

# A Travelling Model

## *The Mythicization and Mobilization of Malcolm X in the Malay World*

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The celebrated Palestinian-American intellectual, Edward Said (1935–2003), once wrote that “[like] people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another [...] the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity”.<sup>1</sup> Said termed this unique movement of thoughts and mentalities “travelling theory”. Travel enables ideas to survive, as they gain new interpretations and meanings outside their places of origin. One historical figure that influenced Said and, at the same time, embodied his notion of travelling theory (and much more, as I will show) was Malcolm X (1925–1965).

To be sure, few African American Muslim figures have gained as much global significance as Malcolm X. In life, and more so after his assassination, Malcolm X’s ideas travelled rapidly, taking on new forms, uses, and importance. His biography became a tool for social, political, and ideological action, particularly in the Malay world, which forms the basis of this article. One chief reason why Malcolm X became, and still is, a symbolic figure in the Malay world has much to do with his travels to that part of the globe. Impressed by the anti-colonial struggles there and the resolutions of the famed Bandung Conference in 1955, Malcolm X grew to become

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1. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge 1983, 226.

progressively concerned with the injustices and exploitation that affected most of humankind, the bottom billion that populated much of Africa, Asia, and the wider Muslim world. Due partly to his encounters with, and admiration for, the activists in the Malay world,<sup>2</sup> Malcolm X's political theology morphed progressively from a racially-oriented position to one that leaned closer to the ideals of Islamic universalism until his untimely demise.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, despite Malcolm X's attentiveness to the plight of oppressed peoples all over the world, and the sway that he wielded in the Malay world in particular, little has been written about his influence outside his home country. He has been particularized as a quintessentially American activist who fused Islam, black suffering, and human rights discourse into a potent political theology.<sup>4</sup> Malcolm X's supra-local significance and the ways in which ideas, experiences, and models from outside the United States shaped his discourses have generally been ignored. As such, my purpose here is to add to the "growing cohort of interdisciplinary scholars whose work extends the project of recuperating Malcolm X's radical humanism and his global legacy, which collectively challenge the 'Americanization' of Malcolm X".<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to recuperate and rehabilitate the image of Malcolm X and to extend Edward Said's theory on the movement of ideas, this essay argues that Malcolm X was, by all means, a "travelling model". By travelling model, I first mean a historical icon whose influential ideas were conditioned by a dynamic and rapidly maturing state of being. His relentless search for a higher truth, the new solidarities that he encountered and formed, as well as the challenges and peregrinations that he faced, all aided in the process of him emerging as a paragon of action and hope for others. Malcolm X's lasting relevance as a travelling model can be traced in his shifting political theology, which developed from one that vindicated black nationalism to a movement towards addressing "racial injustice to the broader plane of human exploitation".<sup>6</sup> Malcolm X's reinvention was effected by his interactions with and acute observations of the state of the oppressed people globally and the alliances they formed against systematic persecution. The

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2. The term "Malay world" consists of present-day Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, South Thailand, and South Philippines.

3. Dustin J. Byrd, "Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary", in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 126; Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought*, Albany, NY 2002, 12.

4. Emin Poljarevic, "The Political Theology of Malcolm X: Between Human Dignity and Returning the Gaze", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 11–27.

5. Zareena Grewal, "1965 and the Global Intellectual Afterlife of Malcolm X", *American Studies* 54:2 (2015), 11.

6. Saladin M. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era*, New York 2014, 116.

interplay between local experiences and global ideational influences coalesced and restructured Malcolm X's thoughts and activism, especially after his departure from the Nation of Islam (NOI) in March 1964.

The second interrelated meaning of the term travelling model is an exemplar whose life journey, personal reflections, and public pronouncements acquire a deep resonance and meaning among a broad spectrum of people, located far in space and time from her own. Malcolm X's life story and ideas have been translated from one language to another, absorbed, adapted, appropriated, and vernacularized among Malay-Indonesian Muslims, ushering novel formulations of the notions of justice, freedom, and equality in a setting that Malcolm X was unfamiliar with but had gained much intellectual stimulus from. His life and ideas are regarded by Malay-Indonesian Muslims as a minefield of inspiration, as a standard of conduct, and as a wealth of reflexive materials for socio-political reform. For those in the Malay world who encountered him, be it through fact or fiction, Malcolm X is a treasure trove to be read, studied, critiqued, and used to promulgate movements and effect change. He is regarded as part of the centuries-long Islamic heritage of intellectual-activists who placed all forms of hypocrisies, oppressions, and injustices under their rhetorical chopping board.

Therein lies a key conundrum inherent in all travelling models, including Malcolm X. As persons whose lives and ideas are seen as meaningful and authoritative, travelling models are often embellished with each retelling and every appropriation. Their imperfections are usually downplayed and the limits of their worldviews overlooked. Their character flaws are, for the most part, lost in many teleological narratives. In this regard, Michael Dyson has identified "at least four Malcolms who emerge in the intellectual investigation of his life and career: Malcolm as hero and saint, Malcolm as public moralist, Malcolm as victim and vehicle of psychohistorical forces, and Malcolm as revolutionary figure as judge by his career trajectory from nationalist to alleged socialist".<sup>7</sup> Building on this schema and in pursuit of my argument of Malcolm X as a travelling model, I focus here on how Muslims in the Malay world projected different Malcolm Xs to serve different ends. In the first part of this essay, I look at the mythicization of Malcolm X, in that his life story was novelized with an eye to demonstrating how a marginal figure in society eventually became a champion of the marginalized. This is followed by a discussion of the mobilization of Malcolm X, whereby he was extolled by contemporary Muslims as a resource for youths, preachers, and political activists. In this, I place into sharp relief the

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7. Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, New York 1995, 24.

employment of the image of Malcolm X to promote certain religious, social, and political agendas. The mythicization and mobilization of Malcolm X's life and ideas is revealing of the wide and ever-expanding uses (and even abuses) of Malcolm X in the contemporary Muslim world.

### The Shaping of a Travelling Model

Malcolm X was among the many prominent Muslims who narrated how travel had changed their visions of life and society. Muslim travellers, both in the modern and even premodern periods, have documented their life-changing experiences of venturing into faraway lands.<sup>8</sup> Like Malcolm X, the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) was especially powerful in bringing about a sea change in how many of these travellers viewed their place in the world and their relations with Islam as a faith. But what differentiates Malcolm X from other writers was that he popularized his sojourn by linking it to his struggles for African American and human rights. Malcolm X's assassination in the prime of his activist career further supercharged public interest in how travel had reinvented his life and thought. Zareena Grewal notes: "Malcolm X fits in two enduring traditions of travel: American seekers and Islamic pedagogical trips (*rihla*). Many American Muslim leaders, before and after Malcolm X, linked their claims to religious authority to the Muslim lands, whether real or imagined, and the (de-colonial) recovery of lost (sacred, powerful) knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

And yet, it is important here to note that there were two stages in Malcolm X's transformative travel experiences, each shaping his thoughts in radically different fashions. The first stage coincided with his tenure as a minister in the NOI. He attended the Bandung Conference in 1955 and, later on, visited Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Ghana in 1959. Biographers such as Peter Goldman highlighted that these travels impacted Malcolm X to such an extent that he saw the incongruities between what the NOI stood for, which was black nationalism and segregation, and the universalist ideals of Islam. A loyal follower of Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), he did not question the NOI's ideology. He side-stepped the contradictions between what he saw as unity between people of all colours in Bandung and his calls for black unity against the white people.<sup>10</sup>

Malcolm X's fallout with Elijah Muhammad in 1963, his break from the NOI, and his subsequent travels a year later was monumental and

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8. See, for example, the collection of essays by Dale Eickelman & James Piscatori (eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, Berkeley, CA 1990.

9. Grewal, "1965 and the Global Intellectual Afterlife", 19.

10. Peter Louis Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, Chicago 1979, 76.

constituted the next phase of his “evolving geopolitical philosophy”.<sup>11</sup> On 10 November 1963, he delivered an iconic speech dubbed “Message to the Grassroots”. He underlined the significance of the Bandung Conference in 1955, a point he repeated on a number of occasions until some days before his death:

In Bandung back in, I think, 1954, was the first unity meeting in centuries of black people. And once you study what happened at the Bandung Conference, and the results of the Bandung Conference, it actually serves as a model for the same procedure you and I can use to get our problems solved. At Bandung all the nation came together. The dark nations from Africa and Asia. Some of them were Buddhists. Some of them were Muslim. Some of them were Christians. Some of them were Confucianists; some were atheists. Despite their religious differences, they came together. Some were communists; some were socialists; some were capitalists. Despite their economic and political differences, they came together. All of them were black, brown, red, or yellow. The number-one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung Conference was the white man. He couldn't come.<sup>12</sup>

More crucially, Malcolm X was rapidly moving away from being an advocate of racial struggle to becoming a promoter of the idea that formerly colonized nations all shared the same forms of oppression and suffering, and therefore should come together in pushing for a global movement towards equality, emancipation, and liberation. Nearing his assassination, Malcolm X “exudes the sort of polycultural ethos [...] a rich figure who cannot be seen as the possession of a people, or posthumous leader of a territorial nationalist movement”.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning with the *hajj*, which was followed by his trips to countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, this phase of travel further structured Malcolm X's “moral geography” to one that acknowledged the global reality of Islam and the universal brotherhood of humankind above and beyond race as well as religion.<sup>14</sup> Or as Stephen Tuck handsomely observes: “His international travels were a response to changes in his outlook, but they

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11. James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcolm X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space*, New York 2006, 31.

12. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, New York 1965, 3–4.

13. Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*, Boston, MA 2001, 105.

14. Zareena Grewal, *Islam as a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, New York 2014, 82.

also caused his outlook to change in turn.”<sup>15</sup> In his diary, Malcolm X related his conversations with the Chinese ambassador to Ghana, who made him realize the crucial need to move beyond racism and constricted ideologies towards approaching problems “as a human being. When we all learn to think as human beings instead of as capitalists, communists and socialist this will then be a world for all human beings.”<sup>16</sup>

Upon his return from Africa, Malcolm X established the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which was modeled on the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that had convened in Cairo, Egypt in July 1964. Malcolm X was an official observer during the meeting and submitted a memorandum that elevated the struggle of African Americans to the level of human rights.<sup>17</sup> In light of all of these experiences overseas, Malcolm X casually remarked: “Well, I’ve done a lot of traveling and, I think over all, travel does broaden one’s soul. If anything at all, that’s probably the most important of what’s happened to me during the past five or six months.”<sup>18</sup> That said, we must take heed of Aminah McCloud’s remark that “Malcolm’s thought and action represent the tension between *asabiyah* [local group solidarity] and *ummah* [global Muslim community], and the demand that Muslims participate in both arenas”.<sup>19</sup>

The revolutionary struggles of Southeast Asians fascinated Malcolm X. The United States’ entry into Vietnam to regain the territories left behind by the defeated French became the substance of his speeches, in his hope to underline that the oppressed peoples could stand up to the hegemonic forces of imperialism if only they were conscious of their own potentialities. “Also in 1964”, Malcolm X stressed,

the oppressed people of South Vietnam, and in that entire Southeast Asia area, the oppressed people of South Vietnam, were successful in fighting the agents of imperialism. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men having enabled them to put North and South Vietnam together again. Little rice farmers, peasants, with a rifle – up against all the highly mechanized weapons of warfare – jets, napalm, battleships,

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15. Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: A Transnational Story of Antiracist Protest*, Berkeley, CA 2014, 5.

16. Malcolm X, *The Diary of Malcolm X*, Chicago 2013, 133.

17. Akwasi B. Assensoh & Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, *Malcolm X and Africa*, New York 2016, 55.

18. Malcolm X, *The Last Speeches*, New York 1989, 91.

19. Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam*, New York 1995, 37.

everything else, and they can't put those rice farmers back where they want them. Someone's waking up.<sup>20</sup>

This speech was one of many examples of an emergent internationalism that defined the last moments of Malcolm X's life. Indeed, by criticizing Western imperialism in Southeast Asia, Malcolm X shattered "the myth of American innocence" and showed to his audiences that resistance to the world's superpower, the United States – or any form of exploitative power for that matter – was possible.<sup>21</sup>

During his speech at the London School of Economics, Malcolm X restated his point about the significance of the Bandung Conference and, by implication, the Malay world:

At the Bandung Conference in 1955, one of the first and best steps toward real independence for non-white people took place. The people of Africa and Asia and Latin America were able to get together. They sat down, they realized that they had differences. They agreed not to place any emphasis any longer upon these differences, but to submerge the areas of differences and place emphasis upon areas where they had something in common. This agreement that was reached at Bandung produced the spirit of Bandung. So that the people who were oppressed, who had no jet planes, no nuclear weapons, no armies, no navies – and despite the fact that they didn't have this, their unity alone was sufficient to enable them, over a period of years, to maneuver and make it possible for other nations in Asia to become independent, and many more nations in Africa to become independent.<sup>22</sup>

Bandung was, to Malcolm X, a model of unity among different nationalities, religions, and ideologies against Western colonialism and neo-colonialism. Little did he realize that he too would soon become a model for postcolonial Muslims in the Malay world, the region in which the Bandung Conference was held.

### Mythicization

In life and in death, Malcolm X is a perpetual source of myth, sometimes loved and, at other times, condemned. In the eyes of his dissenters, he was

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20. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 148.

21. Kevin Gaines, "Malcolm X in Global Perspective", in Robert E. Terrill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, Cambridge 2010, 168–169.

22. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks to Young People: Speeches in the United States, Britain, and Africa*, New York 2002, 58.



a racist, a violent preacher, and a militant, among many other negative epithets. Among those who admire his courage in speaking truth to power, he is glorified as an ideologue for the weak, for human dignity, for revolutionary change, and for the excluded. The mythicization of Malcolm X has made him greater than the sum of the many dimensions and shifts in his life. For that same reason, his subjectivities are all too often drowned by a melange of hero-worshipping narratives and iconoclastic critiques, thus making him an either-or, a praised idealist or a demonic demagogue.<sup>23</sup>

Here, I wish to provide a critical analysis of an ongoing attempt at mythicizing Malcolm X as an icon, or to put it more pointedly, how a travelling model is constructed through a work of fiction. I place under scrutiny a recent and relatively popular novel written by Al Ghazali Sulaiman. Published in Malaysia, the book has gone through two reprints since its release in 2017. Al Ghazali has written twenty historical novels, which are all geared towards making his Malay-speaking readers aware of the lives of prominent historical figures as useful lessons for them to confront a complex future. His novels are, therefore, not sheer pulp fiction but fictionalized versions of actual historical personas narrated in ways that would serve a purposeful function: to reform society. Among the Muslim figures that formed part of Al Ghazali's corpus are Hamzah bin Abdul Mutalib (568–625), Abdul Rahman bin Auf (c. 581–c. 654), Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1368), Hayreddin Barbarossa (c. 1473–1546), Umar Mukhtar (1862–1931), and Syeikh Ahmad Yassin (1937–2004).

The historical novel which has gained Al Ghazali the most attention recently is entitled *Malcolm X: Pembela Kulit Hitam Amerika* (“Malcolm X: Defender of the Blacks in America”). The title is in itself suggestive of the author's narrative framework. The novel aims at uncovering the making of a heroic personality, whose landmark political theology was to speak on the behalf of a marginalized group of people in American history. The word “hitam” (black) placed in the subtitle sets the tone for a story that shows how a valiant coloured man struggled in the face of white domination. This “black versus white” binary that Al Ghazali establishes is among the many myths about Malcolm X that have been circulating among writers, particularly among those who would like to position him as a victim of a white-dominated society and a spokesperson for the black community.<sup>24</sup> The first

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23. Maria Josefina Saldana-Portillo, “Consuming Malcolm X: Prophecy and Performative Masculinity”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 30 (1997), 307. The latest iconoclastic take on Malcolm X is by Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, New York 2011. A sharp yet informed critique of Manning's imbalanced and highly speculative approach to Malcolm X's biography is found in bell hooks, *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Theory and Practice*, New York 2013, 71–80.

24. See Regina Jennings, *Malcolm X and the Poetics of Haki Madhubuti*, Jefferson, NC 2006,



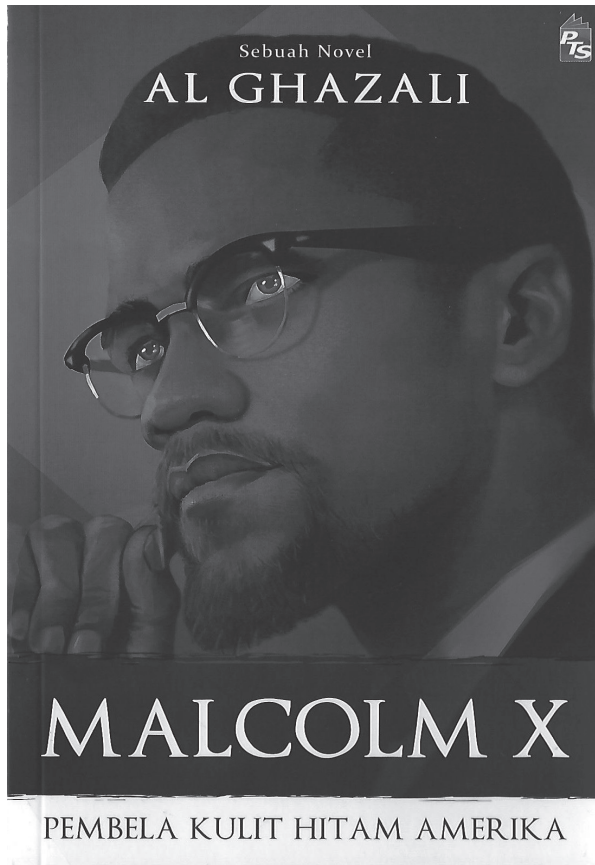


Figure 1. The cover of Al Ghazali's book *Malcolm X: Pembela Kulit Hitam Amerika*.

nine chapters of the novel (almost a third of the book) heighten this point, as Al Ghazali tracks how Malcolm X suffered under the continuous threats from militant white groups that led to his father's death and his family falling apart.

Nor is this all. Although the overall structure of the novel mirrors that of Malcolm X's autobiography, the novel departs in a few significant ways. First, like most texts of this genre, which is tailored towards making the readers sympathetic to or intimate with the main historical actor, it "summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's thoughts and intentions."<sup>25</sup> Al Ghazali achieves this by interlacing the descriptions of actual figures and events with dialogues between them. Some

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25. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston, MA 1995, 5.

of these dialogues and descriptions are highly emotive. For example, while grieving at his father's funeral, the five-year-old Malcolm X said to his elder brother Wilfred (1920–1998): "I am scared." Wilfred replied confidently, which is the author's way of showing black confidence in the face of tragedy: "There is nothing to be afraid of. Our father was a human being. His time has come." Malcolm then looked at his brother in the eyes and replied: "I am afraid that our home will be attacked and burnt down again. Where would we live if our home has become ashes?" Al Ghazali then closes this emotional chapter with a more tragic note, which further dramatizes the grim childhood that formed Malcolm X's eventual character: "Malcolm was just five years old and too young to accept the reality of a painful life. Earl's demise is but a small setback. They [Malcolm's family] least expect a bigger problem that lurks in the horizon."<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, Al Ghazali's historical novel downplays many of Malcolm X's personal failings in an attempt to provide a linear account of his would-be role as an activist of black rights. One of these is the story of Malcolm X's relationship with an African American woman. An entire chapter in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is dedicated to discussing Laura and how much she was affected by Malcolm X leaving her to begin a crime-ridden relationship with a white lady, Sophia. Malcolm X openly acknowledged that "one of the shames I have carried for years is that I blame myself for all of this. To have treated her [Laura] as I did for a white woman made the blow doubly heavy. The only excuse I can offer is that like so many of my black brothers today, I was just deaf, dumb, and blind."<sup>27</sup> The reality is, of course, more complex than Malcolm X had readily admitted. Still, Al Ghazali chose to remove this significant part of Malcolm X's life story that showed that he was not merely a victim of circumstance. He was also a perpetrator of injustice towards his own people at one stage in his life; a fact that he openly disclosed. Viewed from this perspective, if a historical novelist is, as Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) argues, one who does more than regurgitating "the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history",<sup>28</sup> then Al Ghazali has removed more flesh from what could have been a more nuanced depiction, albeit fictional, of Malcolm X. Some flesh in the novel had to be removed to position Malcolm X as a travelling model.

Above all, Al Ghazali's novel embellishes his subject's virtues as a martyr of a pristine form of Islam. He achieves this in two ways. The first was to

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26. Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X: Pembela Kulit Hitam Amerika*, Selangor 2017, 33.

27. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York 1965, 69–70.

28. Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, Lincoln, NE 1984, 67–68.

show how Malcolm X transformed fully from being a black nationalist into a Muslim who accepted that all human beings are equal. In Chapter 35 with the suggestive title “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz”, Al Ghazali related Malcolm X’s radical transformation upon his return to New York City after completing *hajj*. Malcolm X told the press how he was wrong to assume that all white people were evil and he has since accepted that whites too could join hands with coloured people to undo injustices. The chapter ends hyperbolically. While driving his Oldsmobile, Malcolm X encountered a white couple in their car at a traffic junction. The man in the car recognized Malcolm X and called out his name. He then asked: “Are you willing to shake hands with a white man?” Malcolm X responded: “I have no issues with shaking hands with a human being.” He then added: “Are you willing to do the same?”<sup>29</sup> Malcolm X’s rejoinder as narrated by Al Ghazali showed how he had moved on from his racist past. A new Malcolm X emerges in the novel and is positioned as a travelling model for others elsewhere.

Al Ghazali’s other strategy of aggrandizing Malcolm X’s Islamic credentials operates through vivid coverage of his funeral in the closing chapter of the book. More than 22,000 people attended the highly publicized funeral. The highlight of the event was not the deceased, but a dozen Muslim men led by an elderly person dressed in “white turban, black robe, with a walking stick and visibly long white beards”. He was a prominent Sudanese Muslim scholar, Sheikh Ahmed Hassoun (1898–1971), who washed Malcolm X’s body. This was followed by prayers read by Sheikh Al-Hajj Hesham Jaaber (1931–2007). The presence of these two real-life clerics in the story is clearly the author’s attempt to underscore Malcolm X’s Islamicity and, more so, his Sunni inclinations towards the end of his life. Malcolm X, in Al Ghazali’s formulation, is a standard for Muslims because he was endorsed by scholars in his time.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, Al Ghazali’s mythicization of Malcolm X blurs the division between reality and fiction. Indeed, the “idea that reality and fiction are two discrete ‘realms’ is quite misleading, for it blinds one to the more subtle displacements and carry-over effects between the two as well as to the specific and mutable nature of the contradictions or modes of alienation that may arise between and within them”.<sup>31</sup> Al Ghazali challenges the established story of Malcolm X’s life to introduce his own version of the various events, actors, and other contexts that gave rise to a globally renowned African American activist. By de-emphasizing Malcolm X’s frailties and bringing

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29. Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X*, 216.

30. Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X*, 218–219.

31. Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel*, Ithaca, NY 1987, 206.

to attention his radical transformations into a man “whose name would always be remembered in as long as human rights and equality are upheld”, Al Ghazali’s novel adds to the internationalization and vernacularization of the myth-making enterprise of Malcolm X.<sup>32</sup> His fictionalized life, or his mythicized biography, becomes part of the shared legacy of Muslims in the Malay world in the author’s effort to portray him as a travelling model to be followed.

## Mobilization

Since the late 1990s, there emerged a resurgence of interest in Malcolm X in the United States, as state and society coped with the marginalization and mistreatment of minorities, particularly the African Americans. The image of Malcolm X has been refashioned and mobilized recurrently to “represent the internalized expression of their [African American] anger and frustration. The promotion of Malcolm X becomes essentially a kind of voodoo doll – something to shake at white people and say, ‘I’m not happy here. I’m not satisfied yet.’”<sup>33</sup> Although Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia did not experience the same form of challenges as the minorities in the United States, they view Malcolm X as an imperative tool of mobilization and as an effective instrument in highlighting stark prejudices. Malcolm X is a travelling model for Muslims in these countries because his political theology addresses the concerns of three main groups: the Muslim youth, preachers, and political activists. I examine here how these three groups mobilized Malcolm X for their respective causes. Due to limitations of space, I discuss only notable samples from the three groups.

Among the Muslim youth in the Malay world, Malcolm X is the epitome of courage, idealism, and self-reliance, traits that should be imbued in various programmes. An illustrative case in point is the Angkatan Belia Islam Semalaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), more commonly known as ABIM. The 40,000 strong globally recognized movement holds Malcolm X high as an iconic figure in modern Islamic history who affected change in the order of things, especially in the lives of the young Muslims. Malcolm X is therefore couched as not just an African American Muslim but “one who waged a battle against all forms of oppression”,<sup>34</sup> as Ahmad

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32. Al Ghazali, *Malcolm X*, 219.

33. Darren W. Davis & Christian Davenport, “The Political and Social Relevancy of Malcolm X: The Stability of African American Political Attitudes”, *The Journal of Politics* 59 (1997), 561.

34. Ahmad Azam, “Mengenang El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)”, <https://ahmadazam.blogspot.com/2009/02/mengenang-el-hajj-malik-el-shabazz.html>, accessed 2020-02-05.

Azam, one of the former Presidents of ABIM, described him. Malcolm X's speeches, ideas, and life story are often quoted, publicized, discussed, and developed by ABIM into practical activities for the youth in the Malay world.

From 11 to 17 April 1996, ABIM organized a public screening of a documentary on Malcolm X at the Putra World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur, in conjunction with the visit of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad (1933–2008), the son of Elijah Muhammad who transformed the NOI into a mainstream Sunni-oriented movement. This was one of the many programmes that ABIM organized in memory of Malcolm X's activism to inspire the youth.<sup>35</sup> In April 2016, the Malaysia Youth Council, an umbrella body of all youth organizations in the country, held a public forum to critically discuss Malcolm X's speeches, notably *Malcolm X Speaks to Young People*. One of the speakers at the event, Jufitri Joha, was ABIM's vice president. The main aim of the event was to make Malcolm X known to young people who may have not been aware of his importance. The speakers of the forum stressed Malcolm X's remarkable resilience in the face of life's challenges. Clearly, Malcolm X is projected as a travelling model for youth to take lessons from, to encourage them to be more involved in social and other grassroots causes.<sup>36</sup>

If Malcolm X's ideas and life story are mobilized by youth to encourage them to be prime movers of society and catalysts of change, among Muslim preachers in the Malay world he is the standard for any Muslim who works to spread the message of Islam to the world. A quick search on Google with the keywords "Malcolm X" + "dakwah" yields hundreds of websites written in the Malay-Indonesian language which extol Malcolm X's role in Islamic missionary work (*da'wah* or *dakwah* [in Malay]). Many of these articles explain how he brought thousands into the fold of Islam and brought the world's attention to the plight of African Americans. For example, Indonesia's most celebrated and award-winning journalist and poet, Goenawan Mohamed, described Malcolm X's Muslim missionary work as one that moved beyond the shackles of racism to acknowledging the universal conception of justice as enjoined by Islam. The spirit of *dakwah* of Malcolm X, according to Goenawan, is relevant for the Indonesians: "Still we know that Malcolm lives on. The one who transcended hatred or even death."<sup>37</sup>

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35. Ahmad Azam, "Imam Warithudeen Muhammad", <https://ahmadazam.blogspot.com/2008/09/imam-warithudeen-muhammad.html>, accessed 2020-02-05.

36. Jufitri Bin Joha, "Kupasan Buku: Malcolm X Talks to Young People", <http://belia.org.my/wp/2016/04/19/kupasan-buku-malcolm-x-talks-to-young-people/>, accessed 2020-02-05.

37. Goenawan Mohamad, *Catatan Pinggir*, vol. 10, Jakarta 2012, 70.

For Ustaz Abdul Somad, one of Indonesia's most popular preachers today, Malcolm X was a modern manifestation of a known model Muslim, Bilal bin Raba (580–640), who was one of the Prophet Muhammad's closest companions from an African background. Like Bilal, Malcolm X preached Islam to non-Muslims instead of Muslims only. Reflecting on this point, Abdul Somad criticized Muslim clerics for preaching to the converted in the Malay world, who were making Muslims more Islamic instead of bringing the message of Islam to the non-Muslim population. Abdul Somad stressed that Malcolm X's *dakwah* was catered for all human beings, whom Malcolm X saw as his brethren.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, I wish to highlight here the mobilization of Malcolm X by political activists. A cursory survey of the extant literature shows that no incumbent politician in the Malay world had ever mentioned Malcolm X in their speeches and writings, the reasons for which are not hard to guess. Malcolm X's ideas would lay bare many of the jaundiced policies that were in place, especially in the realm of minority marginalization. For the same reason, Malcolm X's speeches and life story have found their appeal mainly among oppositional forces in mainstream politics as a means by which transformations could be agitated.

One prominent example is the use of Malcolm X by members of the former opposition party (now incumbent), Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in Malaysia. During his speech on 4 October 2014 in conjunction with the Hari Raya Haji celebrations (celebrations in honour of the month of *haji*), Azmin Ali, the Chief Minister of the opposition-held state of Selangor, called to attention the spirit of Malcolm X. He urged the public "to support democracy, human rights and tolerance in a multi-ethnic society" which were issues that Malcolm X stood for toward the end of his life.<sup>39</sup> A few months later, in a lengthy interview, the youth leader of the PR, Nik Nazmi, mentioned how Malcolm X had influenced his views on racial equality in Malaysia and in calling for a new form of politics that would address social and economic injustices.<sup>40</sup> In the same month, the leader of PR (now Prime Minister in waiting), Anwar Ibrahim, tweeted Malcolm X's famous quote on the misinformation that newspapers are capable of purveying,<sup>41</sup> indirectly criticizing the ruling government of manipulating the media to entrench their power

38. "Malcolm X – Ustadz Abdul Somad", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8ffcNb4J68>, accessed 2020-02-05.

39. "Azmin Invokes Malcolm-X in Sharp Hari Raya Haji Message", *Malay Mail* 2014-10-04, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/10/04/azmin-invokes-malcolm-x-in-sharp-hari-raya-haji-message/757945>, accessed 2020-02-05.

40. Rita Jong, "The Lessons that Malcolm X Taught Me", *Focus Malaysia* 2014-12-18, 10–11.

41. "If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing."



and consolidate their hegemony in Malaysia.<sup>42</sup> For opposition politicians in the Malay world, Malcolm X was a guiding light and also a weapon against their nemeses.

In sum, like mythicization, the mobilization of Malcolm X is inevitably a selective and condensed view of his multi-faceted life. Malcolm X's noteworthy traits and accomplishments are used for the purposes of mobilization for the marginalized, while his imperfections are redacted and refracted in ways that would transform the negative into useful lessons for personal and social reconstruction.

## Conclusion

In an incisive take on the legacy of Malcolm X, Emin Poljarevic highlighted the epistemic bias within contemporary scholarly analyses that has done much to “sidestep an Islamic dimension of an iconic civil rights leader”.<sup>43</sup> Poljarevic goes further to state that Malcolm X's “fearless commitment to justice and equality are still great moral resources for contemporary minority populations in the USA and, potentially, in Europe as well”.<sup>44</sup> This essay furthers Poljarevic's point by arguing that Malcolm X was and is still more than a travelling model, not only for minorities but also for majorities seeking to realize Malcolm X's dream of a just and equitable society.

Malcolm X demystified the idea that the struggle of African Americans in America was a struggle of minorities against the dominant white population. As he put it sharply: “It's impossible for you and me to know where we stand until we look around in this entire earth.”<sup>45</sup> His travels reshaped his approaches to the struggles for social justice and, in so doing, he became an icon, a model, whose words and deeds were emulated by his Malay world counterparts. It remains to be seen what other forms of appropriation of Malcolm X will pan out in the near future. For now, it is perhaps apt to end this essay with some words taken from Malcolm X's speech delivered at Cornhill Methodist Church, New York on 16 February 1965, merely a week before he was killed. Malcolm X reminds us of the continued significance of the Malay world and of the world at large in influencing his political theology, the struggles which, in effect, transformed him into a travelling model:

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42. Anwar Ibrahim, <https://twitter.com/anwaribrahim/status/541373306507493376>, accessed 2020-02-05.

43. Emin Poljarevic, “Malik al-Shabazz's Practice of Self-Liberation”, in Dustin J. Byrd & Seyed Javad Miri (eds.), *Malcolm X: From Political Eschatology to Religious Revolutionary*, Leiden 2016, 227–228.

44. Poljarevic, “Malik al-Shabazz's Practice”, 245–246.

45. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 163.



But a change has come about us. In us. And what from? Back in '55 in Indonesia, at Bandung, they had a conference of dark-skinned people. The people of Africa and Asia came together for the first time in centuries. They had no nuclear weapons, they had no air fleets, no navy. But they discussed their plight and they found that there was one thing that all of us had in common – oppression, exploitation, suffering. And we had a common oppressor, a common exploiter.<sup>46</sup> ▲

#### SUMMARY

In this paper, I examine works of fiction, digital resources, and speeches of Malay political ideologues who engaged in the mythologization, monumentalization, and mobilization of Malcolm X's thought. As a travelling model, his life and thought has been translated from one language to another, absorbed, adapted, appropriated, and vernacularized among Malay-Indonesian Muslims, ushering novel formulations of the notions of justice, freedom, and equality in a setting Malcolm X was least familiar with but had gained much intellectual stimulus from. It follows then that this paper seeks to address two main gaps in the ever-growing studies on Malcolm X: First, the lack of attention to how his ideas and life story were recast outside the Anglo-American world. Second, I hope to show how a study of Malcolm X can generate the development of new concepts in the path to analyze how political theologies travel from one particular temporality to another.

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46. Malcolm X, *The Last Speeches*, 170.