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Malcolm X: A Native Son's Long, Invisible Shadow

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Abstract

Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska. It is normal for a city and a state to embrace someone of significant historical stature to promote their historical significance to the nation and the world and to generate revenue from tourism and to benefit in other ways from the association with the historical figure. In the case of Malcolm, there has been a perpetual debate over recognition. This article discusses the role of Omaha as an important crucible for the context of Malcolm's birth, and for his parents rearing of him in the "black" liberation tradition. His legacy and the debates over it are central to contemporary discussions in the state and the city about the place of African people: present, past, and future.

From the very beginning, any connection between Malcolm and his birthplace was bound to be problematic, not merely from the expected political backlash by those who did not like the man or any of his evolutionary ideological positions and rhetoric, but also because of the nature of the literal encounter with Omaha itself. Malcolm is of course a "native son," having been born in Omaha. Ironically enough at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, today the University of Nebraska Medical Center, an institution which we will prominently feature in our discussion about the man's legacy and at which this author currently resides.

A second aspect of Malcolm's "encounter" is that his father was a minister and Garveyite activist in the area. This is significant, not only for what it will ultimately say about Malcolm's seemingly natural gravitation towards a pan-African perspective over his life course, but also for what it says about some of the uniqueness of Omaha for African Americans during the period and something of the story of that population which was largely transplanted, Rev. Earl Little was from Reynolds, Georgia, ironically the home state of this writer and his spouse had come from Grenada. Exactly the kind of pan-African personal connections and liaisons that Garveyism promoted in its notion of race-based African solidarity among residents of the continent and throughout the diaspora. The distance between the places from whence they came is also indicative of Garvey's impressive global reach and influence over African-centered populations at the time. History tells us that both of these individuals had been long-standing members. Garvey had managed to do first something today far more difficult within the global African movement, and central to the subsequent "civil rights" era and that was to merge the social and political ideology of Protestantism and Christianity generally with the cultural nationalism and internationalism of pan-Africanism, envisaging Kwame Ture's subsequent suggestion in the 1960's that revolutionaries had to engage the topic and substance of spirituality, organizations like the Nation of Islam which Malcolm took to unparalleled perceptive heights, and of course, Rev. Dr. Martin King Jr's invocation of the spiritual mantra of "overcoming" and "freedom" that Christ gave from sin in the context of the struggle for social equality and justice. In fact, Earl Little at one time served as president of the Omaha, Nebraska division of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).¹

The timing of Malcolm's birth and his familial presence in Omaha could not have been more significant. During the period 1910 to 1920, Omaha experienced a major growth in the size of the African-American population concomitant with the growth of the meat packing industry and its recruitment of African Americans as employees.

These newly minted residents faced a quandary. Segregation was not formally legislated, but it was commonly practiced in public places. You have then the juxtaposition of a large and growing population, with high levels of employment and increasing political and economic power, “the irresistible force,” meeting the “immovable object” of historical discrimination. As you might imagine, while this situation was becoming intolerable for all African Americans, it was particularly resented among a population when it occurred against an “official” backdrop of equality. A flashpoint was the public lynching of Willy Brown, who was, as per usual, accused of having raped a “white” woman. He was stormed and taken from the Douglas County Courthouse by a mob. This gave rise inadvertently to some of the film career choices of Henry Fonda who was 14 at the time and watched the incident from the second-floor window of his father’s shop. Like most organized race-based violence, it had the desired short-term effect of chilling African American initiative and interaction with the majority population. But also like such violence, it had the long-term effect of exposing the deep seated ethnic antagonisms under the surface and setting the stage for much more formal agitation and sociopolitical organization for change.² In fact, in 1921 Claude L. Nethaway, an Omaha city council candidate insisted that the protection of women and prevention of riots was linked to disenfranchising African Americans and maintain segregation.³

The first step in the African American counter to this discrimination involved the formation of a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1912.⁴ In 1917, George Wells Parker formed the Hamitic League of the World. The juxtaposition of these two organizations in Omaha at the time, vying for the allegiance of African Americans revealed a national debate that was breaking out over strategic approaches to the community’s collective condition. The NAACP in this battle represented the mainstream, integrative approach. The Hamitic League however, espoused the philosophy of “black” nationalism. It’s beyond the scope of this piece to expound on that philosophy in depth, but it is important to at least acknowledge its twin foundational principles of self-determination and self-reliance, “self” here referring to the collective and not to the individual as might be commonly understood.

The Hamitic League was central in creating an independent African American literary tradition in Omaha, a tradition that was later to be taken up by the Omaha Star which became the premier and dominant African American publishing organ in the state under the direction of the powerful and courageous Mildred Brown. The League published a pamphlet authored by Parker entitled *Children of the Sun* as well as a journal called *The Crusader*. *The Crusader* was the official organ and a vehicle for the dissemination of Parker’s ideology. Central was the notion that Africa was the cradle of civilization and that the “black race” was actually superior. The latter journal was later to become the journal of the African Blood Brotherhood for African Liberation and Redemption (ABB), a “black” liberation organization established in 1919 by Cyril Briggs. Briggs initially shared a lot of Parker’s views, supporting the idea of a decolonized Africa to which Africans in the United States could be repatriated, a kind of African social Zionism. Eventually Briggs and Parker split over Briggs’ ideological evolution which involving seeing parallels between the condition of “black” workers in the US and working-class immigrant “whites.” He eventually concluded that capitalism rather than racism was the primary villain. The journal began to have a stronger socialist orientation and eventually became part of the Communist Party of America. In its heyday, more than 36,000 read *The Crusader*, most of them in Harlem. The ABB itself initially had a close relationship with Garvey and his UNIA, but that relationship became strained when Garvey met with the Grand Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan and with the failure of his Black Star Line project.⁵

It is within the context of this local population with political voice and unique cultural perspective to express, possessing the resources to sustain more sophisticated sociopolitical organization, the threat of “race”-based violence and intimidation and the backdrop of the pre-existing context for nationalist ideologies that Reverend Earl Little comes in the 1920s to establish the Omaha chapter of the UNIA.

The second critical element of Malcolm’s encounter with Omaha was his departure. Again, at one level, like his birth, it seems relatively insignificant and certainly brief, occurring in 1926, no more than a year after his birth. What is significant are the circumstances of his familial departure which he and Alex Haley reference in his autobiography. Malcolm indicates that his father had come under the scrutiny of the Klan not only for his simply being “black” but for his Garveyite ideology and his use of his pulpit to deliver its message. The local Klan saw him as “spreading trouble” for “good Christian white people.” They apparently arrived at his house (his father was absent at the time) with guns and rifles to intimidate his parents shortly before he was born. They knocked out all the windows with the butt of their rifles. It is notable that his negative encounter with the Klan came as it was growing in considerable strength in Nebraska.

It was reputed to have had around 45,000 members, to have added a branch exclusively for women known as Women of the Klan, and even had clubs for children.⁶ The Klan during this period has experienced a second renaissance. It was born as a post-Civil War terrorist group. By 1915, it had been reformed around its own brand of “Americanism.” It purported to be patriotic, pro-family, pro-public education, anti-alcohol, appearing as a “conservative” wing to the general progressivist movement that had been sweeping the nation. What it retained though was the notion that it was collectively better qualified to determine what people and activities were threats to the social order and to enforce punishment against these or thwart them in some way. The 1915 rebirth was added by the then-popular epic *Birth of a Nation*, based on the organization recruiting novel *The Clansman* (1905) by Thomas Dixon. This film was highly touted as advertising the new “Americanist” Klan and led to a major growth in klaverns in the state of Nebraska. Another factor driving Klan resurgence was the new economic structure that emerged in the United States after the Civil War. In particular, it pitted various European ethnic groups against each other as well as against the formerly enslaved populations and these groups also have vast differences in language, religion, and culture exploitable by the Klan ideology. There was also considerable economic deprivation and dislocation resulting from the war, the suppression of wages, and the lack of social welfare infrastructure. The Klan often served as an economic promotional force for those among the elites who felt unfairly underprivileged and ironically for Protestant churches which found it difficult to fill the coffers with economically depressed congregations. In many ways, this envisaged the third coming of the Klan which was to come closer in the modern age, the conversion of the Klan formally into a Protestant church. Already at this stage, the organization would often pass out bibles and deliver prayers and sermons to the “faithful.” It has been speculated that some of the presence of white supremacy ideology and ethnocentrism in the “religious right” is in part due to the assimilation of elements of what the Klan was in its second reformation.⁷

It was in 1921 that the Klan initiated a major recruitment drive that was to bear significant fruit over the next 4 years. In 1925, the annual Klan Rally was held coincident with the Nebraska State Fair and fairgoers were invited to attend both events simultaneously. They held a parade down the streets of Lincoln with more than 1,500 marchers and subsequently held a picnic which was attended by 25,000 people. The picnic even featured a Klan wedding, with the bride, groom, and the minister all wearing their regalia. In 1925, in Curtis more than 1,000 turned out to hear a Klan organizer expound on the threat of “foreign elements” which he stated would soon overrun Nebraska. In York, Hiram Evans, the imperial grand wizard was moved to state that he expected its Klan membership to double. He stated that he found in the state an abundant number of “genuine” Americans and concluded that the West was not being as undermined as the Eastern section of the country by “un-American” elements. He did however argue that there were at least some, disturbing signs of negative social change. Among these were immodesty of dress among women, an attraction to foreign art, and high taxes.⁸ The Women of the Klan convention held in Lincoln was attended by almost 2,000 women. During the period, there were even rumors of a unit of the Klan even forming in conjunction with the University of Nebraska at the Lincoln Campus. The Klan denied this, but noted in its denial that there were many students who were in fact Klan members. Yet, the Lincoln Star reported in 1921 that the Klan had had an initiation ceremony on campus. In Hastings, Klansmen were formally participating in funeral ceremonies in a Methodist church. The local newspaper the Hastings Tribune noted that the Klan was promoted as an unseen eye in police departments, where it was well represented, enforcing social customs and moral laws and providing punishment if “public decency” was offended.⁹

Most observers of US social developments in the 1920s were surprised at the growth of the Klan in Nebraska. Robert Duffus noted that most of the politically active Klansmen would have fit in with regular progressivists of the time only a few years earlier. John M. Mecklin noted the Klan’s effectiveness at reaching out to relatively politically disenfranchised communities in rural areas and small towns. A major element of the growth involved demographic changes in Nebraska at the time. Although, the number of “blacks” and foreign-born residents was small, there was a fear that the immigrants would come to the West looking for land and that these new residents could not be culturally assimilated.¹⁰ This fear was given a national stamp of approval in a 1924 congressional bill which gave western Europeans preference in immigration and established a severe quota on those from other areas of the world. Yet, they still came. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of African Americans increased by 100 percent.¹¹ The African American community while one of the major targets of the Klan intimidation was, as we noted earlier disinclined to take the treatment lying down. The New Era newspaper in Omaha made the bold pronouncement that the “black” community would not stand for any intimidation or imposition from the Klan or any of its sympathizers.

It went on to say that the race riot of 1919 would be only a mild prelude to what could be expected if action was not taken to stop the Klan advance.¹²

Preserving Malcolm's LITERAL legacy: The "Shining Prince" Was Here

The Malcolm Little who leaves Omaha as a baby goes on to become the international figure Malcolm X and each locale that could claim some part of his legacy in some way has sought to invoke it in various ways for strategic advantage. Sometimes it was used as segue to smoothing over relations with a restive African American local population. At others, a vehicle to drive tourism and development towards economic recessed communities or to improve the image of the relevant neighborhood, city, or state as "tolerant" or "multicultural." Conversely, communities of African descent, domestic and immigrant invoke the legacy as a tool for local and state political advocacy to garner precisely that attention. Each of these strains of invocation have existed in Omaha. But the unique historical juxtaposition of Malcolm's legacy we have discussed, that is between civil rights and "black" nationalism. There was the image of Malcolm, the orthodox Muslim El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, the pan-African internationalist who pushed orthodox Islam as a tool of personal and collective reformation of the spirit and was becoming a central figure in the globalization of the struggle against Eurocentrism. At the same time, there was Malcolm the firebrand revolutionary national spokesperson of the Nation of Islam. These alternative images stood precisely at the analogous juxtaposition of similar historical trends and political forces in Omaha and Nebraska throughout their evolution. There was the image of a Nebraska which was the "free" state that did not have formal de jure segregation, but on the other which had the de facto segregation and witnessed the horrible lynching of Willie Brown. The discomfort with which Omaha and Nebraska dealt with concerning their own checkered past, a macro form of DuBois "double consciousness," led them both to take an at best, duplicitous, and at times hypocritical posture with respect to the actual recognition of Malcolm's physical legacy on the ground. There was a recognition that there was a political advantage to appearing progressive with respect to the legacy and the initiatives for recognition and memorialization among African Americans and other oppressed groups. At the same time, there was political and financial will and resources to move beyond such a symbolic embrace because of concerns about the contemporaneous political implications of "Malcolmism" for the city and the state. There were also concerns that powerful political and financial forces hostile to Malcolm, considering the more "controversial" dimension of his legacy, would be alienated by any public identification with the efforts.

The "Positivism"

In 1965, the Little' house was demolished. The then-current owners, the Moore family, never knew that the house had a connection to him. That connection was discovered in 1970 when Rowena Moore's sister read Malcolm's autobiography. At that point things began to change. Rowena Moore, union and civic activist, a member of the family that owned the property, led the fight for the location to be used to commemorate Malcolm and it was her desire to build a museum dedicated to him there.¹³ In preparation for that, she purchased more land around the site. She was quoted as saying that the property no longer belongs to her, but "to all black people who loved and respected Malcolm X and what he stood for." She hoped that the dedication of the property would "unify all black people." She initiated the idea that the land could become Malcolm X Park.

During the 1970s, Omaha observed Malcolm X Days and participated in a parade from 24th and Paul Streets to Kountze Park at 1916 Pinkney Street. It is estimated that as many as 3000-5000 people viewed the tributes annually. The observances included oratorical contests, plays, poetry readings, skits, and African cultural displays.¹⁴

At an observance at the birth site in 1971, Delmar Kirtly, who attended Malcolm's Sunday School at Zion Baptist Church said that his mother had taught the latter in Sunday school and called him "a very bright child". He said she also knew Malcolm's father and described him as a "very brave man." At the same ceremony, Sen. Ernest Chambers said, "that poster (of Malcolm X) should become as symbolic to 'black' people as a picture of George Washington is to 'white' people". But we've got a real hero, not like George Washington and other 'white' heroes so called 'white' historians have to manufacture and have to make lies about." The Omaha School Board designated the day as Malcolm X Day and said students could be excused from school with a written note from a parent or guardian to attend the observances. Approximately 3,500 students from four high schools and two junior highs did not attend school in observance of Malcolm's birthday. The students represented 39 percent of the student bodies at Horace Mann Junior High, Tech High, Tech Junior High, Benson High, Central High, and North High. The highest representation was at North where 1,200 departed from the regular school schedule.¹⁵

It was during this period that Ms. Moore founded the Malcolm X Foundation to oversee her vision for a memorial. Things reached a zenith in the mid-to-late 1980s. On September 4th, 1986, Ms. Moore urged volunteers to come and help clear the site in preparation for a construction company which was going to grade the site and prepare it for the planting of grass. She hoped at that time to get about \$30,000 from the city in a matching grant to aid in the development of the facility.

Perhaps the height of recognition for the cause came subsequently in 1989. In February of that year, Attallah Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm and then newly minted national president of the Malcolm X Foundation arrived in Omaha. She was greeted by a congressional letter from a Nebraska member of the House of Representatives in which the representative apologized for not being able to meet her during her visit and said, "Although your father's experience in Omaha was tragic, it can be seen as the beginning of shaping an ever-evolving man. His mark in history will be remembered. With your assistance, the birth site of Malcolm X can be recognized as an historical site locally, as well as nationally."¹⁶ Mayor Walter M. Calinger proclaimed May 19, 1989 as Malcolm X Shabazz Day and invited all in Omaha and in Nebraska to join in the celebration of the 65th anniversary of Malcolm's birth.

The Malcolm X Memorial Foundation is a non-profit organization headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska (3448 Evans Street) which was established to educate through the teachings of Malcolm X's legacy on a local, national and international scale. Founded by Mrs. Moore in 1971, the foundation serves as a historical landmark for the birthplace of Malcolm X now covering 12 acres of manicured greenspace in the heart of North Omaha. Through public programs and events, the foundation also serves the Greater Omaha community through social and cultural initiatives.

The Malcolm X Memorial Foundation offers public programs and events as a means to educate others and invite them to participate in the positive social action motivated by the teachings of Malcolm X. Their foci include areas like Leadership Development, Social Action and Civic Engagement.

On May 11, 1989, the foundation effectively commissioned the overall project, involving a park and interpretive center with formal architectural design by the Great Plains Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. They volunteered to design the park and center and to raise 200,000 to 300,000 to build the first phase at 2446 Pinkney Street. Dave Ciaccio, the chapter's chairman said he envisioned a formal garden, walkways, a memorial plaza, open ground and a museum structure. The master plan was unveiled on the 19th. On that date more than 300 attended the showing. It included some additional components when rendered, including an orthodox Islamic mosque, an all-faiths prayer room. It even included a proposal for a radio station on the edge of the project. Public utilities were going to be asked to provide new utilities to the area and to reopen 30th street north of Bedford. The plans also included the linkage of the complex to Adams Park to the south.¹⁷

In 2008, the Foundation allocated 6 areas for a community garden. On March 1st, 1984, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1987, a state historical marker was added.¹⁸ The governor Kay Orr drafted a letter at that time encouraging Nebraskans to visit the historic marker dedicated to Malcolm X and to promote his civil rights causes.¹⁹ The Foundation, supported by the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, commissioned a 15-foot x 34-foot mural on the east wall of North Omaha's J-N-J Grocery store, 3247 N. 42nd Street. The mural was publicly unveiled on Nov. 9.

Omaha artist Gabrielle Gaines-Liwaru, founder of G. D'Ebony Outreach, and Lincoln, Nebraska artist Ben Jones, founder of Anti-Oppression Art, collaborated on the mural project. An inscription from Malcolm X states, "We need more light about each other... Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience and patience creates UNITY." Chéamera Liwaru, an Omaha North High School student, researched and found the inspirational quote by Malcolm X. Lethaniel Bradford, an Omaha Benson High School student, painted the inscription on the mural.²⁰

The Malcolm X Memorial Foundation encouraged neighborhood youth participation in the creation of the mural. As a result, several young people, ranging from grade school to freshmen in college, assisted. During the painting process, neighborhood residents stopped by and shared life experiences and positive feedback with the artists.²¹ Even local educational institutions got into the act. The University of Nebraska-Omaha Department of Black Studies began, under the direction of its then chairperson Dr. Robert Chrisman, one of the founders of the Black Scholar journal and of Black Studies as an academic discipline, the Malcolm X Festival which grew into a Festival and Conference.

The first year was 2002. Its stated goal at the outset was to focus on exploring and expanding awareness of Malcolm X and his significance to the nation and its history, as well as highlighting the set of issues which occupied him including civil rights, black masculinity, “black” nationalism, pan-Africanism, and internationalism. The conference continues to this day and this author as chair 2012-2015 continued the tradition, refocusing it on those issues.

The “Negativism”

For all the positives, from the beginning the X Foundation’s plans, on the surface laudable, revealed so much of the political and ideological angst that Malcolm generated in his outspoken larger than lifetime and replicated to some extent the same kind of backlash that led to his family’s departure in the beginning. This came up as the Foundation sought to raise funds for the completion of its ambitious national, if not international memorial plans. Wilfred Little commented on that when he arrived at the Foundation’s observance of what would have been Malcolm’s 60th birthday. He argued that misconceptions about his brother’s beliefs at the time of his death about the color line might be a roadblock to the Foundation’s efforts. He was speaking at a fundraising dinner for the Foundation attended by around 100 people at the cost of \$25 a plate. He was a supporter of the plans which involving building a park and then expanding subsequently with a community center.²² In January of 1989, Ms. Moore wrote a letter to the city recommending the renaming of the North Omaha Freeway as Malcolm X Freeway. The response was that the cost of signage to be replaced was \$140,000 and that the city did not have the funds to cover those costs. The city did leave the door open, stating that if funds could be raised privately, the Mayor would appoint a committee concerning the naming of the freeway which would advise him on a recommendation to the State Highway Commission.²³

Burton Christopherson, calling Malcolm X “one of the prime movers of our time” wrote a letter complaining to Marvin Kizett, director-secretary of the Nebraska State Historical Society that it was both sad and incredible that very little had been done in the way of official recognition for native son Malcolm X. He writes, “I find it sad because I cannot help but wonder whether the recognition of Malcolm X would be as long in coming had he been ‘white’ or perhaps less an advocate of ‘Black’ concerns and culture.”

The relative sloth of the state historical society is paralleled in the steadfast delays that have been involved in having Malcolm X included in the state hall of fame. A representative letter supporting the application to have X added was written by Tm Heller who began his piece by noting that he was not African American, nor Muslim, nor liberal but supported the effort. And Heller went beyond mere platitudes, he engaged his organization, the Omaha Young Republicans, in aiding in the cleanup of the birth site. He lobbied to have signs acknowledge the location. The most arresting part of his letter is when he comments on meeting Malcolm’s daughter Attallah who said of all the people involved in the organization of the memorial, Heller understood her father best. He went on to argue that Malcolm exemplified the spirit of Nebraska. That he embodied the Nebraska virtues and values of Determination, Leadership, Knowledge, Courage, Justice and Truth and that he should therefore be enshrined. He then enumerated a laundry list of other members of the hall, identifying their distinguishing and most noble characteristic from his perspective and arguing that Malcolm possessed the same. He did however, make two distinctions that he said were Malcolm’s alone. One, that he was assassinated for doing what was right. And two, that he remained at the time of the writing largely unknown to Nebraskans as their own native son.²⁴

Despite supporting documentation and the historical record which itself recommends Malcolm highly for membership, given the lesser credentials of some already given the recognition, he has not gotten in. This has been an issue of contention since 2004. In that year former US Senator Kenneth Wherry was inducted over Malcolm’s nomination. Among Wherry’s resume was his successful efforts to prevent gays from participating in the US government during the 1940s and ‘50s. Imagine. An open discriminator chosen over a man who transformed his life toward humanitarianism. His election via secret ballot was considered illegal and the decision was revoked. There was a new vote set for June 2004 which was then postponed to 2005. In the end, neither Malcolm nor the candidate supposedly better than him was selected for the award period 2005-2009. Even more telling, the candidature of former Senator Wherry was not even presented or accepted for the next induction for the period 2010-2014. The official claim was that the relatively short span of Malcolm’s time in the state was the reason he did not integrate the hall of fame in 2004.²⁵

Commission chairman Harold Andersen said Malcolm X was born in Omaha but “as far as I’m concerned, never looked back at Nebraska. Other members of the Hall of Fame Commission involved in the decision-making raised the same concern and the chair noted that X supported racial separatism for years.

He even questioned whether the popularity of Malcolm X was rooted in an accurate reading of history, claiming that his assassination had created a “cult” around him. Ernie Chambers, at the time the state’s only “black” legislator said the vote was evidence of the need for diversity on the commission and called the decision “an insult to everybody who is not old, white and male.” All five of the voters involved were “white” men. X gained the most support among all the seven nominees in public hearings across the state. Sharif Liwaru, the current president of the Foundation described himself as not disappointed per se at the ultimate choice but disappointed that there was recognition for the impact of Malcolm X among everyone but the state of Nebraska.²⁶

Some have commented on the fact that Malcolm’s application will remain problematic in the future because of some historical developments he could not have anticipated and that are not per se related to him or to whatever controversy might be attached to his ideological journey in life. I am referring here to the modern schism in the United States between those who perceive themselves as Christians and Muslims and Islam as they perceive it in the lens of a post 9-11 civilization. Malcolm was as much an advocate of the peaceable nature of Islam as he was for “black” nationalism and at the time as controversial as that may have been, it was not nearly the problematic issue it is today. For example, this author sat on the board of the Malcolm X Foundation for a time and noted that the neither the then-current plans for the memorial nor the fundraising strategies included the influential Islamic community in the U.S. or abroad. Access to those constituencies at home and abroad could advance the project, but my suspicion is that the reason it evolved to that point prior to my arrival was that the construction of an orthodox Islamic temple and maybe even any reference to faith might be deemed additional ammunition against the creation of a suitable memorial. Yet, in the absence of these, funding continues to be a challenge.

We might summarize that the literal physical legacy of Malcolm in Omaha, as evidenced by the birth site, the memorial plans, the Hall of Fame, and the entire discourse has been as mixed and schizophrenic as Malcolm’s literal short time in the city and the state. On the one hand, the creation of the foundation and the positive moves to recognize him are analogous to the self-determinative and positive communal progress that facilitated his father’s work in Omaha and beyond. Yet the resistance of the larger state apparatus to recognize his status, to provision more funding for the purpose, or to declare him one of its hall of fame natives is more indicative of the close-mindedness of Klan which sought to run him out as those latter forces today seek to avoid him “coming in.”

Malcolm’s Symbolic Legacy and North Omaha

Malcolm’s symbolic legacy might be described as consisting of 5 interrelated elements: self-determination, unity, economic nationalism, self-defense, and self-love. When we say “self” here we refer to the collective selfhood that Mbiti references in the Africana cultural and social context as a thought system which says, “I am because we are, we are because I am.” To what extent is Malcolm, or could Malcolm be relevant to his home town at THAT level of abstraction beyond his literal memorial or actual biography? This, some would say is the most critical question. What is the “symbolic” legacy of Malcolm for Omaha, for Nebraska, for the region, as seen through the prism of the North Omaha streets his parents walked?²⁷

The Omaha Malcolm’s parents knew when the North 24th Street corridor was known as the “Street of Dreams” has undergone a major decline. It was once the home of the Dreamland Ballroom where many jazz greats performed. It was a place where Wallace Thurman spent his early years and where Tillie Olsen grew up.²⁸ Yet it was to be racked by several larger economic developments that irrevocably changed its character. The African American population had come largely to work in the packing houses which had a substantial need for their relatively low-cost labor. They also found lots of work with the railroad since Omaha was the center of Union Pacific and the western arm of the countrywide railway system. The restructuring of both of those in the period from the 1950s to the ‘70s led to massive job loss and therefore to structure impoverishment. This was compounded by the closure of the Storz Brewery, a major community employer in 1966. When formal economic desegregation came, business relocated to West Omaha, creating a transportation barrier for potential African American employees. The loss of jobs led to loss of tax revenue and the city responded by redirecting civic resources not the areas of the most extreme deprivation but to areas of the city deemed more attractive for investment and tourism. So North Omaha was not only poor, but also abandoned. The loss of vital city services led to a community that faced black market economics and the drug trade and the violence concomitant with that, the advent of gangs staffed by unemployed youth, ineffective, relatively underfunded schools, and so on.²⁹

Tech High School once the largest technical education school in the West closed in 1983. By 1966, North Omaha's "Street of Dreams" reputation had changed. It was now, "A Time for Burning"—a reference to the award-winning documentary of the same name.³⁰ The area felt the impact of three major civil disturbances, one after the assassination of Dr. King in 1968. The Black Panther Party had arisen in Omaha and members of the Party were convicted for bombing a house where a local policeman was killed. The nail in the coffin was the construction of the North Omaha Freeway which devastated the housing market, substantially reducing the amount of housing available in the community. Paradoxically, this was "development." The area was also the target of "environmental racism." The American Smelting and Refining Company was engaged in polluting the area. It once held sway over more than 8000 acres. The land was placed on the federal registry for superfund cleanup but as of 2003, only 290 acres had been cleaned.³¹ The local media has created an image of the community as universally violent, poor, and drug-riddled and many residents have bought into these stereotypes.

The symbolic legacy of Malcolm and the lack of its effective realization has led directly to the decline of the area he briefly called home. Similarly, a political movement, incorporating all of the five essential elements is needed to aid in its resurrection. The first problem is that the developments that have impacted North Omaha, with positive or malevolent intent have come largely from economic and political interests outside the community itself. This runs directly counter to Malcolm's notion that "black" communities need to be able to determine their own destinies. Second, the physical bifurcation of the community via the North Omaha Freeway, led to a seemingly permanent splintering of its political and economic power. Key to community development will be the development of a collective agenda that can bring in all or most of the residents and community constituency as participants. Third, there is little doubt that there is in turn, little economic development in North Omaha defined in terms of the current residents themselves. There are many development groups with a relatively large amount of resources, but the nature of their projects aren't about restoring the community to its historical status as a cultural and social enclave for African Americans, and instead about integrating North Omaha into largely schemes of mainstream residential and financial structures that will not serve that purpose. Fourth, poor relationships with the local police department has been a hallmark of the civil disturbances that devastated the life of the community and the advent of gangs and drugs has not improved that dynamic. Despite the rhetoric, there has been little action in the direction of promoting communal means of self-defense and dispute resolution and mediation that might curb outbreaks of individual acts of violence or the formation of criminal organizations. Last but not least, there is a sense of general malaise and lack of collective pride that Malcolm perhaps more than anything else would want to speak to. Finding an avenue for the re-socialization of the community and the dissemination of information about history and culture when it has disappeared largely from the physical landscape is central to changing the collective damage done to the psyche of the people.

In sum, Malcolm can still speak to his community. In his brief life time, he was touched irrevocably by the basic template of events occurring in his Western home, before and immediately at his birth. These were to form a shadow for his life of activism on behalf of people like those in North Omaha and throughout the region, similarly situated. The schizophrenic response to his physical and literal legacy in the state and the city is symbolic of the continual struggle to assert humanity in all of its forms and to connect it with social justice and economic and political equality and equity. Finally, the condition of his former, albeit brief home, is symbolic of the unfulfilled promise which like the assassin's bullet which prematurely took his life threatens to martyr the potential of a generation. Malcolm is indeed Omaha's and Nebraska's problematic native son in his embodiment of their spirit of evolution and transformation. He casts a long shadow, but where there is such a long shadow, there is also a great light like unto a brilliant sun.

ENDNOTES

¹ [People and Events Note concerning Earl and Louise Little for documentary film Marcus Garvey "Look for Me in the Whirlwind" © 1999-2000 PBS Online and WGBH. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/garvey/peopleevents/p_little.html]

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- ³ “Claude L. Nethaway to Charles Bryan,” March 5, 1923, Charles W. Bryan Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln Nebraska.
- ⁴ KETV, *Timeline: Omaha's 150th Birthday* (URL: <http://www.ketv.com/Timeline-Omaha-History/10125148>).
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- ⁶ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking Press, 2011).
- ⁷ Michael W. Schulyer, “The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930,” *Nebraska History* 66:3 (Fall 1985) 234-256; and Walt Sehnert, “The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska,” *McCook Gazette*, June 18, 2012.
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- ⁹ *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1924; *Lincoln Star*, July 5, 1924; and *Taylor Clarion*, April 29, 1924.
- ¹⁰ *Lincoln Star*, September 8, 1921; and September 18, 1921.
- ¹¹ Information on Racial Tensions in Omaha from Nebraska Studies.org 1900-1924.: http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset_reset.html?http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/stories/0701_0131.html
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- ¹⁴ “Drummers Lead Way for Malcolm X Days,” *Omaha World Herald*, May 17, 1971.
- ¹⁵ “Man of Rare Commodity: Malcolm X Honored at Home Site,” *Omaha World Herald*, May 20, 1971.
- ¹⁶ Peter Hoagland, “Letter from Nebraska Congressman to Attallah Shabazz (February 10, 1989),” in Malcolm X: Memorial Foundation, “Correspondence,” *BrotherMalcolm.net* (URL: <http://brothermalcolm.net/2002/omaha/pdf/shabazz.pdf>).
- ¹⁷ Malcolm X Foundation, *Malcolm X Foundation Mission Statement* (Omaha, NE: Malcolm X Foundation, June 17, 2007); and “Welcome” (URL: <http://malcolmxfoundation.org/>).
- ¹⁸ National Park Service, “National Register Information System” *National Register of Historic Places* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, January 23, 2007); Nebraska State Historical Society, “Malcolm X House Site,” in *More Nebraska National Register Sites in Douglas County* (URL: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/nebraska/douglas2.htm>; and <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/nebraska/douglas/DO09-Malcolm-X-House-Site.pdf>).
- ¹⁹ Kay Orr, “Letter from Governor Kay Orr,” in Malcolm X, “Correspondence” (URL: <http://brothermalcolm.net/2002/omaha/pdf/kayorr.pdf>).
- ²⁰ [Blog post Mural at J-N-J on Malcolm X Foundation Site posted in Your Voice November 18, 2013]
- ²¹ [Same blog as above]
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- ²⁴ [Tim Heller Open Letter to the Nebraska Hall of Fame Commission posted on Malcolm X Foundation Page in Hall of Fame and Your Voice November 8th, 2012]
- ²⁵ Mitjás, Fernando González, “Nebraska’s Malcolm X Hall of Fame Controversy” in *The Culture Trip: The Best Art, Food, Culture, Travel* (URL: <http://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/nebraska/articles/nebraska-s-malcolm-x-hall-of-fame-controversy/>).
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- ²⁹ Lawrence H. Larsen, and Barbara J. Cottrell Larson, *Omaha: The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
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