era of self-degradation, where he adapted more and more to white society by trying to act and be like the white man. One of the things he mentions more than once is the so-called conking of his hair to make it look straight and pretty by white standards.

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking ‘white’, reflected in the mirror in Shorty’s room. I vowed that I’d never again be without a conk, and I never was for many years. This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh with lye, in order to cook my natural hair until it was limp, to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are ‘inferior’ – and white people ‘superior’ – that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards.<sup>83</sup>

This can be described as an exterior double consciousness. Malcolm was obviously black, but with certain features which were typical to the white race. The standard of beauty is socially constructed and in Malcolm’s view the black man just followed in the white man’s steps without questioning the white standards of beauty and whether it applied to the black man. This further complicated finding themselves and their identity as black men in society. But nevertheless, the 1930s was one of the better periods for the black population, as the United States entered into the Great Depression. The country had financial problems to worry about and racial tension was on the decline. Through the New Deal the black population also

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. Pages 122-123

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Page 138

had better opportunities to find decent housing, get better jobs and better education. The racial violence also declined in quite a remarkable way especially when it came to lynching.<sup>84</sup> This was the atmosphere which surrounded Boston when Malcolm went to live with his half-sister Ella. Life in the big city was a revelation to Malcolm, especially in the downtown area, where he could escape the snobbery of the New England Negroes. He felt more among his own and attracted to the sense of freedom in the atmosphere. He saw interracial couples holding hands and walking down the street as if they had no worries in the world. This was of course far from the truth, but nevertheless, life in a big city like Boston was undoubtedly different from Lansing, Michigan. Boston was of course segregated too, but within this segregated world there were still more opportunities for a young black man, even if the opportunities were sometimes on the wrong side of the law.

Malcolm had realized years before that to move up the hierarchy in white society was almost impossible. In other words to make a decent amount of money to make a good life for himself was almost impossible. Hustling must have seemed like a good choice at the time, instead of sweating over plates and cutlery in a run-down diner. Malcolm was enchanted and mesmerized by what he saw and felt the world and the opportunities open up on a whole new level. He admired the black man trying to be white.<sup>85</sup> In the autobiography this period comes across as quite a happy time for Malcolm. He had a nice place to stay with his sister and he was living life; hustling, partying, dancing *and* he had a white woman on his arm. A black man with a white woman who is not a prostitute makes the black man desirable, respected and feared.<sup>86</sup> In this part of the autobiography Malcolm and Haley show us how masculinity is ritualized through certain characteristics such as pride and self-control through scripted behavior. “For a hustler in our sidewalk jungle world, ‘face’ and ‘honor’ were important. No hustler could have it known that he’d been ‘hyped’, meaning outsmarted or made a fool of.

---

<sup>84</sup> Woodward and McFeely. Page 118

<sup>85</sup> X and Haley. Pages 125-128

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Page 153

And worse, a hustler could never afford to have it demonstrated that he could be bluffed, that he could be frightened by a threat, that he lacked nerve.”<sup>87</sup> This behavior is like misplaced aggression, due to the fact that black men were barred from mainstream America. Black men’s inferiority and their ongoing emasculation by white America transferred their hopelessness and anger within the black community with the aim of regaining their masculinity. African-Americans were not allowed to do that any other places. The black anger would in the beginning be aimed at themselves, which undeniably in many cases led to self-destruction and violence. Even though Malcolm goes through many transformations and changes, his hustler identity is pretty static due to the fact the code was to keep the mask to subscribe to the hustler identity.

Sometimes, in an effort to muffle their anger, black men would consciously act in certain ways to make fun of their background, such as explained by August Wilson in the book *Speak My Name* from 1995: “The men on the corner with their big hats and polished shoes carried and lent weight to a world that was beholden to their casual elegance as they mocked the condition of their life and paraded through the streets like warrior kings.”<sup>88</sup> Just like Malcolm and his friend Shorty in their zoot suits represented an air of coolness with a message to their surroundings to give them attention, a refusal to be overlooked. It was a way of portraying themselves as happy and content instead of showing their anger: “I took three of those twenty-five-cent sepia-toned, while-you-wait pictures of myself, posed the way ‘hipsters’ wearing their zoots would ‘cool it’ – hat angled, knees drawn close together, feet wide apart, both index fingers jabbed toward the floor. The long coat and swinging chain and the Punjab pants were much more dramatic if you stood that way.”<sup>89</sup>

After Boston Malcolm moved to Harlem where his drug use and hustling ways increased rapidly. But he felt free, with money in his pocket. There were not too many

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Page 218

<sup>88</sup> Belton. Page xi

<sup>89</sup> X and Haley. Page 135

possibilities for young black men to make good money otherwise. It was easy money before it caught up with Malcolm. He was a natural hustler and his hustles included gambling, bootlegging and robberies. To keep his nerves in check he increased his drug-use until he stayed high almost all the time. With his growing reputation as a hustler, the number of his enemies also grew. When you are drawn into a world that consists of crime, drug use, self-degradation and paranoia, disastrous consequences engulf you. The last period as a criminal in Harlem, Malcolm's life was in constant danger, due to a web of circumstances which finally led him to flee New York City, with the help of his friend Shorty and Malcolm's white girlfriend Sophia. The characteristics of an angry black male became more and more predominant in Malcolm and he returned to Boston like a predatory animal. He had turned into a profane, atheistic and cynical man. "Ella couldn't believe how atheist, how uncouth I had become. I believed that a man should do anything that he was slick enough, or bad and bold enough, to do and that a woman was nothing but another commodity. Every word I spoke was hip or profane. I would bet that my working vocabulary wasn't two hundred words."<sup>90</sup>

Malcolm started a burglary ring with Shorty, Sophia, her sister and an acquaintance called Roy. They burgled private homes and Malcolm was the undisputed leader of the gang. His reputation as "crazy" gained even more ground due to his reckless behavior and his drug use which continued to soar. He was a gun-carrying wild man and in the end circumstances were closing in on him. They were eventually arrested and Malcolm was sentenced to ten years in prison, even though the average sentence for burglary was two years. Again, Malcolm was witnessing the inequality of the American system, legally as well as socially. He had committed the ultimate sin in white America; he had slept with a white woman.

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Page 225



Even the court clerks and the bailiffs: ‘nice white girls.....goddamn niggers-‘ It was the same even from our court-appointed lawyers as we sat down, under guard, at a table, as our hearing assembled. Before the judge entered, I said to one lawyer, ‘We seem to be getting sentenced because of those girls.’ He got red from the neck up and shuffled his paper: ‘You had no business with white girls!’ Later when I had learned the full truth about the white man, I reflected many times that the average burglary sentence for a first offender, as we all were, was about two years. But we weren’t going to get the average – not for *our* [emphasis in original] crime.<sup>91</sup>

It is an important issue when trying to understand black male anger to understand the relationship between black men and white women. The desire for a white woman was due to the status and respect the black man received. It might not have been sexual lust, at least not only that, but a desire for the forbidden fruit and for some black men to date a white woman was a way of striking back at the white man and years of oppression. Sophia, on the other hand, must have realized that Malcolm X and other black men had little economic or political power, but maybe she was a victim of the stereotypical view of a black man as a preternaturally sexual being with a limitless sexual desire; a black Apollo in her mind. And of course, a black man was forbidden fruit for white women as well. But it was one thing to hang on a black man’s arm and another thing to hope or plan for a future with a black man. But at the same time Malcolm might have been fun to be with, and feelings between him and Sophia were by all accounts genuine.<sup>92</sup>

In the autobiography Haley does not seem to portray the lighter sides of Malcolm, but rather as a somber, angry and serious man. Haley’s writing works in showing an angry black male, but Malcolm also had a lighter side. One of the few times this is shown in the autobiography is in the foreword where Haley explains how Malcolm all of a sudden breaks

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. Pages 242-243

<sup>92</sup> Wolfenstein. Page 159

out in dance during one of their many conversations, to illustrate how he used to lindy-hop in Boston. It took Haley by surprise as it seemed to be out of character of Malcolm, whom he had just met for the autobiography.<sup>93</sup> Other scholars have manifested that there was a gentle, humorous and humble side to Malcolm as well, but that is not readily apparent in the autobiography. In his book *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, Peter Goldman illustrates Malcolm's humor: "It was a humor that could dissipate tensions. At street-corner rallies in Harlem, Malcolm would harangue the police unmercifully for their brutalities and corruptions, but never the particular policeman assigned to stand guard. 'Maybe some of these blue-eyed devils in blue uniforms here are really black,' he would say. 'If any of them smiles, it's 'cause he knows he's a brother.' Some cops would invariably grin, the crowd would laugh, and nobody would get hurt, which was precisely the object."<sup>94</sup>

There is accuracy and order in the autobiography, a trait which was found in both Malcolm and Haley. The question whether Malcolm was portrayed accurately by Haley is likely, and the fact that Haley prevented Malcolm from changing earlier chapters when his views had altered at the end of the writing of the autobiography gives Haley's portrayal more credibility. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein in fact gives Haley some of the credit for Malcolm's change to a "milder self" in Wolfenstein's book *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*: "Finally, and I think most convincingly, the relationship with Haley and the process of self-reflection this involved were integral parts of Malcolm's personal evolution. By permitting him to develop a knowledge of himself as a distinct individual, they were instrumental in helping to free him from his unquestioning devotion to Elijah Muhammad. It is extremely unlikely that such a process of individuation could have been premised upon major falsification of the life-historical record."<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> X and Haley. Page 18

<sup>94</sup> Peter Louis Goldman, 1979. Page 22

<sup>95</sup> Wolfenstein. Page 37

The devotion to Elijah Muhammad started in prison for Malcolm. When he arrived he was an illiterate atheist, his mind deeply woven in self-degradation and hate. He was given the nickname “Satan” due to his anti-religious views.<sup>96</sup> His behavior during the beginning of his sentence was of an extreme rebellious nature: screaming at the guards, throwing things and refusing to state his number. He preferred solitude where he could curse God and be alone with his thoughts.<sup>97</sup> But Malcolm’s time in prison defined a tremendous change. Bimbi was the first fellow prisoner Malcolm met who he felt it was worth listening to. It was an awakening for him; because what Bimbi said made Malcolm think about life on a whole different level than he had done before. Bimbi asked Malcolm to use his brain if he had one and slowly he started educating himself. Later on Malcolm’s brothers Philbert and Reginald wrote him letters with information about the Nation of Islam. The new knowledge metaphorically knocked him over. Sidonie Smith explains Malcolm’s epiphany:

Although he does not elaborate on his spiritual conversion, he does acknowledge that ‘the very enormity of my previous life’s guilt prepared me to accept the truth’ (163), and describes the effect of the Muslim doctrine as a blinding as a ‘blinding light.’ This ‘blinding light’ radically transforms his way of seeing and the transformation in his way of seeing radically alters his identity, which, like that of the slave narrator before him, must be consecrated with a new name. For this purpose he applies for the symbolic Muslim ‘X.’<sup>98</sup>

Knowing what he had experienced in the hands of white America and to convince him that the white man was the devil gave Malcolm an incentive to get out of the rut he was in, and a chance to eventually preach for others the wrongs which had been committed towards him and his black brothers and sisters for hundreds of years. Not just what the black man had experienced himself but the fact that they had been robbed of their history and knowledge by

---

<sup>96</sup> X and Haley. Page 246

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Page 246

<sup>98</sup> Smith. Page 91

the white man. All the hate the white population had expressed towards the black population produced a hate in Malcolm. “The devil white man cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them from any knowledge of their own language, religion and past culture, until the black man in America was the earth’s only race of people who had absolutely no knowledge of his true identity.”<sup>99</sup>

The majority of the readers of the autobiography can probably sense Malcolm’s anger getting stronger and stronger the more he talks about the wrongdoings which had been done to the black population. His conviction in the Nation of Islam is limitless and identified by an extremely loyal commitment to its leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm changed his life profoundly, if not overnight, in a relatively short time. He felt that Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam had picked him up from the street and saved him from a premature death. The loyalty to him was extreme and became even stronger when he learned that some of his hustler friends were already dead or drug addicts on the threshold of death.

When Malcolm was released from prison it also dawned on him how financially exploited the black population had been. The fact was that almost no businesses were owned by blacks and thus prevented money to come to black communities. At the same time business enriched the white race and kept the black population in the ghetto: “In all my years in the streets, I’d been looking at the exploitation that for the first time I really saw and understood. Now I watched brothers entwining themselves in the economic clutches of the white man who went home every night with another bag of the money drained out of the ghetto. I saw that the money, instead of helping the black man, was going to help enrich these white merchants, who usually lived in an ‘exclusive’ area where a black man had better not get caught unless he worked there for somebody white.”<sup>100</sup> The Nation of Islam’s wish for total separation, with their own supermarkets, schools and barbershops made sense for

---

<sup>99</sup> X and Haley. Page 256

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Page 290

Malcolm.<sup>101</sup> He preferred the comfort of being with his own race where questions and attitudes were not constantly raised. It was a place where they could be themselves, not just angry black men in a white world.

Malcolm's anger was expressed through his excellent speeches and by 1956 the membership numbers in the Nation of Islam had skyrocketed. He was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the Nation of Islam was able to grow at such a rapid pace. His relentless work and energy resulted in more educated members as well, which would give the Nation of Islam more attention in the communities.<sup>102</sup> Then, in 1959, the television program "The Hate That Hate Produced" aired and when white people were shocked at how the black man could have the audacity to preach hate towards the white population Malcolm eloquently shot back:

Here was one of the white man's most characteristic behavior patterns – where black men are concerned. He loves himself so much that he is startled if he discovers that his victims don't share his vainglorious self-opinion. In America for centuries it had been just fine as long as the victimized, brutalized and exploited black people had been grinning and begging and 'Yessa Massa' and Uncle Tomming. But now, things were different. First came the white newspapers – feature writers and columnists: 'alarming' ... 'hate messengers' ... 'threat to the good relations between the races' ... 'black segregationists' ... 'black supremacists', and the like.<sup>103</sup>

In a sense, the television program created the angry black male as a feared cultural icon and the paradox that the white population was crying reverse racism after everything that had been done to the black population in the past and the present just proved to Malcolm that the white man was filled with guilt. Activities that were completely acceptable when the white man did it were terrifying if the black man did it. As in teaching self-defense or claiming the right to bear arms, the threshold for acceptance was a lot higher if one was black. The white man

---

<sup>101</sup> United States, "Office Memorandum." Page 2a

<sup>102</sup> X and Haley. Page 325

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. Page 340

might have said that things were slowly getting better for the black population, but it was as if the white man expected an enormous expression of gratitude from the black man when there was any kind of even minor advancement. The black man on the other hand was thinking it was about time.

“The Hate That Hate Produced” gave the Nation of Islam a lot of attention and Malcolm was on the forefront, speaking in large and small arenas and appearing on TV on a regular basis. The more famous, or infamous he got, the more the jealousy started growing within the Nation of Islam. Malcolm noticed the little changes that were almost undetectable in an isolated way, but over time there was no doubt that powers within the Nation of Islam were actively working against Malcolm. He heard negative remarks about himself, noticed that he was rarely mentioned anymore in their publication *Muhammad Speaks* and heard rumors that he was trying to replace Elijah Muhammad.<sup>104</sup> Jealousy was getting the upper hand.

From 1962 and onwards there were three things which changed Malcolm in a profound way, Elijah Muhammad’s infidelity, John F. Kennedy’s assassination and Malcolm’s comments about it and his pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcolm’s loyalty and love for Elijah Muhammad was limitless. He would sacrifice his life for him. Malcolm had heard the rumors regarding Elijah Muhammad but chose to ignore them as long as he could. The fact that Elijah Muhammad did exactly the opposite of what he preached was a hard blow to Malcolm; it was literally the beginning of the end for Malcolm in the Nation of Islam.<sup>105</sup>

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and the whole country was mourning.<sup>106</sup> A few days later Malcolm was speaking at an event which was planned before the assassination. The theme was “God’s judgment of White America.” “It was on the theme, familiar to me, of ‘as you sow, so shall you reap’, or how the

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Pages 398-400

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. Page 406

<sup>106</sup> Brogan. Page 634

hypocritical American white man was reaping what he had sowed. The question-and-answer period opened, I suppose inevitably, with someone asking me, ‘What do you think about President Kennedy’s assassination? What is your opinion?’ Without a second thought, I said what I honestly felt – that it was, as I saw it, a case of ‘the chickens coming home to roost’.”<sup>107</sup> The criticism exploded and Malcolm seemed genuinely surprised as many other leaders and important personas had spoken about the hate that America produced and that was why President Kennedy was killed. But when Malcolm, “the angriest black man in America”<sup>108</sup> said it, it was more serious and terrifying. Elijah Muhammad had handed down strict orders not to comment on the assassination. President Kennedy was a popular President and to comment critically after he had been killed was deemed too dangerous. When Malcolm commented anyway and said what he honestly felt, he indirectly informed the media that he was speaking for himself and not for Elijah Muhammad. In Eugene Victor Wolfenstein’s words:

For Malcolm too, the chickens had now come home to roost: the contradiction inherent in his relationship to Muhammad was at last fully manifest. He could no longer be Muhammad’s son and his own man. He could no longer convince himself that, as he once put it, ‘It is my mouth working, but the voice is [Mr. Muhammad’s].’ He had a mind and a voice of his own, almost in spite of himself. Malcolm had fallen back into the mode of semi-volitional action that had been characteristic of his life before he had been awakened to Islam. Once again he had been possessed by a compulsion to disobey lawful authority and thereby bring to an end both an untenable situation and a subjective mental state of unbearable ambivalence.<sup>109</sup>

The Nation of Islam seemed to be afraid of what Malcolm X might say next and Malcolm seemed to grow, maybe unconsciously, tired of being caged, metaphorically

---

<sup>107</sup> X and Haley. Pages 410-411

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Page 13

<sup>109</sup> Wolfenstein. Pages 282-283

speaking, by Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. “The angriest black man in America”<sup>110</sup> was putting fear in everybody because he was fearless and spoke his mind without wearing any stereotypical mask. Malcolm X’s journey away from the Nation of Islam’s rigid religious teachings had started, and his pilgrimage to Mecca was to change his views in a profound way. He was genuinely surprised by the friendliness he was met with. He shared everything with people from all nations and felt comfortable sitting next to and talking to white men. The friendly atmosphere and the togetherness was something he had never felt before and he realized that being black in the United States was different from the rest of the world. “That morning was when I first began to reappraise the ‘white man’. It was when I first began to perceive that ‘white man’, as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, ‘white man’ meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been.”<sup>111</sup>

The change astounded everybody, especially the ones who carried a hate-image of Malcolm. Sidonie Smith calls it a “radical break” and explains further: “With this radical break, Malcolm feels for the first time ‘like a complete human being’ because for the first time he determines his own identity, one founded not so narrowly on race but more broadly on his humanity, and thereby he becomes his own master.”<sup>112</sup> In many ways Malcolm is no longer mastered by his own anger and is reborn away from other people’s propaganda, in this case the Nation of Islam. He is ready to speak for himself and to look at himself as a human being in the United States, not just identify himself as a black man. And with racism still prevailing in the United States Malcolm felt it was time for white America to be more receptive to changes and for everybody to realize that racism in America is not just about the

---

<sup>110</sup> X and Haley. Page 13

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. Page 447

<sup>112</sup> Smith. Page 98



color of your skin but rather an attitude. Racism was and still is rooted in the white man's mind subconsciously. The heritage of attitudes from the years of slavery is still devastating for the black man. Malcolm spoke from his heart and said things others would not even dare to think about. The consequences could be fatal. Had Malcolm not been the victim of traitors he would probably increasingly have received more sympathy for his views, even from white America.

What gives a man a right to spout out his anger on society and his fellow citizens? How much pain must a man endure before fits of anger are justified? Violence is not justified but we all know that by hearing personal stories we can understand where the anger comes from. We can understand why incidents happened violently, without condoning violence. Malcolm experienced racism from his earliest memories. The Nation of Islam preached about black pride and also about separatism and it was easy to find followers among the black convicts. Malcolm was articulating anger, built up over many years. He was not making excuses anymore. He wanted what was rightfully his, to live a life without having to bow and give thanks for everything that was offered and given him.<sup>113</sup> The unspeakable right of the white man to keep the black man down was torn down by Malcolm. And he was an intimidating power. In his own words:

They called me 'the angriest Negro in America'. I wouldn't deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. 'I *believe* in anger. The Bible says there is a *time* for anger.' They called me 'a teacher, a fomentor of violence'. I would say point blank, 'That is a lie. I am not for wanton violence, I'm for justice. I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes – if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes – then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law

---

<sup>113</sup> X and Haley. Page 161

fails to protect Negroes from whites' attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves [emphasis in original].<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Page 483

### ***Chapter Three: Barack Obama – The Angry Black Male in Transition***

On October the 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1992 Barack Obama married Michelle Robinson and gathered their families together to celebrate their union. The party could have been mistaken for a Benetton commercial with guests from different corners of the world. It was a happy celebration which emphasized Obama's dreams of tolerance, respect and hope between people, no matter where they came from or what they looked like.<sup>115</sup> In his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* Obama portrays this time as a very happy period in his life. It was "a happy ending"<sup>116</sup> from his emotional odyssey in his quest for identity and belonging, which took place on three different continents in the period of three decades. Obama's life is unusual and was filled with challenging changes, practically from the day he was born. It was an extraordinary life worth sharing with others, to promote understanding and acceptance across racial lines as well as giving the readers a good reading experience.

His autobiography is written by himself about his life and differs from Malcolm's autobiography, which is written by Alex Haley. In Philippe Lejeune's view Obama's book is more faithful to the "autobiographical pact"<sup>117</sup> and thus, in Lejeune's opinion, more convincing. The book is divided into three parts, where the first part is called "Origins,"<sup>118</sup> where he eloquently describes his ambiguous identity, life with a distant African father and present white mother and maternal grandparents in a world where he is defined by his blackness and raised by the white side of his family. The second part of the book is called "Chicago"<sup>119</sup> and is a description of American society. He writes about cosmopolitanism and how life is a struggle for poor people. He also mentions Nation of Islam and the importance of

---

<sup>115</sup> Obama. Pages 440-442

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Page 442

<sup>117</sup> Lejeune and Eakin. Pages 13-14

<sup>118</sup> Obama. Pages 3-129

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Pages 133-295

religion for black people. The last part is called “Kenya”<sup>120</sup> and describes how he finally understands his own racial identity by visiting his father’s side of the family.

Obama’s writing style comes across as less confrontational, more circumspect and less angry than how Haley tells Malcolm’s story. Nevertheless, there is anger expressed, though in a more subtle way. Obama barely uses exclamation points, while Haley uses them frequently when repeating Malcolm’s speeches, which makes the text sound harder and angrier to emphasize that this is undoubtedly an angry black male. This is due to the difference in their backgrounds. Malcolm proselytizes in religious rhetoric, just the way his father did to promote the teachings of Marcus Garvey.<sup>121</sup> It is a common method in religious gatherings as a way to try to persuade people to share a certain belief. Obama uses a more phlegmatic style, which is more faithful to his persona as a lawyer. The lawyer rhetoric is characterized by the ability to stay calm in any situation and in Obama’s book his anger is expressed more between the lines as if he is a writer who struggles to keep his written composure. Their criticism of white people’s attitudes differs in harshness, where Malcolm shouts Obama whispers. In Malcolm’s own words: “The hypocritical white man will talk about the Negro’s ‘low morals’. But who has the lowest morals if not whites? And not only that, but the ‘upper-class’ whites!”<sup>122</sup> Obama sounds calmer when he writes the following: “It was as if whites didn’t know they were being cruel in the first place. Or at least thought you deserving of their scorn.”<sup>123</sup>

Obama’s book is not so much policy oriented but a personal story in which he has to figure out how to be a man and how to live with his ambiguous identity. It is like a romance with a happy ending, represented by his marriage to Michelle and his optimistic hope for a better multicultural future. In a sense, his autobiography is a hymn to a multicultural society

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Pages 299-430

<sup>121</sup> X and Haley. Pages 83-85

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. Page 212

<sup>123</sup> Obama. Page 80

with equal human rights. It is also a story about a life not completed, but a continuous journey in identification and analyzing of the angry black male. Malcolm's autobiography on the other hand is truly a completed life-story as he was assassinated shortly after the book was finished.

Stanley Ann Durham gave birth to Barack Obama in the state of Hawaii in 1961. He entered the world in a turbulent time in the United States, with the Civil Rights movement moving into its most public period. When he was only two years old his parents separated and his father eventually moved back home to Africa. As a little boy he barely noticed the fact that he looked a little different from his grandparents and his mother. His race would not have significance before he grew a little older: "I would not have known at the time, for I was too young to realize that I was supposed to have a live-in father, just as I was too young to know that I needed a race."<sup>124</sup> He was, like any other child, still not influenced by a lot of the complications of life. How he lived was what was normal to him.

Malcolm was born thirty six years before Obama and experienced nothing but racism as a child. And even though his life too was what was normal to him, the violent attacks by white people, such as setting his house on fire<sup>125</sup> and the general state of poverty, constant hunger and the destruction of the family by the state social agency,<sup>126</sup> created anger and confusion in Malcolm X's young mind. When Obama grew up in the 60s, Hawaii was quite different from many of the other states. It was not affected by Jim Crow as was the case in the Southern States. Even though it had a disturbing past, Hawaii was considered a real melting pot, where the population had succeeded in creating racial harmony and mutual respect between the races. In Obama's own words:

The ugly conquest of the native Hawaiians through aborted treaties and crippling disease brought by the missionaries; the carving up of rich volcanic soil by American companies for sugarcane and pineapple plantations; the indenturing system that kept

---

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. Page 27

<sup>125</sup> X and Haley. Page 81

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Page 102

Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino immigrants stooped sunup to sunset in these same fields; the internment of Japanese during the war – all this was recent history. And yet, by the time my family arrived, it had somehow vanished from collective memory, like morning mist that the sun burned away. There were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland’s rigid caste system; and so few blacks that the most ardent segregationist could enjoy a vacation secure in the knowledge that race mixing in Hawaii had little to do with the established order back home. Thus the legend was made of Hawaii as the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony.<sup>127</sup>

This is not to say that racism did not exist on the Hawaiian Islands, but the fact that Obama spent a lot of his childhood years there surely gave him a more idyllic childhood than that of a black child growing up in the inner city neighborhoods of mainland USA. His racial identity and masculinity was not, so far, threatened.

His years in Indonesia gave him a great understanding that there was a different world out there. Totally different from Hawaii and the United States, Indonesia was a different adventure for a young and curious boy. Due to his mother’s marriage to an Indonesian man they integrated well into society and Barack Obama befriended the local people with ease. He also learned that the world in Indonesia could be violent and that power was unevenly distributed. In the United States power was more disguised and one had to look carefully to see where it was situated. In his autobiography he explains how a white person in America might be unaware of how difficult the situation was for a black man unless you gained his trust and he opened up to you. But in Indonesia “power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory.”<sup>128</sup> As in Malcolm’s autobiography, Obama’s story is an educational journey in how it is to live as a black man.

---

<sup>127</sup> Obama. Pages 23-24

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. Page 45

Obama's experiences in Indonesia created an understanding in Obama, as he lived side by side with the people of the village and saw firsthand how they interacted with one another and subsequently learned to live by the local rules. He also saw the poverty and the struggles in an underdeveloped and poor country. The people of Indonesia were slaves of a system, just like the African-Americans were. The notion of knowing one's place and acting in a certain way to avoid trouble was prevalent in both camps. But in Indonesia Obama was a part of the population, not just a person considered to be from a minority group. It gave him a chance to view the world from a different vantage point than Malcolm, who was suspicious towards white people and even some black people.<sup>129</sup> And it was in Indonesia Obama experienced for the first time the complexities of a person's race and skin color.

In Barack Obama's young years he had never really thought of his skin color. It was the way it was and that was it. But after three years in Indonesia something happened which would entirely change the way he looked at his own identity. Before this incident Obama considered himself one of the lucky ones "having been given a stretch of childhood free from self-doubt."<sup>130</sup> His mother had also constantly told Obama of the beauty of being black; "To be black was to be beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear."<sup>131</sup> As an echo from the Nation of Islam's teachings of black pride, Obama learned to appreciate himself as a black man at a much earlier time in his life than Malcolm did, but the revelation he experienced was a revelation many African-American children at some point can grasp, that there is, metaphorically speaking, an invisible enemy out there. It was an enemy which could strike at any moment and act as a brutal eye-opener for the understanding of the condition of a black person.

The specific incident happened when Obama was reading a "Life" magazine and a picture caught his attention. The picture was of a man and Obama could not figure out what

---

<sup>129</sup> X and Haley. Page 15

<sup>130</sup> Obama. Page 51

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Page 51

was wrong with him. He looked sick, as if he was a radiation victim or an albino. When he looked closer he noticed “the man’s crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose”<sup>132</sup> which all had an uneven and ghostly hue. The story went on to tell Obama that the man in the picture had been black but had had a great desire to become white and therefore went through chemical treatments to alter the color of his skin. In the story there were also other black people desiring to become white. Obama reacted with shock and fear and wanted reassurance and some explanation but stayed like frozen in his chair. His thoughts about this would wander over time and his vision changed. The realization that Santa was always white, that the ads in Sears always represented white people and that Cosby never got the girl in “I spy.” He still felt great love for his mom but had a distinct feeling that the way she, his grandparents and his father had portrayed the world was twisted and incomplete.<sup>133</sup> “But that one photograph had told me something else: that there was a hidden enemy out there, one that could reach me without anyone’s knowledge, not even my own. When I got home that night from the embassy library, I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all my senses and limbs seemingly intact, looking as I had always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me. The alternative seemed no less frightening – that the adults around me lived in the midst of madness.”<sup>134</sup> This epiphany, which corresponds to Sidonie Smith’s “radical revision of thought,”<sup>135</sup> illustrated that there were limits for life as a black person. Because why would a person wish to alter his given appearance in such a dramatic fashion if not to believe that it would give him better opportunities in life? Thirty plus years after Malcolm conked his hair to look good according to white standards,<sup>136</sup> many black people still did not embrace their given features. And just as Malcolm had had his dreams

---

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Page 30

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. Page 52

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. Page 52

<sup>135</sup> Smith. Page 105

<sup>136</sup> X and Haley. Page 138



crushed by his teacher,<sup>137</sup> Obama had his illusions about life interrupted. But while Malcolm's experience created anger in him and withdrawal from white people, it created more fear in Obama and thus a curiosity to find out more about his roots and identity. But a nascent angry black male was also born in Obama's mind.

When Obama moved back to Hawaii it was the first time he started questioning the state of being biracial in the context of American culture. Being aware of his racial status and the fact that he did not live with his father, started bothering him in a more profound way than earlier and the sense of not belonging grew in Obama's mind. When the news came that his dad was coming to visit, for the first time since he left Obama at the age of two, Obama was filled with mixed feelings. The visit went relatively well, but it did not feel like a close knit father-son relationship. Even though his dad was physically there he still felt unreal to Obama. And when his dad told him what to do after having been gone for so long, it triggered off a rebellious streak of protest in Obama.

Obama's father spoke at his school which terrified Obama, as he has told numerous lies about his father. One of them being that his father was a prince in Africa. But the meeting went very well and Obama's dad impressed the other kids with thoughtful stories about Africa and the United States and the importance of hard work, freedom and self-esteem.<sup>138</sup> This was strange for Obama, hearing people brag about his father, a man he barely knew. Nevertheless, this was the last time Obama was to see his father, a man who was foreign to him in more ways than one and a man who did not seem permanent in Obama's mind.

The years after his father left, Obama was starting to get a sense of himself. Nevertheless he was still struggling to understand what that might be. Due to his appearance he was expected to act like a black man, a pressure he did not feel at home, around his mother and his grandparents. But away from home he started to hang around black people to

---

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. Page 118

<sup>138</sup> Obama. Pages 69-70

strengthen his identity. Taking up basketball was a way for Obama to hang around friends with the same interests in a field where being black was not a disadvantage. Obama had the advantage of having decent skills in basketball and was easily accepted by his new-found friends. He gained both black and white friends and started to observe how they would interact and behave around one another. Obama listened to his friends talking about “that is how white folks will do you” to him when he had firsthand experience with “white folks” in his own home.<sup>139</sup> His sense of identity was still a struggle and he could sometimes talk about “white folks” himself before he realized he was describing whiteness in a stereotypical fashion which did not agree with the behavior of his mother or his grandparents.<sup>140</sup> But he had to divide the issues into two different parts where one part was the mental state of white America and the other part was the individual state of “white folks,” which could be totally different from person to person, just like it was with “black folks.”

The view of race is another key point of contrast between Obama and Malcolm. Malcolm hated, in his opinion, the white devils, until his persuasion changed at the end of his life. Obama does not register race with the same passion. In a sense his is a whiter narrative. The rage Obama and his black friends felt against the institutional white world was no criticism towards individual white persons, rather a protest against systemized racism. Malcolm was an angrier black male, with a more violent background than Obama. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama emphasizes the fact that he was living in Hawaii and not the Bronx, to clarify that he knew that was an advantage when starting out in life.<sup>141</sup> But to seek an identity in Hawaii was a double-edged sword. With no typical black neighborhoods, as was the case on the mainland, it was difficult to find his group in search of a common identity with others. Dr. Herb Barringer explains that the mixed ethnicity makes it harder for certain groups to “ghettoize” and at the same time no group in Hawaii is large enough to create a dominant

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Pages 80-81

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. Pages 80-81

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Pages 81-82

power.<sup>142</sup> Even with all the advantages of a diversified state it still made it hard for Obama to find his identity.

Obama's appearance made it easier for him to feel at home in a black crowd. But a definition of what being black meant was difficult to describe because there is more to it than just the color of the skin. White people in many ways believed in the stereotypical view of the black man. When "The Hate That Hate Produced" created an uproar in 1959, it emphasized the ignorance of the white population. By the time Obama was a teenager, the rage within a black person's state of mind was by many white people looked upon as quite understandable. Even though Obama was the grandson of white grandparents they still admitted that other nameless and unknown black people could scare them, simply because they understood that black people had reasons to be angry. Obama's grandfather explained why his grandmother did not want to take the bus to work anymore:

He turned around and I saw now that he was shaking: 'It *is* a big deal. It's a big deal to me. She's been bothered by men before. You know why she is so scared this time? I'll tell you why. Before you came in, she told me the fella was *black*.' He whispered the word. 'That is the real reason why she is bothered. And I just don't think that's right.' The words were like a fist in my stomach, and I wobbled to regain my composure. ... Never had they given me reason to doubt their love; I doubted if they ever would. And yet I knew that men who might easily have been my brothers could inspire their rawest fears [emphasis in original].<sup>143</sup>

Obama had been protected from the knowledge that there were many angry black males out there and been protected from the fact that many white people were scared of black men. The incident with Obama's grandmother showed Obama that she also was a victim of the stereotypical view of the black man in America in spite of having an individual representative

---

<sup>142</sup> Dr. Herb Ph. D. Barringer, 2010 "An Essay of Hawaii's People," [www.e-hawaii.com/articles/an-essay-on-hawaiiis-people-by-dr-herb-barringer](http://www.e-hawaii.com/articles/an-essay-on-hawaiiis-people-by-dr-herb-barringer). May 1st, 2010

<sup>143</sup> Obama. Pages 88-89

of a black man in her family. After the incident of the picture of the black man in the “Life” magazine this was the second big epiphany of the brutality of society for Obama. A society in which people of all races should have been able to live peacefully side by side, but fear prevented it from happening. Malcolm on the other hand realized this at a much earlier stage in his life. His father’s Pan African preaching could easily represent angry black males: “As young as I was then, I knew from what I overheard that my father was saying something that made him a ‘tough’ man. I remember an old lady, grinning and saying to my father, ‘You’re scaring these white folks to death!’”<sup>144</sup>

The big difference between a white man and a black man when Obama was growing up was that the black man had most probably seen his parents being degraded in inhuman ways, physically and/or mentally. A state of mind which would make any young man suspicious and in some cases paranoid when it came to white people. Obama’s friend Frank, a black older man introduced to Obama by his grandfather, describes this eloquently:

‘They’ve seen their fathers humiliated. Their mothers desecrated. But your grandfather will never know what that feels like. That’s why he can come over here and drink my whiskey and fall asleep in that chair you’re sitting in right now. Sleep like a baby. See, that’s something I can never do in his house. *Never* [emphasis in original]. Doesn’t matter how tired I get, I still have to watch myself. I have to be vigilant, for my own survival.’ Frank opened his eyes. ‘What I’m trying to tell you is, your grandma’s right to be scared. She’s at least as right as Stanley is. She understands that black people have a reason to hate. That’s just how it is. For your sake, I wish it were otherwise. But it’s not. So you might as well get used to it.’<sup>145</sup>

What obviously was extraordinary in Obama’s situation was that he was living with the side of the family which was all white and therefore he had not necessarily experienced

---

<sup>144</sup> X and Haley. Page 84

<sup>145</sup> Obama. Page 90-91

that his mother or grandparents had been treated in humiliating ways. Malcolm on the other hand had experienced an endless stream of humiliating behavior toward his parents, which increased after his father's death and eventually had his mother admitted to a mental hospital.<sup>146</sup> Obama came from a less violent and more placid background, but to live in two different worlds complicated his quest for identity. Malcolm came from a black family and even though his mother was at least half white, the white men that had, in Malcolm's view, polluted their race were nameless and faceless creatures, white devils who gave him reasons to become an angry black male.

The question of who Obama was became more and more problematic as he started to mature into a young man. His drug use started, among other things, because he was tired of trying to find out about his status in this world. He had "grown tired of trying to untangle a mess that wasn't of my making."<sup>147</sup> The way the world embraced a black man was not a loving embrace but more like a fearful wrestle. Obama's irritation and anger escalated as he saw more and more of how the color of his skin would signify how the surrounding community would react to him. He also noticed how black men facilitated the stereotypes by their behavior. This was out of fear and for self-protection due to the mistaken belief that it would protect them in the midst of a hostile environment. Another thing which surprised and angered him was white people's obvious surprise when they met a polite young black man, as if it was a relief to them and a pleasant experience to meet such a unique specimen of the African-American race. Malcolm also experienced the same and the importance of conducting oneself in a proper and respectful manner, both spiritually and physically, became increasingly more important to him during his transition to become a Muslim. This was not just for his own sake but to destroy the stereotypical view many white people had of the black race as lazy and unkempt and to use the anger to do something productive. It was also a way,

---

<sup>146</sup> X and Haley. Pages 88-101

<sup>147</sup> Obama. Page 93

in Elijah Muhammad's view to "lift up the black man from the bottom of the white man's society and place the black man back where he had begun, at the top of civilization."<sup>148</sup> It was to be a clean life without any substances which would poison both body and soul and would escalate bitterness and anger.

Obama's drug use escalated as he learnt not to care anymore. His college years were filled with parties and finding friends within your own "tribe." He realized that most black people were not interested in revolt or trouble but were sick and tired of all the talk of race and wanted to be left alone. The best way to be left alone was to keep to your own people and stay stronger as a group. This was exactly the goal for the Nation of Islam, that separatism was the only and best solution for a peaceful co-existence. And even though the Nation of Islam was a lot more extreme in their wish for total separation both Malcolm and Obama preferred being with their own race where they could be themselves and not just angry black males in a white society which was unable or unwilling to understand them.

Obama's drug use was a relief from the world which gave no straight answer or helped guide the way in the maze of decisions and consequences. It was a way to numb the anger and a relief from a world which could easily confuse a young person's mind. In Obama's case confusion and disbelief arose when he realized there was a bigger racist world outside the US and that the US highly criticized the regime of apartheid in South Africa but did little to ease the cause for African-Americans within the government's own borders. Malcolm also expressed disbelief at the hypocritical behavior of politicians who criticized South Africa whilst having an apartheid system right in front of them, in the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) dominated American society.<sup>149</sup> Obama realized he needed to do something. He had learned a lot about suspicion between the races, both from his years in Indonesia and his life in the US. He noticed how the black workers were clerks and messengers, not lawyers or

---

<sup>148</sup> X and Haley. Page 294

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. Pages 469-471

doctors, and how the communities had collapsed, especially the black communities, where Obama had hoped he could find some sense of belonging and refuge. A desire to become a community organizer became clearer to Obama as he saw the challenges lying ahead. To make a difference started to mean something real in his life. He stopped using drugs and cleaned up his inner life in a way to get rid of the hypocrisies in his own life and to pronounce the need for change in inner city communities. This is strikingly similar to Malcolm's awakening and wish to make a difference for black people.

Even though Malcolm had a more violent and a more drug-filled background than Obama, the way their anger was turned outwards instead of inwards marked a significant change in both their lives. Obama's years in Chicago as a community organizer were met with slight disbelief by many of his friends and co-workers. They expressed wonderment as to why he wanted to go out and do something almost for free when he, with his education and obvious skills, could easily get a successful career with a significant income. This is also similar to Malcolm, who had almost no income as a minister of the Nation of Islam. His expenses were covered and the only personal belongings he had bought when released from prison were a pair of eyeglasses, a briefcase and a watch. It was as if he had a subconscious vision of his life to come: "I have thought since, that without fully knowing it, I was preparing for what my life was about to become. Because those are three things I've used more than anything else."<sup>150</sup> And even though it was by all accounts harder for Malcolm to get a well paid job than what was the case for Obama, they both sacrificed comforts in life to work for a cause they believed in. It was Obama's way to follow the path to self-discovery and for Malcolm to lead his people to awareness. They both wanted to transfer their anger to something good both for themselves and the community.

---

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. Page 289

In Obama's decision to become an organizer he knew he sent out signals that he must be angry about something as "well adjusted people find more relaxing work."<sup>151</sup> Reality soon dawned on Obama when he saw the struggles the community of Southside in Chicago was dealing with. The expression "beggars can't be choosers" was given new meaning when he saw how the people of Southgate had to live with the fact that their apartments were asbestos filled and the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) never fixed anything that needed to be fixed. To be poor was to be powerless. The CHA owned the inhabitants of Southgate like modern plantation owners. One of the things Obama did was to encourage them to complain about the apartment units not being checked for asbestos, while the management office was thoroughly checked for anything that could possibly hurt the employees of CHA.<sup>152</sup> Obama managed to snap the members of the community out of their old mindset where the inhabitants believed that whatever they did would not help them anyway. But the people's protest and successful meeting with the Director's assistant created a fundamental change in the community. Even though they faced the brutal fact that if the asbestos problem was fixed they would have to wait to have everything else fixed, it was still a victorious feeling that they had faced the problem and forced the CHA to fix it. Things were possible, if one was resistant, stubborn and angry enough.

Obama's work within the school system opened his eyes to what the schools taught the black neighborhoods, not the ability to understand themselves or their history, but somebody else's history and culture. The same system which denied black people their humanity turned around and expected the same black people to learn and accept white culture. It seemed like not much had changed since Malcolm's schooldays when he distinctly remembered the section of African-American history being one paragraph long: "Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and

---

<sup>151</sup> Obama. Page 141

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. Page 234-42



then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. He added, I remember, an anthropological footnote of his own, telling us between laughs how Negroes' feet were 'so big that when they walk, they don't leave tracks, they leave a hole in the ground'."<sup>153</sup> The ridicule and disrespect of black people taught them loss of self worth and loss of identity. The similarity between Malcolm's time and what Obama observed in the school system in Chicago is remarkable. Around 40 years of history had not contributed much to the chapters in the history books. Obama also saw how much more difficult this was for a black *man* to deal with. To grow up with so many black fathers being absent could have devastating results as there were no men present to represent what manhood was or was supposed to be. Girls on the other hand were explained the meaning of womanhood by the presence of mothers, aunties and grandmothers. In the lack of knowledge of historical facts, girls at least had more guidance in how to live life in a complicated world.

During his time in Chicago Obama met his sister Auma and his brother Roy for the first time, two occasions where he would learn about his father and develop a greater understanding as to how Obama himself was as a man. With Auma, Obama felt an instant connection and love. She was sharp, witty and would not hesitate to point out the similarities between Obama and their father. Neither did she try to cover up their father's shortcomings and tragic story. Their father was an intelligent and well-educated man who did very well in the beginning of his short life, before his life spiraled into humiliation and alcohol abuse. After he returned to Kenya he held governmental jobs and when Kenya entered into an era of unrest and trouble after de-colonization, Mr. Obama was one of the few who dared to publicly criticize the government's corruption. Subsequently he lost his job and scraped by with very little. He was humiliated, bitter and angry and turned to alcohol. With barely any food in the house he would still donate whatever little he had to charities, simply for keeping up

---

<sup>153</sup> X and Haley. Page 110

appearances. His shame overshadowed his life and before long he was estranged from his family and friends. But Auma could remember how their father always talked very fondly and proudly of Obama and his mother. The stories his sister told him gave Obama a sense of relief. His father was no longer the successful scholar and respectful man who Obama did not know but struggled to become. It was a newfound liberation which jump-started a new beginning to find his manhood as a black male in America:

Now, as I sat in the glow of a single light bulb, rocking slightly on a hard-backed chair, that image had suddenly vanished. Replaced by...what? A bitter drunk? An abusive husband? A defeated lonely bureaucrat? To think that all my life I had been wrestling with nothing more than a ghost! For a moment I felt giddy; if Auma hadn't been in the room, I would have probably laughed out loud. The king is overthrown, I thought. The emerald curtain is pulled aside. The rabble of my head is free to run riot; I can do what I damn well please. For what man, if not my own father, has the power to tell me otherwise? Whatever I do, it seems, I won't do much worse than he did.<sup>154</sup>

While Obama realized that the truth, as told by Auma, about his father made him free from living up to his father's expectations, it opened up a feeling of wanting to know more about a father who had been absent from his Obama's life. Malcolm never quite understood his father, even though he was a familiar face and a constant presence in Malcolm's young life. From a very early age Malcolm had problems respecting "most people who represented religion."<sup>155</sup> He looked at his father, while he was preaching, almost in disbelief. The jumping up and down, the shouting and the replies from the congregation confused him. He never understood religion and why Jesus was divine and nobody was able to explain it to him either.<sup>156</sup> And another paradox regarding his father was that as anti-white as he was he seemed to treat Malcolm better than his siblings, who had darker complexions than Malcolm. This

---

<sup>154</sup> Obama. Pages 220-221

<sup>155</sup> X and Haley. Page 83

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. Page 83

was, in Malcolm's opinion because his father was subconsciously brainwashed by white standards.<sup>157</sup>

While in Chicago Obama also struggled with his religious beliefs and slowly realized the importance of faith for most black people. The church house had all the way back to the slave days been one of the few places where black people could legally gather. Even though it seemed like a paradox that they would praise a God who allowed atrocities like slavery, hope was the only thing that could not be taken away from them and to hope and pray for better days was better done with people who shared one's fate. The church would also teach more about the black culture and history than the schools had ever done and therefore it became the conscience for black people. Spirituality was viewed as a very important factor in a person's life, and the religious stories of the Bible about survival and bloodshed mirrored the black people's ongoing David and Goliath struggle with white society. From slavery to modern times there was still a need for hope and religious serenity, and Obama found support and strength in religion:

Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shamed about, memories more accessible than those of ancient Egypt, memories that all people might study and cherish – and with which we could start to rebuild.<sup>158</sup>

Malcolm also understood the importance of religious belief for black people but he never understood the white man's religion. Obama would be one of the brainwashed black

---

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. Pages 82-83

<sup>158</sup> Obama. Page 294

people in Malcolm's mind, the way Obama embraced a white Jesus, made up by white people to make it more believable to them. With all the wrongdoings done to black people, Malcolm found it ridiculous to pray to a God for a good afterlife when life while alive was an ongoing struggle. In his autobiography Malcolm eloquently explains: "The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're *dead*, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on *this* earth!" [emphasis in original]<sup>159</sup> It was, in Malcolm's view, a white man's religion and did not apply to the black race. This is a significant contrast between Obama and Malcolm, the way Christianity was viewed. While Obama looked on Christianity as a foundation to build a future on, Malcolm viewed it as a hypocritical tool to still keep the black people down and turned instead to Islam. Malcolm's newfound religion led him to a pilgrimage to Mecca which changed his life.

Like Malcolm's transformation during his trip to Mecca, Obama's first stay in Kenya turned out to be quite an odyssey for him. Obama went through a change which enabled him to get more in touch with his identity than ever before. This was where he finally found some closure and gained a higher understanding of how his father was as a person and why his father's life turned out the way it did. Where his sister Auma started with the introduction of their father's life, other family members continued to fill in the gaps. By understanding his father better he was able to understand himself better. Another important factor was the instant notion of feeling at home. Just the fact that certain people would recognize his name and immediately pronounce and write it correctly was a comfortable feeling for Obama. It was as if his identity was finally identified and it made him feel good that just the mention of his name could create a history of memories in people. He felt the freedom of not being watched and being able to blend in wherever he went. There he did not have to think about

---

<sup>159</sup> X and Haley. Page 320

certain things which would be integrated in his mind in the United States. In Kenya Obama did not stand out and the way he moved did not label him in a certain way. He was home: “Here the world was black, and so you were just you; you could discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing betrayal.”<sup>160</sup>

Malcolm’s experience in Mecca was both similar and a contrast to Obama’s experience in Kenya. A contrast because he found himself at home religiously in a brotherhood of men of all races. He felt understood and respected and, whereas Obama blended into a predominately black world in Kenya, Malcolm had a racial epiphany: “The *color-blindness* of the Muslim’s world’s religious society and the *color-blindness* of the Muslim world’s human society: these two influences had each day been making a greater impact, and an increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking” [emphasis in original].<sup>161</sup> But the similarity is that both autobiographies express a profound change in their life when travelling to a distant and unknown world where they find *home*, peace of mind and serenity. They found themselves more as complete human beings than before and more able to determine their own identity. A spiritual torment was being replaced by a deeper understanding of themselves, and the degree of anger became less pronounced. The epiphany both Malcolm and Obama experienced during their respective trips to Africa stand out in their autobiographies as the most eye-opening experience for both of them. It was experiences of wholeness, completeness and self understanding.

Another thing Obama found helpful to know was an explanation about his father’s fall from grace. Obama senior came from a highly respected family and with his high education, which was very rare where he came from, and his proper English and his western ways, he came back to his country believing he could act in a way which would be very natural in Europe and the United States. He was not afraid to speak up to give his co-workers and his

---

<sup>160</sup> Obama. Page 311

<sup>161</sup> X and Haley. Page 453

contacts a piece of his mind. In a corrupt world, as Kenya was, it was important to pick your battles carefully and keep critical thoughts to yourself if you wanted to climb the ladder to corporate or governmental success. Obama's father had, according to family members, been cocky all his life, but his stay abroad made this personal trait even stronger. He never understood he had to adjust to the way it was in Kenya and Africa when he returned home. Things worked differently there, as Obama's sister explained: "It's the same whether you want a phone, or a visa, or a job. Who are your relatives? Who do you know? If you don't know somebody, you can forget it. That's what the old man never understood, you see. He came back here thinking that because he was so educated and spoke his proper English and understood his charts and graphs everyone would somehow put him in charge. He forgot what holds everything together here."<sup>162</sup> This analysis of general power in Kenya is also applicable to racial power in the United States in Malcolm's time. Which race one belonged to defined your rights. Even though power operates that way on some level all over the world, it was predominant in the United States when Malcolm was growing up and the black population still had to fight for their rights as equal citizens. Just like Obama's father forgot or refused to wear the mask which was expected when he returned to Kenya, the Nation of Islam refused to wear a mask in white society anymore. By separating themselves from the white population, the masks could more easily come off. Obama's father felt ostracized from what had once been his home like black people felt ostracized from white society. Obama's father turned into an angry black male in a country which was molded from colonialism and the struggle for identity and freedom, but had in reality always kept the structures of clan and tribe in place.

The people of Kenya were kept down by a powerful force similar in some ways to the way the blacks had in the United States, and fear of losing their jobs kept them from speaking up. This was a situation which had been a problem particularly for African-Americans ever

---

<sup>162</sup> Obama. Page 322

since emancipation in 1865.<sup>163</sup> And even though one can argue that poverty can be a state of mind, meaning you do not know what you are missing before you see what richer people have. If all you know is your immediate neighborhood and your family, you can be content with what you have, as long as famine and hunger is not a big part of your lives. But as the world progressed and materialistically improved and poorer people realized that richer people had indoor toilets and houses with three bedrooms, it created a hunger for more and a feeling of lagging behind. It was the want for more and when successfully achieving more, it proved ones self-worth and equality with the rest of the community.

Obama's odyssey in Kenya also included a greater historical knowledge about the place and a better knowledge of the people of Kenya and consequently a better knowledge about his African family and heritage. Stories told by various family members were weaved together to form a mental book and for the first time Obama could cry for his father. It was a breakdown which represented a new identity for Obama. It was a "discovery of a primary identity" which according to Smith is "a process of redefinition."<sup>164</sup> He could understand why things had happened and the understanding he felt could partly replace his bitterness and anger. He had achieved a sense of belonging and due to that it was easier to find himself and figure out who he was. He heard stories about his family before the white man had come, how they lived in tribal communities where the elders ruled and organized everything. If one did not obey, he or she would be banned from the village and had to start afresh by building a new village. Respect was essential and expected by every good woman, man and child. When the white man came they were relatively small in number and the Kenyans expected them to leave soon after the arrival, just like the Arabs had done.<sup>165</sup> When that did not happen a totally new situation occurred for the Kenyans, to adjust to a new life with the white people in power. Obama's grandfather, Onyango, realized that to be able to prosper he decided to work for the

---

<sup>163</sup> Brogan. Pages 342-344

<sup>164</sup> Smith. Page 108

<sup>165</sup> Obama. Page 399

white man and soon became a wealthy man among his own. He defended his choices and adapted “white behavior” in some ways, but still believed in having more than one wife. Onyango knew that knowledge was the only way to get out of the white man’s grip and was adamant that his son Obama should go to school. Fortunately Obama Sr. was very intelligent and school was not a problem for him. That is how he finally ended up in the United States with full scholarships.

Obama’s father’s life in many ways mirrors the life of being successful as a black person in the United States. It is the distinct feeling as a black person of almost having to excuse yourself for doing well. This is not only with black people, which class you belong to in society can also leave similar embarrassments for doing well. But for black people this was often a double curse as many had the disadvantage of being poor *and* black. Both Obamas felt it and the father was a victim of it. Obama learned that life in Africa was very different from what he grew up with but he also found similarities, like the similarities between the houses and family structure between many black people in Kenya and the way they lived in Southside, Chicago.<sup>166</sup> The fact that Kenya and the rest of Africa is so far behind the western world is complex and not easily explained, but after colonialism, many Africans still have a defensive nature and hold on to old habits and are even accused of being a victim of the white world if they improve their lives by the help of white technology, for instance. It was when Obama and his sister visited his sister’s former history teacher, Dr. Rukia Odera, that some of the problems in Kenya and Africa were eloquently explained to him.

‘You know, sometimes I think the worst thing that colonialism did was cloud our view of the past. Without the white man, we might be able to make better use of our history. We might look at some of our former practices and decide they are worth preserving. Others, we might grow out of. Unfortunately, the white man has made us very

---

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. Page 318



defensive. We end up clinging to all sorts of things that have outlived their usefulness. Polygamy. Collective land ownership. These things worked well in their time, but now they most often become tools for abuse. By men. By governments. And yet, if you say these things, you have been infected by Western ideology.”<sup>167</sup>

Obama came home a different man who saw the decay in his own country. The smiles of children seemed to have disappeared even more in poor neighborhoods. He also realized that the people in general looked at poor people as not their own or their responsibility. The notion of “it takes a village to raise a child” seemed not to count anymore in the black communities in the United States. Obama tried to reverse the situation by working with discrimination cases as a lawyer. As he had learned to be more patient he had at the same time learned that for something to happen one cannot sit and wait and just hope for the best. He married Michelle, a Southside girl who knew how to keep him grounded. But needless to say, Obama’s childhood in Hawaii, and Indonesia, his later years as a community organizer in Chicago, his years as a law student at Harvard and his extended stay in Kenya made him understand himself more, his manhood, his blackness and the reason for his anger. In many people’s opinion, both in the United States and across the world, his upbringing and background made him an excellent candidate for the presidency of the United States. He reached out his hand to all nations and all religions to improve understanding and tolerance between the peoples of the world.

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Page 434

## ***Chapter Four: Conclusion – Angry Black Males Changing the World***

African-American autobiographies have been representing, ever since the slave narratives, tales of black people's birthright. It is a powerful way to express black people's trials and accomplishments and in this thesis I have discussed the two autobiographies written 30 years apart and marked by the time they were written in. Malcolm told his story to Alex Haley in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. It was a time when African-Americans had to be loud to be heard, a time where they constantly spoke of their plight in white America. Obama wrote the book in a period where racism was still prevalent, but more hidden and sometimes hard to immediately identify.

Malcolm and Obama strike me as different, but far from opposites. The biggest difference is the time and place they grew up in. Malcolm grew up in a time of segregation, Jim Crow South, police brutality and lynching. Obama grew up in a multiracial society in Hawaii and in Indonesia, a country which is hugely diversified. Their respective upbringing would shape the way they looked at the world. Malcolm's views after he left the Nation of Islam are in line with many of Obama's views. After Malcolm's epiphany in Mecca he stated he was not a racist but wanted equality for all. Obama's slogan of unity, diversity in an inclusive society together with the want for change and the importance of hope is an extension of the Civil Rights movement. It was a movement which would have lost a significant amount of its power if it was not for Malcolm and his crusade for justice unrestrained by fear and pragmatism.

Malcolm and Obama led completely different lives but their autobiographies are in many ways similar as they both describe lives full of transitions and changes and show the significant factor of flight in the black experience. They both went to Africa to find their roots and to find *home*. And it was also a means to continue their withdrawal from psychological slavery in a white society. Their visit to Africa represented a profound change in both their

lives. It was a breakdown of sorts, an epiphany which would change their lives. A “radical revision of thought,”<sup>168</sup> which according to Sidonie Smith and her book *Where I’m Bound* is a reoccurring trait in black autobiographies. In Malcolm’s case it was his tremendous change in the view of other races.<sup>169</sup> In Obama’s case the release and the change started to happen when he could finally cry over his father, knowing he had a more truthful understanding of him<sup>170</sup> and thus gained a better understanding of himself.

Malcolm’s autobiography is more of an oral text, a transcription of conversation created to express anger at society. Obama’s autobiography is an introspective and complex book, written before his national fame. This enabled Obama to be candid, probably more so than any conventional politician’s autobiography. On first look they appear to be quite different books with different messages, but they are also remarkably similar. The obvious anger in Malcolm’s book and the more subdued anger in Obama’s book have many of the same messages. Obama’s autobiography is also very critical to U.S. society, and talks a lot about pain and suffering. There are very few words of praise of society but rather a very critical book about the state of white America. Like Malcolm, but without all the exclamation marks, Obama comes across as an angry black male.

Obama and Malcolm both understand the importance of knowing the historical facts of the past to create an understanding of what happens in the present. Anger is understandable in the black population. Malcolm’s fury of the mistreatment of the African-Americans is eloquently described in every chapter in his autobiography: “Four hundred years of black blood and sweat invested here in America, and the white man still has the black man begging for what every immigrant fresh of the ship can take for granted the minute he walks down the gangplank.”<sup>171</sup> Being born at a different time and place than Malcolm, Obama comes across

---

<sup>168</sup> Smith. Page 105

<sup>169</sup> X and Haley. Pages 453-456

<sup>170</sup> Obama. Pages 429-430

<sup>171</sup> X and Haley. Page 275

as less cynical when it comes to race relations, but he makes it very clear throughout his autobiography that there is no doubt that the United States was still saturated with racism in the 1990s and that anger was understandable. In his excellent speech “A More Perfect Union” he explains: “The anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.”<sup>172</sup>

Both autobiographies represent progress and hope. The timeline of 30 years between the two books has experienced many changes. It has been a slow progress for the better due to anger which resulted in action. Instead of being sad and crying over a condition, Malcolm aroused anger in the black population. Malcolm’s struggles laid the foundation for Obama’s run for presidency. Almost forty-four years after Malcolm’s assassination, Obama was elected president. It was an accomplishment which was seen as a utopian idea just a few years before. Malcolm’s autobiography was an important tool in Obama’s life in finding his own identity and to understand black male anger. The men are not opposites but complement each other. Where Malcolm ended his struggle as an angry black male, Obama continues to fight for a nation that includes all races and backgrounds.

Both books have been important in revolutionizing their readers’ thinking. Malcolm stimulated a stronger consciousness about race. His book also signified an increasing interest in autobiographical and ethnic writing. Obama’s book describes the continuous troubles for the black population and with the help of his successful political career the book has resurged in popularity. Both autobiographies have been important tools in creating understanding and tolerance in showing the multicultural complexities which exist in the US with the tragedies and the injustice and also the resilience and the perseverance of its people. Malcolm gave the country a rude awakening and changed the way many people viewed the state the black

---

<sup>172</sup> "Barack Obama's Speech on Race "A More Perfect Union", (USA: BN Publishing, 2009).

population was living in. He became a symbol of hope for the coming black generations. As an extension of Malcolm's teachings, Obama carried on with the slogans of hope and change in his successful Presidential campaign and has become the new black icon. The term "angry black male" is important when reading and understanding both autobiographies simply because both books describe why Malcolm and Obama were angry.

## *Works Cited*

- Barack Obama's Speech on Race "A More Perfect Union". (2009) [DVD]
- Barringer, Dr. Herb Ph. D. (2010) "An Essay of Hawaii's People." Retrieved May 7th, 2010 from: [www.e-hawaii.com/articles/an-essay-on-hawaiis-people-by-dr-herb-barringer](http://www.e-hawaii.com/articles/an-essay-on-hawaiis-people-by-dr-herb-barringer).
- Belton, Don. *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Brogan, Hugh. *The Penguin History of the United States of America*. London: Penguin, 2001.
- Brunner, Borgna. (2007) "The Murder of Emmett Till." Retrieved January 10th, 2010 from: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmjustice5.html>.
- Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974.
- Cleaver, Eldridge, and Maxwell Geismar. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Dell, 1968.
- Conway, Jill K. *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself." In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Nina Baym, 939-73. New York: Norton, 2003.
- Drimmer, Melvin. *Black History: A Reappraisal*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968.
- DuBois, W. E. B. "The Souls of Black Folks." In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Nina Baym, 1702-19. New York: Norton, 2003.
- Eakin, Paul John. *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Goldman, Peter Louis. *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Hale, Grace Elizabeth. *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- Haley, Alex. *Alex Haley: The Man Who Traced America's Roots*: Reader's Digest, 2007.

- Joyner, Plez. (2007) "The Hate That Hate Produced." Retrieved February 2nd, 2010 from: <http://pajoyner.blogspot.com/2007/09/hate-that-hate-produced-1959.html>.
- Lejeune, Philippe, and Paul John Eakin. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Lockwood, Lee. *Conversation with Eldridge Cleaver: Algiers*. New York: Dell, 1970.
- Oates, Stephen B. *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998.
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008.
- Olney, James. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Schuyler, George S. *Black and Conservative*. New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1966.
- Shapiro, Herbert. *White Violence and Black Response*. Cincinnati: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974.
- United States, Government. (1959) "Office Memorandum." Retrieved February 2nd, 2010 from: <http://columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/pdf/071659hthp-transcript.pdf>.
- Wolfenstein, Eugen Victor. *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution*. London: Free Association, 1989.
- Woodward, C. Vann, and William S. McFeely. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition with a New Afterword by William S. Mcfeely*. Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc, 2002.
- X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.