Interview with Louis DeCaro
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INTERVIEWER

What impact did Malcolm's father have in shaping his son’s life, especially his religious beliefs?

LOUIS DECARO

Earl Little died when Malcolm was young, but he had a great impact on that family and that home. Those boys remembered the gardens that their father let them dig, their own little garden, so they could plant their own muskmelons and things where they could experiment and grow. They knew that that was part of what it meant to be a Garvey home.

The influence of his father would have been very limited considering that he died when Malcolm was young. And his recollection of his father probably would have been more in terms of certain images that he remembered, for instance, as he talks about in the autobiography, in the pulpit in churches, which gave him the impression that his father had been a preacher when in fact we know that he wasn't a preacher. He didn't class himself as a preacher. In fact, he was called “elder” within the UNIA [United Negro Improvement Association], within the Garvey movement, and he may have preached. But very likely, as [his brother] Wilfred Little has told me, when he saw his father in the pulpit, he saw him in the pulpit in the UNIA, active in the UNIA movement, so he was speaking in various churches, actually, on the Garvey movement. And as a guest in the pulpit, he may have also brought the Word on a Sunday, but Malcolm's remembrance of his father would be limited. So his influence on him especially theologically, especially in terms of what he believed about religion, would have been probably slight.

INTERVIEWER

Did his mother, then, play the influential role in shaping Malcolm X’s religious beliefs?

LOUIS DECARO

Where the bigger impact came from was his mother, in terms of his early religious training. After the age of five, until the point where he was taken away from his mother and put into foster care, that would have been the person who gave him his religious training. Wilfred also recalled that their mother had the bigger influence in teaching them about religion, and taught them not to be committed to any one religion, any one denomination. She exposed them to a whole variety of religious groups. She brought them, at least in terms of the whole spectrum of Protestant groups, from the Pentecostal and the Holiness, or the so-called Holy Roller (which is the way Wilfred recalled them), all the way to the liturgical Protestant churches that Malcolm and his brother and sister would have been brought to, to see what those religious traditions were like.
But she taught him and taught the children about making their own religion, their own personal faith, their own family altar, based on the religious elements that they chose, which manuscript [they chose]. There was one [manuscript in which] “20 Million Muslims” was the name of one of those chapters. And the other idea is that this book was really designed to magnify Elijah Muhammad.

When Malcolm reached for the dictionary in prison, he wasn't doing something for the first time. He was doing something that his mother used to tell Wilfred: “You don't know a word, look it up.” This is part of that marvelous heritage. This was an exceptional home in terms of the unity and the family, how they felt about being black, how they felt about learning, working for themselves, accomplishing for themselves. And though it wouldn’t have been definite—I'm not trying to minimize their pain, but—they were still a family. And when they could pick up the pieces, they did, and they put it back together. And the Nation of Islam was a kind of glue in that way. The Nation of Islam was a kind of glue that they could use to re-create something that they didn't have anymore, which was their home, their family life, and the new UNIA.

INTERVIEWER
What happened when Malcolm moved to Boston as a teenager?

LOUIS DECARO
As far as Malcolm coming to Boston as a teenager, again we see that there is the element of what he does not talk about in the [Autobiography]—he was a very bright teenager. He does say that back in Michigan he had been first in his class, that he had done very well, which is very clear, that the real Malcolm is breaking through at points, even in the Autobiography. His brilliance, his exceptional character, his ability to read situations and be able to analyze them started as a teenager.

INTERVIEWER
What role did Ella, his half sister, play in Malcolm’s life?

LOUIS DECARO
When he went to Boston and stayed with his half sister, he was staying with, of course, a very strong black woman, strong in convictions, the daughter of Earl Little. Perhaps in a very real way, it may have been somewhat like moving back home with his father, in terms of her attitude, her feelings, her pride in being a black woman, her strength, her attitude toward racism and her resilience, willing to fight it.

I think that from what I can tell, the little that I've been able to read about Ella or to find out about her, [Malcolm] was very, very dependent upon her for advice and counsel. Even before he made the pilgrimage, he spoke to her. And he really needed her help even later on in life. But him being in prison at the age of—he was barely 21, just, I think, February of ’46.

INTERVIEWER
How did Malcolm characterize himself—especially in the public?
LOUIS DECARO

His self-characterization, I think in some ways, is very, very real. He was very angry, but the psychological profile from the interviews, if I remember correctly, suggests that he was a very bitter person. But, again, you almost get a sense that there was a certain theatric nature to the presentation, because at some point he even told the interviewer that he was biracial, that his parents were missionaries, if I remember correctly. So in some respects he's kind of jerking them around, if you'll pardon the expression, even during the interview. But certainly he was not going to open up and show himself to these people.

I remember one assessment was that he's young and he's going to be in prison for a while, that if he could get out and get married, maybe there would be some hope for him to open up as a young man and to develop. But instead he's kind of caught in this trap, because he's going to be in prison, and how he is going to develop? But in the Autobiography he says he's known as Satan, and he's the atheist. He's the one who doesn't believe in God. . . . I believe that these were elements of other people that had lived it, the prison people that he met. I don't believe that he was ever really a die-hard atheist philosophically. I believe he may have been temperamentally in a mood where, as many of us have sometimes been in life, he said, “Well, maybe there's no God. We believe in God, but we may want to renounce him, because we're angry at our circumstances.” I think he went through a phase like that.

I think he also went through a phase where he was challenging people, challenging religious ideas, in prison. If there was a seminary class, and a seminary professor came over to teach the Bible, he'd challenge that person, too, later on. We see that in his story. But [in terms of] his view of white people, I believe, again, we have to keep in mind that everything he's telling us he's telling us through the lens of the Nation of Islam in 1962.

INTERVIEWER

In what way and in what role did Malcolm X see Elijah Muhammad?

LOUIS DECARO

Malcolm hit the ground running in 1952 when he comes out of prison, and he's evangelizing, he's developing the movement. And initially I don't even think it mattered whether or not he really did deep down inside believe white people were devils. He loved Elijah Muhammad. And, again, I don't think you can overstater the case that the biggest part of his involvement in the Nation of Islam was his personal love and belief in this man. He says this himself and I believe he speaks truthfully when he says it. He believed in Elijah Muhammad more than Muhammad believed in himself. He believed that Muhammad was what even Muhammad himself did not actually believe. And so in the early ’50s, when he's spreading this message and expanding and building these temples—they later called them mosques after he was in the Middle East and saw that Muslims don't worship in temples, they worship in mosques. So they changed the name after '59 or after '60, to make it appear, again, more in sync with the Muslim world. But as he was traveling and preaching and teaching, he was doing so for love of Mr. Muhammad. And he had a lot of basis in what was going on in civil rights, what was being highlighted later in the civil rights movement, what was evident in the urban centers of the north, in the racism that black people confronted day in and day out. This gave that whole teaching a very real basis. The problem was that, theologically and
philosophically, it didn't work in the long run. And even a person, a sensitive human being like Malcolm, had to start to ask questions.

**INTERVIEWER**

What was Malcolm X's view of women, especially considering their perceived role in religious institutions?

**LOUIS DECARO**

Malcolm X and women ... there's a lot of things that have to be considered—how women stood in the black church and in the religious institutions, as well as in the culture, the overall society. But I do get a strong sense that there was a sexist treatment of women. I mean, I don't think anyone would question that, and as we said elsewhere, there was kind of a strategic use of women, getting the women in [the temples]—that if we can get the women in, we can really build up this movement. He talks about what he did to build up Temple Number 7 in the 1950s, that he went after these church-oriented women because they would bring him a basis, a firmness, and a support.

I don't know that I would be able to defend—or even describe, let alone defend—what was going on there. I just believe that in the process of his development, particularly after he made the hajj, that he was dealing with a lot of these questions. And still he has been criticized, because I think one of the later things he said was that we have to give the women an opportunity to advance.

And of course the feminists would say that you don't give by granting an opportunity [while] you're still claiming paternalistic [control] over them. First of all—and this is just maybe a gut feeling, but—I really don't believe Malcolm wanted to get married. And I don't believe he should've gotten married. Wonderful daughters came out of the marriage; wonderful things came out of the marriage. I'm not trying to speak in a negative way but, I think, from the standpoint of where he was and who he was and what he was by his own admission.

He liked St. Paul. St. Paul was a celibate. He was an activist; he traveled. He didn't have time to get married, and he didn't have a family. And probably Malcolm should not have married. I've been told by some who knew him that he was essentially told to get married because it would lend a certain credibility to his role, and also stop this constant issue with the women in the various groups as he traveled around.

So he goes into marriage really not prepared to be married. And I believe Robert Guy would be right to say he was like a musician, or any person who is so committed to his work and traveling all the time. I don't know how much can be said to reflect upon his view of women, as it was just his view of, hey, this is what I'm called to do. That was a problem and it reflected that his unquestioned loyalty, his obligations, are to Muhammad.

The fact, for instance, that he died and he didn't have anything. I mean, he just barely changed the rights to the *Autobiography* to his wife and family. The proceeds would've gone to the Nation of Islam. The house that they lived in—he was trying to get the house back, though he had more than paid for that house, and it wasn't anything compared to where Muhammad was living. And I think he was bitter about those things in his last days, that Mr. Muhammad was wearing expensive suits and living in palatial splendor.
Here he was, [someone] who had made Muhammad pretty much become a national figure, and the home that they lived in was taken from them. And that's really his fault. I mean, it was all part and parcel with this whole thing. Wilfred Little said he was warned when he went to the Middle East in '59. They said, if you keep building this, you keep building this God, someday he's going to fall on you.

(Conducted August 27, 2001 at Columbia University)