“The Afro-Asiatic Ummah: Appraising the influence of Islamic Humanism on Malcolm’s pro-Palestine politics”

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“We must return No boundaries should exist No obstacles can stop us Cry out refugees: “We shall return” Tell the Mts: “We shall return” Tell the alley: “We shall return” We are going back to our youth Palestine calls us to arm ourselves And we are armed and are going to fight We must return” -Harun Hashim Rashid

The poetic verse opening this paper was extracted from these diaries and written by a Palestinian refugee, Harun Hashim Rashid, who fled Gaza in 1956. In many ways the usage of this poem speaks to the major and minor omissions in Alex Haley’s Autobiography. Why would Malcolm include this verse in his diary entries with no other such poetry? Why Palestinian poetry? What is the significance of this notation? Although forty-five pages of the Autobiography are devoted to a conflation of both of his Hajj and his attendance of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit Middle east/African trips and one paragraph (242) to his 1959 trip to the region#, much has been omitted, ahistoricized, or overlooked. Areas of Malcolm’s time in the region and his relationships with Middle Eastern and Islamic leaders and artists, such as Rashid, are either addressed marginally or wholly neglected in the narrative of Malcolm’s political and spiritual maturation. If even covered by scholars as historian Manning Marable’s award winning biographical intervention Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention and Louis DeCaro’s On The Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X did, Malcolm’s thoughts on Palestine have rarely enjoyed more than two pages of coverage and have been analytically reduced to a politics of political expediency. Thus, his travel diary entries and contemporaneous op-ed pieces in Middle Eastern and Africans newspapers are necessary to help contextualize Malcolm X’s relationships with Arab and Islamic leaders, and from this emerges a more complex Malcolm, free from Haley’s neatly packaged and strait-jacketed character. The Autobiography’s omission of peoples, details and socio-historical contexts of Malcolm’s intersections with the Arab world significantly robs the reader of the complexities of the fiery leader’s personality and politics. As the Rashid entry and other revealing observations in his diaries suggest, a great deal remains unknown about Malcolm X, particularly the development of his politics and faith towards the end of his life. In order to explore the political and spiritual relevance of his experience with the Arab world, I will examine one of Malcolm’s post-Hajj political passions underserved by the Autobiography: support for Palestinian liberation. Sharp reliance on the Autobiography and historical renderings on the man continue to repackaging and sell the myth to the general public that Malcolm X was anti-Semitic. In countering this in what follows, I argue that it was not anti-Jewish sentiment but Malcolm X’s advocacy of radical humanism through the lens of Islam, and more specifically his post-Nation of Islam (NOI) spiritual education, that fundamentally shaped and formulated his anti-Zionist politics. Malcolm, it appears, did not just want to internationalize the African American plight and link it up to the “Darkskinism (or the dark world’s struggle).” He wanted to internationalize Islamic humanist principles. Although Malcolm, it can be argued, was fully committed to and preliminary concerned with African American liberation, he did so within the underpinnings of a spiritual compass that valued principles of universal brotherhood, human rights (defined as Freedom, Justice and Equality), and tawhid (the Oneness of God). Malcolm, thus, not only prescribed Islam as an antidote to America’s “cancer of racism,” but as a spiritual commitment that pushed his advocacy of human rights for “22 million African Americans,” his support for third world “dark-skinned” anti-
imperialist liberation movements worldwide and his political and ethical concerns over Zionist practices and policies.