

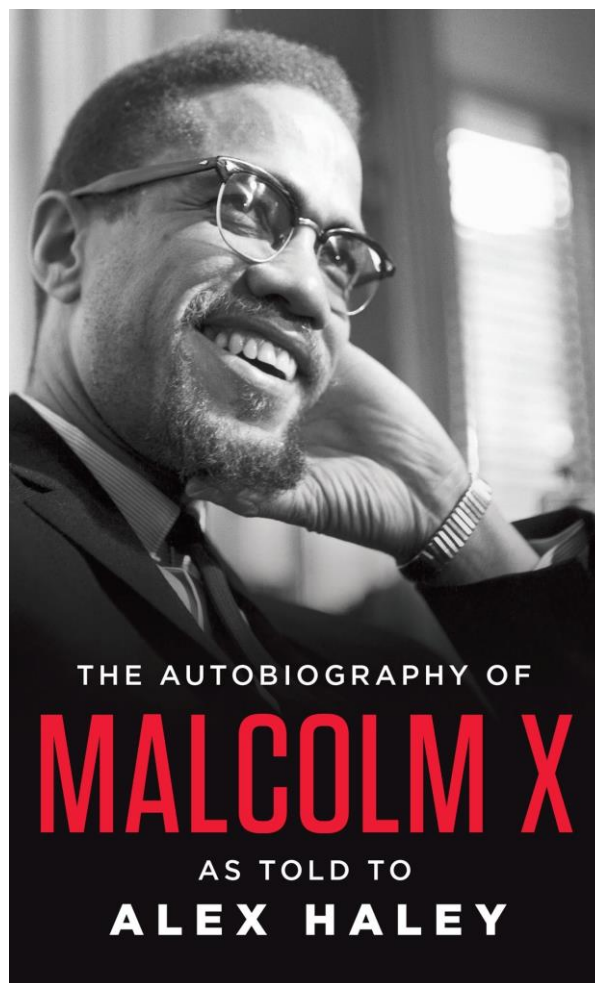
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change and The Autobiography of Malcolm X

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.47, 1995)

by Linda S. Watts



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X, 1965

Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change. Mark O'Brian and Craig Little. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Malcolm X and Alex Haley.

In the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X characterizes himself as, among other things, an unconventional reader and learner, in part due to his time spent in the prison library during incarceration: "No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand."

His self-presentation (brought forward in this case through collaboration with Alex Haley) helps dramatize the role context plays in reading and responding to a literary text. Within a course on literary analysis and theory, I invited students to respond to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* through an assignment calling upon class members to function as Malcolm X suggests he did, as an unconventional reader and learner.

In conjunction with the assignment, I ask students to read sections of *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change* pertaining to the forms of literary study conducted by Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival (KOS). Rollins engages New York City high-school students in artistic practices by which they transform their experiences and reactions to literary texts into visual forms. In addition to traditional artistic materials, the resulting visual pieces often involve alterations or treatments of actual book pages from such texts as *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Within the context of our course, I asked students to create and comment on a visual piece of the sort KOS prepares, using a passage from the *Autobiography*, along with whatever other materials they chose to incorporate in rendering a cultural interpretation of the text in visual form(s).

Students defined their own passages, identifying them by page number within their written commentaries. Students also chose the subject/focus of their essays, although I indicated some issues they might wish to raise: the impact of social movements, the role of the individual in effecting change, the experience(s) of race, concepts of learning (including the intellectual, universities, and literary study), the role of leaders, the implications of interpreting one's personal history (or roots), and the origins of change in an individual life. I did require that students take some risk within this process by speaking to a matter about which they perceive or anticipate controversy.

One such student responded to the assignment by fashioning an art piece from a found object: an empty 40-

ounce malt liquor bottle. To the outside surface of this vessel, he applied language with gold-colored paint and affixed visual images culled from magazines. Crowned by the words "ALL ARE WELCOME" are images of people of color. Above their heads snake words from (or derived from) the *Autobiography* (e.g., "Tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's school drop-outs are keeping body and soul together by some form of hustling," and "The white man has brought upon the world's black, brown, red, and yellow peoples every variety of the sufferings of exploitation"). His written commentary named the heavy marketing distribution of these large-portion, high-proof alcoholic beverages to communities populated by people of color as a consumerist form of colonialism.

Through these somewhat unorthodox practices for literary study, I hoped it might become possible for students to offer more and different connections/insights than earlier essay assignments in the course accommodated. By such an assignment, I also hoped to suggest that students of literature might present their work in a variety of formats including, but not limited to, the by-now familiar five-page critical essay.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).