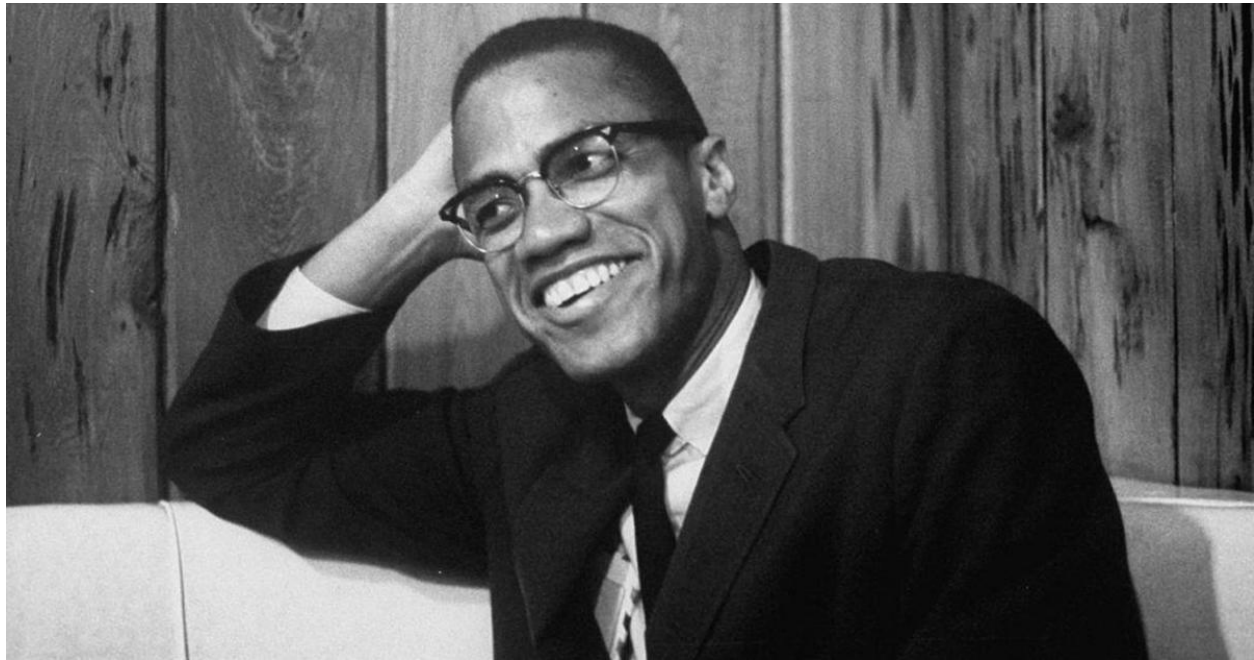


Black History Month: Myths and Misconceptions About Malcolm X

By: Hedija Spahalic

Malcolm X is one of the most revered Muslim civil rights icons; however, his role in the civil rights movement and other aspects of his life are still misunderstood or misrepresented.



Known for his passionate speeches and calls to action, one of America's first Muslim leaders, Malcolm X, was a celebrated proponent of Black Nationalism. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925 he was raised in various parts of the north, which gave him a different perspective on the superficially integrated world he was living in.

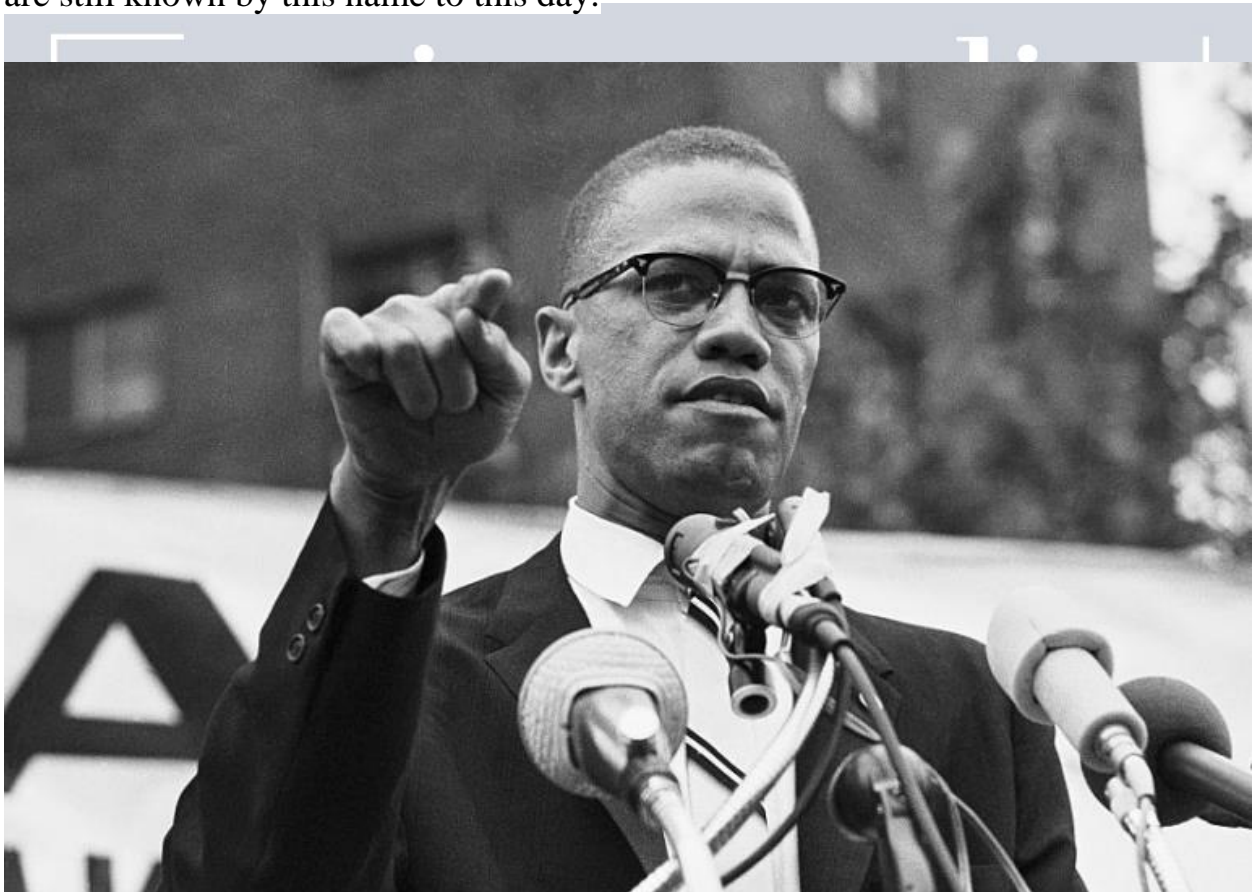
Malcolm X became synonymous with revolutionary activism through his forceful nature and powerful oratory. However, he still remains an enigma to many and there are several critical parts of his life and work that are misconstrued to this day. Here are five things that are widely associated with Malcolm X which require correction or context:

Misconception: His name is Malcolm X

Malcolm X was actually born Malcolm Little. Members who joined the Nation of Islam were encouraged to give up their “slave” last names and replace them with the letter “X.” NOI’s Leader, Elijah Muhammad, would anoint them an “original Muslim name” once a member had proven themselves to him. To Malcolm, the X represented the true African-derived name he would never know.

“For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears,” he said.

Later, when Malcolm completed his first pilgrimage to Hajj in 1964, he went on to change his name for the second time to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Since he was assassinated soon after changing his name, history continues to refer to him as Malcolm X. His wife and children, however, adopted the last name Shabazz and are still known by this name to this day.



Myth: He was a member of the Black Panther Party

Malcolm X was not a member of the Black Panther Party. In fact, he was killed before the party was formed. He was assassinated on February 21, 1965, and the Black Panther Party had officially formed on October 15, 1966. Co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, wrote in his biography that Malcolm X would not have done things the way they did. Although the party was partially influenced by some of his ideals, members and those close to him have acknowledged the fact that his spiritual beliefs and ethics would not have aligned with their movement.



Misconception: He preached violence

Malcolm X was a proponent of self-defense. He wanted black Americans to defend themselves “by any means necessary.” Those means included educating opponents, psychological warfare and even arming oneself as a last resort. His support for the Second Amendment stemmed from his desire to protect himself and his family from harm. The infamous photo of Malcolm X wielding a gun, looking through a window, was published in Ebony magazine’s September 1964 issue. For many, this image embodies his equal right to self-defense, a right enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. In fact, he never called for violence nor did he encourage his supporters to initiate it.

This was of course where he and Martin Luther King, Jr. disagreed. His belief that black people had a right to defend themselves juxtaposed with MLK Jr.’s pacifism and belief in peaceful protesting. Malcolm X rejected non-violent civil rights demonstrations, believing it to be hypocritical. He thought it was unreasonable to expect black people to remain non-violent when experiencing violence by armed white people, including the police.



TODAY

Misconception: He was a Civil Rights Leader

Although Malcolm X is regarded today as a civil rights icon, especially by Black Muslims, he was not part of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Though his activism occurred in the 60s, during that period, Malcolm X saw himself as a human rights activist and placed more emphasis on religious and racial equality. The Civil Rights Movement primarily took place in the south and was church-led by MLK, Jr. Initially, he was critical of their slow, non-confrontational framing and pushed for more direct action.

“As long as you fight it on the level of civil rights, you’re under Uncle Sam’s jurisdiction,” he said.

However, towards the end of his life, Malcolm asserted his support for MLK and the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. After he founded the Organization of

Afro-American Unity in 1965, he wanted his focus to shift from civil rights to human rights.



Myth: He was racist

One of the most common phrases associated with Malcolm X is, “The white man is the devil.”

This phrase emanated from the teachings of 19th-century abolitionist, David Walker, who was studied by Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammed. It was supposed to be an explanation for the evil and suffering brought on by racism.

“I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man – and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color,” Malcolm X said.

Malcolm X was echoing Walker’s views and his reference to white slave owners “acting like devils.” It was also a counter to white supremacist claims that black people were associated with evil and the devil. However, it should be noted that his

views shifted radically after his Hajj trip when he saw Muslims from all over the world, including those with different skin colors.

“Their belief in the Oneness of God (Allah) had actually removed the ‘white’ from their minds, which automatically affected their attitude and behavior toward people of other colors. Their belief in the Oneness of God has actually made them so different from American whites, their outer physical characteristics played no part at all in my mind during all my close associations with them,” he said.

