

## Enhancing Life Studies: The Autobiographies of Dorothy Day and Malcolm X

This seminar, designed for students in the College at the University of Chicago, allows for in-depth engagement with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with Alex Haley (1965), and Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1952). Both autobiographies are read twice during the quarter, with brief introduction to two influential predecessor texts in the interlude, Augustine's *Confessions* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Day was a social radical motivated by the cause of the poor, who became the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Malcolm X was a revolutionary who became an iconic figure in the global Black freedom struggle. A close reading of their autobiographies enables the exploration of the relation among self-creation and re-invention, social critique and change, and a sense of an ultimate context of community and source of all life.

Augustine's *Confessions*, and almost every other consequential autobiography since, tells us that it's the middle of life between birth and death that's the real place of enigma and change. It's the middle where limits are confronted and the beyond may be sensed; the middle where ambiguity, vulnerability, and anguish are faced and may be transformed. In other words, it's the middle of life where threats of endangerment and possibilities and responsibility for enhancing life are met.

The autobiographies of Day and Malcolm X, like those of Augustine and Douglass, are not finally concerned with discovering a self or even with narrating a religious conversion. Rather, they explore how answers to the perennial question of "who am I?" open to vocations with and on behalf of others and, more, to the source and power of life itself. Thus, reading these texts can offer not only understanding, but also practices of self-reflexivity, social critique, and transformation, and it can help orient service with and for others to enhance life.

## The Autobiographies of Dorothy Day and Malcolm X

Religious Studies (RLST)/Fundamentals: Texts and Issues (FNDL)  
Committee on Race and Ethnicity Studies (CRES)/  
Gender and Sexuality (GNSE)  
The College, The University of Chicago  
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Kristine A. Culp  
[kculp@uchicago.edu](mailto:kculp@uchicago.edu)

Dorothy Day was a social radical motivated by the cause of the poor, who became the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Malcolm X was a revolutionary who became an iconic figure in the global Black freedom struggle. A close reading of Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1952) and of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) will allow for the exploration of the relation between self-creating and re-invention, on the one hand, and social critique and change, on the other. Among themes to be considered are: the relation of narration and critical consciousness, appropriation of cultural and religious narratives, diagnosis of personal fault and social ill, and the transformation and flourishing of human life and community.

### COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

March 29 Introduction

Please secure a print version of Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* [1952] (all editions have the same pagination) and Ballantine Books's mass market print edition of Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* [1965], so that everyone has the same pagination.

#### **First reading**

*I write these things now because sometimes I am seized with fright at my presumption. I am afraid, too, of not telling the truth, or of distorting the truth. I cannot guarantee that I do not, for I am writing of the past.* - Dorothy Day

*I was going through the hardest thing, also the greatest thing, for any human being to do; to accept that which is already within you, and around you.* - Malcolm X

March 31 Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 9-50 ("Confession" through "University").

April 5 Day, remainder of Part One, 50-109.

April 7 Day, Part Two.

April 12 Day, Part Three.

April 14 Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, chapters 1-9.

April 19 *Malcolm X*, chapters 10-15.

April 21 *Malcolm X*, chapters 16-19.

April 26 Alex Haley, *Malcolm X*, Epilogue. Ossie Davis  
John Edgar Wideman, "The Art of Autobiography," in Joe Wood, ed., *Malcolm: In Our Own Image* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992; Anchor Books, 1994), 101-16.

**Interlude: Confession and conversion; creation and self-creation; narrative and witness**

*I have given to this book so much of whatever time I have because I feel, and I hope, that if I honestly and fully tell my life's account it might prove to be a testimony of some social value.*  
- Malcolm X

*The sustained effort of writing, of putting pen to paper so many hours a day when there are human beings around who need me, when there is sickness, and hunger, and sorrow, is a harrowingly painful job. I feel that I have done nothing well. But I have done what I could.*  
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Dorothy Day

*[Augustine] makes the central, paradoxical discovery of autobiography: memory is not in the service of the past; it is the future that commands its presence.*

- Patricia Hampl, "Preface" to Augustine, *The Confessions*

April 28 Augustine, *Confessions*. Vintage Spiritual Classics ed.; trans. Maria Boulding, OSB. Books I.1,1-10,16; II-III; VI; VIII.6,13-12,30.

May 3 *Confessions*, Book ; IX.6,14-13,37; X.1,1-28,39; preface by Patricia Hampl.

May 5 African American abolitionist and enslavement narratives  
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), chapters 1-7.  
Trudier Harris, "African American Autobiography," in Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* (Cambridge University Press, 2014): 180-94.

**Comparative and thematic re-reading**

May 10-26 Six sessions, to be determined in consultation with "angle of inquiry proposals."

*N.B. The following sessions resulted from the proposals submitted for this iteration of the course, but the session themes are not merely illustrative. They are at the heart of the two books, of areas of study under which the course was listed, and of the enhancement and endangerment of individual and social life.*

May 10 Prison and jail narratives

Isolation, suffering, dehumanization, and the "downward path" to wisdom and salvation

*He will never get completely over the memory of the bars.* Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 155

*To be a prisoner, whether for a weekend, or a month, as many of us have, is never again to forget those walls, those bars, those brothers and sisters of ours behind them.*

Dorothy Day in 1975, after her eleventh and final time of being jailed

*Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever....[B]ut for the hope of being free, I have no doubt that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed.* Frederick Douglass, 1845 *Narrative*

Focus your re-reading on Dorothy Day's two narratives of being jailed and on Malcolm X's account of being imprisoned. (Also of interest: Day, "Vocation to Prison," September 1957 <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/726.html>)

Among issues to explore: the psychological and spiritual effects of prison on X and Day, and in shaping conscience; what prison "teaches" and how can it be said to be a "school"; themes of solitude, isolation, community, solidarity, and their interrelation; freedom and constraint; the role of self-control and ascetic practices in transformation; hustler/trickster themes and the pursuit of knowledge; the import and resonance of prison narratives in a time of mass incarceration

May 12 Creation of the self; self-creation and self-narration

*Truth it is that I want to do, in my heart by confession in your presence, and with my pen before many witnesses.* Augustine, *Confessions*, X.1,1

*My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.* Frederick Douglass, 1845 *Narrative*

Focus your re-reading on the narratives of birth, childhood, and youth; consider also the narrative arcs that extend throughout the texts from birth to becoming "Malcolm X" (and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) and "Dorothy Day, the legendary Catholic social activist," as the subtitle puts it.

Among issues to consider: the relation between becoming and narration, especially how self-creation is narrated and for what purposes. The narration of multiple selves or possibilities of self-creation; the creation of "authenticity" through narration/readers' reception of struggle and reconciliation of the divided self.

May 17 Race, consciousness, change

*The black brother is so brainwashed that he may even be repelled when he first hears the truth. It had to be dropped only a little bit at a time. You had to wait a while to let it sink in.* Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 185

Focus on the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, especially on the metaphor of "brainwashing" and on chapters 14, 15, 16, and 19. See also Day's account of traveling in the South in late 1956:

<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/714.html> and  
<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/715.html>

Among issues to explore: How are Malcolm X's experiences of race and consciousness of race and privilege portrayed? How do they change in the different places and phases of his life? How is race "theorized," e.g., historicized? mythologized? treated in relation to aesthetics, rationality, etc.? interrelated with political and economic self-determination, colonialism, etc.? How does this portrayal inform and configure its reading audiences, and how do audience expectations shape reception? How does his approach inform personal and social transformation?

May 19 Poverty and precarity

*He [Maurin] believed in poverty and loved it and felt it a liberating force. He differentiated between poverty and destitution, but the two often came close together in his life....*  
Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 179.

Focus on Dorothy Day, especially "Labor" and "Community" chapters, and read "Poverty and Precarity," May 1952, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/633.html> and "The Meaning of Poverty," Dec. 1966, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/560.html> See also Malcolm X's treatment of the Black bourgeoisie and his contrast of "house" and "yard"/"field" Negroes in the chapter, "Black Muslims"; Robin D.G. Kelley, "House Negroes on the Loose: Malcolm X and the Black Bourgeoisie," in Manning Marable and Garret Felber, ed., *The Portable Malcolm X Reader* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 527-54.

Also relevant: Day, "On Thirty-Seventh Street" (and her recollections in 1960 after re-visiting Chicago, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/762.html>), "University," "The East Side," and "Peasant of the Pavement."

Among issues to explore: Day's experiences of and consciousness of poverty, labor, and inequality—and how they change over time and in differing contexts. How is poverty "theorized," particularly, how do anarchist and communist philosophies correlate and articulate with theological perspectives? Note the distinctions between the masses and the people, the poor and the destitute, and involuntary and voluntary poverty; and also the theme of seeing (recognizing and paying attention to) the poor and of seeing Christ in the poor. How does her approach inform personal and social transformation?

May 24 Women and womanhood; friends, lovers, and mothers

*The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman.*  
Malcolm X, 1962 speech in Los Angeles, quoted by Beyoncé, 2016

*Being a mother is fulfillment, it is surrender to others, it is Love and therefore of course it is suffering.*  
Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 236

Focus on Day's chapters "Man is meant for happiness," "Having a baby," "Love overflows," and "Family," and review her discussion of vocation throughout. See also Day's discussion of the

role of Mary, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/559.html>. Reread Malcolm X's portrayal of women in the *Autobiography*, especially Louise Little, Ella, Laura, Sophia, and Betty. Read Farah Jasmine Griffin, "'Ironies of the Saint': Malcolm X, Black Women, and the Price of Protection," in *The Portable Malcolm X Reader*, 555-72.

Also of interest, Malcolm X's 1962 speech in Los Angeles after the murder of Ronald Stokes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpr6PK-Cz3c>, especially minutes 22:30-27:00.

Among issues to explore: Day's characterizations of women in general, especially in relation to work and love. The role of women in major social movements. Malcolm X's characterizations of women, especially associated affects of contempt, distrust, guilt, respect, protection. Strategies for contemporary reading and appropriation of X and Day. How Day's and X's religious views shape their views of women and men and vice versa, especially how experiences of human love, care, and desire offer experiences and analogies for divine love.

May 26 Religion

*One thing I was sure of, and that was that these fellow workers and I were performing an act of worship. I felt that it was necessary for man to worship, and that he was most truly himself when engaged in that act.* Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 93

Religion enters these narratives from their first chapters. Remembering that, focus your rereading on these later chapters: Day, "Love Overflows," "Paper, People, and Work," "Retreat"; Malcolm X, "Savior," "Mecca," "1965."

Among issues to explore: The role of humility in both texts: in bolstering credibility and in cultivating a sense of self proportion and responsibility with others and before God. The varied registers for expressing and engaging religion in both Day's and Malcolm X's texts (as piety, practice, morality, theology, community, institution, and national/global culture). Strengths and limitations of tying critique of religion to white vs. black, elite/wealthy vs. of the people/poor, false vs. authentic frameworks. The relation of consciousness of self and of God/Allah to the formation of moral conscience, mature selfhood, and universal regard. Theological formation for service, suffering, and sacrifice vis-a-vis personal and social transformation.

May 31 Telos: "Sainthood" and "Manhood"?

Love and community; courage, justice, freedom; joy

*We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that loves comes with community.* Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 286

*I believe that it would be almost impossible to find anywhere in America a black man who has lived further down in the mud of human society than I have been; or a black man who has suffered more anguish during his life than I have. But it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest joy can come; it is only after slavery and prison that the sweetest appreciation of freedom can come.* Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 387

Reread Day, "Community," "Peter's Death," "Chrystie Street," and "Epilogue"; also read "Fear

in Our Time,” <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/253.html>. Reread Malcolm X, “1965,” and Ossie Davis, “On Malcolm X”

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### 1. Preparation for and participation in the seminar.

The seminar will focus on a close reading of the Day and Malcolm X texts. It will consist primarily of discussion and elucidation of ideas offered, elaborated, and suggested in the text. This approach depends upon thorough preparation for each class. ***For each class session, select a key paragraph or passage from among the assigned pages, and be prepared to elucidate the significance of that paragraph/passage in class.*** Final course grades will include an assessment of participation; preparation and attendance—excellent or haphazard—will affect the final grade.

### 2. Angle of Inquiry proposal - due Friday, April 29, by noon.

3-4 pages double-spaced. A concise proposal for a theme or topic for the comparative and/or thematic re-reading of Day and Malcolm X texts. These proposals will inform the class readings and syllabus for May 10-26.

### 3. A short paper - due Friday, May 13, by 5:00 pm

4-5 pages double-spaced. Here is the prompt; it relates also to the class topic for 5/12:

In her preface to Augustine's *Confessions*, Patricia Hampl argues that, in his *Confessions*, Augustine "...makes the central, paradoxical discovery of autobiography: memory is not in the service of the past; it is the future that commands its presence....Autobiography for him does not seek a self, not even for its own salvation. For Augustine, the memory work of autobiography creates a self as the right instrument to seek meaning."

Do Hampl's observations—and particularly the final part, *autobiography does not seek a self, not even for its own salvation, ... [but] creates a self as the right instrument to seek meaning*—ring true also for the autobiographies of Dorothy Day and Malcolm X? If so how; if not, why not. You may wish to focus on Day or on Malcolm X, using the other autobiography as a contrast or comparison on a key point or two.

### 4. A final paper – due June 2 for graduates; due June 7 for all others.

10-12 pages double-spaced. (You may choose to write up to 15 pages, if your approach to this assignment needs a little more space, however, longer is not necessarily better.) This paper will offer the opportunity for a substantive engagement that extends or expands perspectives of the course. At the same time, your paper should make evident your quarter-long engagement with both texts and their ideas. Do cite relevant ideas, passages and, when appropriate, use well-chosen quotes as the basis for further examination or to illustrate or culminate your own point.

Choose one of two options:

- a) Using Patricia Hampl's preface to Augustine's *Confessions* for the Vintage Spiritual Classics series as a model, write a preface to Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, OR to Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Feel free to imagine which kind of series your preface is for, and thus to focus your observations accordingly, e.g., "Spiritual Classics," "Narratives of Self-Creation and Social Transformation," "Race and Religion," "Women and Social Change," and so forth.
- b) Write your own self-narrative, informed by themes and questions that Dorothy Day and Malcolm X addressed (or particularly failed to or were unable to address). You may wish to add a preface or an afterword that indicates how your reading of Day or Malcolm X

informed what and how you crafted your narrative.