

P A R T I I

The Spiritual Children of Malcolm X

Darwin describes evolution as descent with modification by means of natural selection. There is no natural selection in matters of the spirit. But there is descent with modification. Spiritual descent operates by a different set of laws, if it can be call law-like at all. Many of its relations of cause and effect remain undiscovered, a mystery to be solved by careful investigation. Lines of descent can never be established beyond doubt and, therefore, are always subject to controversy. There is no DNA evidence in matters of the spirit. Thus experts in discerning spiritual kinship sometimes disagree. And denials of kinship, of ancestry and descent are always possible. Recall Ralph Ellison's eloquent, if nasty (and Ralph could be oh so nasty¹) denial that Richard Wright was his artistic ancestor and the subtlety with which he distinguished his artistic vision from James Baldwin's in "The World and the Jug." Ellison rebukes Irving Howe for presuming that familiarity, propinquity, and racial affinity are enough to establish artistic descent. In the light of Ellison's example, I am aware of possible objections to my interpretation and have tried to anticipate and respond to them. The final verdict lies with readers. My claims about Malcolm's spiritual legacy are built on the example he set: his *Afro-Eccentric* religious choices, especially his reinterpretation of Jesus, his response to the black freedom struggle, and the way that he "blues" that is, improvises on both, constructing a new identity that circumvents the conventions of the Standard Narrative of Black Religion. Thus, in my *Afro-Eccentric* interpretation, Julius Lester and Jan Willis are the spiritual descendants of Malcolm X.