

'I WORRY MY FATHER IS BEING WRITTEN OUT OF HISTORY'

Fifty years after Malcolm X was shot, his daughter wants to remind America of his commitment to non-violence

HALF WAY DOWN a winding country road in New York's wealthy Westchester County, one of America's most famous revolutionaries lies buried under three feet of crisp white snow. It is 50 years since Malcolm X was gunned down at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem and since then he has lain in Ferncliff Cemetery – far from his people, surrounded by a ring of country clubs and golf clubs, alongside other dead celebrities including Judy Garland, Joan Crawford and Ed Sullivan.

He is an icon. He is a face on a T-shirt. But although he was certainly not silent in life, his daughter Ilyasah Shabazz fears he is not well understood. "It was when I was watching the second Obama inauguration that I started to really worry that my father was being written out of history," she says, explaining her determination to correct what, she believes, is the misrepresentation of her father's legacy with a series of projects that include turning the memorial centre for both of her parents at the Audubon Ballroom into a more active institution, commemorating the afternoon of Malcolm X's murder with a moment of silence, and supporting a campaign for his birthday to become a national holiday in the US, as is Martin Luther King's.

On a quiet winter's morning at the Audubon Ballroom, with its small exhibit and sole staff member on the premises, some of these plans seem far from fruition – but Malcolm X continues to be a powerful figure in the political consciousness and a widely accepted part of the American story. In 1972, Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, dined with Richard Nixon, and in 1999 the US Postal Service issued a Malcolm X stamp in his honour – something the man himself might have found unbelievable.

Even so, it may be more difficult for President Obama – who has rejected the false claim that he



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BEN GABBE/GETTY, CORBIS

FAMILY MATTERS: Ilyasah Shabazz, left, and above with her father in 1964, had a racially-integrated upbringing in a well-off neighbourhood of a largely white suburb

is a Muslim – to recognise Malcolm X, than Clinton or Nixon. Although Obama has talked about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* inspiring him as a young man, it was a bust of Martin Luther King that he installed in the Oval Office.

If it is easier for the political establishment to embrace Martin Luther King's doctrine than to look into the mirror of the consequences of racial oppression and justice held up to the world by Malcolm X, the political reality annoys Ilyasah: "Why can't these people just have a backbone and invite Malcolm? I mean, what is the big deal? Put a bust up of Malcolm X. Let's tell the truth about Malcolm X," she says.

Shabazz was there on the afternoon of 21 February 1965 when her father was shot more than 20 times by followers of his former organisation,

the Nation of Islam. She was sitting alongside her three small sisters, and her mother, who was pregnant with twin girls. At two and a half years old, Shabazz says she remembers nothing of the terrifying events of that day, but she does remember something of her father himself: "I remember a big, tall, beautiful person with these big teeth. And I remember my doll that he'd given me, and I remember my rocking chair. I remember his voice."

What she remembers most about her father is love; something she knows not often associated with his public representation as an angry militant separatist. While Malcolm, born El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, advocated discipline, self-reliance and pride in the black community and his African roots, he never supported violence, she

says – only telling his followers that they were entitled to defend themselves in the face of the horrific assaults and murders that black people faced on a daily basis. After he left the Nation of Islam in 1964, he embraced Sunni Islam and evolved his stance on topics as wide ranging as women’s rights, interracial marriage, and the possibility of people of all races and colours working together against injustice in a common brotherhood.

At the time of his death he was no longer Malcolm X, preaching to black urban ghettos, but Malcolm the global revolutionary, who had brought together an alliance of African and Middle Eastern leaders in support of his new Organization of Afro-American Unity, and who was intent on pressing his human rights claims against the US government at the United Nations.

It was an evolution lost on most of mainstream America, however, who remembered the man who once said, “The common enemy is the white man,” reminded black Americans that it was within their legal rights to buy a shotgun, and said president Kennedy’s assassination was a case of “chickens coming home to roost”. After his murder, *The New York Times* called him an “extraordinary and twisted man” who had turned his gifts to “evil purpose”, while *TIME* denounced him a demagogue whose “creed was violence”.

“Malcolm’s image has been tampered with, just as Dr King’s image was tampered with,” Ilyasah says. Her father needed to use strong language, she believes, to wake people up to what black Americans faced. “He used that shock factor,” she says. “It wasn’t that he thought white people were the devil – not all white people. He had to use these extreme measures because he was trying to uplift people. And so he educated a mis-educated people – and by that I mean all of America.”

It took a while for her to find her own voice and purpose, Ilyasah admits. Growing up in a largely white suburb, riding in limousines, and attending the best private schools, she was insulated from the public life of being the daughter of one of America’s most controversial leaders and she says she still does not feel personally discrimi-

nated against as a woman, a Muslim or an African American: “I think I refuse to feel it.” It was only at college that she was shocked when people ran after her shouting – “You’re the daughter of Malcolm X!”

“College was where I got to actually experience the difference between black and white,” she says. She was daunted when the Black Student Union appointed her their chairperson before she had even arrived. “What was I supposed to say?” she laughs, and makes a tiny black-power fist pump with a bewildered face: “Power to the people? Say no to drugs?” Public speaking terrified her and she once fled from the stage pretending to be sick. Her sister calmed her by telling her that she was the daughter of the Malcolm X, and she didn’t need to prove it to anybody.

“Everyone wants me to be this political person . . . I’m not Malcolm X.” Instead she likes teaching young people, and exploring her father’s legacy through her books. After writing her autobiography, she wrote a children’s book, *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X*, and the recently released *X: A Novel*.

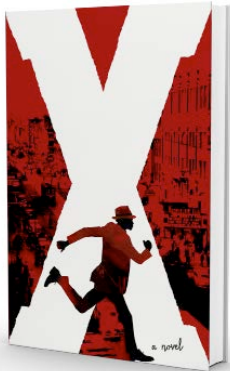
CLAN X: Malcolm X’s wife Betty, centre, and daughters, including Ilyasah, far right, at the world premiere of Spike Lee’s film ‘Malcolm X’ in 1992. Opposite page, ‘X: A novel’, by Ilyasah Shabazz with Kekla Magoon, depicts the black leader’s early years



Her autobiography grew out of her pain and need to make sense of her mother’s death in 1997. They had been exceptionally close: “I got it all from my mother. She was amazing.” Betty Shabazz raised her six daughters alone, went to back to college and got a PhD, and was key to ensuring Malcolm X retained his rightful position in history. “My mother inspired me tremendously.”

Malcolm X’s widow died after being burned in a fire in their apartment set by her grandson, and Ilyasah Shabazz’s 12 year old nephew, Malcolm. His mother, Qubilah had been arrested two years earlier for an alleged plot to kill Louis Farrakhan,

LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY, CANDLEWICK



by then the leader of the Nation of Islam, who she believed was responsible for death of her father. Although Qubilah maintains her innocence, she accepted a plea bargain that involved drug and alcohol counselling, and her son Malcolm was living with his grandmother. He later said setting the fire was attempt to be reunited with his mother.

“My mother just loved and adored him,” Ilyayah says. “When this accident happened it changed his life. My mother was gone – and it was nothing he could ever have intended for her. So he went to a group home, and bless his little heart, I remember when he came home, I saw that he was still between growing-up and still being a little kid. And it was so sad because there was this regret, and it was so heavy on him.”

Ilyayah says she got married at this time in part to provide a solid home for Malcolm, and she cared for him after his release, trying to keep him out of the vicious spiral of the justice system. “I was just trying to get him out of that system. If you come in at 8.03 with an eight o’clock curfew, you go to jail. And he’d cry like a baby. You know, I didn’t know how to get him out.”

“ . . . they said that my father liked putting powder on old white men’s butts . . . ”

Seeing her nephew as a young man now struggling to make sense of his life and circumstances prompted her in part to write her children’s book, wanting to put her father’s life in context. She found that her nephew had changed, “He was like – I’m from the streets of Harlem. And I’m thinking, no you’re not! He used to say that his life was so parallel to his grandfather’s. And I would think – no it’s not.”

Malcolm X had been pained by the death of his father and the dismantling of his own family. “No one was there to say – young man, it’s okay, we’re going to get through this,” says Ilyayah, who believes her father’s own bestselling book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* downplays his solid supportive family background, and plays up his troubled youth.

Young Malcolm was finding his own way as an activist when he was killed in 2013 after a dispute in a bar in Mexico, where he had gone to support the rights of Mexican construction workers in the US. Now he lies in Ferncliff Cemetery alongside his grandparents.

Ilyayah, who devoted so much time to caring for her nephew, waves her hand in front of her

face at the enormity of the tragedy. “Eventually he accepted the fact that he didn’t grow up in the mean streets of anywhere; that he went to these great schools; that he was very smart and that he came from a lineage of activists. So his life was very similar to my father’s, in the end.”

Last summer’s protests over the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and then over the death of Eric Garner in New York, made Ilyayah want to reach out again to young Americans and explain her father’s legacy.

“Now you have people of all different ethnic backgrounds saying, yes, black lives matter. Then you start to think about Malcolm X and say, well, wait a minute, what did he really say that was wrong? And because you silenced people like Malcolm X we find that the same problem persists 50 years later.”

While she supports the protests, Ilyayah questions what follow-through there will be: “What is the end result?”

The end result for the memory of Malcolm X may not yet be a national holiday. Howard Dodson, who oversaw the Malcolm X papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, recounts that only intense lobbying by his family, and well-known figures, achieved that objective for Martin Luther King in the face of much opposition. Such opposition would be only more intense over Malcolm X.

More recently, Ilyayah and her family have disputed a series of lurid personal claims in a 2011 biography of Malcolm X written by Manning Marable. “It was a great book but they inserted three things that were just absolutely ridiculous, and we felt that it was sensationalised,” she says. In addition to alleging that Malcolm X was a cross-dresser, “they said that my father liked putting powder on old white men’s butts”, and alluded to a relationship Betty Shabazz may have had with another man while married to Malcolm. These things are “just not true”, Ilyayah says, adding that her mother was a widow for many years and never remarried. If anything of these allegations had been true, she points out, the FBI would have had a field day revealing them in the 1960s.

Ilyayah Shabazz believes the father she was denied the opportunity to know in life should go down in history as “a courageous man. A compassionate man. He was such a loving person, but he sacrificed his personal self for the benefit of humanity.” Like many of the protesters Ilyayah saw on the streets this summer, she says: “He was a young man seeking justice.”