

# Malcolm X's No "D" Academician Career

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**Abstract:** *Malcolm X rose to international prominence within a short period. From nothing he rose up to something significant enough to change the course of events in race relations in the United States of America (USA). Determined to vanquish the status quo of the so-called "lazy and shiftless Negro," he was among the best students at school though he dropped out to escape from his teachers' cruelty. Sent to prison for burglary, he then started reading through any books he laid his hands on. Finally, Malcolm X attained an intellectual stature many PhDs had not. At the peak of his career, prestigious universities such as Harvard and powerful media groups aspired to invite him as guest speaker or interviewee. In his speeches, one could tell how well he mastered sociology, religion, philosophy and history, among other themes. This paper proposes a journey into Malcolm X's intellectual development from the stage of innocence to his imprisonment to his prominence as a mass leader. At the end of the journey, you will notice that Malcolm X reached the highest level of an academician with no formal university degree.*

**Keywords:** Civil rights activism, Mr. Ostrowki, Mr. Williams, no "D" academician, rhetoric of freedom

## 1. Introduction

The professional career of Malcolm X as a public speaker in the American crisis-packed context of race, democracy and justice is worth spending time and effort. He had a distinguished career as a charismatic orator and mass leader of millions of African Americans across the United States of America. Just like Abraham Lincoln, William E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, John F. Kennedy, who marked the history page of their epochs with an indelible ink, Malcolm X deserves the same consideration any other great American has. Malcolm X's powerful influence proves that people with PhDs and people with no "Ds" are on an equal footing in terms of self-making and intelligence.

After the successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr., published an essay to immortalize the events that led to that victory. That book was titled *Stride Toward Freedom*, and it was published in 1958. In his essay, King delved into the new determination among African Americans that evidenced that the status quo of the oppressed African Americans waiting for freedom and justice on a silver platter was about to change. In a sentence that has inspired the title of this paper, King declared that the PhDs and the no "Ds" were bound together in a common venture to fight Jim Crow in public transportations (King, 1968). King used the term "PhDs" to refer to African Americans from the middle class or the high class who had never needed to ride the buses and whose social status spared the slurs and harassments that the no "Ds" such as maids, laborers and seamstresses like Rosa Parks, suffered from on a daily basis when riding the city buses.

Malcolm X was a no "D" because he stopped his education in his teens and never earned any college or university degree. Even though he did manual jobs here and there, he was far from being in the category of the no "Ds" King referred to. Malcolm X was a great academician in the right sense of the word. He was a man of thinking, debating and producing when it came to sharing brilliant ideas on racial crisis and social justice in America and beyond. This owed him hundreds of invitations to speak in public on podiums in the United States of America (USA) in the first half of the 1960s.

For a charismatic orator who came a long way from prison, Malcolm X's life and biography give lessons of courage, reeducation, self-making and hope.

This study examines the itinerary of a Malcolm X who, from poverty, burglary, hustling, and prison, rose himself up to prominence. His charisma and fame catch interest. After the fashion of Frederick Douglass who freed himself from slavery, Booker T. Washington who reconstructed himself and constructed his fellow African Americans, or more recently, Barack Obama who reached the highest supreme office, Malcolm X shared the same virtue of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps. This paper will investigate the difficult journey that took Malcolm X from the low point of an innocent underprivileged black child to the high pedestal of an intellectual of imposing stature.

## 2. Innocence and Guilt

Malcolm X's no "D" status does not stem from illiteracy. Nor does it come from permanent menial jobs. Malcolm X's no "D" status emanates from the fact that he did not pursue higher studies in universities until the PhD degree just like other prominent African Americans such as the historian Carter G. Woodson. As a student, Malcolm X was so brilliant that he was on top of his other classmates, mostly whites, as he went to an integrated school. Nonetheless, the American society did not offer him the opportunity to reach the official highest academic stature.

In the first chapter of his own autobiography written with the significant help of Alex Haley, author of the 1976 famous novel *Roots*, Malcolm X depicts violent stages of his life while he was just an innocent child whose world started to take shape in a weird manner. The following excerpts are relevant:

Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy [Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalism] among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my

Volume 13 Issue 6, June 2024

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one, my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar. And my father was finally himself to die by the white man's hands.

(Malcolm X, 1964, p. 2)

As in Omaha, my mother was pregnant again, this time with my youngest sister. Shortly after Yvonne was born came the nightmare night in 1929, my earliest vivid memory. I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground.

(Malcolm X, 1964, p. 3)

My mother was taken by the police to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet was over my father in a bed, and she wouldn't look, she was afraid to look. Probably it was wise that she didn't. My father's skull, on one side, was crushed in, I was told later. Negroes in Lansing have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half.

(Malcolm X, 1964, p. 10)

This first chapter of Malcolm X's own autobiography helps understand his legitimate paradoxical race fight. Fighting for the freedom and justice of one's own race while hating another is a total paradox. In his own family, this paradox survived, too. Malcolm X's father, Earl Little, was belligerent toward all his children, except Malcolm. Earl Little was a one-eyed intrepid Black who was a big, six-foot-four, very dark man. Malcolm X's mother, Louise Little, was so clear-skinned that she almost looked like a white woman. Her father was white (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 2). It was common during slavery times to see black servants become pregnant by their white masters since rapes of black women were rampant and unpunished.

In Malcolm X's family, the skin color made a difference though insignificant. Earl, the dark-skinned father beat his darker children and spared Malcolm, the lightest one. However, Louise, the almost white-skinned mother beat Malcolm the most. Each of Malcolm X's parent suffered a skin color complex that they would turn into retaliation into the family as if their own skin color caused their pains. Because of his black skin, Earl faced all sorts of tribulations with the racist Whites. His chances to live a decent life were narrow. He could not give his children what they needed. So, instead of blaming the racist Whites, he blamed his own skin

color. It was a different story as for Louise. Louise was so light-skinned that the racist Whites would think she was white. Unlike Earl, she could take profit of the situation.

This psychological case invites the example of the behavior of a monkey in the jungle. Let us imagine a thirsty monkey jumping from one coconut tree to another in search of ripe coconuts using the nearby creepers. On noticing a fully ripe coconut, the monkey becomes so excited that his hands involuntarily let go of the creepers, and he falls down and breaks his leg. Instead of thinking of avoiding distraction next time, he glares at the creepers as if they caused his failure. The monkey will eventually go home with an empty bag, but it will take him a long time before being able to jump with creepers again. Besides, since he wrongly thinks the creepers disappointed him, he might be considering using something else to climb from one tree to another even if that thing will be less useful than creepers as ropes.

Malcolm X got his reddish-brown color of skin, and his hair of the same color from his maternal white grandfather. Later he learnt to hate every drop of that "white rapist's blood" in him (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 3). At Malcolm X's father's death, his family was confronted to the ugliest face of his country. Racism walked hand in hand with poverty. Malcolm X's poverty separated his siblings and him from his beloved mother and made him quit school. This passage portrays how racism and poverty dislocated African American families:

But there were times when there wasn't even a nickel and we would be so hungry we were dizzy. My mother would boil a big pot of dandelion greens, and we would eat that. I remember that some small-minded neighbor put it out, and children would tease us, that we ate "fried grass". Sometimes, if we were lucky, we would have oatmeal or cornmeal mush three times a day. Or mush in the morning and cornbread at night.

(Malcolm X, 1964, p. 14)

Despite the social family plight Malcolm X did not escape from, he was a fine student. Alternately, Malcolm X attended kindergarten at Pleasant Grove Elementary School, then he went to Lansing's West Junior High School, afterwards he entered Mason Junior High School at seventh grade. Malcolm X never turned down any extracurricular activities he was invited to join, from debating societies to basketball teams. This was why he considered himself as his foster family's and school's mascot (Malcolm X, 1964). At school, he liked most English and history classes.

Mr. Ostrowski, his English teacher, gave him advice about how to become something in life. He also advised him about what a student ought to read, to do, or to think about. Malcolm got some of his best marks under him and felt that Mr. Ostrowski liked him as a person (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 31). Mr. Ostrowski's earlier behavior toward his students is the classic interaction between teachers and students. As a matured intellectual adult who knows full well the value of education in real life, the good teacher does not just teach, assess and grade. The teacher who runs a reduced service at school avoiding building rapport with his students is but a limited teacher however talented he may be.

Educational systems need more than limited teaching. Unlike parents, teachers have the exceptional occasion to help their students tap their unused potential. This is why any good teacher would act as Mr. Ostrowski did toward Malcolm. He took time to talk to Malcolm in an impersonalized tone until he wrongly felt that Mr. Ostrowski liked him. Malcolm might have thought, "How come that an adult white man appreciates so much a black boy?" At the first interactions with his English teacher, Malcolm did not know the reality out of innocence. His awakening to the stark reality was going to be brutal.

Malcolm's history teacher, Mr. Williams, further dramatized the brutality of the race relations reality. Mr. Williams was a version of the disrespectful teacher. Mr. Ostrowski was racist by words only. He did not mean to belittle Malcolm's good performance, but he thought to be doing the best for Malcolm given the race relations dilemma. America was a dream for the Whites but a nightmare the Blacks. On the contrary, Mr. Williams was the kind of history teachers who never told the fact and always wrote the wrong. He was a teacher who considered that his classroom time was a power, a tool to disparage an innocent child promoted to a fine future. Unlike Mr. Ostrowski, he did not seek to help Malcolm use his potential for anything useful in life. He just looked for ways to make him feel that he does not represent anything in life and that his race was a wretched human tribute on earth.

Later on, as a new Muslim convert, Malcolm X would develop a deep belief in the different doctrine that considered the white race as the wretched human tribute on earth (see Diop, 2024). The Nation of Islam successfully managed to subjugate the black Muslims into believing principles proscribed in Islam thanks to the weapon they were fighting with. They just gave the Whites tit for tat. Islam did not only come as a monotheistic religion that advocated brotherhood and cleanliness of the soul. Islam came to African Americans as a religion that could foil Christianity's domination plans as the very Whites who made African Americans catch hell in the USA were almost all Christians. Moreover, Christianity whipped Islam and African traditional religions away from the minds and hearts of the newly brought Africans to New England (USA).

This is like getting sartorial independence. When your oppressor oppresses you to the point of obliging you to wear his own clothes, you will not hesitate a second to take off his clothes in order to wear other types of clothes even if these new clothes will not mean anything significant in your quest for independence. At that point, all you will see is the symbol of oppression, tyranny and domination that no more covers your nudity. This is palpable in all countries that fought until they obtained independence. The first things to change are always symbolic not material or financial. Those things could be clothes, currency, names of public places or streets, official languages, and so forth.

The relationship that Malcolm X had with his teachers and which he remembered the most difficult and heartbreaking moments faithfully in his autobiography can be sketched as a tragicomedy. In a three act play, I can demonstrate how this Malcolm X tragicomedy unfurls. Act One sets the scene,

provides the context, introduces Malcolm, the protagonist, and his teachers, the antagonists, and gives the situation. Here, we will understand what the protagonist's problem is. Then, the protagonist works toward recognizing or solving the problem. Act Two portrays the protagonist as one who appears to solve the problem, but things actually get worse. It might take a while for the protagonist to realize this. Act Three shows the protagonist who discovers the inner flaw that caused the failure, resolves that, and reaches the true resolution. In a comedy, the protagonist succeeds; in a tragedy, he loses. But in a tragicomedy, he does both.

## ACT ONE

*An eighth grade classroom in Mason Junior High School, Mason, Michigan, around 1941. The classroom is full of white students, except for one black student whose name is Malcolm Little. Malcolm is an intelligent lanky boy with reddish-brown skin and hair color.*

*The school is a two story brick building built in the 1880s. Malcolm's classroom has 48 oak and cast iron desks bolted to the floor. The floor, door and trim are all oak. There are tall windows and radiators on one side of the classroom and a blackboard in front behind the teacher's desk. On the side opposite the windows are two doors with another blackboard in between. The cloakroom is in the back of the classroom.*

*There is a small American flag by the door towards the front of the class and pictures of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt on the walls. The alphabet in longhand and in print are posted above the front blackboard. Seasonal decorations are over the blackboard on the sidewall. Whatever textbooks are used are kept under the top of student's desks along with their pencils and papers.*

At the time of these events, it was still fresh in the minds of African Americans that in December 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to issue an executive order banning discrimination against black workers in the defense industry. A. Philip Randolph called for 10,000 loyal African American citizens to march on Washington, D.C. Randolph brought the gospel of trade unionism to millions of African American households (AFL-CIO, 2024).

Randolph led a ten-year drive to organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and served as the organization's first president. Randolph directed the March on Washington movement to end employment discrimination in the defense industry and a national civil disobedience campaign to ban segregation in the armed forces. The nonviolent protest and mass action effort inspired the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s (AFL-CIO, 2024).

## ACT TWO

All the students are in the room by 7:45 A.M. There are three rows and 30 students in the room. Malcolm is sitting in the second row next to a girl. All the students refer to him as “nigger,” “darkie” or “Rusta”. They did not think of these words as insults. This is just the way they think about him and about any other black person. The students have opened their English textbooks on page 35 as Mr. Ostrowki instructed last week. At 8 o’clock, Mr. Ostrowki enters the room and all the students are on their feet at once in sign of respect toward their teachers.

## Scene One

Mr. Ostrowski: (*smiles a bit, puts his leather bag on the desk, sits down, and opens his book*). Good morning, dear students! Read the text on page 35 titled “Students Prepare their Careers” and do the related comprehension activities on page 36. You have half an hour.  
(*The students start sharpening their pencils and then plunge into total concentration*).

Now it is 9:45 A.M., time is up. Mr. Ostrowski has congratulated Malcolm for his best performance in giving the correct answers. He encourages him to keep on working harder. Malcolm is smiling. He feels proud but is insane enough to feel that it was some kind of status symbol to be light complexioned that one was actually fortunate to be born thus. Next term, Malcolm will start questioning this deceptive feeling.

The break has ended. It is the history class time with Mr. Williams. Malcolm is still talking to Mr. Ostrowski about diverse subjects his white classmates have no knowledge of. But Mr. Ostrowski reminds him that he should not be late for the history class and waves him goodbye and heads to his car.

## Scene Two

Mr. Williams: (*puts his leather bag on the desk, sits down, and starts looking around as if he lost something in the room*). Go to the first page of your history books and ...

Before Mr. Williams finishes his sentence, Malcolm steps in the class.

Mr. Williams: (*stares at Malcolm as a starving wolf would look at a herd of elks in the cold desert of Alaska. Suddenly, he starts singing*). Way down yonder in the cotton field! Some folks say that a nigger won’t steal!

Surprised and hurt, Malcolm keeps quiet and calmly resumes his seat as if he did not hear a word.

The spring of 1941 has gone well for Malcolm Little though the poverty of his family is becoming unbearable. Confident, he has decided to work harder in the summer as Mr. Ostrowski advised. It is 7:45 A.M. and all the students are in class waiting for Mr. Ostrowski.

## Scene One

Mr. Ostrowski: (*enters the class in good humour as always, puts his leather bag on the desk, sits down, and opens his book on page 35*). Good morning, dear students! We must finish the comprehension activities related to the text titled “Students Prepare their Careers”.

Mr. Ostrowski goes on to question the students about their ambitions and plans. They mostly express their desires to become farmers. Some, mostly girls, want to be teachers. A few want other professions such as one boy who wants to become a county agent, another a veterinarian, and one girl wants to become a nurse. He encourages those who want to strike out on their own, to try something new, giving them advice about how to get there though none of them had earned marks equal to Malcolm. Then, he turns to Malcolm.

Mr. Ostrowski: Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?

Malcolm: Yes, sir. I dream of practicing a liberal profession. I want to be a lawyer.

Mr. Ostrowski: (*looks surprised, leans back in his chair and clasps his hands behind his head half-smiling such as a fox alone with one stray sheep*). Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me now. We all here like you, you know that but you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer, that’s not realistic. You need to think about something you can be. You’re good with your hands making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person, you’d get all kinds of work.

Malcolm felt so bad about this discriminatory and treacherous attitude of Mr. Ostrowski. As his confident, Mr. Ostrowski was supposed to be an ally but not a foe. At 9:45 A.M., Malcolm stands in a corner of the school courtyard thinking about many things as he was preparing to face Mr. Williams, his next torturer, and his disparaging comments.

## Scene Two

Mr. Williams: (*asks the students to open their history books on the last page section on African American history. The text is just one paragraph*

long. The title is “Negros’ History”. Usually, he asks the volunteers to read aloud but this time he decides to do the reading. He starts laughing as he is reading aloud how the African Americans had been slaves and then freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. Then he adds his own remark.). You know dear students, African Americans’ feet were so big that when they walked they did not leave tracks, they left holes in the ground. Ha! Ha! Ha!

### ACT THREE

*The more Malcolm thinks afterwards about what Mr. Ostrowski and Mr. Williams said, the more uneasy it makes him. It just keeps treading around in his mind. It is a surprising thing that he has never thought of it that way before, but he realizes that whatever he is not, he is smarter than nearly all his white classmates. But apparently he is still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever he wants to be. It is then that he begins to change inside. He starts drawing away from white people.*

*He comes to class, and answers when called upon. He becomes a physical strain simply to sit in Mr. Ostrowski’s and Mr. William’s class. Where the word “nigger” slips off his back before, wherever he hears it now, he stops and looks at whoever has said it. And they looked surprised that he does. Malcolm simply realizes that he must drop out.*

Malcolm X’s innocence and guilt life stages is similar to a tragicomedy, a situation blending tragic and comic elements. This paradox would come repeatedly in his life and in his career as a mass leader. The American society did not spare Malcolm as an innocent, orphan and poor child. It enslaved his forefathers, deprived his parents of opportunities, killed his father, drove his mother completely crazy and dislocated his family. As he dropped out, Malcolm became homeless and was exposed to drug dealing, procuring, and burglary until his imprisonment.

The American society made an innocent man guilty after dispossessing him of his childhood, his freedom to get good education, and the hope to start a family as normal persons. Malcolm was shameful of being innocent as he ignored that his light complexion meant nothing in a racist society, as he ignored that Mr. Ostrowski was just like the other white people who felt in their hearts that African Americans are but slaves.

### 3. Public Prominence

Malcolm X achieved international prominence thanks to his joining the Nation of Islam with his “white devils” and black supremacy speeches (Diop, 2024). His conversion to Islam signed the termination of his strange contract with the underworld. It also cleansed his moral standards making him a newly born man. In prison, Malcolm did not consider himself as a bird trapped in a cage, but he used it as an

opportunity to catch up with all the things he missed in Mr. Ostrowski’s and Mr. Williams’s classes.

According to one of Malcolm’s daughters, Attalah Shabazz, in prison, after being reacquainted with books, Malcolm proceeded to outread the library stock. Attalah has seen letters that her father wrote from prison in his early twenties, eagerly looking for the third volume of a text, or wanting help to track down out-of-print books, or even suggesting books to his friends and family on the outside (Malcolm X, 1964). This appeared in his speeches as he was increasingly rising to prominence.

Malcolm naturally loved defending his arguments in debates. As a student, mathematics was the subject he hated most because it left no room for argument. If you made a mistake that was all there was to it (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 31). Malcolm X must have felt that mathematics was for timid people or people who were so cool that they never got involved in politics or activism. Unlike mathematics, literature, philosophy and history offered Malcolm X the opportunity to show the power of his rhetoric of freedom. Even though they are often partly fictional, movies based on facts give a fine portrayal of men such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Alexander the Great, etc.

In Spike Lee’s 1992 biographical film on Malcolm X, starring Denzel Washington in the title role, one night scene shows a huge crowd gathered in the streets as one block chanting “We want justice”, the police resorted to Malcolm X to help them calm the angry crowd down. The following is a transcription of a thirty-four second video extract:

Police officer: Now, let’s disperse this mob. *Smiling, Malcolm X turned around and walks to the mob. He raises a finger and points it to a group of well-dressed and highly disciplined men who obeyed him like the Waffen-SS soldiers would under Hitler’s orders.*

Police officer: That’s too much power for one man to have.

(AKA-PTv, 2022)

Michael M. S. Handler assumes that Malcolm X was much in demand as a speaker at student forums in Eastern universities and had appeared at many by the end of his short career as a national figure. He always spoke respectfully and with a certain surprise of the positive response of white students to his lectures (Malcolm X, 1991). According to Archie Epps, in 1964, Malcolm X was the second most sought-after speaker on college campuses after the Republican Party nominee for President Barry Goldwater (Malcolm X, 1991, p. 32). In his long list of speeches in public halls, forums, mosques, churches, and at colleges and universities are the following:

- Queens College
- Harvard University
- Yale University
- UC Berkeley
- Columbia University
- University of Ghana
- Oxford Union
- Harvard Law School

- London School of Economics

On countless occasions, Elijah Muhammad sent Malcolm X to represent him on television and radio programs and at public lectures (Young, 1979, p. 76). Malcolm X was in great demand as a speaker and lecturer. Often he received more than twenty requests for speaking engagements in one mail. He traveled so much that his wife always kept a bag packed for him, so that when he returned from one round of speaking engagements, he could leave immediately for another. Throughout his tours, Malcolm always attracted large audiences, and the more controversial he became, the larger were his audiences. He argued and debated issues related to the Nation of Islam all across the country. While he served as one of its ministers, he was its foremost spokesman (Young, 1979, p. 81).

In his autobiography, Malcolm X confesses that one will not find anybody more time-conscious than he was. He lived by his watch, keeping appointments. Even when he was using his car, he drove by his watch, not his speedometer. Time was more important to him than distance (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 196). This is a lesson about discipline. As a sought-after leader and speaker, it was fundamental for him to abide by the rules of meticulousness. Malcolm X's short career of a self-made man who had no university degree but had the same posture as a senior lecturer is tremendously inspiring. But as his daughter Attallah Shabazz put it, "It is not often that an American government institution honors those who embody a whole and uncompromised truth" (Malcolm X, 1964).

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has recounted in a new perspective Malcolm X's short school career. Importantly enough, it has plunged into the feelings of Malcolm X's school abandonment stemming from Mr. Ostrowki's and Mr. Williams' behaviors as teachers toward him when his family name was still Little. Malcolm X dropped out and embraced the underworld. Prison replaced school in his teens. Prison became for him a transformational university that classic universities like Harvard could not do for him.

He had come to prison with 20/20 vision. But when he got sent back to Charlestown, he had read so much by the lights-out glow in his room at the Norfolk Prison Colony that he had astigmatism and the first pair of the eyeglasses that he had worn ever since (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 193). Malcolm X's rise to international public prominence puts him in the rank of an academician with no "D". In the early 1960s, he became a public speaking star invited by famous media groups and universities all over the world. This consideration made him win a place in the academia of great leadership.

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