

The Semiotics of Malcolm X from Harlem to Tahrir

ANDERS ACKFELDT

Anders Ackfeldt is a research fellow in Islamic studies at Lund University.

anders.ackfeldt@cme.lu.se

This article discusses the ways in which Malcolm X (1925–1965) and his legacy have been used within US hip-hop music.¹ Although it in no way provides a complete inventory of the uses of Malcolm X in US hip-hop, it maps some of the different ways in which US artists have articulated and expressed Malcolm X and his legacy. Premised on the analysis of a corpus mainly of hip-hop albums and videos from the US from 1980 to 2011, this article identifies and maps the usages of Malcolm X in aural, visual, and textual modes.

The main argument in this article is that US hip-hop artists, since the birth of the genre, have participated in the processes of transmuting Malcolm X and his legacy by not only casting him as a symbol of local

1. This article largely draws on the chapter “Sights and Sounds of Malcolm X in U.S. Hip-Hop” in my PhD thesis, Anders Ackfeldt, *Islamic Semiotic Resources in U.S. Hip-Hop Culture*, Lund 2019, 131–160. I wish to thank all the attendees of the workshop “The Political Theology of Malcolm X” in August 2019 at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul. The comments I received on the first draft of this article were crucial. Particularly, I am grateful to Emin Poljarevic for his insightful comments and cooperation during the process of putting this special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* together. Thanks also to Joel Kuhlin for inviting me to speak at the symposium “From Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz – The Legacy of an American Icon” at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, in October 2018, during which the first seeds of this special issue were planted. Two anonymous reviewers have made insightful suggestions on how to improve the text, which were greatly appreciated. Finally, thanks to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University for financially supporting this project.

African American resistance against racial inequalities, but also by fashioning him as a global Muslim revolutionary by creatively name-, image-, or sound-dropping him in different audio and visual settings. More extensive usages mainly involve key quotes of Malcolm X or lengthy sound bites of classic speeches. The use of certain iconic photos is comparable to key quotes, as these are clearly meant to trigger established associations. It is important to stress that the legacy of Malcolm X and his political theology within hip-hop culture goes beyond national borders, religious beliefs, and political goals, in other words: from Harlem to Tahrir square.

The Semiotics of Malcolm X in US Hip-Hop

Malcolm X's unique life story and legacy provide the potential for several different kinds of meaning making. Manning Marable illustrates this by pointing to the many personas he adopted, the most famous being Detroit Red, Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. To these we can add lesser-known personas such as Jack Carlton, the name he used when he performed as a dancer and musician at night clubs in Harlem during the 1940s, and prisoner 22843, the prison number he received during his stretch in Charlestown state prison.²

Each of these characters represents a significant phase in Malcolm X's life. Each phase has been emphasized or deemphasized by artists, activists, and scholars in order to conjure a Malcolm X (or an El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) tailored to the pre-figured narrative expression of the desires and intentions of these meaning makers.³ Sometimes these different interpretations of Malcolm X's life and legacy cause heated debates, illustrated by Spike Lee, who described the confrontations he faced when making a movie about the life of Malcolm X:

I know the challenge in front of me. Malcolm X was so many things to so many people, and then there are the people who think they know all about him, but they don't know anything that's true. And I also know for a fact that around ten million motherfuckers are going to come out of the walls saying that they were down with Malcolm, and that's bullshit. Malcolm X causes reactions, so there is no way the film won't do the same thing.⁴

2. Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, New York 2011, 10.

3. See Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, Oxford 1995.

4. Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, London 1993, 10–11.

Michael Eric Dyson explores some aspects of these interpretations. According to Dyson there has been a tendency to “obscure and reduce the complex nature of his [Malcolm X’s] achievements and failures” and a bent towards “idolizing or demonizing” Malcolm X’s life and deeds.⁵ Clearly, Malcolm X means many different things to innumerable people. And one of these “things” is his potential for being perceived as a Muslim icon. The “Islamic” aspects of Malcolm X, needless to add, do not exclude other popular interpretations of him and his legacy. For example, the interpretation of Malcolm X as someone who did not compromise about important principles, someone who came from hardship and “nothing”, and yet built something for himself and spoke truth to power. More often than not these different meanings overlap and interrelate.

In order to disentangle the usage of Malcolm X in US hip-hop music, this article leans on concepts from the field of social semiotics. Social semiotics is a sub-field of semiotics that discards the structural determinism of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), finding fresh inspiration in theorists such as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), and Michael Halliday (1925–2018). Central to the field of social semiotics is the assertion that language is not seen “as a set of rules but as a *resource*”. The emphasis here is on the “human processes of interaction” and the constant changes to and reworkings of the meaning of these resources.⁶ In recent years, scholars in the field have extended the linguistic origins of social semiotics to include other methods of communication, such as gesticulations, pictures, layouts, sounds, and motions. A central concept in the field is “semiotic resources”.⁷

Semiotic resources have meaning potential, based on their past uses, along with a set of affordances. An affordance is the prospective use of a given object.⁸ These semiotic resources (actions and artifacts) are channelled and shaped through the medium of the communicative act or mode. Examples of different kinds of modes include images, music, moving images, and gestures. Most communicative acts do not involve one mode (monomodal), but operate over two or more modes (multimodal), all of which contribute to the creation of meaning.

Consequently, in this article, Malcolm X and his legacy are described as semiotic resources, communicated and expressed in aural, visual, and

5. Dyson, *Making Malcolm*, xxv–xxvi.

6. Michael Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotics: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, London 1978, 192. Italics in original.

7. See, for example, Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, New York 2005.

8. van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, 273.

textual modes. As such, Malcolm X is approached not as a fixed, reified persona, but as a resource for different kinds of meaning making in different times and spaces. In order to illustrate this, I suggest a periodization of the ways in which Malcolm X and his legacy have been used over time by US hip-hop artists.

The First References to Malcolm X

In 1980, the young aspiring musician Erik Nuri came up with the idea to create a hip-hop song in order to encourage young African Americans to vote in the upcoming election. The song “Let’s Vote” was released during the summer of 1980.⁹ “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang had been released in September 1979, and the new sights and sounds of hip-hop culture were quickly spreading from New York’s inner-city neighbourhoods to the rest of the country.¹⁰ The song failed to reach mainstream recognition but was endorsed as the voter registration theme song by both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL).¹¹

With lines like “I don’t come to bang, bang the boogie” and “So throw your hands in the air / And shake your body like you really don’t care but I hear you complaining about your property tax / they pay a little and you pay the max”, the song clearly carried a political message in stark contrast to the party-oriented message in Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight”, which the first lines of the quote above paraphrase. As such, “Let’s Vote” probably stands as the first released political hip-hop song. The song also contains the lines “I love the rap of Brother Malcolm X but what was his plan of success? / He said the ballot or the bullet”, in reference to Malcolm X’s famous “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech, delivered at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio in April 1964, making “Let’s Vote” the first song in hip-hop

9. Erik Nuri, *Let’s Vote* [7" single], New York 1980.

10. For written accounts of this development, see Alex Ogg & David Upshal, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap*, New York 1999; David Toop, *Rap Attack 3: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*, London 2000; Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, New York 2005. The pictorial accounts of the early years of hip-hop are often forgotten by academics. Photographers such as Martha Cooper, Henry Chalfant, Ernie Paniccioli, and Joe Conzo have all made important contributions to our knowledge of early hip-hop history. See Martha Cooper & Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, London 2015; Martha Cooper, *Hip Hop Files: Photographs 1979–1984*, Berlin 2013.

11. Author’s interview with Erik Nuri in New York, 12 May 2015.

invoking the name of Malcolm X.¹² This less than a year after the release of “Rapper’s Delight”.¹³

In 1983, the drummer and staff member of Sugar Hill Records, Keith LeBlanc, became the first person to sample the spoken word of Malcolm X in a hip-hop song, “Malcolm X: No Sell Out”.¹⁴ Inspired by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*,¹⁵ LeBlanc decided to sample extracts of Malcolm X’s voice from various recordings of his speeches and to put them over an early electronic hip-hop beat.¹⁶ LeBlanc was also the first hip-hop artist to use a photo of Malcolm X on a record cover. The cover features the last known photo portrait of Malcolm X, taken by Robert Lee Haggins (1922–2006) on 18 February 1965, three days before his assassination.¹⁷ In the photo, Malcolm X is wearing a tweed jacket, a dark tie, a white shirt, and his characteristic Browline glasses. He thoughtfully looks down, possibly reading something. Red block letters state “NO SELL OUT” on the top and “MALCOLM X” on the bottom, surrounding and contrasting the black-and-white photo.

12. Already in the late 1970s and 1980s, the DJ and hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa was known to overlay Malcolm X’s speeches over the German electro group Kraftwerk’s driving and repetitive beats. But, to my knowledge, these sessions were never recorded. Toop, *Rap Attack*, 130. Later, in 1986, Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force released the single “Renegades of Funk”, which made reference to Malcolm X in the following section: “Nothing stayed the same but there were always renegades / Like Chief Sitting Bull / Tom Paine, Dr. Martin Luther King / Malcolm X / They were renegades of their time and age / So many renegades.” Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, *Renegades of Funk* [7" single], New York 1983. In 2001, the funk metal band Rage Against the Machine released a cover of the song. Rage Against the Machine, *Renegades of Funk* [CD], Los Angeles 2001. The cover art of the latter includes the famous photo from 1964 of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) and Malcolm X shaking hands and smiling. The speech can be found in full in Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, New York 1989, 38–64. In this speech, Malcolm X advised his audience to exercise their right to vote, but he also warned that if the government continued to restrict the rights of African Americans it might be necessary to take up arms. For background information and an analysis of the speech, see Marable, *Malcolm X*, 303–304.

13. Nuri started the short-lived record label Salaam Records in 1983, targeting the Muslim community in the US. The record label, named after his mother’s surname, only released one group, The Whizdom Kids, consisting of Nuri’s two kids. The group released songs such as “Come to Allah”, “My Imam”, and “Elijahville”. The Whizdom Kids made several appearances at events in connection to Muslim gatherings and festivities, primarily in New York. Their curious sound can best be described as electro-nasheed soul and jazz with some hip-hop elements. Author’s interview with Erik Nuri in New York, 12 May 2015.

14. Keith LeBlanc, *Malcolm X: No Sell Out* [12" single], New York 1983. Outside hip-hop, it is worth mentioning that the American soul singer Billy Paul sampled Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech in the song “Let ‘Em In”. Billy Paul, *Let ‘Em In* [LP], Philadelphia, PA 1976. Thanks to Emin Poljarevic for pointing this out to me.

15. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1965.

16. Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, New York 2010, 103.

17. Robert Lee Haggins was Malcolm X’s personal photographer from 1959 to 1965. The cover was designed by Overnight Type & Graphics, who also designed the cover for Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force’s single “Renegades of Funk”.

The back cover features a brief biographical text about Malcolm X as well as a short statement from his widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz (1934–1997), stressing that Malcolm X is as important now as he was when he was alive.

Malcolmania: The Commodification of Malcolm X

Arguably, no other hip-hop group has contributed more to the aural and visual articulations of Malcolm X in hip-hop than Public Enemy.¹⁸ Their carefully planned visual and aural agenda not only connected a new generation of hip-hop listeners to his legacy, they also became an exemplar for other hip-hop acts.¹⁹ Chuck D has repeatedly told the following story:

One-day Hank [Shocklee] and I was hanging a flyer with Malcolm on the cover of the flyer – of the gig that we were presenting – and this kid comes up and says: “You know, who’s this Malcolm the Tenth?” And you know, we looked at each other, and said “well, something needs to be done about that!”²⁰

Public Enemy’s sophomore album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, made Malcolm X a hip-hop household name.²¹ The song “Bring the Noise” was first released on the soundtrack to Marek Kaniévská’s movie *Less than Zero* (1987), but it also served as the opening song on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. The soundscape of “Bring the Noise” consists of an aggressive mix of siren noises, James Brown funk beats, hard-hitting drum machine clatters, and wild scratching by the group’s DJ, Terminator X (another possible Malcolm X reference). At the beginning of the song, Public Enemy’s production team, the Bomb Squad, sampled parts of Malcolm X’s voice from his speech “Message to the Grass Roots”, delivered at the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference on 10 November 1963, at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit. The phrase “Too black, too strong” is repeated twice.²² This speech was delivered by Malcolm

18. The original members of Public Enemy were front man Chuck D, Flavor Flav, Terminator X, and Professor Griff. Public Enemy was formed in 1982 at Adelphi University on Long Island, New York. Comments by Professor Griff to *The Washington Times* in 1989 brought charges of antisemitism, which ultimately resulted in him leaving the group. Today, Professor Griff is again performing with the group.

19. Derrick P. Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas”, *The Journal of African American History* 90 (2005), 236.

20. Chuck D, quoted in James Hale, “Public Enemy: Prophets of Rage” [TV Documentary], London 2011. This story has been retold by Chuck D on several occasions. It can also be found in Chuck D, “Malcolm X the Tenth”, in *Return of the Mecca: The Art of Islam and Hip-Hop*, Los Angeles 2014, 24.

21. Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* [LP], New York 1988.

22. The full quote: “It’s just like when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means

X just a few weeks before John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) was murdered in Dallas, and is often considered to be the last great speech Malcolm X delivered as a member of the Nation of Islam (NOI).²³ The speech is 40 minutes long and contains some of Malcolm X’s most commonly known tropes and metaphors: for example, the house Negro and the field Negro, the difference between the Negro revolution and the revolution, as well as the difference between black coffee and coffee with cream. It is also in this speech that Malcolm X started to make his move from local Black Nationalism to a more international approach.²⁴

Public Enemy’s formula for the successful promotion and mobilization of their ideas cannot be reduced to lyrical quotes and single samples of Malcolm X. The group’s entire visual register, including record covers and music videos, signalled a radicalism that accentuated their vision of African American empowerment fuelled by Black Power ideology and the teachings promoted by the NOI. In concerts, interviews, and promotional pictures, Public Enemy surrounded themselves with the NOI’s uniformed security force, the SiW (Security of the First World), something that added to the militant aura of the group.²⁵

When MTV launched the show *Yo! MTV Raps* in late 1988, the group successfully made use of music videos to disseminate their ideas. Public Enemy’s first real attempt in making a music video resulted in the video of the group’s third single from *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, “Night of the Living Baseheads”. The song addressed the crack epidemic in the US at the time and in the video, directed by Lionel C. Martin, Chuck D is seen performing in front of the Audubon Ballroom, in which Malcolm X was assassinated. The visual message is clear: Chuck D picks up the microphone where Malcolm X dropped it twenty-three years ago.

it’s too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak. But if you pour too much cream in it, you won’t even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep.” See Marable, *Malcolm X*, 264–265. The sample was taken from Malcolm X, *Grass Roots Speech Detroit, Michigan November 1963* [LP], New York 1979. Later the phrase “Too black, too strong” from “Bring the Noise” was sampled in 2 Black 2 Strong MMG’s “2 Black 2 Strong” on 2 Black 2 Strong MMG, *Doin’ Hard Time on Planet Earth* [CD], New York 1991. The song, which featured Gamilah Shabazz (daughter of Malcolm X), also paid homage to Malcolm X with the lines: “I’m rated X, like Malcolm / How come the brother wasn’t welcome / To tell the knowledge about us?” Gamilah Shabazz also appeared on Big Daddy Kane’s “Who Am I” on Big Daddy Kane, *Taste of Chocolate* [CD], New York 1990.

23. Saladin M. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era*, New York 2013, 32.

24. Marable, *Malcolm X*, 265.

25. Several of these pictures were taken by the photographer Ernie Paniccioli. For some examples of the photos, see Ernie Paniccioli & Kevin Powell, *Who Shot Ya? Three Decades of HipHop Photography*, New York 2014.

The use of Islamic themes in hip-hop climaxed in the early 1990s. Artists were inspired by Islamic traditions of interpretation, ranging from the cognitive universe of the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) and the NOI to different Sunni interpretations. Hip-hop acts like KRS-One, X-Clan, Brand Nubian, Lakim Shabazz, Kin Sun, The Jaz, Kool Moe Dee, The Poor Righteous Teachers, Big Daddy Kane, Ice Cube, Paris, A Tribe Called Quest, Movement Ex, and Gang Starr contributed heavily to this development. Islamic themes thereby underpinned different aural, visual, and textual articulations of the hip-hop of this era. In this context, Malcolm X proved to be a significant source of inspiration, references to his example and legacy abound, and they could even be seen as central to the message of hip-hop.

This trend accelerated with Spike Lee's guerrilla marketing campaign for his biographical film *Malcolm X* (1992). Lee strategically gave away his self-designed iconic black baseball cap with a silver "X" on the front to sports stars, hip-hop artists, and other prominent figures in the African American community. The popularity of the Malcolm X brand was also fuelled by the extensive bootlegging of Spike Lee's design. Soon the market was flooded with consumer products, including coffee mugs, lighters, refrigerator magnets, air fresheners, and potato chips containing Spike Lee's silver "X" or other renditions of Malcolm X's life and legacy.²⁶ Manning Marable has described this development as "Malcolmania", during which Malcolm X-related products reached an estimated annual sale figure of \$100 million.²⁷ Between 1989 and 1992, the book sales of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* saw a 300 percent increase. This development can, at least in part, be attributed to the usage of Malcolm X in hip-hop culture and the latter's power to influence a broad audience with purchase power.²⁸

Normalizing Malcolm X

In some ways, the Malcolmania of the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the normalization and somewhat diminution of the radical aura of Malcolm X. In turn, it also led to a multiplication of the meanings of Malcolm X.

The Wu-Tang Clan became one of the driving forces of hip-hop in the 1990s. The group, which originally included nine members, has to the present day released seven studio albums, along with at least nineteen compilation albums as a group. Most of the members have launched successful solo careers. To this must be added several affiliated artists, a successful clothing

26. Lee, *By Any Means Necessary*, 21, 25.

27. Manning Marable, "Rediscovering Malcolm's Life", in Manning Marable & Hisham Aidi (eds.), *Black Routes to Islam*, New York 2009, 303.

28. Lewis Lord & Jeannye Thornton, "The Legacy of Malcolm X", *US News & World Report* 1992-11-23.

company, and several record labels. Over the years, several Wu-Tang Clan members have made references to Malcolm X.

One example is Ghostface Killah, an original member of the Clan, who named a song after Malcolm X. The song is simply entitled “Malcolm” and features on his acclaimed solo album, *Supreme Clientele*. Ghostface Killah wrote the song before a four-month-long incarceration. The song begins and ends with a sample from Malcolm X’s “After the Bombing” speech, delivered on Valentine’s Day, 1965. The sample section of the speech contains the following words:

But they try and project the image to the public that this is being done by thieves, and thieves alone. And they ignore the fact that no, it is not thievery alone. It’s a corrupt, vicious, hypocritical system that has castrated the Black man; and the only way the Black man can get back at it is to strike it in the only way he knows how.²⁹

In the song, Ghostface Killah enters the mind of a troubled young African American man, living a crime- and drug-ridden life. He starts the song by comparing himself to Malcolm X: “I’m like Malcolm out the window with the joint / Hooded up blood in my eye.”³⁰ In the hook, Ghostface Killah encourages the protagonist of the song to walk the same path as Malcolm, in other words, to straighten up and leave his criminal life.

Another rapper that has invoked Malcolm X several times in his lyrics is Killer Mike. For example, in the song “Pressure” (featuring Ice Cube) from the album *I Pledge Allegiance to the Grind II*,³¹ Killer Mike samples Malcolm X’s voice from two different occasions.³² In the song, Killer Mike and Ice

29. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 200. The speech was held after Malcolm X’s home in East Elmhurst, Queens, was attacked with Molotov cocktails. Malcolm X and his family were sleeping in the house when it happened. The house was seriously damaged, but Malcolm X and his family managed to escape without harm.

30. Ghostface Killah, *Supreme Clientele* [CD], New York 2000.

31. Killer Mike, *I Pledge Allegiance to the Grind II* [CD], Atlanta, GA 2008.

32. The two sections sampled are: “Who are you? You don’t know? Don’t tell me ‘Negro’ that’s nothing. What were you before the white man named you ‘Negro’? What was your name? It couldn’t have been ‘Smith’ or ‘Jones’ or ‘Bush’ or ‘Powell’ that wasn’t your name. They don’t have those kind of names where you and I come from. No, what was your name? And why don’t you know what your name was then? Where was your history? How did a man wipe out your history? How did the man, what did the man do to make you as dumb, as you are right now?”; “No negro leaders have fought for civil rights, they have begged for civil rights. They have begged the white man for civil rights, they have begged the white man for freedom, and any time you beg another man to set you free, you’ll never be free. Freedom is something that you have to do for yourselves. And until the American Negro lets the white man know that we are really ready and willing to pay the price that is necessary for freedom, our people will always be walking around here second class citizens or what you call twentieth century

Cube relate the conditions for African Americans post-9/11 to the transatlantic slave trade. The duo rally against police brutality and perceived corrupt political leadership. According to Killer Mike, it does not matter how successful you are, or how much money you make, as an African American you will always be considered a lesser human being, and the ultimate price for freedom is death: “Liberation costs more than a damn dollar / It costs what Christ gave / King gave / X gave / A billion dollars don’t make you an ex-slave.”³³

Other rappers have had a more politically quiescent attitude to Malcolm X. Kanye West invokes Malcolm X when it comes to fashion in the song “Good Morning”: “I’m like the fly Malcolm X, buy any jeans necessary / Detroit Red cleaned up” is a nod to Malcolm X’s catchphrase “By any means necessary” and his well-known fashion sense.³⁴ Another example of such a commercialized use is Drake, when he cleverly invokes Malcolm X in the song “Forever”: “Labels want my name beside an X like Malcolm”, and in the song “Uptown”: “I drive two black cars / I named ‘em Malcolm X and Martin Luther.”³⁵

In addition to these uses, artists have sought to commemorate the legacy of Malcolm X in the form of visual expressions. New York rapper Nas famously sports a rendition of the iconic photo of Malcolm X with his finger pointed to his temple on the side of his stomach. Similarly, the Washington, DC rapper Wale appeared on the cover of a 2013 issue of the tattoo magazine *Urban Inc* styled in the same way as Malcolm X, on the photo discussed above, showing off the same photo tattooed on his left arm. The headline of the cover reads: “Revolution is ink!”³⁶

The trap phenomenon Young Jeezy used the same photo of Malcolm X and his words from a speech as inspiration for his mixtape *Trap or Die 2: By Any Means Necessary*.³⁷ The group The Root, meanwhile, used a 1944 mug shot of Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) for their album *The Tipping Point*.³⁸ In order to memorialize the fiftieth anniversary of Malcolm X’s death in 2015, the hip-hop magazine *The Source* commemorated him with

slaves. [What price are you talking about sir?] The price of freedom is death.”

33. This is a good example of the “dignity argument” discussed in Emin Poljarevic, “The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 11–27.

34. Kanye West, *Graduation* [CD], New York 2007.

35. Drake (featuring Kanye West, Lil Wayne & Eminem), “Forever” [MP3], Atlanta, GA 2009; Drake, *So Far Gone* [MP3], Toronto 2008.

36. *Urban Inc*, Summer Edition (June 2013).

37. Don Cannon & Young Jeezy, *Trap or Die 2: By Any Means Necessary* [MP3], Atlanta, GA 2010.

38. The Root, *The Tipping Point* [CD], Santa Monica, CA 2004.

a special edition cover. Under the headline “X Legacy: Wake up, Clean Up, Stand Up”, rappers from Chuck D and Raekwon to Ludacris and Kendrick Lamar expressed how Malcolm X had influenced their art and music.³⁹

The Internationalization of Malcolm X

Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) explained the significance of Malcolm X in an interview with Sohail Daulatzai, in connection to the latter’s exhibit “Return of the Mecca: The Art of Islam and Hip-Hop”:

Speaking out against the injustices that exist in the world and dealing with our struggle in America not as an isolated – domestic – issue, but as an international problem. It’s really inspiring but it’s also really intimidating for a lot of people, you know. If you are an individual that’s not afraid of anything then people tend to be afraid or threatened by you. That attitude is expressed in hip-hop. So it is very dynamic for anyone who has ever been poor, hungry, or hunted.⁴⁰

Yasiin Bey’s attitude is manifested in many songs from his catalogue. One of the more interesting examples is the opening song “Supermagic” on the album *The Ecstatic*.⁴¹ The song starts with Yasiin Bey uttering the *shahada* (the Islamic creed) in Arabic, followed by a lengthy Malcolm X sample from the dramatic closing minutes of his address to the Oxford Union:

You’re living at a time of extremism, a time of revolution, a time when there’s got to be a change. People in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change and a better world has to be built, and the only way it’s going to be built – is with extreme methods. And I, for one, will join in with anyone – I don’t care what color you are – as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth.⁴²

Malcolm X’s Oxford Union address, delivered at the famous debating society at Oxford University on 3 December 1965, has been described as “the lost jewel of the civil rights movement”.⁴³ Saladin Ambar describes the

39. *The Source*, Issue 256 (April/May 2015)..

40. “Yasiin Bey (aka Mos Def) on Malcolm X, for ‘Return of the Mecca: The Art of Islam and Hip-Hop’”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jln12UJ8H8U>, accessed 2020-02-11. In relation to this, see Khairudin Aljunied, “A Travelling Model: The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 79–94.

41. Mos Def, *The Ecstatic* [CD], New York 2009.

42. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 180.

43. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 33.

speech in the following way:

Malcolm at Oxford represented the most comprehensive, best articulated, and clearest sense of his personal and political vision on the future of race relations – not only as a domestic concern, but also a global one. [...] Oxford suggests a pivotal moment in human history, as the majority of the world’s population begins to unyoke itself from colonial or imperial rule while simultaneously struggling with, or anticipating, the challenges of racially pluralistic societies developing along egalitarian lines. The demands of the future, rather than a mere articulation of present or past problems, brought the very best out of Malcolm X – and it happened in Oxford.⁴⁴

In many ways, “Supermagic” sets music to Malcolm X’s internationalist vision. The lyrics of the song are basically a burst of freestyle energy, in which Bey showcases his skills as a lyricist. The phrase “Super magic black origin freshly out of dopeness” is repeated throughout the song. The words are a homophone-twist of the tongue-twisting phrase “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious” from the 1964 Disney movie *Mary Poppins*. It is not Yasiin Bey’s lyrics that communicate an international outlook; rather, the soundscape conveys that message. Bey does not, like Public Enemy, build the song around a James Brown drum break. Instead, “Supermagic” is built around guitar riffs from the song “İnce İnce Bir Kar Yağar” by the Turkish protest singer Selda Bağcan, which, in turn, is a rendition of composer and poet Aşık Mahzuni Serif’s (1940–2002) song with the same name. The funky “oriental” guitar loop, in combination with portions of the highly politically charged Turkish lyrics that highlight the conditions of poor people in eastern Turkey, and in combination with Malcolm X’s warning, carries the song across nations and establishes a sonic bond between disenfranchised groups around the world. The words of Selda (“Yandık yandık, bize okul, bize yol, bize hayat, etme ağam, n’olur, n’olur, n’olur, n’olur” [We’re doomed, education to us, roads to us, life to us / Come now sir, please, please, please]) Yasiin Bey takes out of the local Turkish context and inserts on a global scale.

Another illustration of the internationalization of the semiotic resources extracted from Malcolm X’s life in hip-hop is the cooperation between the Egyptian hip-hop trio Arabian Knightz and the Brooklyn-based rapper General Steele (from the duo Smif-n-Wessun). In April 2011, in the midst of the Arab uprisings, they recorded the song “I am Malcolm X” (2011).⁴⁵ The

44. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 33.

45. The title of the song is a reference to the ending scenes of Spike Lee’s movie *Malcolm X*. The film ends with a scene of an African American teacher in an American classroom. Behind

lyrics of the song link the Arab uprisings to the civil rights movement in the US. The opening of the first verse accentuates the legacy of Malcolm X as the Sunni Muslim El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The lyrics call for a new civil rights movement in Egypt (called *umm al-dunya*, the mother of the civilization), premised on an “Islamic truth”:

Malik was a king that had a dream like Martin Luther / Built an Islamic truth for constitution revolution / our generation needs a new one / the mother of the civilization needs civil rights movement.⁴⁶

The video clip accompanying the song underlines this message and illustrates it with powerful video footage showing the crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, when Alabama state troopers attacked civil rights demonstrators outside the town of Selma. These images are crosscut with more recent footage of demonstrators being brutally attacked by police at Tahrir Square in Cairo.⁴⁷

Conclusion

As seen in the material discussed above, Malcolm X and his legacy as semiotic resources have the potential to both connect him to his African American Islamic heritage as a member of the NOI and as a universal Islamic semiotic resource, and indeed they have been used to these effects. As a universal resource, artists have highlighted Malcolm X’s final years following his *hajj* to Mecca in 1964. In doing so, hip-hop artists have helped to turn Malcolm X into one of the cornerstones in the Afro-Arab political imaginary,⁴⁸ or, more broadly, a manifestation of what Manning Marable

her on the blackboard are the words “MALCOLM X DAY”. She tells the class that it is Malcolm X’s birthday. “Malcolm X is you, all of you, and you are Malcolm X”, she says. Some of the students in the classroom rise up and one after another holler, “I am Malcolm X!” The scene cuts to a classroom in Soweto in South Africa where students also stand up and shout, “I am Malcolm X!” The movie reaches its climax when the recently released anti-apartheid activist, the late Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), recites one of Malcolm X’s speeches. The message, both of the song and the scene from the movie, is clear: Malcolm X’s struggle was not confined to American soil, but was a global struggle to free all oppressed people in the world.

46. “Arabian Knightz – I am Malcolm X – Feat General Steele (Smif n Wessun)”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGbPccT5ChY>, accessed 2020-02-11.

47. Linking Malcolm X and his legacy to local uprisings and struggles is not unique to Arabian Knightz. A similar strategy was deployed by the Basque separatist hip-hop group Negu Gorriak in the early 1990s. The group’s usage of Malcolm X and his legacy in aural and visual modes are described in Jacqueline Urla, “We are all Malcolm X!”, Negu Gorriak, Hip-Hop, and the Basque Political Imaginary”, in Tony Mitchell (ed.), *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, Middletown, CT 2001, 171–193.

48. Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary*, Chapel Hill, NC 2014.

calls the “perhaps most important” reinvention of Malcolm X: his function as a “bridge between the American people and more than one billion Muslims throughout the world”.⁴⁹

The cultural resonance of Malcolm X within hip-hop is key in order to understand the worldviews of many young Muslims around the globe.⁵⁰ Nowhere is this more applicable than in the contemporary Muslim struggle for civil rights, which has spread through several heterogeneous organizations, initiatives, and movements around the world, in which Islam has become a path to social, political, and religious liberation. Yet, as Graeme Abernethy reminds us: “Malcolm’s Islamic faith has always been among the aspects of his life least embraced and understood.”⁵¹ Malcolm X’s unique and complex story has found and will most likely continue to find new ways to inspire hip-hop artists as well as artists in general in their artistic expressions. ▲

SUMMARY

With no ambition to provide a complete inventory, this article introduces the reader to the ways in which Malcolm X and his legacy have been used within US hip-hop music. The central argument is that US hip-hop artists, since the birth of hip-hop, have been participating in the processes of reinventing Malcolm X and his legacy by not only casting him as a symbol of local African American resistance against racial inequalities, but also by fashioning him as a global Sunni Muslim revolutionary by creatively name-, image-, or sound-dropping him in different sound and visual settings. More extensive usages mainly involve key quotes of Malcolm X or lengthy sound bites of classic speeches. The usage of certain iconic photos is comparable to key quotes as these are clearly meant to trigger established associations. It is important to stress that the legacy of Malcolm X and his political theology within hip-hop culture goes beyond national borders, religious beliefs, and political goals.

49. Marable, *Malcolm X*, 486.

50. For other examples of this, see Yolanda van Tilborgh, “Expressions of Political Theology in Art and Islam: Malcolm X-Inspired Transformations among Muslims in the US and the UK”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 61–78.

51. Graeme Abernethy, *The Iconography of Malcolm X*, Lawrence, KS 2013, 227.