

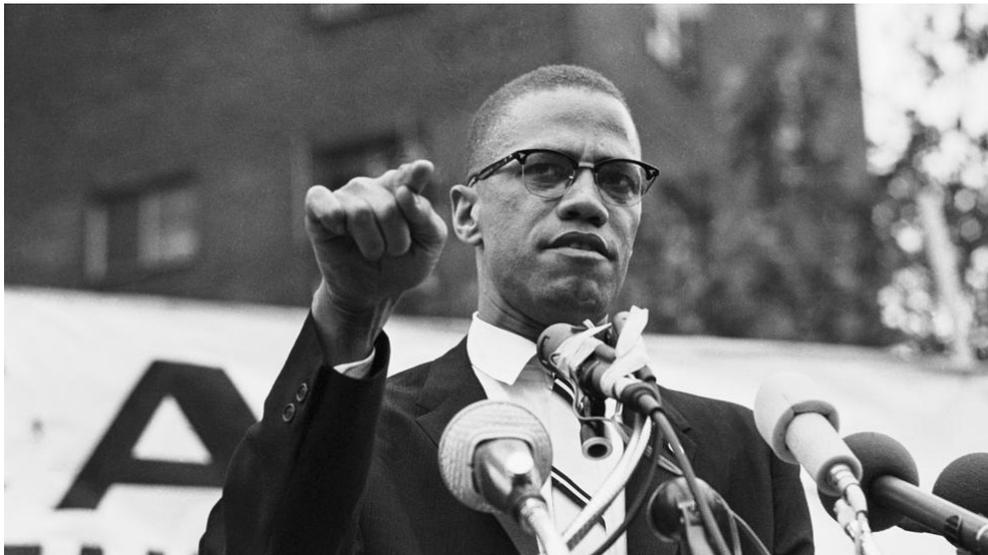


A THORN IN THE SIDE OF BLACK AMERICA: THE ASSASSINATION OF MALCOLM X

JOAQUÍN SARAVIA
UNIVERSIDAD DE CÓRDOBA

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (1925-1965), better known as Malcolm X, one of the most iconic figures in African American culture and its antiracist movements. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, and baptized by his Christian parents as Malcolm Little, the short and dramatic life of X could easily be the story of several fictional antiheroes: moral corruption, redemption, and a violent death while pursuing his mission.

As with millions of Blacks in the United States, Malcolm X experienced the devastating effects of racism since his childhood. In 1931, his father was fatally hit by a streetcar. Although the death was officially ruled an accident, the entire community believed that Earl Little had been murdered by the Black Legion, a white supremacist terrorist organization. The Legion was also suspected of burning his family's home in 1929.





After his mother was taken to a mental health hospital, Malcolm lived in several shelters until 1941, when he moved to Boston to start living with Ella Little Collins, his half-sister. He did not stay long in Boston. He moved onto Flint, Michigan, and in 1943, he arrived in Harlem, New York. The Harlem period is, by far, the darkest of Malcolm X's life due to his participation in several forms of organized crime like procuration, drug-dealing, gambling, or robbery. In the end, he was caught, arrested, and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

While serving his sentence in two Massachusetts prisons, first in Charlestown and then in Norfolk, he established an epistolary relationship with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Muslim Nation. This was a turning point in the life of Malcolm X, who abandoned atheism and turned to Islam. Here is when he decided to erase the surname Little and to adopt "X". The explanation behind the adoption of the "X" is a simple one. "X" was initially an Anglo mark of enslavement. Malcolm X was interested in repurposing the "X" to symbolize the original African identities that had been stolen by these Anglo oppressors.

Once he was established as a member of the Muslim Nation, Malcolm became an influential activist of antiracism and Black nationalism. X did not agree with the passive resistance strategies promoted by Martin Luther King Jr. Instead, he urged his peers to rebel and actively fight against white oppression, even with violence if necessary. He was the voice of the voiceless Blacks that were angry and willing to counterattack structural and systemic violence.

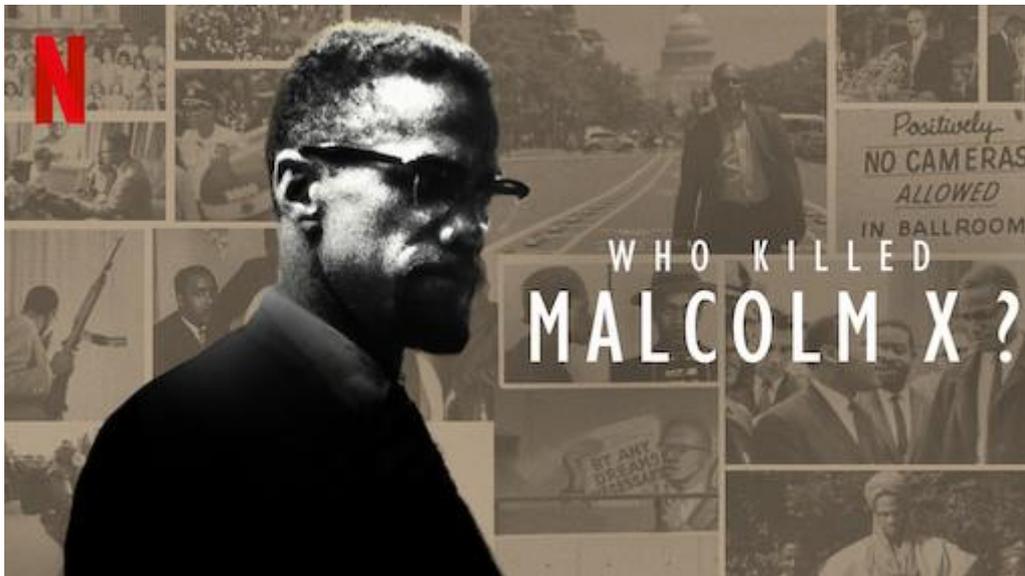
His outstanding rhetorical and oratorial skills were not only used against white supremacy, but also to rebuke those who, like King, believed in different paths towards emancipation. These combative ideas not only awakened the antipathy of a racist America, but also of other Blacks.

X's rocketing popularity even worried Elijah Muhammad, who gave him power and treated him as a son, until the young preacher was perceived as a potential threat to his leadership. The breaking point arrived when Malcolm X mocked the murder of President John F. Kennedy, which was punished with a temporary suspension of his membership to the Muslim Nation. In the end, this suspension became permanent.

In 1964, X left the Muslim Nation and founded Muslim Mosque, Inc. After a pilgrimage to the Mecca, he also embraced Sunni Islam and adopted his final name, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The emancipation from the Muslim Nation was the beginning of a harsh confrontation that resulted in death threats against X and his family.

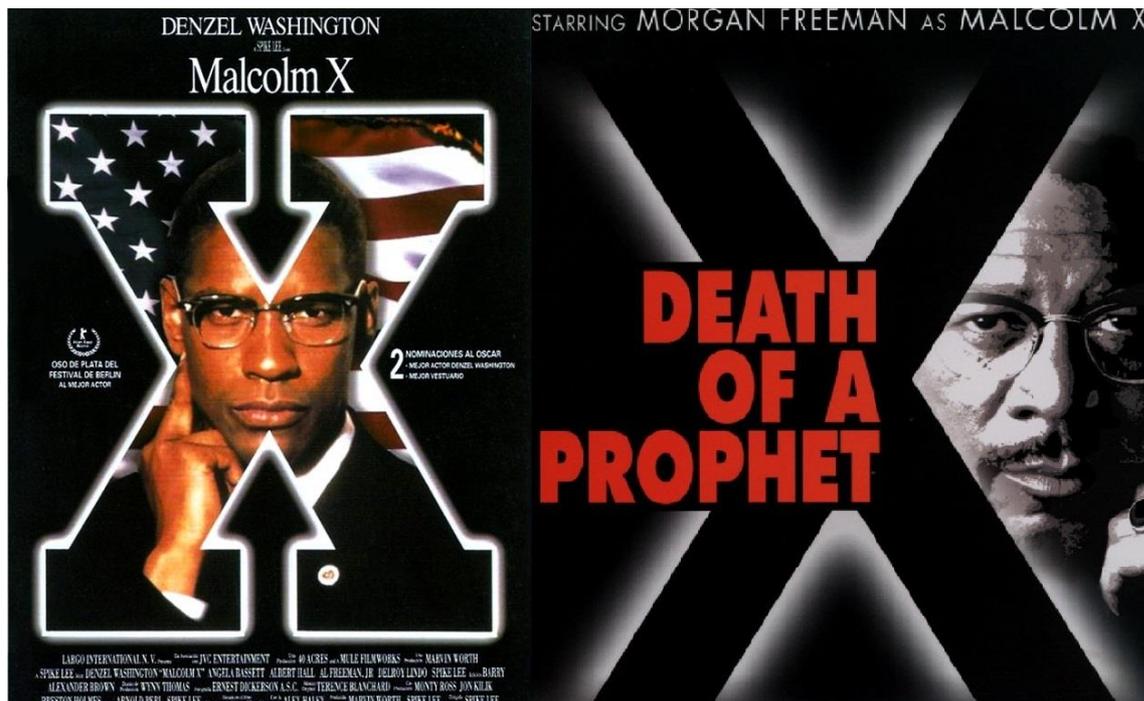
On February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan, Malcolm X was murdered by three men who shot him sixteen times. One of the assailants, Talmadge X Hayer (also known as Thomas Hagan), was captured in the act, whereas the other

two assailants were able to escape. Malcolm X died moments before his arrival to the medical center at the University of Columbia. He was only 39 years old. The details of the incident remain unclear. Although a jury sentenced Norman 3X Butler and Thomas 15X Johnson, both men still proclaim their innocence, as does Hayer.



The lack of facts that are known about what occurred that day have led scholars, journalists, and film makers to fill in the blanks. One of the latest attempts was carried out by the six-chapter documentary miniseries *Who Killed Malcolm X?* (2020), directed by Rachel Dretzin and Phil Bertelsen. This exhaustive and well documented work explores not only the ‘Muslim against Muslim’ version of Malcolm X’s story but also the possible role played by the New York Police Department and the FBI. These two institutions saw X as a threat because of his radicalism and Communist ideas.

Other films have also asked questions about what really happened. *Death of a Prophet* (1981), written and directed by Woodie King Jr. and starring Morgan Freeman, is a documentary-style film that attempts to interrogate what really happened to X. Even though the film takes considerable creative license, its depiction of the last day of Malcolm X (whose name is never mentioned onscreen) is moving and empowering.



The 1992 film *Malcolm X*, written and directed by Spike Lee, depicts X's life from a different angle than *Death of a Prophet* did. Based on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (1965), the film presents a much more accurate portrait of the activist's life. This film was very well received by critics well received by the critic.

The success and impact of *Who Killed Malcolm X*, but especially the new evidence it provides about the innocence of the two assailants who were convicted, settled the ground for the reinvestigation of Malcolm X's murder. Fifty-six years later, truth and justice seem unreachable. Only time will tell if they can be grasped.



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