

MALCOLM X, THE PRISON YEARS: THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF FORMAL EDUCATION

Jed B. Tucker

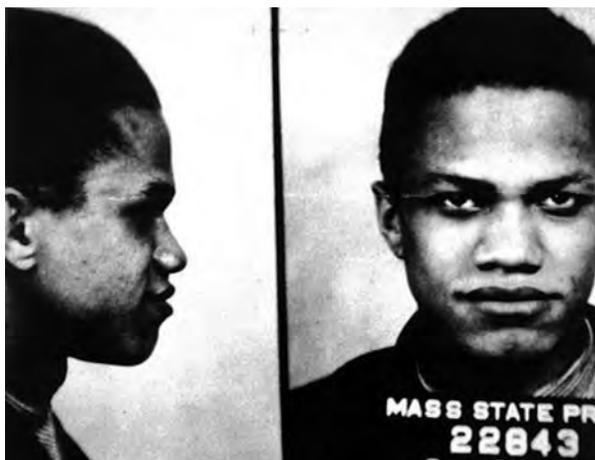
There are many good reasons why Malcolm X's legacy has outlived his short life. Though his life as a public figure lasted just thirteen years before an untimely death—murdered by gunfire at 39 years old while speaking at the Audubon Ballroom—his ideas about achieving racial justice remain among the most influential of any thinker or leader before or since. He is arguably responsible for giving birth to the movements for black pride and Black Power. Perhaps even more memorable than the challenging and powerful ideas he advanced, it was Malcolm's literary style in the fight against racism—both in speech and writing—that make him an entirely unique figure among contemporary or subsequent civil rights leaders. This is why Ossie Davis presciently predicted over fifty years ago that despite the many enemies his fiery and controversial rhetoric produced, Malcolm X would be remembered as a martyr for the cause of racial justice.¹

So, it's not surprising that his story has been told and retold countless times through popular and scholarly literary works, films, theater, opera, music, ancillary products, and more.² As it stands, Malcolm's life is generally remembered as the heroic struggle of an individual who overcame extreme odds all on his own, rising from ignorance and obscurity to become one of the great thinkers and leaders of his time. But it is curious that a key period in his life—the prison years—remains largely unexamined. And examining this period complicates what we think we know about who he was and how he came to occupy such a central and influential space in the American psyche.

One of the most important questions and the stuff of myth is how Malcolm Little, an ordinary young man, became Malcolm X. In sermons, lectures, and public debates, Malcolm often referred to his life's dramatic lows and highs as an example of the kind of transformative journey he considered necessary for all African Americans. He described himself as a reformed street hustler who did serious time and emerged from prison a new man, thanks largely to having discovered the teachings of the Nation of Islam's leader, Elijah Muhammad. The prison years, then, are a critical period for understanding the making of Malcolm X.

Jed B. Tucker is Director of Reentry and Research Scholar in the Bard Prison Initiative, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.

That Malcolm was incarcerated as a young man is widely known. He spent six and a half years in three Massachusetts state prisons, from 26 February 1946 to 7 August 1952.



Malcolm Little mug shot. Prison file of Malcolm Little, Massachusetts Department of Corrections

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley, he depicts these years as the most decisive of his life. It is, after all, while incarcerated that Malcolm replaced his last name “Little” with “X,” indicating his conversion to the Nation of Islam. Yet, despite the importance of these years, numerous biographies reveal almost nothing not found in the *Autobiography*. There is little mention of Malcolm’s daily life in prison, about the critical differences among the three prisons where he was held, and, most importantly, about how Malcolm navigated the Massachusetts prison system driven by a purpose to access the formal education that helped shape him. A fuller examination of his time inside reveals a great deal that is left out of the popular story and missing in the existing biographical record; it offers a revealing window into Malcolm’s personal and professional capacities, aspirations, and development during these formative years.

Two critical features of Malcolm’s life in prison will be challenged in this essay. The first is his characterization of himself as a “hoodlum, thief, dope peddler, and pimp” when he entered prison.³ Indeed, it was due to his own intellectual abilities and ambition—evidenced early in his sentence—that he was able to take advantage of unusual educational resources while in prison. The *Autobiography* is the source of the widely accepted portrayal of the young, wild, and hapless Malcolm, which in many ways mischaracterizes his evolution in prison as a dramatic departure from his early life. The evidence presented here

supports the few scholars who have challenged this portrayal of the young Malcolm, and also shows for the first time the strength of his commitment to formal education.

The second point highlights the extent of Malcolm's formal education while in prison. The folklore has it that Malcolm was an extraordinary autodidact. But recently released primary source materials—two archives containing his letters from prison and the archive of Norfolk Penal Colony Superintendent Howard Gill, in particular—reveal the extent to which he took advantage of the uncommon academic resources that became available to him in prison, including college-level courses.

Acknowledging evidence of Malcolm's academic and intellectual pursuits before prison and his tenacity in seeking further education inside is important. His iconic image figures prominently in larger questions about African American masculinity, African American boys' rejection of school, violence by and against young African American men, and much else. But before we can conjecture about how knowing these things about Malcolm's life might influence larger questions of culture and politics, we need to amplify the historical record itself.

EXAMINING THE NEW EVIDENCE

With several notable exceptions, the *Autobiography* remains the primary source of the accepted story of Malcolm's time in prison. The power of its narrative has overshadowed subsequent portrayals of Malcolm's life, even those that have raised persuasive challenges to its details. A few scholars have pointed out some of the *Autobiography's* mischaracterizations, but none has paid serious attention to the prison years.

Louis DeCaro's *On the Side of My People*, for example, uses evidence from Malcolm's Massachusetts prison file, including letters he penned, to demonstrate that his deep interest in education began much earlier than he and others have claimed.⁴ DeCaro's work also notes that Malcolm's behavior in the early years of his sentence was closer to that of a model prisoner than the irascible and drugged-out Malcolm Little portrayed in the *Autobiography*.

Najee E. Muhammad benefitted from the subsequent appearance of three more letters from prison, compiled in an archive in 1999, for his rich analysis of Malcolm's grammar school and junior high education. One of these, a letter written just nine months into Malcolm's sentence, completely undermines his claim of illiteracy when he entered prison.⁵ This letter is not only well written, but it also describes his undertaking extensive writing projects during his earliest months in prison.

Charlestown, Mass
12/14/46

My Dear Sister

I'm writing this to let you know what I want for Xmas. At least I'm blunt - huh? I've worn my fountain pen completely out. That's what I need, a fountain pen and a pair of gloves (preferably mittens). You asked me two months ago what I wanted for Xmas, so don't go blowing your top, now that I've told you.

The pen, I need, because I still intend writing that book while I'm here. I've already started on it (several times) but I've had to destroy it because I wasn't satisfied with what I had accomplished.

Letter from Malcolm Little to Ella Collins, 14 Dec 1946. From the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (Malcolm X Papers, MSS117)

Muhammad also had DeCaro's text to draw upon, and he references an excerpt from Malcolm's 27 July 1947 letter—just twenty-one months into his sen-

tence—in which Malcolm pleads to be transferred to the only facility in the state system with an academic educational program. “I was terribly upset when the warden told me I wasn’t to be transferred,” Malcolm wrote. “My sole purpose for wanting to go to Norfolk was the educational facilities. . . .” Muhammad uses this letter, with other evidence, to build a convincing case that Malcolm’s successful school experience prior to incarceration, and his parents’ enduring commitment to the education of all their children, ensured a well-developed intellectualism in Malcolm well before he went to prison.⁶

These findings, along with several blatant chronological errors in the *Autobiography*, require a revisiting of Malcolm’s prison years. So why has this not happened? In fairness to DeCaro and Muhammad, the prison years were not the focus of their work, and neither had enough supporting material at the time, even if it had been. But I believe even more important than alternative scholarly interests or the absence of evidentiary support, it is the broad appeal of the dominant narrative of Malcolm’s life across the political spectrum, to which he contributed, that best explains the neglect of Malcolm’s prison years.

In December 2002, new primary source material appeared for the first time, making this re-examination almost inevitable. The collection contains, *inter alia*, fifteen original letters from prison never revealed to the public, nor referenced in any published work.⁷ Read in conjunction with the *Autobiography*, other biographies, and Malcolm’s prison and FBI files, these letters beg for a radical rethinking of the emergence of Malcolm X. His own letters contradict his claim of being barely literate. And they show that Malcolm was determined from the onset of his sentence to better himself through formal education. The new story revealed by these letters suggests new ways of interpreting other evidence of Malcolm’s intellectual development, such as his old friend and co-defendant Malcolm Jarvis’s comments about how the two men studied together extensively in prison, and how they valued education as a form of political resistance.

The untold story of how Malcolm pursued education in prison is also the story of how tens of thousands of prisoners have managed to access higher education for the first time in their lives, and to realize their latent intellectual talents by taking advantage of woefully rare opportunities for self-improvement in American prisons. It is the story of how so many Americans throughout the nation’s history have returned to society successfully after years of incarceration to live productive, sustaining, and even extraordinary lives.

There are at least nine published biographies of Malcolm’s life.⁸ The most recent of these, Manning Marable’s 2011 *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, deserves particular attention because it is the only one published since the appearance of the new prison letters. Marable realized the *Autobiography*’s shortcomings at the beginning of his research in 2005. “Nearly everyone writing about Malcolm

X . . . accepted *as fact* most, if not all, of the chronology of events and personal experiences” in the *Autobiography*.⁹ Marable would not make this mistake; perhaps he even went too far. His work has been criticized for substantiating details of Malcolm’s life from what some consider suspect sources, though Marable’s work undoubtedly corrects the historical record on many fronts.¹⁰ Nonetheless, he devotes just thirty pages of his 594-page work to the prison years, which repeats the narrative themes of the *Autobiography*.¹¹

Marable challenges what he calls the “inherent bias” of memoirs.¹² Others, in a similar vein, have gone even further, suggesting that the *Autobiography* is largely a work of propaganda for the Nation of Islam.¹³ There is not much evidence to support these criticisms. Like all successful memoirs, it has a good story to tell, but nothing suggests it was purposefully misleading. And if it was principally a propaganda tool, it would have involved a committee of writers, yet no one has seriously argued that anyone but Malcolm and Haley collaborated on the book. As such, the *Autobiography* is one of various sources I use to reconstruct Malcolm’s prison years, and while I question a number of its biographical details, I rely heavily on passages where Malcolm describes his feelings about his prison experiences that I can verify through other sources. These personal, value-laden comments help us understand who he was and why he chose to conduct himself as he did in prison.

I turn to a number of sources to suggest a new perspective on his life in prison: the totality of the letters Malcolm wrote from prison that have been made public through the two recent archives; Malcolm’s 147-page Massachusetts State Prison file; Norfolk Superintendent Howard Gill’s personal papers (released in September 2013); and Malcolm’s FBI file, that corroborates a few key details that undermine his tale of prolonged rebelliousness during the early prison years, a story that has been adopted almost *verbatim* in every major account of his life. Although this new evidence challenges how we remember Malcolm, it does not presume to settle who he “really” was or what he “really” believed. This essay presents a close account of Malcolm’s years in prison (1946 to 1952); it does not follow him into his years as a public figure or speculate about who he might have become had he not been assassinated. I share Michael E. Dyson’s critique of the tendency in so much contemporary scholarship based on weak claims that Malcolm was a closely aligned political “brother.”¹⁴ Consider Malcolm’s wonderfully self-deprecating comment just days before his death, in which he expresses his own doubts about his politics: “I’m man enough to tell you that I can’t put my finger on exactly what my philosophy is now,” he declared, “but I’m flexible.”¹⁵ And those who seek to dismiss or silence all that Malcolm had to say and stood for, because of some of his early, fiery rhetoric, should recall what he told photo-journalist Gordon Parks in an interview around the same time. “I did many things as a [Black] Muslim that I’m sorry for now,” Malcolm admitted. “That was a bad

scene, brother. The sickness and madness of those days—I'm glad to be free of them."¹⁶

THE MYTHS ABOUT MALCOLM'S PRISON YEARS

Malcolm was 20 years old in 1946 when he was ordered to begin his sentence at Massachusetts's only maximum-security prison, the notorious Charlestown prison, also known as Massachusetts State Prison.¹⁷ It was a tough place for a first-time offender, especially for a charge that could have easily carried a far shorter sentence. His eight-to-ten year sentence was unusually punitive given that his one prior arrest at age 19 was for surreptitiously pawning a relative's fur coat (for five dollars).¹⁸ The criminal justice system had apparently considered that first offense so minor that despite his failing to report to his probation officer for the entire one-year term of probation, the case was simply closed.

Charlestown Prison was particularly harsh. Built in 1805, it was an aged, unkempt facility, so bad that the state closed it in 1870, only to reopen it in 1884 due to overcrowding at other facilities.¹⁹ According to the 1920 annual report by the state's Commissioner of Corrections, Sanford Bates, Charlestown had no communal dining area; prisoners would eat alone in their cells, which, in turn, were made unsanitary by the absence of plumbing. They relieved themselves in small wooden buckets (the "bucket system") that remained in their cells along with their food scraps until the next round of cleaning.²⁰ Prisons like Charlestown are known to elicit poor behavior, and Malcolm's description in the *Autobiography* of how he reacted to the place suggests he played his part.

When I try to separate that first year-plus that I spent at Charlestown, it runs all together in a memory of nutmeg and the other semi-drugs, of cursing guards, throwing things out of my cell, balking in the lines, dropping my tray in the dining hall, refusing to answer my number—claiming I forgot it—things like that.²¹

In this excerpt—so frequently referenced in writing about Malcolm—we see the self-described "bad Malcolm," undisciplined and unruly. This image of the young Malcolm, both before and during his early years in prison sets the stage for the *Autobiography's* narrative of his dramatic transformation. When his older half-sister Ella Collins, whom he respected dearly, sent him money in prison to help with his basic needs, he claims he wasted it on drugs. He was getting high so often, he said, and acting out so much, that during his first year in prison, "I tested the legal limit on how much time one could be kept in solitary."²² He says he was called "Satan"—a chapter title in the *Autobiography*—because his language was so foul.

The *Autobiography's* rendition of Malcolm's lengthy sentence is just one of the narrative's many inconsistencies. On the one hand, it is cited as evidence of the institutionalized racism of the legal system. On the other hand, by playing up Malcolm's formidable, illicit lifestyle as a street hustler and his outrageous misbehavior in prison to establish his bad character, the unfairness of his sentence seems to be minimized.

A first point of departure from this script is knowing that Malcolm's risky lifestyle at the time of his arrest was really an aberrant five-year period in his late adolescence (from 1940 to early 1946), following the abrupt dissolution of his family. Though his father had died violently when Malcolm was just six (on 28 September 1931), his mother kept the family together for almost another eight years, until he turned 13, at which point Malcolm and his six siblings were separated and sent to foster care following Louise Little's commitment to a mental institution in Kalamazoo, Michigan in January 1939.²³ Certainly until his father's death, by all accounts, the Little family was disciplined and structured, and while they encountered many real challenges associated with the overt racism of 1930s America, Malcolm did quite well in grade school and was liked. Louise, who was always the family's education advocate, managed to keep Malcolm engaged in school years after his father was gone, such that he was voted class president in his predominantly white school in the seventh grade in 1937.²⁴ He spent just under one year in foster care, starting in August 1939, before visiting his stepsister Ella Collins in Boston in 1940, and then moving in with her the next year, when he was 15.²⁵ Living with Ella in Boston was Malcolm's first experience of big-city street life—going out to nightclubs, getting drunk and high at late-night parties, and engaging in a variety of petty, illicit activities to support his lifestyle, which no longer included school. The move to Boston occurred four years before he committed the burglary that resulted in his incarceration.²⁶

A second, even more damning challenge to the *Autobiography's* version of Malcolm's prison years is that even though the behaviors he describes may be typical in prisons like Charlestown, official documents make clear he did not partake in them. Most prisons maintain detailed files that describe an individual's activities throughout his or her incarceration. These files include prisoner work assignments, therapeutic programs and, of course, "incident reports." Prison officials refer to these periodically to review treatment plans, assess progress, and provide evidence of rehabilitation for consideration by parole commissioners. These files have unfortunate shortcomings for understanding an individual's prison experience. For example, while minor infractions typically garner pages of text, surprisingly little space is devoted to the instructors' evaluations of an inmate's skills, attitude, or accomplishments. Yet Malcolm's prison file, as well as his July 1947 letter to prison officials, which was saved in his file and referenced in at least three

treatments of his life, and another December 1946 letter to his family, appearing for the first time in the 1999 archive, make one thing irrefutably clear: Malcolm was a model of composure throughout his six years inside.²⁷ Yes, he performed his work assignments slowly at times, intentionally, to effect a change in his work assignment; and after his religious conversion he refused practices that conflicted with Islam, but he was punished only once (and very lightly). He never engaged in combative, violent, or disruptive behavior and was certainly never sent to solitary, as he had claimed. Indeed, he received no more than a minor admonition during his entire six years behind bars. There is more. It is not only that he displayed extreme self-control and equanimity, a prison record as clean as Malcolm's suggests someone with aspirations too important to risk. That he was locked up at such a young age makes the maturity of his character, as reflected in his behavior, all the more impressive and noteworthy.

With this understanding of prison life, even Malcolm's single infraction during his first year requires a reimagining of him as a young man. At Charlestown he was admonished for the minor offense of "shirking," for which he was "placed in detention three days and work changed."²⁸ Based on his 14 December 1946 letter to Ella—one of the three letters seen for the first time in the 1999 archive—this infraction is more likely an example of calculated resistance. The punishment got him what he wanted, a switch of work assignment to something more favorable. One month after he was moved to the foundry, he wrote to Ella, "The work is a little harder and very much dirtier, but I don't have any of those prejudiced, narrow-minded instructors messing with me now."²⁹ Moreover, during that first year—perhaps within the first six months—Malcolm requested to be interviewed by the recruiting delegation from the Norfolk Penal Colony, explicitly *because of* its well-known educational resources.³⁰ He had expressed the same intent in an early letter to Ella, pleading, "Are you still going to get me transferred to Norfolk?"³¹

When he was not selected for Norfolk during that first interview, Malcolm wrote to the state's commissioner of prisons to request a second interview, pointing to his clean institutional record to bolster his case. "I've been confined for eighteen months now and my record is clean."³² This time his appeal was granted and he was moved out of Charlestown. However, because he was not moved to Norfolk, but rather to the Concord Reformatory, a prison without a school, Malcolm remained unrelenting in his transfer requests. In a letter dated 28 July 1947, he reminds Commissioner Dwyer that he had been led to believe that if he was well behaved, his request to be transferred to Norfolk would be granted. It took one more request before he finally succeeded. On Thursday, 25 March 1948, Malcolm was interviewed by the Norfolk board and granted the transfer.³³ Such determined pursuit of education from the earliest days of his incarceration is not characteristic of the *Autobiography's* hapless and undirected young Malcolm.

To Mr. Dwyer
 Number Norfolk Prison Colony, Department of Corrections, Concord
 City State House Boston State Mass.

DEF AUG 4
 MASSACHUSETTS

Mr. Dwyer,

A year ago, while an inmate of Charlestown State Prison, I was interviewed by the Norfolk Board. I was terrible upset when the warden told me that I wasn't to be transferred so I wrote to you for consideration. I was rewarded with another interview from the Board. After re-hearing my plea they told me that I would be transferred and in the meantime to keep a clean record. Well, I've kept my record clean and, instead, they've sent me here at Concord. My sole purpose for wanting to go to Norfolk was the educational facilities that aren't in these other institutions. It

Malcolm Little letter to Mr. Dwyer, 28 July 1947. Prison file of Malcolm Little, Massachusetts Department of Corrections, p. 43

In fact, the *Autobiography* contains none of this information. Nor does Malcolm revise it later in his life. Neither he nor Haley ever mentions his requests and appeals for the Norfolk transfer. Rather, he implies that his arrival at Norfolk was simply good fortune. There is just one, misleading reference in the *Autobiography* to this episode. In a passage describing his surprise that his brothers and sisters had converted to Islam, he says, “Independently of all this, my sister Ella had been steadily working to get me transferred to the Norfolk Prison Colony.” “Somehow,” he continues, “Ella’s efforts on my behalf were successful in late 1948.”³⁴ He does not mention in the *Autobiography* how he had implored Ella in his letters repeatedly to intervene on his behalf: “Are you still going to get me transferred to Norfolk? . . . If you get me transferred to Norfolk, I’ll try and complete that whole book next year. . . . I only hope you don’t stop trying to get me transferred to Norfolk.”³⁵

Beyond knowing how Malcolm actually spent his time in prison, understanding what was driving his relentless quest for formal education tells us something about what education meant to him. The record reviewed thus far describes how Malcolm resisted temptations to misbehave in prison because he believed this would earn him access to higher education. The explanation of his old friend and co-defendant Malcolm Jarvis, that the two young men saw educating themselves as a form of resistance to their incarceration, as so many incarcerated people do, is especially striking in light of the power of his rhetoric. Even at the moment of their sentencing, as Jarvis recalled:

Malcolm and I couldn't believe that society had put us away the way they had, and we were just two people out to rebel against it. In our own way. Now *the only way we knew how to rebel was to cram some knowledge into our brains*, so when we went back to society we wouldn't have to worry about ever going back to prison—*because we'd know too much and be too smart for that* (emphasis added).³⁶

NORFOLK PENAL COLONY: AN EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESSIVE INCARCERATION

Malcolm was interested in being sent to the Norfolk Penal Colony because of its unusual educational opportunities. This was the talk among prisoners. What he could not have known was the full extent of the radical challenge to historical notions of corrections promoted by Norfolk Superintendent Howard Gill, whose commitment to education grew out of his own extensive education. A graduate of Harvard, where he majored in sociology, and Harvard Business School, Gill's only previous encounter with prisons was a 1931 survey for the Department of Justice.³⁷ He was a true reformist outsider.

Norfolk of the 1940s and 1950s was among a small number of prisons in U.S. history that provided a genuine alternative to punitive corrections. Its distinction could be considered ideological on several fronts. Opened in June 1927, it was the embodiment of early 20th-century Enlightenment thinking about human development, inasmuch as any prison could stake such a claim. Norfolk's architects, Superintendent Howard Gill among them, believed their blueprints would revolutionize the outcomes of confinement and overcome what had become the accepted failure of prisons to rehabilitate. "To attempt to apply these techniques in a prison of the Pennsylvania or Auburn type," declared Gill, "would be like asking a modern surgeon to operate on the kitchen table."³⁸

While prisoners had to be selected for Norfolk from other facilities, this did not necessarily mean, in contrast to Malcolm's understanding, that only the best behaved would be admitted. Again, what made the Norfolk experiment unique was the belief that a well-designed prison program could literally change people.

Its staff evaluations of prospective recruits from Charlestown, for example, exhibit an almost zealot-like adherence to the Norfolk approach. They would accept the most recalcitrant men from the maximum-security prisons because they believed Norfolk's regime to be infallible.³⁹

Gill's challenge included doing away with the usual defining practices of prisons at that time such as isolation, prisoner uniforms, and even metal bars, which he was convinced were responsible for the institutions' historical failures. In a pamphlet introducing Norfolk to the state legislators, he highlighted the regimen's distinctions.

They are sleeping in ordinary houses behind unlocked doors with no bars on the windows. There is not a gun in the place. At the beginning, failure was widely predicted, but thus far the experiment has proven a striking success.⁴⁰

To appreciate Norfolk at that time, one has to imagine a kind of institution that does not currently exist in the United States, something between the university and today's conventional lockdown prison.

In that brief era of progressive U.S. corrections, there were others who supported Gill's ideological claims. The preeminent American criminologist Cressey Sutherland heralded the Norfolk Penal Colony as the nation's first community prison; staff and prisoners called it the honor camp. This was not lost on Malcolm. He refers to Norfolk admiringly in the *Autobiography*. What struck him most clearly was its intellectual culture.

The Colony was, comparatively, a heaven in many respects. . . . [It] represented the most enlightened form of prison that I have ever heard of. . . . A high percentage of the Norfolk Prison Colony inmates went in for "intellectual" things, group discussions, debates, and such.⁴¹

Gill encouraged this culture by brokering institutional ties to the Massachusetts Department of Education to supplement the higher education opportunities Norfolk could not provide on its own. In its inaugural year, Norfolk made it possible for its eighty-nine student-prisoners to enroll in university-level correspondence courses.⁴² The following exchange between a Norfolk instructor and his supervisor about a particular student provides a telling glimpse into Norfolk's academic culture in the early 1930s.

Question:

Is he taking Engineering Thermo-Dynamics, and with what purpose?

Reply:

He says the mathematical part of the course is too much for him.⁴³

Gill's commitment to his educational ideals is reflected in how he reallocated the prison's budget. Whereas most prison administrators invest large sums in secu-

city infrastructure and very little in the physical resources necessary to support innovative programs, this calculus was reversed at Norfolk. In a 1931 report to the Commissioner of Corrections, Gill described how he addressed the inadequate school facilities at Norfolk. "This condition was somewhat relieved by the purchase of three discarded school buildings, each 25' x 35', with some miscellaneous equipment from the Boston School Department," he noted. "These provided a library and school office."⁴⁴ In most prisons today, "schools"—where they exist—are little more than a handful of unmarked rooms designated for occasional academic activities. The three dedicated school buildings inside Norfolk helped redefine Superintendent Gill's prison.

The Norfolk library was legendary throughout Massachusetts's prisons, and Malcolm mentions it in the *Autobiography*. It was jump-started by a donation from Massachusetts State Senator Lewis Parkhurst, who was also a significant donor to his *alma mater*, Dartmouth College. Those familiar with prisons might imagine the Norfolk library full of the usual old legal texts and a censored selection of novels. But they would be wrong. In his annual report to the Governor in 1931, almost 20 years before Malcolm's arrival at Norfolk, Gill describes it as containing "a very generous quantity of text books on academic subjects." And he continues,

Our collection of books now comprises some 2,700 volumes, and of this number approximately 400 have been added [in the last 13 months]. The Dewey system of cataloguing has been installed, and a thorough-going system of library administration put into affect.⁴⁵

Gill must have been thrilled to acquire the Parkhurst collection, given his singular focus on building a real school at the prison, but he was still not satisfied.

In addition to instituting a standardized cataloguing system at the Norfolk library and acquiring the Parkhurst donation, Gill formed a partnership with E. Kathleen Jones of the State Division of Public Libraries to make Norfolk's library a "branch of her Department," thereby guaranteeing borrowing privileges for incarcerated students.⁴⁶ Norfolk was the only prison in Massachusetts, or any of the state's sixteen other (and far less secure) corrections housing facilities at that time, with anything close to its educational resources.⁴⁷ Establishing a lending relationship between Norfolk and the state's library system was a concrete, practical step that expanded students' access to source material. It was also a powerful symbolic expression of Gill's interest in diminishing the separation of prisons from the larger society, and evidence of his astute institutional politics, absolutely essential to making good on his ambitious plans to provide meaningful education inside a prison.



**The Norfolk library. From the Howard Belding Gill papers, MS.1995.018,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College**

Given Norfolk's institutional resources and unusual day-to-day activities, it should come as no surprise that Malcolm's experiences there played an outsized role in his personal development. And yet, while the *Autobiography* describes his curiosity about its academic offerings, including his enthusiasm about debate, and even refers to the many books he read there, it omits any discussion about the depth of his participation in Norfolk's educational programs. Instead, he insists he was still too unprepared to have taken advantage of any such resources, and that when he arrived at Norfolk in the spring of 1948, he was too illiterate to make sense of what he was reading. "[E]very book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese," Malcolm claimed. "When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said."⁴⁸

Interestingly, by the end of his prison career, Howard Gill would change his entire perspective about the carceral enterprise, becoming even more radically progressive—a fascinating trajectory for anyone interested in larger questions about penal institutional practices. Gill came to the conclusion that only those convicted of the most serious crimes should be imprisoned, and even then for only limited periods, because the harm of such isolation and social exclusion in itself could not be alleviated by improvements to the regime.

I am sure you have to reach the emotions of men if you are going to reform them, that you have to reeducate men if you are going to influence their lives, that you have to teach men trades and

vocations, that you have to study them individually, that you must teach them how to live in groups, and that you must understand them medically and mentally. But I am convinced that you cannot do all these successfully in institutions.⁴⁹

Despite Gill's end-of-career cynicism, there can be little question that the prison routine Gill inspired did make a difference to Malcolm, as he attests, and was a salvation to the tens of thousands of other men who did time at Norfolk.

WAS BIMBI MALCOLM'S INTELLECTUAL INSPIRATION?

By misrepresenting the extent of Malcolm's personal network in prison, the *Autobiography* minimizes its importance in shaping who he became, as well as the structures and activities that nurtured his comrades' interests. Malcolm's personal relationship with Elijah Muhammad, through correspondence, is no doubt the most influential of Malcolm's prison years, and he credits the Nation of Islam (NOI) with providing direction to his life. But there were also others who have received far too little attention. The *Autobiography* mentions only one. Through an elaborate and compelling tale of his friendship and mentorship with a fellow prisoner nicknamed Bimbi, Malcolm explains how he readied himself for the critical teachings of Elijah Muhammed and he credits Bimbi with igniting his educational curiosity. As Malcolm tells it, it was Bimbi's public remark that he "had some brains," despite his acting the fool, that jolted him into his first real moment of self-reflection.⁵⁰ Then Malcolm followed Bimbi's advice to "take advantage of the prison correspondence courses and the library."⁵¹

While Malcolm never mentions him again during all the years of his public life, Bimbi has generated much attention from scholars and biographers. Most scholars believe Bimbi to be the nickname for John Elton Bemby ("Bemby" in his prison file), a man whose period of incarceration in Massachusetts overlapped with Malcolm's. Bemby was not interviewed before his death in 1989, and at least one scholar questions his identity altogether.⁵²

In the *Autobiography*, Bimbi is credited with single-handedly inspiring Malcolm's interest in education, thereby changing the course of Malcolm's life. Their fortuitous encounter is described as marking the moment when Malcolm ceases all the unruly behavior that supposedly characterized his first twelve to eighteen months in prison. One scholar's description of Bimbi as Malcolm's "educational catalyst" captures the way he is portrayed by countless others.⁵³ But given what is now certain about Malcolm's participation in educational activities during his first year in prison, the timing of their meeting, and Bimbi's role, are called into question.

The *Autobiography* describes their meeting at Charlestown prison in January 1947, though this date is almost certainly incorrect since Malcolm was transferred

out of Charlestown on January 10 of that year.⁵⁴ Malcolm's prison file shows that he completed several college-level correspondence courses during his first eleven months, while at Charlestown—Part I, “Elementary German” and Parts I-IV “Elementary Latin,” “with excellent marks” in Latin.⁵⁵ If he did not meet Bimbi until the beginning of 1947, then clearly he had begun studying in prison well before the two met. But as I've noted before, the *Autobiography* downplays his early educational activities at Charlestown. It refers only casually and without any detail to Malcolm's enrolling in a Latin course during that first year, and entirely fails to mention both the German course and Malcolm's earning through correspondence a diploma in Elementary English, after just sixteen months inside.

Though the precise dates of his early coursework are simply omitted in the *Autobiography*, the chronology of the two men's meeting indicates that its claim that they met *before* Malcolm enrolled in academic classes is probably false. This could be an innocent mistake; chronologies become dislodged from time as our memories reconstruct events to make sense of them retrospectively. Malcolm may have met Bimbi in early 1946, not 1947, in which case their friendship could have begun before he started any coursework, which would better support the substantive thrust of the *Autobiography*. Alternatively, as Crispin Sartwell suggests (though without citing sources) the two met at the Concord Reformatory—Malcolm's second prison—and not Charlestown, sometime between January 1947 and March 1948.⁵⁶ Though still inconclusive, this is the more likely scenario, given other circumstantial evidence, in which case Malcolm had already completed several correspondence courses and expressed his desire for more education prior to their meeting.

How does this scenario change our understanding of Bimbi's influence on Malcolm's intellectual life? Engaging in academic study in prison can be a lonely affair. It is also a defining occupation, requiring people to make choices about how and with whom they spend their time. Those who study in prison form clearly defined cohorts; they need each other and they protect one another's sacred space. Given Malcolm's decision to engage in this community of practice on his own, meeting Bimbi must have felt like an affirmation that he had finally found his community. Therefore, it might be more accurate to describe Bimbi as a supporting actor in Malcolm's drama, albeit a particularly important one—something I will return to—but not as the seminal spark igniting Malcolm's dormant intellectual curiosity.

As it turns out, Bimbi was one of several people with whom Malcolm interacted in prison to form a community of like-minded individuals who supported one another's intellectual interests. They formed the kind of sacred community in prison that progressive prison administrators hope to cultivate through specialized programs, and the kind of “family” that serves as a refuge for many incarcerated indi-

viduals, without which personal development in prison is a far greater challenge.

Malcolm describes Bimbi in the *Autobiography* as a kind of organic intellectual giant, a self-taught individual who was “the first man I had ever seen command total respect . . . with his words.”⁵⁷ Of Bimbi’s presence in the prison, Malcolm says, “Often . . . we would sit around, perhaps fifteen of us, and listen to Bimbi. Normally, white prisoners wouldn’t think of listening to Negro prisoners on anything, but guards, even, would wander over close to hear Bimbi on any subject.”⁵⁸ According to his nephew, Clinton Bembry, Bimbi’s rhetorical talents made him a favorite speaker at family events years after his release from prison.⁵⁹ Malcolm may even have felt a paternal closeness to Bimbi. As a young boy—and his father’s favorite among his six siblings—Malcolm attended church services and sometime-clandestine meetings of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), where he would listen to his father’s sermons and preaching about the black nationalist politics of Marcus Garvey.⁶⁰ Listening to Bimbi hold court in prison might have resurrected these childhood memories of powerful oratory; it was certainly not the first time Malcolm witnessed the power of words.

Bimbi’s charming personality and strong presence likely made him a formative member of Malcolm’s group, but he was not the only one. For example, Malcolm’s old friend, Malcolm Jarvis (nicknamed Shorty), describes how he and Malcolm would often study together at Norfolk. In one particularly colorful passage in his own biography, Jarvis remembers their amazement at learning about the danger of contracting trichinosis by eating inadequately cooked pork. He reflects, “I am still amazed at the subjects we delved into while in prison.”⁶¹ Jarvis describes bunking across the hall from Malcolm at Norfolk and being a student in music classes offered by Boston University’s extension school.⁶² Despite scant mention in the *Autobiography*, Malcolm refers to Jarvis in a letter to his brother Philbert that first appeared in 2002 with a casualness that suggests it was common knowledge the two were together: “Tell Reg [Reginald Little] that Jarvis was examined by the psycharitrist (I murdered that spelling) yesterday.”⁶³

According to Jarvis, Malcolm routinely provided feedback on the musical pieces Jarvis was composing. In the *Autobiography*, however, Malcolm distorts this history when he claims, “Later, I found out that in prison Shorty had studied musical composition.”⁶⁴ Why does Malcolm not only fail to mention the meaningful exchanges he had in prison with Jarvis, but also purposefully attempts to obscure them? Jarvis remarks on how the *Autobiography* misrepresents their relationship and suggests, forgivingly, that Haley “misunderstood” Malcolm. But given how Haley described Malcolm’s close attention to the text, this is hardly plausible.⁶⁵ A more credible explanation is that Malcolm’s rewriting (with Haley) of his prison connection to Jarvis is more consistent with the myth of the self-made man.

Finally, Malcolm's siblings, and his older brother Philbert Little, in particular, are another largely ignored influence on Malcolm during his imprisonment. Philbert and Malcolm had an ongoing correspondence about texts they were both reading on religion, politics, and more. It's even possible that the *Autobiography's* Bimbi character is an amalgam of the many individuals with whom Malcolm conversed during this formative period of his life—both in and out of prison—in a portrayal that further minimizes his extensive community of support.

MALCOLM'S ACTUAL EDUCATIONAL BIOGRAPHY

In the *Autobiography*, first published in 1965, thirteen years after his release from prison, Malcolm muses that he entered prison barely literate, "I practically couldn't read my handwriting myself."⁶⁶ But his 14 December 1946 letter to Ella Collins (eight months after starting his prison sentence) and released for the first time in the 1999 archive, demonstrates otherwise. This four-page letter is grammatically flawless, well organized, even poetic ("dark dreary walls"). In it he asks for a pen for Christmas to continue his literary work. "I've worn my fountain pen completely out," and continues, "I still intend writing that book while I'm here. I've already started on it several times, but I've had to destroy it, because I wasn't satisfied with what I had accomplished."⁶⁷

In addition to working on a book during his first nine months in prison, he had already written many other letters to Ella Collins. "I haven't written to you in a long time, because one day you mentioned something to me about my 'boring letter,' so now I write to you only when there is no other alternative."⁶⁸ There are other sources of early letters as well. Malcolm's nephew, Rodnell Collins, Ella's son, claims possession of two letters written prior to this one, dated 12 April 1946, and 10 September 1946.⁶⁹ The Collins letters—the two earliest letters I have found referenced anywhere—are not currently accessible in any public archive.

Malcolm's formal and informal literary practices during his first year in prison included college-level correspondence courses in German, Latin, and English; starting to write an autobiography; composing numerous personal letters; and his repeated written requests for a transfer. These activities consumed him and provide a plausible explanation for his previously unimagined good conduct during that first year. In the same letter to Ella, Malcolm tells her how "I almost broke my own code and lost my head last week. But I counted to ten, and was transferred the next day. One good thing you learn how to do while inside and that is how to use a little self control."⁷⁰ Hearing about the educational opportunities at the Norfolk Penal Colony gave him a purpose that organized his daily activities. But was he ever able to realize his academic ambitions?

'3'

~~read last week. But I wanted~~
~~to be, and was transferred the next~~
~~day. One good thing you learn~~
~~how to do what you're in for~~
~~and that is how to use a~~
~~little self-control. If you~~
~~get me transferred to Norfolk,~~
~~I'll try and complete that~~
~~school book next year. They~~
~~have a fine library down there,~~
~~and one can learn so ~~many~~~~
~~more different things. My only~~
~~reason for wanting to go, is the~~
~~library alone.~~

Jaci was over here to visit
 the last week. I wondered why
 you didn't come too. I also wonder
 if you're going to send me
 some more pictures. Reg says
 he left the ones that I was
 asking about there. They can
 brighten up my "suite" (smile).
 Are you still going to get
 me transferred to Norfolk? I'm
 reading in the forenoon now.
 The work is a little thicker and
 very much dirtier, but I don't
 have any of those prejudiced,
 narrow minded instructors mess-
 ing with me now. I almost
 make my own code and beat my

Letter from Malcolm Little to Ella Collins, 14 December 1946. From the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (Malcolm X Papers, MSS117)

When Malcolm was transferred to the Concord Reformatory after Charlestown, he took advantage of the opportunity to learn a useful trade, including carpentry, gardening, and raising poultry and rabbits.⁷¹ Part of why the 1940s is considered a progressive era in prison management is that prisoners could learn transferable skills for post-release employment. Both Concord and Norfolk even made it possible for the men to engage in economic activities with the public from behind the prison walls, by participating in an “avocation program” where they fabricated goods for sale to the public through a prison store. Prisoners at Norfolk would advertise their goods and services in the classified section of one of Norfolk’s periodicals, *The Colony*, which listed their names and cell locations. *The Colony* published twenty-four issues per year, bimonthly, with a \$1 annual subscription fee. The classified section included prisoners’ names, trade, perhaps a short advertising pitch, and cell location:

Wood Working “My Business—Not a Hobby,” Duke Gates, Unit 1–3.

Art Work, See or Write James X Gibson, Unit 6–3.⁷²

Malcolm learned practical skills at Concord. His nephew Rodnell Collins remembers receiving a gift of a “small table and chair he made in the prison workshop.”⁷³ Concord surely represented a significant improvement over Charlestown in daily comfort and opportunities. And it created the possibility of earning some money while incarcerated. The fact that Malcolm was nevertheless dissatisfied there speaks volumes about his ambition and commitment to formal education. We know that Malcolm received financial support from Ella while in prison.⁷⁴ He was never, as so many others were, left entirely on his own. He surely wanted to get away from the unhygienic and austere Charlestown facility, but more than the improved living conditions represented by facilities like Concord, he wanted access to an academic program.

Norfolk was the only facility in the state prison system that could offer Malcolm the opportunity to study formally. The story of his self-education in prison is mythical in several senses. His description of learning to read closely in prison is so moving that it has inspired perhaps the most trenchant detail of Malcolm folklore from his biographers. Who could fail to be inspired by a prisoner devoting himself entirely to literature? But the belief that his learning was a solitary activity—“self-directed learning,” as Andrew Smallwood writes—would require us to ignore his academic record while in prison.⁷⁵ The college-level coursework he undertook through correspondence during his first year at Charlestown was just the beginning. At Norfolk he took advantage of a depth of resources that would have been unimaginable at either Charlestown or Concord.

The full story of his formal schooling emerges from several disparate sources. This is, in part, due to sparse prisoner files, which include no information about what were considered “volunteer-operated” activities such as higher education programs supported by outside institutions. Malcolm’s prison file even fails to mention his participation in Norfolk’s renowned Debate Club, probably because it was led by a volunteer from the community.⁷⁶ Even though the prison’s annual reports to the Massachusetts governor describe such activities at Norfolk, including Debate Club, individual prisoner files don’t mention it and there is no official record of the men who participated—no attendance sheets or lists of names has been found.⁷⁷ Indeed, Malcolm’s prison file contains only the most limited qualitative detail about his two years of consistent schooling at Norfolk. There are no school papers or report cards, and scant comment or narrative assessments of his work from anyone. Therefore, the picture of his academic training in prison must be gleaned from other sources.

His prison file does contain a section called “academic history,” and in it there are five entries between May 1948, two months after he arrived at Norfolk, and February 1950, one month before he left.⁷⁸ He was enrolled in classes almost the entire time at Norfolk:

Elementary English and Rhetoric, from 5/12/1948 to unavailable
 Junior High, from 9/7/1948 to 1/15/1949
 Senior High, from 9/12/1949 to 1/4/1950
 Latin Part 1, from 2/15/1950 to unavailable (college level)
 The Great Books (no dates provided)⁷⁹ (college level)

Norfolk oversaw the operation of just three academic courses: “Elementary Academic Course, Intermediate Academic Course, and Junior High Course.”⁸⁰ Any course offerings beyond this would have had to be administered by an outside institution. Reflecting the prison’s progressive penal philosophy, only the Elementary Academic Course was mandatory. This makes any enrollment beyond the most basic level an indicator of the individual’s initiative in seeking an education. Norfolk’s unusual progressivism is also reflected in the fact that even the in-house, elementary, and high school level courses were staffed by trained teachers from the community, rather than by prison employees as was, and remains, the custom in most prisons.⁸¹

The first course listed in Malcolm’s academic history is likely the mandated elementary class, and perhaps being compulsory helps explain his mediocre final grade (“good”). He was surely overqualified for it, having already earned a diploma in Elementary English at Charlestown two years earlier. He then opted for the only two other courses Norfolk offered in-house, junior and senior high. These included subjects like geography and arithmetic.⁸² He did not perform well in these either, dropping one and being asked to leave the other before completion. The only instructor’s comment about him for these courses was “attitude poor.”⁸³

Still, Malcolm signed up for college courses. Program officials at Norfolk were committed to supporting anyone’s pursuit of higher education. The facility’s capacity to provide this opportunity appears to have evolved significantly, prior to Malcolm’s arrival. Writing about the academic resources at Norfolk in the academic year September 1931 to May 1932, over a decade before Malcolm’s time at Norfolk, Superintendent Gill reports that the correspondence courses were administered by the State Department of Education.⁸⁴ By the time Malcolm arrived at Norfolk in 1948, the University of Massachusetts had taken over this function through its extension program.⁸⁵

It remains uncertain whether the two college classes noted in Malcolm’s prison file—Latin Part 1 and Great Books—were offered through correspondence or on-site instruction. Misread sources by other scholars about this point fail to support either position.⁸⁶ The *Autobiography’s* reference to the presence of faculty from local universities, including “Harvard and Boston [u]niversities” seems to provide evidence that the classes were on-site, but it does not mention whether Malcolm participated, and again, his prison file contains nothing about visiting faculty from these institutions, but then, this is to be expected.⁸⁷

It is noteworthy that, having done poorly in the mandatory English class, Malcolm received “average to excellent” marks in Latin. He is said to have quit the Great Books discussion after attending fifteen of seventeen classes; the teacher’s final comment—“Had his own ideas but was ok.”⁸⁸—would surely have elicited one of Malcolm’s infamous wry smiles. I have not found sufficient source material to evaluate Malcolm’s performance in the college courses at Norfolk. Still, it is worth noting that program officials considered participation in these courses a significant challenge. Writing about another prisoner at Norfolk with a spotty academic history, who had, nonetheless, become interested in the correspondence program, the official opines, “He has not the ambition or persistence” to succeed.⁸⁹ Clearly, Malcolm was among a small group of exceptional students for whom Norfolk supported higher educational aspirations.

THE NORFOLK DEBATERS

Debate was one of the most exciting academic opportunities at Norfolk. Superintendent Gill had introduced debate in the early 1930s as an intentional effort to engage the men in intellectually stimulating rehabilitative activities. In its early years, under the leadership of Rev. John Arthur Samuelson, Norfolk debate teams apparently competed only among themselves.⁹⁰ But when Coleman Bender, the debate coach at nearby Emerson College, was invited by Samuelson to take over, Emerson and the Norfolk debate team made local news by romping powerhouses like Harvard and Yale. “All the biggies,” recalls Bender.⁹¹ The Norfolk debate team held its first competition against a private university in 1937 under Bender’s leadership.⁹² Because of the legacy and competitiveness of debate at Norfolk, it must be considered among the most important intellectual experiences Malcolm had there.

From the mid-1930s to the 1950s the “Norfolk Debaters” competed against visiting teams from Harvard, Yale, Williams, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia, Princeton, Holy Cross, Emerson, Boston University, Oxford, Cambridge, McGill, and other major universities, and more often than not, they won.⁹³ As Bender remembers, “We were part of their annual circuit.”⁹⁴ The Norfolk team consisted of one to two dozen members, and according to Bender, competitions often drew crowds of hundreds of prisoners out of a total facility population of approximately 800.⁹⁵ Sheer volume of attendees does not arguably imply the relative value of debate in the prison, since there is so little else of interest to compete for the community’s attention; and even small treats such as special meals or movies attract widespread interest. But only debate created the opportunity for prisoners to command the admiring attention of large crowds, including outsiders, with their intelligent arguments and practiced rhetoric. Debate competitions have always been one of very few ways to dispel timeless myths of prisoners’ intellectual deficits.

According to the *Autobiography*, Malcolm was enthralled by the seriousness of debate culture at Norfolk. And soon enough, as anyone who ever heard him speak might imagine, he became actively involved. He describes the debaters as local celebrities, including perhaps himself. As Jarvis recalled, when Malcolm began debating, his “name and fame began spreading among the prison population, and that’s when the population started to grow at the debating classes.”⁹⁶ Malcolm’s one almost breathless account in the *Autobiography* about his debating career at Norfolk captures its paramount significance for him.

I will tell you that, right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been. Standing up there, the faces looking at me, things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling it right, then I had won the debate—once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating.⁹⁷

Malcolm’s involvement on the debate team also included writing articles for *The Colony*, such as his January 1949 piece on capital punishment. Though lacking the religious references he later began weaving deftly into his lectures, even at this early stage in his literary career, Malcolm had refined a style of writing that combined references to experts with appeals to moral righteousness to construct one of his classic, utterly convincing arguments.

Bender recalled his wife as invariably more attuned to the politics of his prison debate work than he was.⁹⁸ During debate season, Bender held two training sessions a week at Norfolk. Mrs. Bender arranged an hour-long “tea time” after each competition for her invited guests of legislators, judges, and other influential people, so that they could mingle casually with the Norfolk debaters. The intensity of the practice schedule, the high stakes of the competition, and the presence of important outside guests all play a significant part in defining the total experience of incarceration for those who participate in debate. In a space with so few intensive, collaborative, and enriching activities, a prison debate club is often, as it was for Malcolm, a defining life experience.

As recorded in *The Harvard Crimson*, over the sixteen-year period from 1936 to 1952, the Norfolk team had an amazing record of 44 wins to 15 losses.⁹⁹ Malcolm was at Norfolk from 1948 to 1950. Hundreds of college students from some of the most prestigious universities in the United States visited Norfolk during this period to compete against prisoners, not to study them. The dynamics of these interactions structured through debate competitions must have helped to normalize these years in Malcolm’s life, despite his being incarcerated. The notoriety of the debate club helped to attract the attention of new college faculty. Bender remembers Boston University professors beginning to visit and provide instruction in the writing and art programs, and it was typical for debate club members

to participate in these classes. The faculty members who taught in the Boston University Music Extension program at Norfolk that Jarvis participated in were first exposed to the facility through the debates.

Malcolm's official prison record makes no mention of his involvement with the debate team, nor even the existence of debate at all among what it presents as the exhaustive list of program offerings. Different parts of the record even contain contradictory summaries of his academic history.¹⁰⁰ Such omissions and distortions highlight the evidentiary limits of prison administrative files and help to explain why crucial parts of Malcolm's story have been ignored for so long.

CONCLUSION

Unearthing and acknowledging the real story of Malcolm's academic ambitions and achievements requires us to confront complexities more significant than the absence of reliable records or the fallibility of memory. Malcolm and Alex Haley told a compelling story in the *Autobiography*, beautifully crafted to appeal to a timeless cultural sensibility. We want desperately to believe the *Autobiography's* narrative because it is a cherished story of what Malcolm and the NOI referred to as "the resurrection of the dead."¹⁰¹ Despite how Malcolm X would be maligned in his short life by much of white America and many African Americans as well, even though he committed his life to anti-racism, the story of his solitary self-improvement in prison is a persuasive version of the classic American "bootstrap story." Its mythical qualities are particularly dangerous today.

From the civil rights era to the present, roughly from the presidencies of Richard M. Nixon to Barack Obama, the conservative turn in American politics has been grounded in selling the inefficiencies, defectiveness, or outright bankruptcy of public institutions. We are seeing the commitment to this position most recently by President Donald Trump who promises to downsize major governmental agencies. To assure this self-fulfilling prophecy, progressive ideas and values have been debunked and investment in basic institutions—notably public education—has been derailed, in favor of privatization. Individual heroes have always had a compelling legacy in the American social imagination, from reverence for the frontier and manifest destiny to those who have made their way out of poverty; indeed, today this often seems to be the only politically viable story about how to realize "the American dream." That attention to and investment in quality educational programs inside prisons could actually produce effective interventions in the lives of the incarcerated, as indeed was the case for Malcolm X and countless others, challenges the foundation of this entire regressive political ideology. Malcolm's extraordinary academic and intellectual achievements in prison against

all odds, far more than how he and Haley chose to present his story, perhaps best explains why this aspect of his story has been lost for so long.

The history of the Norfolk Penal Colony and Malcolm's education there provide an important counter-narrative to political ineffectiveness and some Americans seem poised to hear it. Rhetorically at least, there is discussion of bipartisan support for reversing mass incarceration. Though it is too soon to say what outcomes we will see at the national level, several states have taken decisive steps to undo the 40-year trend of mass incarceration begun in the 1970s. A handful of state correctional systems—namely, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and even Mississippi—are undertaking ambitious higher education programs in prisons, albeit so far in only a small fraction of each state's facilities.¹⁰² What role these experimental programs are playing in shifting trends has not been given the serious attention that Malcolm's prison experience suggests they deserve. It is worth remembering that years before Malcolm became a student there, it was the presence of just one facility with college programming in the state system that provided meaningful direction to Malcolm's later life.

What the story of Malcolm's formal education in prison means about how we remember him is even more complicated. Consider how his story has been resurrected in recent years through popular culture, from Spike Lee's blockbuster film to operas, stamps, and, perhaps most importantly, Hip-Hop culture. It is Malcolm, more than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but also, interestingly enough, more than avowed radicals Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, or Fred Hampton, who most symbolizes and speaks to the struggles of young, displaced, and working class African Americans today.

Some have explained Malcolm's popular appeal as class-identification. His humble childhood, his time in the streets, and his prison experience make his life uniquely relevant. This is likely part of the explanation, but shared experience alone does not always create solidarity. In his eulogy to Malcolm, Ossie Davis picks up on Malcolm's extraordinary capacity to connect with people. Davis describes an inimical communicative style that endeared him, even to those who disagreed with him.¹⁰³ There is something about his entrancing, razor-sharp social critiques, delivered with a rhetorical eloquence crafted through years of study and practice that gives him an almost transcendent appeal to today's young people, as it did among his contemporaries. This is the same youth culture described by philosophers such as Cornell West as nihilistic, by sociologists such as John Ogbu as rejecting school success as "acting white," and by urban ethnographers such as Elijah Anderson as celebrating violence. Malcolm's real, complete life story was anything but a celebration of random violence, anti-intellectualism, or, least of all, despair.¹⁰⁴

For contemporary struggles for economic and political justice for the socially disadvantaged, embracing *this* Malcolm X—and here one must consider the 99

percent movement and Black Lives Matter—could provide a tangible way forward. It is an old story and a powerful one. The answer to the kind of extreme social displacement foisted upon poor, racialized minorities in the United States since the 1970s is not awaiting individual heroism; rather, as Malcolm's life reveals, by investing in institutions that provide some hope, in even the most desperate of those spaces, it becomes possible to create the conditions for radical personal and community transformation.

NOTES

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¹Ossie Davis, "Eulogy to Malcolm," in Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1965), 466.

²Manning Marable discovered "930 books, 360 films and internet educational resources, and 350 sound recordings" about Malcolm X while researching his 2011 biography, see Manning Marable, "Rediscovering Malcolm's Life: A Historian's Adventure in Living History," *Souls* 7, no. 1 (2005): 26.

³Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, publisher's frontispiece.

⁴Prison File of Malcolm Little, Massachusetts Department of Corrections. The file contained six letters written by Malcolm, dated 28 July 1947; 18 March 1950; 18 April 1950; 6 June 1950; 13 December 1950; 6 June 1951 (hereafter X Prison File).

⁵Malcolm Little to Ella Collins, 14 December 1946. Malcolm X Papers, 1940–1990, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, box 1, folder 16 (hereafter Wright MX Collection).

⁶Malcolm Little to Mr. Dwyer, Norfolk Prison Colony, 28 July 1947. X Prison File, 43, in Najee E. Muhammad, "The Educational Development of Malcolm X," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (2002): 243.

⁷The Malcolm X Collection and Papers, Sc MG 721, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation. This collection contains the largest quantity of Malcolm's personal letters written during the period of his incarceration (hereafter Schomburg MX archive). Another, smaller collection of his letters appeared for the first time in 1999 on loan to Emory College, see Malcolm X collection, Special Collections Department, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. The exhibition remained at Emory for just one year before being taken back by its original owner and then subsequently loaned to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan in 2011, where it remains today; see Wright MX Collection. The full record of Malcolm's prison experience has revealed other family and friends to whom Malcolm wrote extensively, such as Bertha and Wesley; mentioned in Malcolm Little letter, month unknown 1948, 2 in Schomburg MX archive, though these letters have not yet been located. In the published version of Malcolm's FBI file there is an excerpt from a letter dated 29 January 1950, the same date as a letter contained in the Schomburg MX archive, but it is not the same letter; see Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York, 1991), 101.

⁸Marable Manning, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York, 2011); Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of the Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY 1991); John Henrik Clarke *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times* (Trenton, NJ 1969); Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Chicago, IL 1973); Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York, 1996); William Strickland, *Malcolm X: Make it Plain* (New York, 1994); Rodnell P. Collins, *Seventh Child: A Family Memoir of Malcolm X* (Secaucus, NJ 1998); George Breitman, *Malcolm X: the Man and His Ideas* (New York, 1965).

⁹Marable, "Rediscovering Malcolm's Life," 26.

¹⁰See, for example, Jared Ball and Todd Stevens Burroughs, eds., *A Lie of Reinventions: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X* (Baltimore, MD 2012).

¹¹For a critical assessment of the Marable biography and other recent works on Malcolm X, see “Book Forum: Reflections on the Legacy of Malcolm X,” *Journal of African American History* 98 (Fall 2013): 562–606.

¹²Marable, “Rediscovering Malcolm’s Life,” 20–35.

¹³Muhammad, “The Educational Development,” 244.

¹⁴Michael Dyson, “Who Speaks for Malcolm X? The Writings of Just About Everybody,” *The New York Times*, 29 November 1992. See also, James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY, 1991).

¹⁵Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 436.

¹⁶One of several interviews with Parks, 19 February 1965 (www.malcolm-x.org/docs/int_parks.htm).

¹⁷X Prison File, 94.

¹⁸X Prison File, 18 and 103. The next arrest in his record, on 15 January 1946, was related to the breaking and entering charges in late February 1945, which resulted in his one prison term.

¹⁹Walter H. Commons, “Official Manual of the State Prison Colony,” in Carl R. Doering, *A Report on the Development of Penological Treatment at Norfolk Penal Colony in Massachusetts* (New York, 1940), 4.

²⁰As quoted in Thomas Yahkub, “A History of the State Prison Colony,” in Doering, *A Report on the Development*, 71.

²¹Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 156.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Manning Marable and Garrett Felber, *The Portable Malcolm X Reader* (New York, 2013), 23–33; and, Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File*, 58.

²⁴Strickland, *Malcolm X*; Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*.

²⁵Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File*, 58. In the prison file there is suggestion he was living in foster care from 1936–1939 (X Prison File, 100). He may have done so sporadically during this period, though I have found no other evidence to support this.

²⁶Malcolm told the police investigator he and his crew committed the first home burglary on 11 December 1945 (X Prison File, 22).

²⁷Little to Dwyer, 28 July 1947. This letter was referenced in DeCaro, *On the Side*, 81; Strickland, *Malcolm X*, 62; Muhammad, *The Educational Development*, 245; see also Malcolm Little letter 14 December 1946 in box 1, folder 16, Wright MX Collection.

²⁸This happened in November 1946 (X Prison File, 34).

²⁹Little to Ella Collins, 14 December 1946, in box 1, folder 16, Wright MX Collection.

³⁰In the letter dated 28 July 1947 to Dwyer, he writes, “A year ago, while an inmate of Charlestown State Prison, I was interviewed by the Norfolk Board.” If it were really one year prior this would mean he was interviewed in July 1946.

³¹Little to Collins, November 1946.

³²Little to Dwyer, 28 July 1947.

³³Little to Ella Collins, 28 March 1948, in box 1, folder 17, Wright MX Collection.

³⁴Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 160

³⁵Little to Collins, 14 December 1946, just nine months into his prison sentence.

³⁶Malcolm Jarvis, quoted in Strickland, *Malcolm X*, 62.

³⁷Walter H. Commons, “Official Manual of the State Prison Colony,” in Doering, *A Report on the Development*, 4.

³⁸Howard Gill, “The Norfolk State Prison Colony at Massachusetts,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 22, no. 1 (1931): 108.

^{39a}“Prisoner Behavior Evaluations,” February 1929, Box 63, Folder 24, Howard Belding Gill Papers, MS.1995.018, John J. Burns Library, Boston College (hereafter Gill Papers.)

^{40a}“The New Prison at Norfolk Mass (1932),” box 63, folder 24, Gill Papers.

⁴¹Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 160–61.

^{42a}“Education, academic year Sept 1931–May 1932,” box 63, folder 4, Gill Papers.

^{43a}“Job Report,” box 64, folder 6, Gill Papers.

^{44a}“To the Commissioner of Correction, Oct. 1 1931,” box 64, folder 6, Gill Papers.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

^{47a}“Statistical Report of the Commissioner of Correction for the year ending December 31, 1946,” Gill Papers.

⁴⁸Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 174–75.

⁴⁹See Howard Gill, "One Hundred Years of Penal Progress," in *The Prison Journal* 25 (1945): 12–21.

⁵⁰Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 178.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 157.

⁵²John Bembry died at 77 years old, on 29 November 1989, in New York City; Social Security Administration (SSA), *Social Security Death Index*, database, Ancestry.com, accessed 19 November 2015. In 1981, Ferruccio Giambino interviewed a man claiming to be a fellow inmate of Malcolm's at all three Massachusetts prisons who said that Bembry's real name—"his first name or his family name"—was Alexander; see Gambino, "The Transgressions of a Laborer: Malcolm X into the Wilderness of America," *Radical History Review* 55, no. 1 (1993): 7–31. Both the anonymity of Giambino's informant and the lack of corroboration make this counter-narrative inconclusive, though this is the only reference to Bimbi's possible identity that I have found outside *The Autobiography*.

⁵³Muhammad, *The Educational Development*, 244

⁵⁴"I met him in 1947, at Charlestown," Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 156. "It had really begun in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge"; *ibid.*, 174. See also, X Prison File, 29, 35.

⁵⁵X Prison File, 99, 145; Malcolm Little letter, 28 July 1947. He refers to the diploma in English in his letter to Dwyer though he does not specify where he was when he received it, but it appears that only correspondence courses were available at Charlestown.

⁵⁶Crispin Sartell, *Extreme Virtue: Truth and Leadership in Five Great American Lives* (New York, 2003), 113.

⁵⁷Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 157.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 156–57.

⁵⁹Clinton Bembry to the author, January 2015.

⁶⁰DeCaro, *On the Side*, 40, writes, "The Little household laid the foundation for the critical aspects of Malcolm's later ideas . . . intelligence was an especially admirable trait, and he respected learned people. No doubt this was a reflection of his early exposure to Garveyite meetings, which Malcolm remembered as intelligent, purposeful, and organized. . . ."

⁶¹Malcolm Jarvis, *The Other Malcolm—"Shorty" Jarvis* (Jefferson, NC 2001), 87.

⁶²Jarvis, *The Other*, 8.

⁶³Letter to Philbert (no day) February 1949 in box 3, folder 1, Schomburg MX archive.

⁶⁴Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 195.

⁶⁵Jarvis, *The Other*, 195.

⁶⁶Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 172.

⁶⁷Malcolm Little letter 14 December 1946, in Wright MX Collection, 1.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 1–2. In addition, Malcolm's childhood friend, Cyril McGuire, told an interviewer there were times he received letters from Malcolm "every week," in which he "vividly described prison life"; see Strickland, *Malcolm X*, 59.

⁶⁹Collins, *Seventh Child*, 71 and 72.

⁷⁰Malcolm Little letter 14 December 1946, in Wright MX Collection.

⁷¹"Avocational Programs," box 64, folder 6, Gill Papers.

⁷²"Program Chart," box 64, folder 6, Gill Papers.

⁷³Collins, *Seventh Child*, 71.

⁷⁴Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 156.

⁷⁵Andrew P. Smallwood, "The Intellectual Creativity and Public Discourse of Malcolm X: A Precursor to the Modern Black Studies Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 248–263.

⁷⁶Investigative journalist team Natasha Haverty and Adam Bright have collected oral histories from many of the Norfolk debaters in an absolutely remarkable and wonderful series of interviews. They tell the story of their work here: http://masshumanities.org/ph_stories-from-the-norfolk-prison-debate-team/

⁷⁷*Official Manual of the State Prison Colony, 1934*; Gill Papers.

⁷⁸X Prison File, 145

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰Commons, "Official Manual," 53.

⁸¹"Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Corrections, State Prison Colony, Superintendent's Report", 1930, 1932, box 63, folder 24, Gill Papers.

⁸²Edwin Powers in Doering, *A Report on the Development*, 256.

⁸³X Prison File, 99.

⁸⁴"Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Corrections State Prison Colony Superintendent's report,"

1930, 1932, box 63, folder 24, Gill Papers.

⁸⁵Commons, "Official Manual," 53. This text refers to the school as the "State University Extension Program," a program that has since been replaced.

⁸⁶Robert Branham seems to validate the claim made in the *Autobiography* that these courses were taught on-site by Harvard faculty when he writes, "Norfolk placed particular emphasis on prisoner education, including evening academic and vocational courses with instructors drawn from Harvard, Boston University, Emerson College and other nearby institutions. 'Beyond these formal courses of education,' writes Colony historian Thomas Yahkub, 'the administration encouraged participation in debate clubs, lectures, forums. . ..'" See Robert James Branham, "'I Was Gone on Debating': Malcolm X's Prison Debates and Public Confrontations," *Argumentation and Advocacy* (Winter 1995): 120. Andrew Smallwood references this entire excerpt from Branham as evidence of his claim that Malcolm took courses from visiting faculty. But Branham's use of sources is misleading. In the Branham references from Yahkub, the colony historian is actually referring to the basic on-site academic and vocational courses and the correspondence courses through the State Department of Education, not any courses taught by outside faculty from visiting universities; see Doering, *A Report on the Development*, 100. The original excerpt reads: the academic and vocational classes "were limited to elementary and junior high school and the latter were mostly related to construction work then in progress at Norfolk. Men were thus getting a kind of training through related classes. Through the co-operation of the State Department of Education the inmates were able to take correspondence courses in bookkeeping and accounting, etc. Besides these formal courses of education. . . ." Branham thus elides references resulting in a potentially inaccurate description.

⁸⁷"A variety of classes was taught there by instructors who came from places such as Harvard and Boston universities"; Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 176.

⁸⁸X Prison File, 145.

⁸⁹Edwin Powers in Doering, *A Report on the Development*, 258.

⁹⁰Branham, "I Was Gone," 120-121.

⁹¹Coleman Bender, telephone interview with the author, 12 February 2012.

⁹²There appears to be some uncertainty about the debate coach's identity during Malcolm's time at Norfolk. Branham references Gambino to assert his claim it was Rev. John Arthur Samuelson; see Branham, "I Was Gone," 121. But Gambino's claim is made on a very unlikely personal note from the Reverend claiming, "During the time I was the Protestant Chaplain at Norfolk, the blacks seemed to be a minority who had little or no contact with my activities," Gambino, *The Transgression*, 28 n.35). Malcolm's debating notoriety throughout the prison makes it nearly impossible for Samuelson to make such a claim were he there when Malcolm was debating.

⁹³Branham, "I Was Gone," 121-22.

⁹⁴Personal interview, February 2012.

⁹⁵*Statistical Report of the Commissioner of Correction for the year ending December 31, 1952*. Gill Papers.

⁹⁶As quoted in Branham, "I Was Gone," 123.

⁹⁷Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography*, 187.

⁹⁸Coleman Bender interview.

⁹⁹J. Anthony Lukas, "Norfolk Convicts Boast Lopsided Record Against Harvard, Other College Debaters," *The Harvard Crimson*, 5 December 1952.

¹⁰⁰X Prison File, 99 and 145.

¹⁰¹V. P. Franklin, "Malcolm X and the Resurrection of the Dead," in *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, 1995), 319-345.

¹⁰²Ellen Wexler, "Prisoners to Get 'Second Chance Pell,'" *Inside Higher Education*, 24 June 2016; see also, "12,000 Incarcerated Students to Enroll in Postsecondary Educational and Training Programs Through Education Department's New Second Chance Pell Pilot Program," <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/12000-incarcerated-students-enroll-postsecondary-educational-and-training-programs-through-education-departments-new-second-chance-pell-pilot-program> (24 June 2016).

¹⁰³"And if, to protect my relations with the many good white folks who make it possible for me to earn a fairly good living in the entertainment industry, I was too chicken, too cautious, to admit that fact when he was alive, I thought at least that now, when all the white folks are safe from him at last, I could be honest with myself enough to lift my hat for one final salute to that brave, black, ironic gallantry, which was his style and hallmark, that shocking *zing* of fire-and-be-damned-to-you, so absolutely absent in every other Negro man I know, which brought him, too soon, to his death," in *The Autobiography*, 466.

¹⁰⁴Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street* (New York, 1999); John Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (Mahwah, NJ, 2003); Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston, MA, 2001).