In recent years it has become somewhat fashionable to cite Malcolm X as an admirer of John Brown the controversial 19th century abolitionist, particularly by those who have advanced the latter as a forerunner of the contemporary black struggle for freedom or an example of black-white unity. Perhaps the most notable in this regard is David Reynolds’s *John Brown Abolitionist* (2005), who mentions Malcolm X several times in conjunction with the militant black struggle. In his proposal that Brown seeded the Civil Rights movement, Reynolds points out that some of Brown’s Harper’s Ferry raiders had envisioned a revolutionary black state and even contrived a logo of a black warrior bearing a sword. Reynolds writes: “To make an angry, armed black man the state symbol was more than daring or progressive; it was revolutionary. It looked forward not to liberal legislation but to militant pronouncements by the likes of Robert F. Williams and Malcolm X” (Reynolds, 2005: 247). Reynolds also quotes Malcolm referring to John Brown in January 1965, although he uses only the brief excerpt of Malcolm’s words quoted by Benjamin Quarles in *Blacks on John Brown* (1972): “I don’t go for non-violent white liberals. If you are for me and my problems – when I say me I mean us, our people – then you have to be willing to do as old John Brown did” (Reynolds, 2005: 498; Quarles, 2001: 107).1

As the first to prepare a full-fledged biography of Brown in the 21st century, perhaps I must also bear some of the responsibility for promoting the Malcolm-Brown theme, which at times has been taken too far. On the dust jacket of my book, *Fire from the Midst of You*: *A Religious Life of John Brown* (2002), it is stated that Malcolm called Brown “a real white liberal” – really an editorial error since Malcolm’s actual phrasing was simply “a white liberal.” However, when I was writing *Fire from the Midst of You,* I was still quite mindful of Malcolm since this was the first major point of transition in my biographical

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labors from the Muslim activist to the Christian abolitionist. Although I did not make some of the explicit claims that Reynolds does in his preeminent work, perhaps my biography is equally graphic in illustrating the extent to which Brown himself was both involved with and committed to black people. This was what I had in mind in my introduction, where I quote Malcolm's words before his Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in New York City on July 5, 1964,

> You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free slaves. White people call John Brown a nut. Go read the history, go read what all of them say about John Brown. They're trying to make it look like he was a nut, a fanatic. They made a movie on it, I saw movie on the screen one night. Why, I would be afraid to get near John Brown if I go by what other white folks say about him. But they depict him in this image because he was willing to shed blood to free the slaves. And any white man who is ready and willing to shed blood for your freedom – in the sight of other whites, he's nuts... So when you want to know good white folks in history where black people are concerned, go read the history of John Brown. That was what I call a white liberal. But those other kind, they are questionable.

*Malcolm X, 1970: 81–82*

Although there is undoubted appreciation for Brown in Malcolm's public expressions, I have come to reflect somewhat differently upon his intentions in such remarks. Certainly, it is incorrect to portray Malcolm's words as being a reference to Brown's strategic value to black resistance. Reynolds is mistaken in concluding that Malcolm X believed Brown's “violent response to injustice was a paradigm modern blacks must follow” (Reynolds, 2005: 498). Quite to the contrary, Malcolm X never used John Brown's militant example as a paradigm for blacks, but rather as a challenge to white liberals. This would have been clearer had closer attention been paid to the context of Malcolm's words as found in the edited transcription by George Breitman in his essential collection, *Malcolm X Speaks*. In fact, this reference to Brown was made during a post-speech question-and-answer session before the Militant Labor Forum, a socialist group, on January 7, 1965. “There are many white people in this country,” Malcolm declared, “especially the younger generation,” who had come to realize that the injustices committed against black people would result in negative consequences for whites, “the chickens coming home to roost eventually.” Malcolm continued that even if these whites were not morally motivated, at least intelligence “obligated them to see that something had to be done,” and