Interview with **Alex Haley**
Date: October 24, 1988
Interviewer:
Camera Rolls: 1026-1031
Sound Rolls: 112-113A
Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation
Interview with Alex Haley, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 24, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1026]
[sound roll #112]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Camera ten twenty-six. Sound one twelve. Team A.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:22:00

Alex Haley:

My perception of, say, the, the reactions to Malcolm in the early 1960s, from my experience, was—

00:00:31:00

Camera crew member #2:

Can I stop for a second?

[cut]

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:35:00

Interviewer:

First question's on response in—

Alex Haley:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—1961-1962.

00:00:39:00

Alex Haley:

In, say, 1961, 1962, when I came first to know Malcolm, my perceptions, from what I experienced, were that, say, most White people, probably nearly all from the better, from the exposure I had ranged from being very, very apprehensive about Malcolm to hating Malcolm, the image of Malcom, which had been purveyed by the media, of course. And that was not too far afield of probably the majority, also, of Black people. You know, nowadays you might hear a lot of people talking about how they followed him and so forth, but at that time, again, my perception was that the large majority were frightened by the things Malcolm said. They were so, so extreme, it seemed, and so radical by comparison with what others were saying. And then, of course, you had the people, not only the Nation of Islam itself who were, who, for whom he was speaking, but those who were empathetic with the Nation who were feeling that Malcolm was having the, the courage to say aloud publicly things which they had felt or which they wished somebody would say. And so, that was largely the, the, the, the Black reaction was a mixed one, you know, from terrified, some were by what, by what he was saying, to those who cheered and applauded when his name was mentioned, let alone when he came into sight. My own perception of Malcolm was one of something bordered on fascination, really, because I was looking at him and reacting to him as a subject. I was a young writer, I had been the usually requisite fifteen years getting rejection slips for the most part and finally was beginning to get assignments, and I saw him as someone who

was hard to top as a subject. He was, I always like to say of Malcolm, he was just simply electrical. Everything he did almost was dramatic, and it wasn't he was trying to be, it was just the nature of him. He—in later years, I, I would be rather taken by a statement he would make of himself. He would say, I am a part of all I have met, and by that he meant that all the things he had done in his earlier life had exposed him to things that taught him skills of one another sort, or it had taught him traits of one another sort, all of which had synthesized into the Malcolm who became the spokesman for the Nation of Islam, such as that here was a man who, in the eighth grade in Michigan, a school where I think he was the only Black in his class and one of the very few in the school, had been an outstanding A, straight-A student, you know, who had been in fact the president of his class. And all the others were White in the eighth grade, obviously he had to be exceptional to be those things. So, you had that quality, which was a facet of him, the brains, the innate ability to learn and to acquire and to use and utilize knowledge. And then you had the Malcolm who had left school and who had gone to Roxbury, Massachusetts where he had gotten his first exposure to what might loosely be called hustling. I remember him telling me with great seriousness about how he had learned at the, the tu, tutoring of a, a, an older person who came from where he had come from in Michigan and who had called him homeboy. I, I made that chapter, the title of that chapter was Homeboy. And this man had taught him his first hustle, that to be a shoe shine boy was OK. He would get, say, fifteen cents or maybe twenty cents per shine, but if he learned how to make the rag pop loudly, there was a way you could use the rag kinda loosely and then jerk it down on the shoe and it would make a noise, a popping noise, and people somehow liked that and they would give Malcolm as much as a quarter tip, and so he became the popping-est shoe boy, shoe shine boy in town and so on. And this type thing, the hustler world became part of him. And then later he was into more serious things, you know, crime type things. And all of these sharpened his wits and his ability to connive and to do cunning things. And these were part of the Malcolm of 1961, '62 as well. And then finally the ultimate thing, he was in prison. And the world of the prisoner is one that is quite educational in its way, and so that was another part of him. And so, Malcolm liked to say that he, the Malcolm as of 1961 and '62 and subsequently, he said, I am a part of all I have met, which was another way of saying he was a synthesis of all that he had learned in these various roles.

00:05:54:00

Interviewer:

Cut now.

00:05:54

Camera crew member #2:

Cut?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:05:58:00

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:02:00

Alex Haley:

One cannot very well talk about Malcolm, as a matter of fact I don't think one should not talk about Malcolm without making reference to the Nation of Islam, colloquially the Black Muslims which had brought him to public fame. He had, prior to that time, all the things he had done, and Malcolm, it is said and I certainly agree, lived more than the average ten men in his few years, relatively few years, his young years. And nobody knew about him except the people right around him, you know, in, in all those earlier years. It was only via the Nation of Islam and its drama that brought Malcolm to public notice. I know that he, in turn, he thought of himself totally as the embodiment of the Nation of Islam and what it could achieve. He would say, he loved to tell about how other peoples' lives had been changed, but none so dramatically, he would say, as my own, and then he would tell you about having been in prison, having been a hustler and having done this and that and the other. And he said, And look at me now, you know. And, and he was now the, the epitome, if you might say that, of, of loyalty to the Nation of Islam. I guess the most graphic illustration I could give of, of that, at, at least in my experience, was that, ***when I began to interview Malcolm for the book that would later be called The Autobiography of Malcom X,*** the book was to be about him. It had taken a great deal of effort to get him to agree to do such a book, and he would come down to my place, I lived in Greenwich Village at the time at 92 Grove Street off Sheridan Square, I had a basement apartment. And he would come down there and he was, he had big feet and he would pace the floor. He was like a caged tiger. And night after night after night, when he'd come down, which was about twice a week that he would come 'round nine at night, ***he would talk about the greater glories of Mr. Elijah Muhammad, his leader, and about the Nation of Islam, and there was nothing else he would talk about. And finally I began very delicately as I could to say to him, Mr. Malcolm, this book is to be about you, so I, I, I know about them, you've told me, I've written with you about them, but we need now to go into your life. And he would always get first testy about it, and then he got distinctly annoyed about it, and finally he would get angry with me.*** This was over a period of weeks. And then finally, a story I can tell you that is not in this direct line, but

what, what, what changed that was one of the most moving experiences I ever had with Malcolm, was one night I had been interviewing him for about two and a half months, and I had come to the private thought that, since I couldn't get him to say anything about himself, all he would talk about was Mr. Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, that I was gonna have to go to the publisher and tell him this and say, You know, you either need to try another writer who may be able to get through to him, or you need drop the project if that's what decision you wanna make. It was OK with me, fine, whichever. And then this night Malcolm came, I only remember that it was deep snow, knee-deep snow, and Malcolm had had something happen that day that really had churned him up, he was furious, and he walked the floor and he walked. And that night, late, I guess about eleven o'clock after he had walked and fumed at one or another thing, he stopped talking long enough that I said something to him. I said, Mr. Malcolm, once again I must ask you, could you please say something about yourself? We have to, have to do the book about you. And now, now he just blew up. He was furious, he glared at me, he grabbed his coat. I remember his little houndstooth coat, grey in color, and I remember thinking that coat's too light for this weather, that was just my own thought. And he started charging toward the door. And when he got to the door and reached and got in his, the knob in his hand and started to jerk it open, I said something to him. I don't know where it came from. I certainly didn't have time to think it, and it was not the kind of thing you would ask of Malcolm, particularly angry Malcolm, but I remember saying to him as he started to jerk the door open, ***I said, Mr. Malcolm, could you tell me something about your mother? And I will never, ever forget how he stopped almost as if he was suspended like a marionette.*** And he gave me the oddest look and he turned and he began to walk back in the reverse direction, but slowly now. And he walked around that room, I suppose the room was ob, oblong, and he musta walked, say, three times around the room before he spoke—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Alex Haley:

—and now his voice was a little bit higher of register.

[cut]

[camera roll #1027]

[slate]

00:11:19:00

Interviewer:

Alex.

00:11:21:00

Alex Haley:

The words came out of my mouth. You know how sometimes you hear yourself saying something that you hadn't really thought about? It just involuntarily came, and I said, Mr. Malcolm, could you tell me something about your mother? And he turned, he gave me a very odd look, and he began to walk in the reverse direction. And he—I had this oblong room, so it gave him some walking distance. And I guess he circuited the room three times before he spoke again, and this time his voice was higher of register, was kind of a stream of consciousness manner, ***and he said,*** It's funny you should ask me that. ***I remember the kind of dresses she used to wear. They were old and faded and grey, and then he walked some more and he said, I remember how she was always bent over the stove, trying to stretch what little we had. And that was the beginning, that night, of his walking. He walked that floor until just about daybreak.*** I never asked him a question. I was just taking notes furiously. I had a silent typewriter, they called them silent, they don't make too much noise, and I'm just going as fast as I could, capturing as best I could in kind of cablese form what spilled out of Malcolm X. That night, he said totally involuntarily just about everything that is now in the first chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in the chapter titled Nightmare, a story of a little boy, I think he was about seven at the time, amidst his siblings whom his mother was trying to keep together. The father, her husband, had been murdered. He was a Baptist minister. He'd been thrown under a streetcar, and the state now was trying to split up the family, and the mother was fighting desperately to keep her family together and her, under the strain, her mind was beginning to, to, to loosen or tauten or whichever is correct. And Malcolm from years later, now, that night was remembering and recalling all this the way it went. He talked about each of his brothers and sisters and so on, and then subsequently, as I have come to know some of them, who would recall the same time and make commentary on what Malcolm said. And as a matter of fact, about, I'd say within the past year, I met Malcolm's mother who is living up in Michigan with his sister Yvonne. And Malcolm's mother talked to me about Malcolm, and the one thing she reacted to mostly was that something I, I said Malcolm had often said that he learned early as a little boy that if something happened, he would holler immediately and he'd get more attention. And he said, it was always something he'd learned that the hinge that squeaks the loudest gets the grease. And she smiled and she said, Yes, that was Malcolm, that he would holler first, more than anybody else. And then Malcolm's relationship with his mother, I should tell you also, was, after that night when he talked about his mother, about two weeks later he told me he was going away for a week, and, you know, he was always going away for some time to do work of the Nation of Islam. And this time when he came back he had that patented, copyrighted Malcolm X grin. His daughter Attallah has got the same grin today. Attallah's my goddaughter, and I was telling her not long ago in Los Angeles she grin just like her daddy. And he now grinned and said to me that he had been to Michigan and with his brother Philbert, who was a minister in the Nation of Islam, they had gone to whatever institution it was where their mother had been for a long time, more than a decade, and they had undertaken the initial steps to have her brought out, and, and it, it sort of got its genesis from him talking about it. He later told me that he, it had been pent up in him all these years. He didn't wanna think about it, he didn't, certainly didn't wanna talk about it because he did not

feel good about it. But he felt so great when he and his brother and others of the family came together to have their mother released.

00:16:04:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

00:16:05:00

Alex Haley:

Thank you.

00:16:05:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

00:16:06:00

Camera crew member #2:

And speed. Mark, please.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

We have about five minutes left on this roll.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:16:14:00

Alex Haley:

You said the best story about Malcolm and his power upon people. I, I would say, one day Malcolm said to me, Would I like to ride with him. Periodically he would ask me that. He had a blue Oldsmobile, and he liked to drive around, just tool around in Harlem whatnot,

sorta, like, he called it patrolling his beat. It was among his people, and he genuinely enjoyed it. People would recognize him and they would wave. In some areas he was like Sugar Ray Robinson driving around, you know. And one such day, in an afternoon, we were in Harlem up in the 130th area and all of a sudden Malcolm slapped [claps] his big foot on the brake, the car just jolted to a stop, screeched, and I said, Oh my God! I knew we were shot 'cause, you know, Malcolm was, was a target to, in, in lots of areas. And before I knew really what was happening, he had burst out of the door, the driver's side door and was over against, near the wall of a building, and he's standing like an avenging devil over three young Black men who would be, say, eighteen, nineteen, in that area, maybe twenty, and his finger's out and it was the angriest I ever saw Malcolm. He was shaking his finger at them and he was just raging at them. It was something like, Beyond these doors is the greatest collection of information about Black people in the world, and other people in there studying about you, and the best you can do is be out here shooting craps against the door. You should be ashamed of yourself, or yourselves. And these young men got up and, I tell you, literally, they went slinking away. Now, the, the significant part is, these were young men who probably woulda cut the throat of anybody else who would have dared come up and accost them in such a manner, but they recognized Malcolm and such was Malcolm's image, such was his power in the image terms that their reaction was just to slink away. They were embarrassed, they were guilty as charged. And he fumed about it. He had a way of coming, coming upon something that would really get to him and then he would just mutter and go on about it until it kinda wore down. But he was furious about that and he was also furious a, about anything that he came upon that he interpreted as Black people, particularly younger Black people shirking opportunities to learn about themselves, about anything. He said, Unless we get equipped with information that is taught, we will not be able to cope in this society. That was his general thematic thing.

00:19:13:00

Interviewer:

Now, this was at where?

00:19:15:00

Alex Haley:

At the, oh, I'm sorry. That, that was at the Schomburg. The, the young men were shooting dice against the door of the Schomburg Library, the Countee Cullen Library which holds the Schomburg collection that, which is in fact the greatest collection of Black people in existence, or certainly it was at that time. Mm-hmm.

00:19:34:00

Interviewer:

K, stop down.

00:19:36:00

Camera crew member #2:

Stop down?

Interviewer:

Yep.

Camera crew member #2:

Stop.

[cut]

00:19:40:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

00:19:43:00

Alex Haley:

It happened that, when I was working with Malcolm, interviewing Malcolm for the book, I still was working for *Playboy* magazine doing the interviews, or some of the interviews, and they asked me if I would see if I could do an interview with Dr. King, and I began to make connections, you know, and to make queries. And over a period of time, it worked out, he agreed. Now, I would periodically, where it had been Malcolm saying to me, I'm gonna be going off a few days, and, you know, I'd say Fine, 'cause it would give me a chance to get my notes and stuff together, now, with great apologies, I asked Malcolm if he would mind if I was away for a few days because I had to go see Dr. King. Now, people who are being interviewed for something like a biography become rather possessive of the writer. They don't say it, but they feel that that writer, in effect, is theirs, and Malcolm reacted very, very sharply. He didn't say anything, but I could tell that he was offended by the idea that I would even think about leaving him to go talk to Dr. King or anybody else, but there was nothing he could say, you know, and so I went. Now, Dr. King already knew that I was working on

Malcolm, and a thing began to develop that amused me, though I would never have said to either it amused me, was that when I would get to Atlanta to interview Dr. King, he would sort of fidget around for maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, you know, and I'd ask him this and ask him that and we'd do a little, little talk, you know, obligatory kind of little chit-chat and everything. And it would be about fifteen minutes before he would finally get around in a very indirect, oblique manner as if he just happened to think of it, Oh by the way, what's Brother Malcolm saying about me these days?, he would say. And, of course, I would make some fuzzy answer because that was the thing to do. Then I would go back to New York. Malcolm's personality was different. He would right, bam [strikes hand], right off the top he'd say, What's he saying about me? That was it, and I was always amused by how they reacted to each other and what was each other saying about the other. And the truth of the thing was, I gathered, both men had an immense respect each for the other, but the image that had been built up around them was that they were on opposite sides. But the truth was, as I came to know it, they really, I believe, would have dearly loved—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Alex Haley:

—to get together and just talk out, you know, tactics, strategy and so forth. Mm-hmm.

00:22:27:00

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #1028]

00:22:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling, and speed. Ten twenty-eight.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:22:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, Alex.

00:22:35:00

Alex Haley:

In the late fall of 1964, Malcolm had been to Mecca, he had been to Africa, West Africa, and he had had experiences in both places which had contributed toward his returning to this country with a new perspective and with a new message as it were. Broadly speaking, Pan Africanism. And Malcolm was personally, at least in my perception—I was still working with him, of course, by this time, I was writing on the book, the research largely having been done, and we would communicate, you know. I'd have questions to ask to fill in something, or something he just wanted to volunteer, things like that. And he had this sort of experience that he shared about, I remember one that he was particularly impressed with was that, in Mecca, he had found himself amidst a great majority of either White or lighter skinned people. And I remember there was one expression of his, something like that I sat with brothers whose eyes were bluer than blue, whose skin was fairer than fair, or something of that order, and we were all the same; brothers. And then he came, he came to Africa, and I remember of his numerous experiences there, he met African leaders, various ones. I have subsequently met some of the people whom he contacted in his African journey. Dr. Carlos Moore from Martinique I remember was one who, who translated for Malcolm in, in one of the countries. Carlos speaks French and other languages fluently. And then I remember a thing that hurt Malcolm so much was, at some place, I don't remember which country, he had met—I believe it was in Ghana—he had met Muhammad Ali who had earlier been almost, it had been like Muhammad Ali was like his younger brother, little brother. He was very, very proud of him. I remember Malcolm calling me from somewhere in Florida where, I believe it was in Florida, where he had, Muhammad Ali had just won one of his decisive battles and Malcolm was boasting about how his little brother had done so marvelously well. And I could hear the noise in the background, and Malcolm spoke to Muhammad Ali and said for him to holler something at me over the phone, which he did, you know. And so, it was kinda like you could tell a melee backstage after the fight. And now he went to West Africa, and in Ghana, he and Muhammad Ali happened to be crisscrossing in their journeys in West Africa, and now Muhammad Ali did not look in his direction, though they passed right by each other, nor speak. And Malcolm was deeply hurt, wounded by that, and so he came back in a sort of down, depressed frame of mind. He was such a public figure that he couldn't show this publicly, so he would, you know, he had always the standard stock of statements to make, and the press was always asking him something, and he had his just a, like a bibliography of the proper statement that would sound OK to get him by, but the bottom-line truth was that Malcolm was now in a situation where he, where he and Malcolm, he and the Nation of Islam had broken up. That had been for years his power base. That was what gave him strength. He spoke for them and they were a powerful group indeed, but now they were no longer with him, they were no longer behind him, so he's on his own. He is Malcolm X but without a structure under him. He was trying to create his own organization, I think he

called it the OAAU, the Org, Organization of Afro-American Unity. And he had a sort of an office up on the mezzanine of the Theresa Hotel. I, I have the impression that it wasn't an office for which he paid, because Malcolm didn't have very much money at that time, but it was an office I think that had been kind of donated to him. And he would go, I would go with him, he'd invite me some nights to go with him up there after we had interviewed, or, or by now I was writing, as I say, so it wasn't so much interview, but just go with him. You know, when you're with a subject as long as I had been with him, you just kinda need to touch and be close to each other and commune, sometimes without even talking. And Malcolm had a way that I came to know, that if he was annoyed or vexed or even angry, he would seldom say it. He, he was a great believer in discipline, this was one of his keystone things for himself; discipline, self-discipline, and he would never speak his anger, but he had a way he would quickly bit his lower lip like that and you could see him do it and you knew something had upset him. And I saw him numerous nights go into the office, in the Theresa mezzanine, and look on the desk and that lip would get bitten because now there was work that should have been done which nobody had done. Now, the people who said they were with him, who somebody had said they'd come in and type or fix this or make up cards or do something, somehow something else had been of more priority that day, and so it wasn't done, and there was Malcolm. And I remember one night he and I went up there and there was something he had wanted to make announcements about, but envelopes hadn't been typed, and he bit the lip. And he was supposed to sign letters, or sign—it was printed flyers that he was gonna mail, and he was gonna sign each one to give it a little personalization. So, I just said to him, Well, well, Mr. Malcolm, why don't you just go ahead and sign them, and I type pretty well, and give me the list? And so, he looked at me, he gave me the list and I sat down and typed his envelopes, typed the names and addresses for him. And there were little things like that, but what you saw, what I was seeing was a man who was valiant beyond belief, whose structured world was tottery and he was trying to hold it together. See, what he needed and what he wanted and what he was trying to do was somehow to maintain a public presence but in a manner that would not get him into difficult trouble, say like with something like the government or with other strong forces, until he could build up his own organization. That's what he was into. As a matter of fact, when he, up to his death that was his general, as I perceived it, his general position and effort and struggle. Hmm.

00:29:55:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:29:57:00

Camera crew member #2:

Speed. Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

February, '65.

Alex Haley:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second, just a second, Alex.

Alex Haley:

Mmm.

Camera crew member #2:

OK, now.

00:30:08:00

Alex Haley:

In the early part of, of 1965, you know, January moving into February, Malcolm was in mounting problems. By now his biggest worry was his family. How were they? What was gonna happen to them? He was the head of the family. Their home had been bombed, for one thing. And ***he just felt I guess as near desperate as I ever saw him because, again, here's the image of the fearsome, indomitable Malcolm X, but bottom line was he was a father and he was a husband and his wife and his daughters were in peril, and what could he do about it.*** And another fact, he had relatively little money. And I remember the, the exact date I can't re, remember, but it was in February of '65 that my phone rang one day and a voice came out—

[rollout on sound roll]

[00:31:26:00]

[sound roll #113]

Camera crew member #1:

Ten twenty-nine camera. Sound one, one, three.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:31:34:00

Alex Haley:

After a period of time it had become almost a macabre experience to be in my role as biographer for Malcolm because by this time I'd come to know him, you know, as more than a, an abstract subject whom you interviewed and were writing about. I knew the man now, you know. I knew his wife, Sister Betty, I knew his children, little girls, and I knew how, one among numerous things, how much he wanted a boy, and he had four girls. And coming into, say, spring of '65, Sister Betty was pregnant again. He said, That's that boy. And that was about the only joyous thing really happening to him at that time because around them otherwise were organizations, agencies vying for him to join them. I think everything from the Protestant Church to the most extreme radical groups there were, were kinda courting Malcolm. They, they all wanted to have his name affiliated with what they were doing. The moderates of the church groups wanted Malcolm to be an example of conversion, so to speak, and the other groups wanted him because of the very potency of his name. And I remember Malcolm crying out to me, literally crying out one night about this. He said, I'm trying to turn the corner, but they won't let me. I'm caught in a trap. And it was because whichever way he tried to turn, somebody else wanted him somewhere else and he was just in that middle. It went on thus until, as things worsened, one night Malcolm's home was bombed, and this was probably the thing that surfacely upset him most because this got underneath the image of Malcolm, the fearsome, the indomitable Malcolm X, this got to the father and the husband of Sister Betty and their daughters. Sister Betty, as I say, was pregnant. And he was just really sh, shook to pieces about that. And I remember feeling sometimes as if I wanted to hug him, I mean, just, you know, go up and hug your brother or something because he was in such pressure, and yet his discipline, his image, demanded that he be stoic and move on, you know. And then Saturday, one Saturday, I think it would've been the 20th of February 1965 I was in upstate Rome, New York. This is where I was living at that time and it's where I was working. After finishing the interview process of Malcolm, I had moved upstate. I had more time, I was freer, I could write better up there because I just had fewer distractions, also it was cheaper, I didn't have any money, you know, to be doing much in the way of rent. ***And the phone rang and I picked it up, it was the morning, and a Saturday morning as I recall, and this voice came on and ask, and started talking and I'm wondering who is it. I didn't understand, I didn't recognize the voice. And finally something he said made me realize with a great shock, my shock, that was Malcolm X. And for the first time in our whole acquaintance of years I really didn't, didn't perceive who he was. The thing was he was under such pressure that it was as if it had constricted his vocal cords, cords.*** He was saying to me that he wondered if I could go to the publisher and get an advance that would enable him to pay down on a house for his family, and he said something like, As you know, they have bombed us out of our home. And I told him that I was gonna do

everything I could do and I would go to the publisher, which I certainly could do and was, was planning to do, and I told him I would go on Monday, as soon as they were opened, and I would present this to them. And I think if I'm not mistaken he needed, he said, $20,000 minimum.

00:36:30:00

Camera crew member #1:

Twenty thousand [unintelligible]?

00:36:31:00

Alex Haley:

He, he needed, if I recall correctly, he needed $20,000 minimum as a down payment. And I told him that I felt pretty good that that could be had, and, and I did feel that they could do it because, in, in an interesting way, the publishers who, who had first been very apprehensive about Malcolm, now I was turning in some copy and they had begun to feel less so. They were beginning to feel the drama of his life and the drama of his story. And that was Saturday, and we finally wound off and said, you know, Bye. See you. And I went back to doing whatever I was doing. And then the next thing I heard was Sunday, that I heard on the radio that Malcolm had been shot to death, and it was a feeling, I, I don't know how really to describe it really to this day but a feeling of great loss, a feeling of such a shame. I remember sort of they say when you have some real emergency your whole life will flash before you. I found myself in a vicarious way that his life sorta flashed before me because I knew it, you know, I had written, I had the chronology of his life. And I remember thinking about the little boy who had been with his mother and his siblings and she was trying to hold the family together, and then thinking about him in school as the only Black in the school, I believe it was Mason, Michigan. And then the class advisor who told him he shouldn't want to be a lawyer as he had said, but that he should be a carpenter because his popularity in school indicated to him how White people would give him work, and things like that. And then he left school and went to Roxbury. It was just sort of seeing the chronology, and there he was dead, 39 years. I think that was also the, the death age of Dr. King, I believe, 39. And somebody later who I think was C. Eric Lincoln, Dr. C. Eric Lincoln told me also that the death of Christ was age 39. And I just sort of didn't know how to feel. And I went, you know, down, of course, went to New York right away and just kinda wandered around the places where we had gone together. And then I remember going to—it was funny, I couldn't get to anybody close. The wall, the bars in effect had, had gone up and, and I couldn't get to people who had been close to him, family was in seclusion. And I went to, finally to—so, I bought all the papers and I listened to all the broadcasts to find out what was happening. And then finally his body had been wrapped in, in a, a, a Ea, Eastern style, you know, Eastern religion style, and he was lying in state in a Harlem mortuary. And I remember going there and just, I just got in the line and went filing along with the other people, and there he was in the casket, and I remember just kind of looking and I said sort of to myself but to him, just barely audibly, Bye, Red, 'cause he liked to be called Red by those who knew him very well. He

once had been called Detroit Red, and to those who were very close to him, and I had eventually become—I never had called him Red to his face, but I, I felt now I was among those close to him, and so I just said, Bye, Red, and filed on past. And then I went back up to Rome and I wrote as feverishly hard as I ever have in my life that part which appears at the end of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The chapter I think is titled Epilogue, if I'm not mistaken. And in that I put everything that I knew or heard or whatever about Malcolm which had not been in the earlier section that he had talked about. I told things, you know, in that which I just did it in a sense of wantin' to kinda share with readers up to my own recent visit of passing his bier, and then it made the book have between two covers the account of a man's life from birth to death. And I based that on saying that as, as, as I recall the book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* begins, I started with the phrase "When my mother was pregnant with me", I was told later and then it went on, you know, what had happened to his father. So, it went from that "When my mother was pregnant with me" to him lying there in that mortuary.

00:41:37:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Stop down?

Camera crew member #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:41:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Sound one, one, three.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:41:46:00

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second. OK.

00:41:48:00

Alex Haley:

There was, there's an expression I sometimes use about Malcolm saying he was as the point of the plow, but when I say it I don't mean it in the sense that he was alone, that, you know, he was not a person who did all this alone. He would be the first to say so. Malcolm was the visible person. That's why some time back I was saying you should never talk about Malcolm without linking him, at least certainly in that phase of his life, with the Nation of Islam. He himself, I don't think Malcolm uttered five sentences in the period that I first knew him without saying, I have been taught, all that I know comes from the honorable Elijah Muhammad. And he was in fact, at least according to what he testified and said and volunteered, taught virtually everything he knew in the area he was famous for by Mr. Muhammad. And what Malcolm became was the extremely effective public figure, the man who could go out and face the microphones and face the audiences and rivet and galvanize people and make people stop and think. I remember him, not only Malcolm but Malcolm in particular I remember, and then there were other Nation of Islam ministers who could do this immaculately well, who could go in to a group of people assembled on a Sunday afternoon, Protestant church-going people, they would stand outside Baptist and Methodist churches Sunday morning and pass out cards, neatly groomed young men with their, you know, perfectly clean shirts, their hair cut short, and politely invite people, Would you care, since you like good preaching, to come over and hear ours? And then these people who were old, old-line members of, of Baptist and Methodist churches, Southern backgrounds the people had, some of them would come to the Muslim's church front or storefront church and there would be Malcolm. I mean, you really missed something if you never saw Malcolm operate like this. The people would file in, here was Malcolm standing up there looking as if he was a pent-up volcano, which he was, in a metaphoric sense, and on the stage with him would be something like a lithograph in color of Jesus Christ, and there would be a blackboard, and Malcolm would say something like, Brothers and Sisters, we're glad you have given up your time to come be with us this afternoon, and I want to say at the first we may say things, we will say things that may not be something you've ever heard before, and all we ask is not that you join us or not that you agree with us, but that you go home and think about what we talk about here. And then he would say something like, Who is this; pointing with a pointer at the lithograph? And you'd hear these old-line Christians in the back say, That’s my Jesus. That's Jesus Christ, and Malcolm would listen to all this and then he, he would say, You know, isn't it interesting that this person to whom you pray, you do pray, don't you? And then you would hear, Oh yes I do, every night, and so forth, until they all agreed. And then he would say, Isn't it interesting that this person to whom you get on your knees in your most private of sessions at night and you pray doesn't even look like you? Your eyes are not blue. Your hairs

are not this color, and so on. And he was doing it in the sense of someone exhorting people to just think about it, what they were doing. And then he would say things like, Now, do we correctly understand that this, all who believe in this person are the same? That that's what he teaches, that you're all the same, you and those of other race who believe in him too? And you would hear a little weaker, Well, that's what it says, and so forth. And then he'd say, Well, you know, ladies and gentlemen, we are going to be closing our little service here shortly, but I'd just like to ask one thing. He said, When you leave here, you who are equal in his sight with the others who believe in him, you go get on the subway and you go downtown and you walk around and look at the houses the other Christians live in and the factories they own and the businesses they own, and then you get on the subway and you come back up here where you live and walk around and look at where you live and what you have and what you own. And then go home tonight, Brothers and Sisters, and think about if you are indeed equal in his sight. And Malcolm would quickly bring the meeting to a close; no collection, and people began to defect from the old-line Protestant churches. There were churches which split. One part of the congregation went to the Nation of Islam, the other remained Baptist and Methodist, but even then kinda shakily. And so, that is why I say Malcolm was the point of the plow. He and other, not just Malcolm, all, all able Nation of Islam ministers could do it. They were schooled in it. They picked those who were able particularly to be oratorical acrobats, almost, almost oratorical ca, calisthenics and maintain an image of great cool. Nobody shouted, nobody jumped up and sc, screamed like in the churches we know about, but it was extremely effective, certainly in this period of time, and Malcom was simply the most dramatic of all that I ever saw. And then he trained many others who came more or less in his pattern. And then he was trained, all of them were trained by Mr. Elijah Muhammad.

00:48:00:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. OK, cut.

[cut]

00:48:03:00

Alex Haley:

When was that?

00:48:04:00

Interviewer:

It say, it says here at, in '65 after the success of the autobiography.

00:48:07:00

Alex Haley:

Yeah, OK.

00:48:08:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:48:09:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK. Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:48:15:00

Alex Haley:

In, after *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published, I remember one thing that happened was that the then *Saturday Evening Post* bought the condensation rights for the book and paid $20,000, and that meant that I got half, Malcolm got half and I got half. His family got half, you know, 'cause he was gone by now. And, I hadn't known there was that money, much money in the world, $10,000, at one time. And, but I had as a result of this suddenly become what's called an author. You know, when you're a magazine writer, you're a ma, you're a writer. But then when you get a book out, you become an author and with that came other things like people wanted you to speak and they would actually pay you for running your mouth, they would—people wanted you to write things, they would pay you more for writing the same amount you had before, you know. And there was a year I suppose around 1960—'66, '67 that I remember the tax thing that I had to, you know, declare was $100,000. Incredible, unbelievable. And that was the same period in which I had begun to think about the stories my grandmother used to tell me about the family; how graphically I remember when I was about, specifically when I was six years old, my grandmother, my maternal grandmother had—my, my grandfather had died, her grief was, she was just inconsolable, and she had called—written letters to her sisters to come and visit. This is Henning, Tennessee. At the time population about 475. And five sisters came from places which sounded so exotic to a little boy from Henning, Tennessee; St. Louis, Dyersburg, Tennessee, Eastern Michigan, places like that; and these sisters gathered. It was the first time they'd been together since they were girls in some place called Alamance County, North Carolina that my grandmother used to talk about. And I remember that in the evenings after all day visiting or workin' in the garden or crocheting or something they would gather on the front porch. It was about at dusk, deep into early night. There were thick honeysuckle vines all around the front porch and all over the honeysuckle vines were lightning bugs, as we

called them, flicking on. You know what lightning bugs are. And—the first thing they would do, it would take them about five minutes to get to rocking together. They were all in rocking chairs, you know, and you don't just sit down in the rocking chair and start rocking, you have to kinda get it adjusted just right and the cadence just right. And when they had kind of a synthesis of rocking, there in the early night on the front porch every one of them would run their hand down in the pocket of her apron and every one would come up with that inevitable little can of sweet Garrett snuff, and they'd load up these lower lips and then they would start taking little practice shots out over the honeysuckle. The champion, I remember, my Great Aunt Liz, came from a little place called Wewoka, Oklahoma. She'd been teaching a long time. And Liz could drop a lightning bug at four yards when she felt like it. And they would just talk about family, preceding family. I didn't really realize it was my own ancestors they were talkin' about. I heard them, they talked about, that's when I first heard about Chicken George was on that front porch. Chicken George was their grandpa. Their daddy was Tom Murray, he was a blacksmith. Their mother was Arrena Murray. The father of their father, Father Tom, was Chicken George. And Chicken George's mother had been Miss Kizzy, and Miss Kizzy's father had been this mysterious African. And they'd talk every night, they'd tell some more of the story, and I learned it, I heard it without awareness I was learning it. You know what? I learned that story very much as I was—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Alex Haley:

—hearing and learning other stories in a different context in Sunday school.

[cut]

[camera roll #1031]

00:52:59:00

Camera crew member #1:

Ten thirty-one.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:53:03:00

Interviewer:

Why do you insist to make the journey?

00:53:05:00

Alex Haley:

Yeah. My, the stories that I heard my grandmother and her sisters say about the family, their family and my ancestors, although I didn't really think of it as such, were in a certain sense rather similar to another set of stories I heard in Sunday school. Henning, like many little Southern towns, was just pure Protestant at that time. You were either White or Black, you were either Methodist or Baptist or you were a sinner in the eyes of the community. And all children when to Sunday school, and in Sunday school we heard the stories, the biblical parables. And I would assume, I'd guess that by the time I was, say, 10, 11 years old my head in story terms was a jumble of David and Goliath and Chicken George and Moses and Miss Kizzy, they were all just in there, and I would've had to stop at some point and figure out which one belonged to which set of stories, you know. But it was, I, I sorta go into some detail to, to explain how I got this material about the family. Now I have, since Roots, come to know many, many Black families, as well as White families, grew up we, we used to have a tradition that the entertainment before television, before radio, the entertainment for families particularly in the South was that on the weekends, Sundays particularly, the family would gather after the noon meal on the front porch or in the li, living room and the elders would talk and the young would listen, and the elders told stories and the children grew up, that's why the South has such a rich story tradition and a rich culture, and that's why we better raised than most folks and things like that; it's the truth. And anyway, I grew up knowing the story of the family before I ever had any dream of the significance. I couldn't have spelled the word significance. I didn't know what was significance if it had ever come up, but I grew up knowing a story. And then when I, decades later, had quite by chance, accident even, had become a writer, you know, I had written for magazines and then had written finally *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and now I am that thing called an author, I began to think about the stories that Grandma and them had told. And I think playing it back, I believe that my motivation for thinking about that was that it was now in the '60s, the latter '60s, the Malcolm X book was published in '65, and I was hearing, as all around were hearing, a lot more than previous about Africa, about Black people, about one thing and another. And the first time it occurred to me, first time I ever heard the word Africa was on the front porch in Henning when they were talkin' about the African who was the father of Miss Kizzy, and he—she was the mama of Chicken George, and so on down the line. And, of course, the whole thing they were talkin' about was about Black people, and that really was what gave, what, what, what brought back that story business to me, and I began researching not with, not with the slightest thought of a book, but just because, if you are a writer, almost by intuition, almost subconsciously you go poke around and see if you find a little bit more, a little bit that kinda gratifies you or reassures you about what you were looking for or interested in. It was just a matter of interest, and then every time I'd find this little bit, I'd find a little bit more. And finally, a rather critically important day, one Saturday I went up to, I was in Washington, I had interviewed somebody, I have no idea who nor about what, and I was walking up a sidewalk and I looked up and there's this tall building, great tall columns

and across the top was inscribed Archives of the United States. And I didn't have to get back to New York right away; it was Saturday afternoon, and I just, impulse, went up the steep steps, and I went up in there and I, I walked around the lobby. They had things about the founding of this country, the Bill of Rights is blown up, the Constitution. And then I went up in the main reading room and a young White fella came up and later, he's an intern, he was very polite and he said, Sir, can I be of help to you? And, and I remember the word just came out of my mouth I heard myself say, I hadn't thought about it, and I said, I wonder if I could see the census records of Alamance County, North Carolina, in 1870. Now, I asked for 1870 because I had always heard that the Civil, after the Civil War was the first time the census listed Black people by name. And I asked for Alamance County because all my life back to little boyhood I had heard my grandma and her sisters talking about Alamance County. You see, something that's very important particularly in, well, not only Black, any other genealogy that far back is, when you talk with very old people living today and you ask them about where did they live when they were young, you will hear them repetitively refer to such and such county. And the reason for that was that they did not have anything like the mobility we have. Their mobility was as, as far as a horse could travel, and as a consequence you had whole families that might spend generations within one county, and so people then tended to talk about county and think about county where we think about a state today. And so, that's why you hear counties, I heard Alamance County. And then I'm looking and I'm looking and I'm looking at names of people in old-fashioned handwriting, you know, we've all seen it, and finally, bless the Lord, I'm looking down there and it was like it just came up like a fist through this eye piece I'm looking at this microfilm, and there's Murray comma Thomas. How many times had I heard Grandma, Aunt Liz, all of them talk about their daddy, Tom Murray the blacksmith? Occupation, blacksmith. Age, I forgot what his age was. Color, B for Black. And right underneath his name it was just incredible, Arrena, A-R-R-E-N-A. How many times that I heard Grandma and them talk about their mama's name was spelled A-R-R-E-N-A and not Irene like a lot of people called her. And there was her occupation, housewife, 1870 was the first time you ever saw Black women described as housewife in the census—and her color was M for mulatto. And then underneath her was their children. And the thing wa—that was so astounding to me was not the names, I knew their name, my grandmother and her, her sisters, but their ages. Here they are age 14, age 12, a woman I knew as gray-haired, everything. And then I finally got on and the last one listed was Elizabeth, age 6. Was no way in the world—that was the snuff dipper, Aunt Liz, no way in the world she coulda ever been 6 years old. And then the shocker was, that was it. And I'm sittin' there looking at this thing, where is Grandma? There was no Cynthia. And I felt like I wanted to just tear up this thing. Where was Grandma? If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't even be sitting here looking. And then it hit me, she wasn't born yet. Grandma had two years to go before she would come on the scene. And when I think back about it, and I have many, many times, that was for me the first bite of the genealogical bug from which there is no cure. Once bitten, forevermore you will be searching, hunting for something somewhere, and that really was what propelled me into *Roots*. And you talk about the money thing. I don't know what it is about writers, artists, creative people, but you learn, man, the, maybe the least important thing in the world is money. I, I, I know I was having a thing at one time, it was involving a divorce, and, you know, all the talk about she'll, she'll take everything you've got and all that. And I remember the thing that gave me a tremendous sense of strength, and I remember running my hand in my pocket and, and I pulled out and I said, Just give me that. I

don't care, if I got my pen. That's my strength, you know. And I felt at that time about I, I could care less about money. I just had to get the next fact, the next this. And I, for a time, was living almost hand-to-mouth because the important thing was the story. And when I look back at it, if I hadn't done that, *Roots* would never have existed. And I'm not saying that in some martyred success sense. I'm just saying that, when you are on the quest of something that has you, you see, people talk about your writing a book. If you are on a powerful book idea, the time comes fairly soon when it has you, not vice-versa, and you've just got to go wherever that book takes you, and whatever research it involves, you go do it, and whatever it costs, raise it, do it. That's it.

01:02:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut. Ooh.

01:02:54:00

Alex Haley:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:02:57:00