Malcolm X's critique of the education of Black people

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Western Journal of Black Studies
07-01-2001

**Abstract**

HEADNOTE

Noticeably absent from discussions of Malcolm X's contribution to the modern Black freedom movement is his critique of the education of Black people in the United States. Too often, critiques of the Black experience are given more validity if emanating from formally trained academics. In this article, the author illustrates how Malcolm X used his life experiences as the basis for his critique of the education of Black people. Explicated is Malcolm's incisive critique of major educational issues facing Black people during the height of his leadership in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Throughout, the author illuminates the importance of situating Malcolm X within the historical tradition of Black intellectual activism, and concludes by highlighting the legacy of Malcolm's revolutionary spirit in contemporary African American education.

**IMAGE PHOTOGRAPH**

**Introduction**

This article focuses on Malcolm X's critique of the education of people of African descent in the United States from the time of his leadership within the Nation of Islam, until his assassination in 1965. To place Malcolm X in the center of a discussion on Black education, on the surface, might appear as another effort to appropriate his life for mere intellectual analysis. However, one cannot dismiss Malcolm's searing analysis of educational issues during his lifetime. Specifically, Malcolm taught Black people about the value of placing their history and culture in the center of their education, while presenting a scathing critique of white control of public schooling. The significance of understanding the scope of Malcolm's critique of the education of Black people lies in the fact that academics, educators, and activists incessantly reference Malcolm's words when offering a "radical" analysis and perspective on the education of Black people.

Unfortunately, Malcolm X's views on education— and the impact of his revolutionary spirit on educational movements after his death— have been largely ignored except for a few essays, which include an outline by Hurst (1972) almost three decades ago, and a recent collection of essays edited by Theresa Perry (1996), which emphasize how Malcolm X's life was the embodiment of how literacy could be an essential step towards freedom. Over the past decade or so, and particularly within the pages of this journal,
scholars have thoroughly examined Malcolm X's sociopolitical philosophy from various perspectives. Some include Malcolm's views on the role of Africana women in Black liberation (Hudson-Weems, 1993), Malcolm and the economic salvation of African Americans (Stewart, 1993), the oppositional logic of Malcolm X (Karenga, 1993a), Malcolm as a human rights activist (Harris, 1993), and his views in relation to the sociopolitical thought of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Baldwin, 1989; Cone, 1995). An intellectual understanding of Malcolm's contribution to the Black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s can be gleaned from the existing body of scholarship, and there is little need to reiterate the arguments and criticisms put forth by these scholars. However, noticeably absent from these discussions has been an analysis of Malcolm's social and political beliefs regarding the education of people of African descent in the United States.

Malcolm X offered an insightful perspective on the education of Black people. In the historical tradition of Black educators, he was undeniably committed to "uplifting the race" by encouraging Black people to become cognizant of their consignment in the American social order, and then proposing the necessary steps to rectify these conditions. Malcolm deserves a place in the intellectual tradition of African American education. Too often, critiques of education are associated with formally trained scholars and academics who have become legitimized and validated by traditional educational institutions and organizations. Malcolm, on the other hand, privileged experience as an essential part of education (Karenga, 1993a). Rather than relying on theoretical and philosophical abstractions, Malcolm used his life and experiences as a basis for his critique of the education of Black people in the United States.

To begin, I first illustrate how pivotal periods in Malcolm's life and schooling experiences profoundly shaped his critique of the education of Black people in the United States. Next, gleaned from Malcolm's speeches and the literature are his views on major educational issues facing Black people during the height of his leadership in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These issues include the desegregation of public schools, the negation of Black history and culture in schools and its subsequent influence on Black identity, and Malcolm X's views on the purpose of education for Black people. Finally, the article highlights the legacy of Malcolm's revolutionary spirit in contemporary African American education, and discusses how Malcolm X as a person, thinker, and activist inspired educational movements and activism-some of which took root shortly after his assassination.

Since Malcolm X did not leave a body of writings per se that addressed significant educational issues, his speeches, autobiography, and several books and articles written about his life serve as the basis for extracting these views. Throughout, the article is infused with rich and descriptive quotes-though not as powerful as hearing Malcolm's engaging and incisive speaking style-which provide a glimpse into his uncanny ability to communicate on multiple levels and with vivid imagery.

The Formulation of Malcolm's Critique of Black Education

Malcolm's views on the education of Black people were collectively shaped by his earlier life and schooling experiences, which left an indelible impression regarding his perspectives on formal and informal education. Malcolm regretted not receiving a formal education, and consequently, was later driven to provide himself with a "homemade" education while incarcerated. Prison is where he began to develop his reading, writing, and debating skills and also where he first encountered the teachings of the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm's transformation, within and outside of the Nation of Islam, and his travels to various African and Asian countries, further cemented his commitment to the education of Black people. These pivotal points in his life are briefly discussed, so as to contextually situate his critique of the education of Black people in the United States.
Earlier Life Experiences

Born Malcolm Little (later to become El-Hajj-- Malik-El-Shabazz), Malcolm X's earlier life and school experiences are essential to understanding how and why he targeted his social and political vision toward the resurrection of Black people in the United States. The murder of his father, a follower of Marcus Garvey, the confining of his mother to a mental hospital, and the eventual break-up of his family by social service agents, drastically impacted Malcolm's distrust of white people. These feelings were cemented by his earlier schooling experiences, where his classmates, and the White junior high school English teacher that he referred to in his Autobiography as Mr. Ostrowski, repeatedly called him a "nigger." Malcolm notes that disparaging comments such as these "rolled off" his back because he was so used to them and never gave serious thought to the vileness of the comments (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 37).

Although elected class president, and one of the top students in his junior high class, when Malcolm expressed to Mr. Ostrowski his ambitions of becoming a lawyer, he was informed that such an aspiration was unrealistic for a Negro. This encounter was a turning point in Malcolm's life and profoundly shaped his misanthropic demeanor toward formal education. Feeling dejected and having lost total interest in school, Malcolm dropped out of school and later moved to Boston to live with his sister, Ella. This particular experience would become pivotal in later shaping Malcolm's skepticism of the integration of public schools as the best means to ensure quality schooling for Black children. In his own experiences, he witnessed the harm that Black children might encounter in integrated schools. The actions and words by Malcolm's teacher left an indelible imprint regarding the extent to which white teachers could effectively teach Black children. Though he might have thought that he was properly advising Malcolm, Mr. Ostrowski's comments revealed lower expectations for Malcolm in comparison to his white classmates-despite the fact that Malcolm was performing better than most of them.

Malcolm's move to Boston to live with Ella was supposed to have helped him to re-focus his life. Instead, he became fascinated with the glitter and the glamour of the city life and all that it offered. While in Boston, Malcolm carefully observed how segments of the Black community engaged in pretentious behaviors and lifestyles. This deep-seated impression intensified his identification with, and loyalty to, economically impoverished and "everyday" Black people. After spending time with his sister, Malcolm left Boston and moved to New York City.

Malcolm was in awe of how Black people in Harlem, New York, lived in their world-apart from the white world that he had been consumed by when he lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and Lansing, Michigan. Harlem, New York, allowed Malcolm to no longer feel like a "mascot" that he felt he was while growing up and attending school in Lansing and Mason, Michigan. Malcolm's consumption of Black culture in Harlem, particularly his fascination with and immersion in Black music, dress, and language, enabled him to develop a great appreciation of and admiration for Black culture. Unlike many Black intellectuals of his time who often shunned Black popular culture, Malcolm never relinquished this appreciation of the Black cultural aesthetic. This would become evident in his lectures, which often highlighted the value of Black history and culture in the educational process. However, Harlem is also where Malcolm began to "hustle" and burglarize for a livelihood. He eventually fell into a life of crime, which was short-lived when he was eventually caught and sentenced in February 1946 to ten years to the Charleston State Prison.

Prison Experience

Malcolm served a total of seven years in prison; part of his term was served in the Charleston State Prison in Massachusetts, and the other in the Norfolk Prison Colony. Three major events, which
profundely shaped his desire to become literate, occurred while incarcerated. The first event involved his move from Charleston State Prison to Norfolk Prison Colony, which had an extensive collection of library books that were willed by a millionaire named Parkhurst. The second event was his encounter with "Bimbi," an "old-time" burglar with extensive prison experience, and whom Malcolm greatly admired because of his verbal skills and understanding of philosophy. The final event was the encouragement by his siblings to develop his reading and writing skills, and to later join the Nation of Islam.

The respect and admiration that Malcolm had for Bimbi personifies the awe that a student has for his or her best teacher. Malcolm wished that he could display the degree of intellectualism and command the kind of respect among the prisoners and the guards that Bimbi received. Bimbi modeled to Malcolm how literacy, systematic thought, oratorical skills, persuasiveness, and knowledge were also tools for change.

The first man I met in prison who made any positive impression on me whatever was a fellow inmate, "Bimbi." I met him in 1947, at Charleston... Often after we had done our license plates quota, we would sit around, perhaps fifteen of us, and listen to Bimbi. Normally, white prisoners wouldn't think of listening to Negro prisoners' opinions on anything, but guards, even, would wander over close to hear Bimbi on any subject... What fascinated me with him most of all was that he was the first man I have ever seen command total respect... with his words (Malcolm X, 1964, pp. 154-155).

From the initial encouragement by his sister Hilda, Malcolm began developing his penmanship and English skills. His brothers, Reginald and Philbert, introduced him to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, whom he regularly began to correspond with by writing letters. Malcolm even wrote letters to the President of the United States regarding the plight of Black people in America. He notes, "It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education" (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 172). As Theresa Perry notes, Malcolm began to understand that literacy was an initial step toward liberation (1996).

While in prison, Malcolm read books in history, politics, philosophy, and science-almost any written material that he was able to access through the prison's extensive library. He also debated prisoners and clergy on politics, religion, and other subjects. For Malcolm, reading had changed forever the course of his life and gave more significance to the meaning of living. Some of the books that he read included H.G. Wells' Outline of History, Will Durant's Story of Civilization, W.E.B. Du Bois' Souls of Black Folks, Carter G. Woodson's Negro History, J. A. Roger's three volumes on Sex and Race, and Gregor Mendel's Findings in Genetics. These and other books contributed to Malcolm's appreciation of history and his knowledge of the contributions of Africans to world civilization. Upon his release from prison, Malcolm formally joined the Nation of Islam. While in the Nation, he honed the speaking and debating skills that he had begun to develop while in prison. Malcolm's "homemade" education, coupled with his exposure to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, enabled him to become literate, confident, and articulate on the "race question" in America.

The Influence of the Nation of Islam

During most of his life, Malcolm was not a theorist or ideologist, but instead, an interpreter and teacher of thought (Karenga, 1979). Elijah Muhammad constructed the system of thought, and as a minister, Malcolm taught it in a way unlike Muhammad. The Nation of Islam, founded by Elijah Muhammad, arguably was the most powerful influence in Malcolm's life immediately after his release from prison. The Nation (as it is commonly called) profoundly shaped Malcolm's systematic understanding of race in the United States and his critique of Black education. The Nation's philosophy stressed the importance of Black racial and historical pride, and identified white people as the "devils" who created the abyss that Black people were experiencing in America (Cone, 1995). Like Woodson (1933), he also surmised that the
white oppressors—along with misinformed Black people—were largely responsible for the mis-education of Black people. Though he remained true to his commitment to Black people and their liberation, after his break with the Nation, he would later change many of his views, especially those towards white people and Islam.

While a minister in the Nation, however, Malcolm preached a message that encouraged Black people in the United States to take pride in themselves and their history, to believe in their abilities, and to become self-sufficient. Black nationalist in its philosophy, the Nation preached that Black people should control the economics, education, social situation, and politics of their communities. Along with the earlier influence from his father's embracing of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, Malcolm's experiences in the Nation greatly shaped his anti-integration stances on education and society, reaffirmed the significance that he placed on Black history and culture as part of the schooling process, and reaffirmed his belief that intellectualism did not necessarily reside in formal education (Bimbi had already made a huge impression on him). In addition, despite the fact that Elijah Muhammad's formal education went no further than the fourth grade, Malcolm was moved by Muhammad's wisdom, knowledge, and intellectual analysis of the experiences of people of African descent in the United States. However, after his break with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm's own personal, political, and social views broadened beyond a U.S. analysis, and became Pan-African and global in nature.

International Travels

Though he had earlier made a trip to Egypt, parts of the Arab world, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana as Elijah Muhammad's emissary, Malcolm took a succession of trips to African and Asian countries during 1964 where he steeped himself in the political, social, and economic struggles of the people. Malcolm traveled to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Guinea, Lebanon, and Algeria. His pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia broadened his religious view of Islam, which helped to dispel the notion of White people as the "devil": "In America, `white man' meant specific attitudes and actions toward the Black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had been" (Malcolm X, 1964, pp. 338-339).

However, Malcolm's "transformation" did not mean that he ceased to address how white supremacy affected people of African descent in the United States and throughout the world. Every opportunity he was given to speak while abroad, Malcolm reiterated how the color races of the world still had to struggle against the collective white man (white supremacy and imperialism). During his travels, Malcolm met with heads of states, dignitaries, revolutionaries, and leaders at all levels of government and society. Some included President Nyerere of Tanzania, President Jomo Kenyatta (who was then Prime Minister of Kenya), Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda, President Azikiwe of Nigeria, President Nkrumah of Ghana, and President Sekou Toure of Guinea. In meeting with these individuals, Malcolm further developed his analysis of the struggles of Black people in the United States, by paralleling them with the struggles of Black people globally. His attempt to mount international pressure, and eventually bring before the United Nations the United States' mistreatment of its Black citizens, culminated with his presence at the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) conference in Cairo, Egypt, in 1964.

In addition to developing a broader understanding of Black struggle, as well as new perspectives on Islam and racism during his travels, Malcolm also had to face the fact that he possessed limited foreign language skills, and therefore, would encounter difficulties in communicating with others. Because he was so committed to taking the plight of Black people to a broader and international audience, he became frustrated because of his inability to speak multiple languages, thereby, often needing an interpreter:
I don't know anything more frustrating than to be around people talking something you can't understand. Especially when they are people who look just like you. In Africa, I heard original mother tongues such as Hausa, and Swahili, being spoken, and there I was standing like some little boy, waiting for someone to tell me what had been said; I will never forget how ignorant I felt (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 386.)

Malcolm's disappointment with his inability to speak a language besides English, and consequently, effectively communicate with African and Asian people, reflected the discontent with his own educational experience, as well as cemented in him the significance of literacy as a tool for empowerment and navigation in a society. Malcolm's cumulative life experiences and feelings of inadequacy with his lack of formal education provide a window for understanding why he possessed such strong convictions about the education of Black people. Though not an exhaustive analysis of Malcolm's views on every educational issue of concern to Black people, the depth and cogency of Malcolm's critique of Black education are most evident in his views on public school desegregation, the role of Black history and culture in the education of African Americans, and his beliefs on the purpose of education for Black people.

A Critique of the Education of Black People

Public School Desegregation

While one might point to a number of issues pertinent to Black people during the 1950s and 1960s, unquestionably, one of the most pressing was the debate regarding the desegregation of public schools as the means to implement the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision of 1954. This issue was inextricably linked to efforts to rectify the historic denying of civil and human rights to people of African descent in the United States. From the 1940s to the early 1960s, the predominant message articulated to bring about equality in United States society was through the integration of the races, in hope of ensuring the equitable treatment of Black people throughout the larger society. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) played a major role in this effort by overturning the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, and bringing about the legal demise of public school segregation with the passage of Brown.

Over a course of almost ten years, Malcolm X intensely observed many White Americans' resistance to the mandates of Brown. On one hand, he was clear about not supporting Black subordination through legalized segregation. On the other hand, he did not believe that the integration of public schools would ensure a quality education for the masses of Black people, as he notes in a speech before the Militant Labor Forum on April 8, 1964:

Am I in favor of school integration in the public schools? Insofar as integration is concerned, I don't know anywhere in America where they have an integrated school system, North or South. If they don't have it in New York City, they definitely never will have it in Mississippi. And anything that won't work I'm not in favor of. Anything that's not practical I'm not in favor of...But a segregated school system isn't necessarily the same situation that exists in an all-white neighborhood. A school system in an all-white neighborhood is not a segregated school system. The only time it's segregated is when it is in a community that is other than white, but at the same time controlled by the whites. So my understanding of a segregated school system, or a segregated community, or a segregated school, is a school that's controlled by people other than those that go there... On the other hand, if we can get an all-black school, that we can control, staff it ourselves with the type of teachers that have our good at heart, with the type of books that have in them many of the missing ingredients that have produced this inferiority complex in our people, then we don't feel that an all-black school is necessarily a segregated school.
Malcolm clearly argues that instead of integrated schools, Black children needed high quality, and well-funded all-Black schools, and did not necessarily have to attend schools with white children in hopes of receiving a quality education. Malcolm also believed Black people should control their children's education, which was being controlled by outside forces and people. His views starkly contrasted with the integrationist paradigm advocated by major civil rights organizations in the 1950s and 1960s such as the NAACP, and resonated with W. E. B. Du Bois' during the 1930s-ironically, one of the founders of the NAACP who vehemently opposed the organization's integrationist approach to education (see Alridge, 1999; Du Bois, 1935). As Du Bois in 1935, Malcolm still did not believe that white Americans during the 1960s were at a point of seriously committing themselves to an equal and equitable educational system for Black children.

Moreover, Malcolm reinterpreted the passage of Brown as part of a larger effort by the United States to promote its image as a champion of democracy, rather than a genuine effort to improve the state of Black people. For example, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s, the United States was in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Both countries were competing for the opportunity to wield their influence on other, less powerful countries. The United States, ironically, was championing democracy abroad, while at the same time sanctioning the doctrine of "separate but equal" between Blacks and whites within its borders. At a meeting organized by the Africa Society at the London School of Economics, Malcolm pointed out this contradiction during a speech on February 11, 1965:

The Supreme Court came up with what they called a desegregation decision in 1954-it hasn't been implemented yet .... This was all tokenism. They made the world think that they had desegregated the University of Mississippi. This shows you how deceitful they are. They took one Negro, named [James] Meredith, and took all of the world press down to show that they were going to solve the problem by putting Meredith in the University of Mississippi. (Reprinted in Malcolm X Talks to young people, 2001, pp. 46-47).

This cynicism towards traditional civil rights policies was ever present in Malcolm's incisive critiques. Massive resistance by white people toward desegregation in the South and the North during the 1960s and 1970s, and current debates surrounding affirmative action and desegregation in the 1990s and 2111 Century, speak volumes about Malcolm's insightful-and at times prophetic-critique of symbolic, rather than substantive attempts to reform the educational and social conditions of Black people.

The Role of Black History and Culture in Education

The period from the 1950s to late 1960s also witnessed dramatic shifts in terms of group racial identity designation among people of African descent in the United States. "Colored" was replaced with "Negro," which subsequently became replaced with "Black." Moreover, the famous doll studies, conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, concluded that Black children's choosing of the white doll was evidence of "self-hate." Later used as expert testimony in the Brown case, the Supreme Court inferred that this self-hate was caused by Black children's attendance in all-Black segregated schools. However, Malcolm's analysis of Black "self hate" transcended prevailing views that segregation was primarily the cause. He viewed the issue as one that was historically rooted in slavery, and perpetuated internationally.

Malcolm was bitterly critical of how U.S. society and European colonial powers "mis-educated" Black people by teaching them to hate themselves and to disidentify with their land of origin, Africa. He educated Black people on how they had been brainwashed to believe they were nothing, to believe they were inferior. To Malcolm, this brainwashing was a form of miseducation that kept Black people in their
place and caused them to hate their African attributes. He consciously connected Black Americans' psychological view of themselves to their negative perceptions of their historical and cultural roots. At a speech in Detroit, a few hours after his home had been bombed, Malcolm spoke at a meeting organized by the Afro American Broadcasting Company. The following excerpt from the speech sheds light on Malcolm's determined efforts to educate Black people about how they came to perceive negatively of themselves:

Now, what effect does [the struggle over Africa] have on us? Why would the black man in America concern himself since he's been away from the African continent for three or four hundred years? Why should we concern ourselves? What impact does what happens on them have upon us? Number one, you have to realize that up until 1959 Africa was dominated by the colonial powers. Having complete control over Africa, the colonial powers of Europe projected the image of Africa negatively. They always projected Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative that it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn't want anybody calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself. You show me one of these people over here who has been thoroughly brainwashed and has a negative attitude toward Africa, and I'll show you one who has a negative attitude toward himself You can't have a positive attitude towards yourself and a negative attitude towards Africa at the same time. To the same degree that your understanding of and attitude toward Africa becomes positive, you will find that your understanding of and your attitude toward yourself will become positive. And this is what the white man knows. So they very skillfully make you and me hate our African identity, our African characteristics (Malcolm X, 1965, pp. 168-169).

The above quote further reflects Malcolm's keen analysis of the colonization of knowledge, and the representation of Black history, culture, and people. Similar to Frantz Fanon (1963; 1961), the author of The Wretched of the Earth, Malcolm provides a poignant critique of the psychological impact of colonialism and racism on oppressed people throughout the world. Malcolm's travels to African and Asian countries, and his analysis of the political, social, and economic conditions throughout the world, provided him with an uncanny ability to relate the struggles of Black people in the United States with colonialist and imperialistic efforts being practiced by European powers and the United States against African and Asian countries.

Moreover, Malcolm fervently believed that schools in the United States perpetuated notions of Black people's inferiority through the curriculum, textbooks, and the overall schooling process. As he notes below, part of the mission of the Organization of AfroAmerican Unity (OAAU)-one of two organizations that he formed after his break with the Nation of Islam-would include taking an active role in the education of Black children. The following excerpt from a speech at the OAAU founding rally on June 28, 1964 in the Audubon Ballroom in New York, expresses Malcolm' disdain with the current educational curriculum taught to Black children:

When we send our children to school they learn nothing about us other than that we used to be cotton pickers. Why, your grandfather was Nat Turner; your grandfather was Toussaint L'Ouverture; your grandfather was Hannibal. It was your grandfather's hands, who forged civilization and it was your grandmother's hands who rocked the cradle of civilization. But the textbooks tell our children nothing about the great contributions of Afro-Americans to the growth and development of this country (Malcolm By Any Means Necessary, 1992, p. 43). 1

According to Malcolm, rectifying the psychological conditioning of Black people should first begin with the
proper education of Black people—one that grounded and centered Black children, as well as adults, in their history and culture, prior to their enslavement in the United States of America:

And now it is important for us to know that our history did not begin with slavery .. We came from Africa.. We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people (pp. 54-55).

The above two quotes capture Malcolm's ardent belief that Black people needed an education that transformed a "slave-oriented" perspective of their history, to one that centered Black people in a history and civilization beyond notions of servitude and an "uncivilized" past. Undoubtedly, Malcolm's re-characterization of Black history through a revisionist framework was a prelude to the contemporary scholarly fields of Black, African, and African American Studies, which followed his death in 1965.2 On the other hand, he was careful not to confound the acquisition of academic credentials and status with "education." As the following section illustrates, Malcolm reconciled the purpose and function of education for Black people by asserting that education should uplift the social, educational, and political status of Black people in the United States.

The Dichotomous Function of Education: Racial Uplift vs. Social Status Elevation

Consistent with the Black intellectual-activist tradition of David Walker, Martin Delany, Anna Julia Cooper, Marcus Garvey, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and W.E.B. Du Bois during the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries, Malcolm X believed that education (albeit one grounded in the history and culture of people of African descent) could uplift the race. Malcolm X consciously separated education—a liberatory and emancipatory process—from the mere process of schooling, a process that resulted primarily in the conferring of status. He often juxtaposed the notion of education, or its potential, as a tool for liberation and racial uplift, with his disdain of education as primarily a status symbol:

Education is an important element in the struggle for human rights. It is the means to help our children and our people rediscover their identity and thereby increase their self-respect (1964 Speech at the founding rally of OAAU in By any means necessary, 1992, p. 43.)

... I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 180).

Despite never realizing his dream of becoming a lawyer, Malcolm later developed and maintained a persistent faith in the power of education. For example, throughout the Autobiography, he made constant references to the educational potential of many of his Boston and Harlem friends and associates. The reason why many of them—including himself—did not attain their full potential, was due to a history of slavery, racism, and discrimination in the United States, which consigned millions of Black people to the bottom of U.S. society. While reflecting on how his life had been impacted by the lack of formal education in the Autobiography, he also named friends who possessed unlimited intellectual talents that never became realized:

My greatest lack has been, I believe, that I don't have the kind of academic education I wish I had been able to get— to have been a lawyer, perhaps. I do believe that I might have made a good lawyer I have always loved verbal battle, and challenge. You can believe me that if I had the time right now, I would not be one bit ashamed to go back into any New York public school and start where I left off at the ninth grade, and go on through a degree (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 386).
I've often reflected upon such black veteran numbers men as West Indian Archie. If they had lived in another kind of society, their exceptional mathematical talents might have been better used. But they were black. (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 117).

Though he valued the potential of education as a tool for liberation, Malcolm still offered a scathing critique of how some Black people acquired formal schooling for the sole purpose of individual benefit and social status elevation. Akin to Carter G. Woodson (1933) in his classic, The Miseducation of the Negro, Malcolm also advocated education that was beyond the mere training of people. The type of education that he advocated was not primarily intended for socioeconomic upward mobility, nor was it reserved for the privileged. Malcolm realized that in a racially stratified society, the system of schooling primarily served the interests of the dominant race.

For Malcolm, education should be practical and useful for Black people—particularly as it related to the liberation of Black people. It should also make Black people cognizant of how social, political, economic, educational, and psychological forces impacted their experiences in the United States. In addition, he felt that those few Black people who had been fortunate to obtain graduate and professional degrees should be more vigilant in educating the masses as a sense of responsibility and duty to the collective. In many ways, Malcolm regretted that he did not have the formal credentials possessed by these individuals, which he felt could better enable him to advocate politically and intellectually—on behalf of Black people. At times, this regret resulted in him conflating his critique of Black intellectuals with his critique of the Black bourgeoisie.

Malcolm's critique of the Black bourgeoisie and intellectuals began to form when he lived with his sister, Ella, on the "Hill" in Roxbury, Massachusetts. There, he saw the pretentiousness of some Black people, who were only a step from poverty, but "looked down their noses at the Negroes of the black ghetto"... (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 41). In the following quote, he notes how many Black people artificially elevated their status, although these symbols were of little value in the broader context of U.S. society:

I guess that eight out of ten of the Hill Negroes of Roxbury [Boston], despite the impressive-sounding job titles they affected, actually worked as menials and servants. "He's in banking," or "He's in securities." It sounded as though they were discussing a Rockefellers or a Mellon—and not some gray-headed, dignity—posturing bank janitor, or bond-house messenger "I'm with an old family" was the euphemism used to dignify the professions of white folk's cooks and maids who talked so affectedly among their own kind in Roxbury that you couldn't understand them. I don't know how many forty- and fifty-year old errand boys went down the Hill dressed like ambassadors in black suits and white collars, to downtown jobs "in government," "in finance," or "in law." It has never ceased to amaze me how so many Negroes, then and now, could stand the indignity of that kind of self-delusion (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 42).

Reminiscent of his "house-Negro" and "field Negro" metaphor, Malcolm's critique of Black "society" resonated with the themes of the then controversial book by E. Franklin Frazier (1957), Black Bourgeoisie. As did Frazier, Malcolm also viewed this Black society as representing "status without substance" because of its absence of real power, imitation of white society, and the distance it created between itself and the masses of Black people. His detesting of the Black bourgeoisie—which at times included a critique of Black academics—became more pronounced after being repeatedly attacked by Black academics because of his political and social views, and also because of what he perceived as the failure of Black academics to seriously engage in scholarly pursuits that generated new knowledge about the experiences of Black people:

One particular university's "token-integrated" black Ph.D. associate professor I never will forget; he got
me so mad I couldn't see straight. ...I was racking my head, to spear that fool; finally I held up my hand, and he stopped. "Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.'s?" He said something like, "I believe that I happen not to be aware of that "-you know, one of these ultra-proper-talking Negroes. And I laid the word down on him, loud: "Nigger!" (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 288).

History has been so whitened by the white man that even the black professors have known little more than the most ignorant black man about the talents and rich civilizations and cultures of the black man of millenniums ago. I have lectured in Negro colleges and some of these brainwashed black Ph.D.s, with their suspenders dragging the ground with degrees, have run to the white man's newspapers calling me a "black fanatic." Why, a lot of them are fifty years behind the times. If I were president of one of these black colleges, I'd hock the campus if I had to, to send a bunch of black students off digging in Africa for more, more and more proof of the black man's historical greatness (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 182).

The first quote speaks more directly to the attacks Malcolm received while a minister in the Nation, and the second captures his vision of the role and responsibility of the Black intellectual towards the production of scholarship about the history and culture of Black people. Both however, reveal Malcolm's uncanny ability to visually present the contradictions, dilemmas, and crises of the Negro intellectual. In the second quote, Malcolm's creation of an image, "suspenders dragging the ground with degrees," personifies how he believed that the Black intellectual, who felt he had all of the preparation and skills to contribute to his race, instead placed greater value on the status associated with advanced education. Obviously, Malcolm's assertions do not completely describe all Black academics at predominantly white, or predominantly Black universities during his time. Nonetheless, Malcolm felt a sense of disappointment collectively from individuals in these professions because of no clear and visible effort by many to engage in what he believed should be their focus. Nevertheless, shortly after his death, academics, activists, and many others openly embraced Malcolm in an iconoclastic manner. Today, Malcolm leaves behind a revolutionary legacy in all aspects of African American life, including education.

The Legacy of Malcolm X's Revolutionary Spirit in African American Education

Malcolm's militancy and revolutionary spirit influenced Black student activism during the 1960s and 1970s, the ethnic studies movement, contemporary theoretical and philosophical perspectives about education, as well as inspired the political thought and educational programs of Black Nationalist organizations. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, a few years after his death, Malcolm X's revolutionary rhetoric inspired college students from Howard University to Harvard Square to make demands such as humane dormitory conditions, curriculum relevant to their historical and cultural experiences, and a greater role in the universities' decision making. This legacy continued decades later as reflected in the rallying theme of "No Compromise, No Sellout" by Black students at places like Tennessee State University during the 1990s, as well as demands by students at various universities to name cultural centers and theme houses after Malcolm.

Within the context of public school desegregation, Malcolm was one of the earliest persons to bring what some have termed today a "critical race" analysis of the power dynamic in desegregating public schools when he argued for the desegregation of power and resources, rather than the movement of Black students from once predominantly black schools, to white schools (see Bell 1987; 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). He anticipated that the desegregation of public schools as educational policy would result in less control of the education of Black students, by Black people.

Contemporary examples of Malcolm's legacy in public education include the work by the Council for Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), an association of non-governmental schools in the United States. Independently owned and controlled by people of African descent, many of these schools reinforce
African and African American history and culture through all facets of the school's curriculum. They closely resemble Malcolm's vision for Black education—which noted earlier, was part of the educational platform of the OAAU.

In addition, activists and reformers in cities like Detroit and Milwaukee struggled during the early 1990s to create public schools, some of which bear Malcolm's name, and focus on African American students' social, cultural, and cognitive development. On the other hand, however, many public schools in large urban areas of the United States still do not have the control of Black education that Malcolm hoped that the OAAU could achieve. For example, while the Black middle class in the United States has increased, a greater gap exists between it and the Black underclass than has ever existed. Moreover, though not politically controlled, many cities are now politically led by African American mayors, teachers, school boards, and superintendents, but African American children, especially those who are low-income, still struggle to receive an effective education (Henig, Hula, Orr, Pedescleaux, 1999; Morris, 1999a). For Malcolm, the illusion of political power was useless if Black people lacked the substance, which also includes the economic control and the commitment to make a difference in the lives of their brothers and sisters relegated to a permanent underclass status.

Finally, it is important to understand that as a rhetorical strategy, Malcolm often spoke with sweeping generalizations, so as to dramatize the injustices encountered by people of African descent in the United States. One such generalization was his common depiction of Black schools as "inferior"—an inferior status that he was clear to note caused by white people who imposed on Black people, an education that ill prepared Black children. For example, all of the Black schools that Black people attended before the passage of Brown v. Board were not inferior in quality then, nor are they today. However, Malcolm was primarily noting how Black people, in general, lacked control of virtually every aspect of their children's schooling, which resulted in many Black students receiving an inadequate education.

Conclusion

Malcolm X's sociopolitical message embodied an unwavering commitment to racial uplift during the 1950s and 1960s, challenged prevailing thinking regarding the appropriated educational setting and curriculum for Black children, fueled the militancy of the Black Power Movement, and foreshadowed the ethnic studies' movement by poignantly analyzing American racism, and articulating the masses of Black Americans' rage and frustrations. With a sociopolitical message grounded in Black Nationalism, Malcolm X provided Black people in America and throughout the Diaspora the confidence to become agents in their liberation (Clarke, 1990; Perry, 1996). Except for Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement during the 1920s, none articulated as thorough and as scathing of an analysis and critique of the Black experience in America during the 20th Century (Karenga, 1979).

Whether first introduced to Malcolm X through the Autobiography, biographies on his life, or audio and video recordings of his speeches, admirers and critics alike have been moved by his life and uncompromising commitment to Black people. Malcolm's revolutionary message represents a continuation of the Black intellectual-activist tradition because of his prophetic articulation of the fate and promise of Black people. The revolutionary fervor embraced by many today who struggle on behalf of the education of Black people, is only a miniscule testament to the overall impact and influence of Malcolm X's revolutionary spirit on contemporary education and society.

FOOTNOTE
Notes

1. Evident in this quote is Malcolm's use of gendered constructs as a means of illustrating how "men" laid the foundation of modern civilization. As did many of his male contemporaries during the Black
freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Malcolm's rhetoric was filled with patriarchal views that subsumed women under men. However, as Hudson-Weems (1993) notes, Malcolm's attitude toward Africana women was evolving towards one of greater respect for the contributions of Africana women toward the overall Black struggle.

2. See Maulana Karenga's (1993b) Introduction to Black Studies for further information on the advent of these areas of study.


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Citation for your reference:

Morris, E, Jerome.. "Malcolm X's critique of the education of Black people." Western Journal of