



MALCOLM X LEGACY STILL RESONATES TODAY; [FINAL Edition]

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If Malcolm X were still living, he'd be 80 years old this week. Imagine. Instead of being etched in our minds as a fiery nationalist rhetorician, he'd be a sage octogenarian who would have had to incorporate two generation's worth of change into his thinking. There's no doubt that he'd have been able to embrace and incorporate the changes that have happened since his assassination in 1965.

Malcolm X was always evolving: from hustler to Nation of Islam minister to nationalist leader. Some of that evolution is featured in a display that opened this week at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, part of the New York Public Library. His eighth-grade memo book, shells from the shotgun that killed him, and family photos are part of a display titled "Malcolm X: A Search for Truth." Thousands will throng to the exhibit because he owns a part of the black American soul.

Blunt-spoken and incisive, he was eulogized as "our living, black manhood" by the late actor Ossie Davis. It has been 40 years since his assassination, since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, since the days of segregation. Today folks debate multicultural identity and opine that the racial playing field is level. Why does his legacy still have a hold on the black imagination?

His legacy endures because many black men feel as beleaguered today as they did 40 years ago. According to the Community Service Society of New York, nearly half of the city's black men ages 16-65 were jobless in 2003. Among black undergraduates, men were just 38% of those enrolled. And you can hardly talk to a brother without hearing a racial-profiling story.

The sense of siege eludes data, but it is all too real for the men who experience it. For them, the strident Malcolm X makes sense. "Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on the plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American," he once said. "Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it." There's that "living, black manhood" that Davis spoke of, the "stormy, controversial and bold" black man whose life and words were the embodiment of challenge and evolution.

At 80, Malcolm would likely be less stormy. But he would also likely be no less incisive and inspiring. His legacy endures because, despite progress, African-Americans have so much more to do to attain equality.

Julianne Malveaux is editor of *The Paradox of Loyalty: An African American Response to the War on Terrorism*, just released in paperback.

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