

THE RETURN OF MALCOLM X: BLACK YOUTH AND THE RADICALIZATION OF
BLACK POLITICAL CULTURE

by

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Malcolm X is the central figure in the most phenomenal revival in the history of Black political culture. While in the heart of every inner city ghetto Malcolm X was never forgotten, the last several years have seen a tidal wave of interest storm into the consciousness of Black youth throughout the world, including many third world youth and radical whites as well.

Many people regard this as a fad, and therefore reduce the Malcolm X revival into a basic American pattern, the transformation of an icon into a profitable commodity. After all, people in this country are taught it is positive to sell anything you can to everybody. But, from the point of view of the Black community this focus on Malcolm X represents a new rebirth of consciousness and the desire for change. It is this aspect of the Malcolm X revival that requires discussion if Black history is to be taken seriously,

both its past and its future!

Who was Malcolm X? Was he a demon or a genius? Why is he the greatest hero of Black youth in the 1990's?

1. WHO WAS MALCOLM X?

Perhaps even more than most people, Malcolm X was a man in motion. He experienced life so fully and so intensely that in his brief 40 years one has to say that he led several lives. Anytime someone attempts to define Malcolm X without regard to his full development they run the risk of distortion. And worse, this **is** often done as a cover for sectarianism, claiming Malcolm belongs to one's own political tendency. The responsible answer to this question requires examining his entire life and not one part of it.

Malcolm X, with the collaboration of Alex Haley, wrote a classic autobiography in the great tradition of the slave narratives of Gustavus Vassa and Frederick Douglas, and the autobiographical texts of Booker T Washington and WEB DuBois. This is our greatest single source about Malcolm X.

Malcolm Little (1925 - 1941)

Malcolm was born May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Earl and Louise Little. He was a Georgia born baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey in the Universal Negro Improvement Association. She was a Grenadian born outspoken activist in the UNIA as well. He had nine brothers and sisters.

When Malcolm was 6 his father was brutally killed after suffering years of racist persecution, and six years later his mother succumbed to the pressure of the welfare system after trying to care for her children in poverty. She was committed to a mental hospital where she stayed from 1937 to 1963.

Malcolm Little was a Black youth alienated from his family through racist violence, and forced into the street to search for his manhood.

Detroit Red (1941 - 1952)

After spending three years in a foster home and detention school, and still not escaping institutional racism and individual prejudices, he moved to Boston with his eldest paternal half-sister Ella Collins. In Boston he turned away from what he considered the

hypocritical imitative lifestyle of the Black middle class, and took to the cultural dynamics of the street, the nocturnal fast lane of pop culture.

First in Boston, and then in New York Malcolm explored the full range of illegal alternatives. He did everything that still haunts the Black community today: drugs, prostitution, robbery, violence in many forms. He formed a gang of robbers in Boston, that quickly led to a prison term in **1946**. In his 21st year he was a school drop out, a drug addict, and a jail-bird! He put it this way in his Autobiography:

Looking back, I think I really was at least slightly out of my mind. I viewed narcotics as most people regard food. I wore my guns as today I wear my neckties. Deep down, I actually believed...one should die violently.

Malcolm X (1952-1963)

It was while incarcerated that Malcolm came to understand how he had been isolated and rendered powerless other than as a source

of vulgar naked violence. In this depth he experienced one of the great reversals of the 20th century, the rehabilitation and conversion of a hardened criminal. He met Bimbi, a prison intellectual, who taught him to respect language, books, and reasoning. Malcolm was introduced by his brothers and sisters to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. These two men guided him to self emancipation, reading and writing his way to intellectual growth, and to a reversal of habits to reenforce a new life style and moral code.

He went into prison a degenerate criminal, and after seven **years** had become a model of commitment, dedication, and discipline when he was released in 1952. Malcolm was now a man. He was moving in the path of his father, as a Black nationalist organizer attempting to save Black people from the destruction of a white racist society.

For the next 12 years Malcolm became the main leader for the Nation of Islam's growth from 400 to 40,000 members, with Temples organized in virtually every major-city in the United States.

Malcolm went to Detroit first, and then to live and study with Elijah Muhammad in Chicago. He was then assigned to organize key cities. He became Minister of the New York Temple and became the National Spokesperson for his organization and leader. He married and had 6 daughters.

Omwale (1964-1965)

Malcolm acted as one of the many sons of Elijah Muhammad, and was an extremely dedicated follower. However, strains developed, and on a personal and a political level the strain turned into conflict and led to separation. Mr Muhammad was alleged to have fathered several children out of wedlock with two very young assistants, and in Malcolm's eye's this was a devastating transgression only exceeded by the cover-up hoax to validate his behavior through biblical reference. Malcolm violated Muhammads mandate to remain silent after Kennedy's assassination with his famous statement "that chickens were coming home to roost." He was simply saying that "those who live by the sword die by the sword" but in Muhammad's eyes this was an intolerable act of

insubordination. Malcolm was silenced December 3, 1963, and he formally announced his independence from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964.

For the next year, Malcolm spent nearly 6 months abroad after announcing the formation of two organizations, the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In this last year Malcolm visited and lectured in over a dozen countries and established himself as a theoretical leader of the Black liberation movement. He had become even more dangerous outside of the sectarian Nation of Islam since people from all aspects of the Black community, and from all over the world were searching him out and seriously considering his ideological and political leadership. However, after less than 40 years, Malcolm was assassinated February 21, 1965 in New York City at the Audubon Ballroom while lecturing to his followers. After becoming a man advocating world brotherhood he was brutally murdered.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King

The brief life of Malcolm X has become mythic in its

implications, and full of lessons for the masses of Black people. His life is a stark contrast to Martin Luther King. King was "to the Manor **born**," a third generation preacher in the same large middle class church in Atlanta, and a Morehouse College graduate with a PhD from Boston University. Malcolm X was the son of an itinerant preacher who never had a permanent church, and he had to survive juvenile delinquency, a life of street crime, and drug addiction. Both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King became great leaders, travelling different roads and leading different parts of the Black community, but both were brutally murdered.

Martin Luther King had reached great heights of accomplishment, but Malcolm X had just begun to climb. He had passed through four phases. A positive Black youth was rejected and turned into a dangerous criminal. This "Satan" was converted into a zealous religious leader, who in turn was being transformed in the last year of his life into a revolutionary thinker with great mass appeal in the Black community. His appeal was especially with the "bottom of the pile Negroes," as he used to

call the homeless, the unemployed, because he felt himself to be one of the greatest victims as well.

Radical Black Tradition

The question remains, was he a demon or a genius? There were many in the mainstream who would argue that he was a harbinger of hate and racial violence, but this was usually the reaction of whites or middle class Blacks who were not used to hearing the honest and articulate voice of the Black masses who had suffered the brunt of all of the racist violence unique to the history of the USA. It truly was shocking to hear the echoes of slavery and the lynch mob in an articulate and fearless urban working class Black leader. Malcolm forced American and the world to see itself from the eyes of the Black victim.

Malcolm was a genius nurtured in the lessons of the radical Black tradition. This tradition has been produced anew by each generation on an ad hoc basis as each had to face and fight racism and poverty. But also, this radical Black tradition has ~~been~~ symbolically reproduced as the continuity of cultural legacy in

opposition to oppression. Traditions like this are greater than the leaders who maintain them. This is what is meant by the statement that you can kill a freedom fighter but not the fight for freedom. Malcolm was murdered and now he is being born again in the minds of a new generation of Black youth.

There are five aspects to the radical Black tradition:

1. Black religion: belief in a spiritual god force, a moral first principle that gives energy ^{and guidance} to the people to resist ("God helps those who fight back"). This includes the Voodoo priest who started the Haitian revolution, Nat Turner, and contemporary Black liberation theologians like James Cone, Cornel West, and Vincent Harding.

2. PanAfricanism: belief that all Black people are linked to Africa and the great origin of all human civilization, and are obligated to fight to liberate and unite Africa. This includes great leaders like Chaka Zulu, Bishop Henry Turner, and contemporary leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, and Amilcar Cabral

3. Nationalism: belief in the unity and development of the Black community, especially its social institutions. This includes most of the leadership of the Black community, especially the Black church and business community.

4. Feminism: belief in the defense and development of Black women as leaders of the Black community. This includes Queen Nzinga, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, Ida B Well, and contemporary figures like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Ruby Doris Robinson.

5. Socialism: belief in social justice and economic equality based on the positive role of government and self help. This includes the radicals like Paul Robeson, CLR James, Claudia Jones, and Abner Berry.

The dynamic of this tradition defies dogmatism, as doctrinaire positions like that held by Malcolm was he was in the Nation of Islam are sectarian and isolationist. The dynamic has always gained energy when the masses of people have been engaged in a great debate in which they have attempted to gain from applying all

of these aspects of the tradition to their situation to solve their problems.

There have been three great debates: 1. The Emancipation Debate (Frederick Douglas, Martin Delaney, and others in the National Negro Convention Movement); 2. The Self-Determination Debate (W E B DuBois, Booker T Washington, and Marcus Mosiah Garvey); and 3. The Black Liberation Debate (Martin Luther King and Malcolm X). By becoming a standard bearer in one of the Great Debates of the Radical Black Tradition Malcolm X will be regarded as a genius of all time for the Black community. He will never be forgotten.

Black Youth in the 1990's

The current situation for the Black community, especially Black youth, is do dire and the "dream" such a "nightmare" that there is a great necessity for the Radical Black Tradition. This is the significance of the Malcolm revival, a reawakening of the Great Debate for freedom. We are witnessing the beginning of a process in the early **1990's**, and we have yet to find out the nature

of the new Debate that is emerging. Will it be a continuation of the **1960's**, or will it be something new. The same debate is over rap (is it new?) and other aspects of the life forms being created by the new generation of youth. Will the youth learn from Malcolm and grasp the lessons of the last three Debates? Will whites in the USA respect the Debates and incorporate them into the mainstream of political discourse? Will everyone learn from Malcolm?

One thing is certain. Malcolm has been reborn in the minds of the Black youth and that's a fact. We "dis" them at the risk of our own peril.