

THE JOY OF BIRTH AND THE PAIN OF DELIVERY:  
MALCOLM X AND THE REBIRTH OF BLACK RADICALISM IN THE 1990'S  
=====

Abdul Alkalimat  
May 19, 1992

SISTERS AND BROTHERS  
COMRADES AND FRIENDS

If this talk had been given a month ago it would have been a different talk and you would have been a different audience. Los Angeles has happened to all of us. We moved from a hypothetical to the real thang, we got an answer to our central question -- how long will our people take the pain and suffering before breaking out in rebellion?

I consider it a great opportunity to address a meeting at this moment, to speak at a time when many more of us are awake and asking questions, seeking the road forward toward rebuilding a powerful movement of Black liberation that can go through 'til the job is done. But let me also say that once the oppressed and exploited masses have broken out of the prison of silence, we have to take our intellectual task of political analysis and the forging

of strategy and tactics very seriously. There are no quick and easy answers, nothing is self-evident, nor can we assume that the debate is concluding, because the reality is that we are just beginning again.

My task is to discuss "Malcolm X and the Rebirth of Black Radicalism in the 1990's." First I want to place this discussion in a historical context that takes into account the recent wave of rebellions initiated in Los Angeles, and then I want to discuss the meaning of Malcolm X and finally make some comments on the shape and direction for social revolution in the USA.

Let us remember some basic facts:

1. Malcolm X was assassinated February 21, 1965 and the Watts rebellion broke out August 11, 1965. There were 34 killed, 1,032 injured, about 4,000 people were arrested, and approximately \$35 million in property damages.

2. In 1966, after James Meridith was shot by a sniper (would be assassin) on a march in Mississippi, the clarion call for Black power was issued forth. This was answered in October of 1966 when

the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed in Oakland California.

3. In 1967, July brought rebellions in Newark (23 killed, 1500 injured) and Detroit (43 killed, over 2000 injured) and a national conference on Black Power.

This was a period of great mass struggle, and corresponding repression by local, state, and federal troops. Organizational forms of resistance emerged, and a great debate about the nature of Black liberation was carried out. This represented a critical shift in the movement in the mid-1960's, from the south to the north, from civil rights to Black liberation. Malcolm X had put forward his ideas as political ideology, and these ideas began to become a material force when the masses spoke through collective action. The central issue was power, control over the resources of society, over the agencies of government, over the development and quality of life for the people of this country, and the role this country would play in the development of world affairs.

The struggle was clear for all to see. The counter revolution

made strong moves: in 1968 Martin Luther King was killed, and Richard Nixon was elected president of the United States. For our struggle, Malcolm had posed the question of two roads to power: the Ballot or the Bullet, the road of reform or the road of revolution. These proved to be the actual alternatives for the Black community.

Still under the middle class leadership of the civil rights movement, the majority choose the reform road and for over 2 decades primarily engaged in the exercise of seeking liberation at the ballot box.

On the other hand a militant minority began to search for the road to revolution, they initiated a deeper search for a revolutionary vanguard. The key motion was the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, also in 1968. This search for a revolutionary vanguard went in many directions, usually following one of the main paths or tendencies reproduced from our radical Black tradition. Malcolm remained a universal reference for all positions and vanguard efforts.

Malcolm X was killed 27 years ago, and now he has been reborn

in the hearts and minds of a new generation of Black youth. And now, 27 years after the great Watts rebellion once again Los Angeles has erupted and put the issue of power on the agenda once again.

But this is a new time. We have had 27 years of following middle class Black leadership down the road of reformism utilizing the vote. We have voted for Black mayors, the Congressional caucus has expanded, we have a Black governor and we have even given Jesse Jackson two rides in the fast lane of the Democratic Party presidential primaries of 1984 and 1988. We did this to make things better, but the facts are that things have gotten worse.

The revival of Malcolm X comes out of these conditions, and everybody has to deal with it. Up til now the ruling class has dissed Malcolm and/or tried to "ig" him out of existence. Now they are trying the opposite tact, put his picture in a prime time TV sit-com (in fact 2 pictures hang on the set of ROC), and give up over \$30 million dollars to make a hollywood picture. The crises has intensified with the rebellion in Los Angeles -- the movie has

a bigger job to do (cool out or misdirect) and we have a bigger job to do (grasp more firmly the meaning of Malcolm X for the revolutionary road).

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

#### 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. They had eight children.

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.

Omowale (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. For them, 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 America and the world to see this "so called democracy" 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 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 so dire and the "dream" such a "nightmare" that there is a great necessity for the Radical Black Tradition to be



revived in a great debate to ground it in our new realities. 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 involves a debate over the meaning of rap music and other aspects of the cultural forms being created by the new generation of youth. How fast and how effectively will Black youth (and increasingly I think all youth) continue to learn from Malcolm and absorb the lessons of the last three Debates (emancipation, self determination, and liberation)? 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.

Just compare the 1965 rebellion and the 1992 one currently

getting started. In 1965 there were 34 killed, this year there have been 58 so far. In 1965 there were 4,000 arrested, in 1992 there were over 20,000 arrested. In 1965, almost all of those active in the rebellion were Black, and in 1992 over half were Latino and white. I don't care what the news anchors were saying if you looked at the pictures and maintained a critical frame of mind you had to recognize that something new and very important was involved in this rebellion.

It is only by grasping what is new in this situation that we can stand on the shoulders of Malcolm's thought and see farther and go farther. We have to dare to do it by being bold and courageous. The responsibility for our revolution is ours. Fanon put it clearly, each general has a mission it can fulfill it or betray it. Most people want to talk a rough game but are not clear and committed enough to act rough. It seems clear that the middle class (and this includes college students) are the leaders when it comes to reform, but the job of initiating a more basic struggle falls to the working class, especially those who are fighting fore

their very survival. But, brothers and sisters, when they get it on we have a historical responsibility to understand and join in by extending the action and taking it to a higher level because only in that way can we ever have any hope of winning. This is an all hands on deck situation, that means you, YOU, everyone of us in this auditorium.

I speak as a social scientist, a materialist, a Black militant grounded in the working class philosophy of historical and dialectical materialism. This means that I join with others to make a materialist analysis of the world in which we live so that political action can be developed that can change the world the way it is, not the way it used to be or the way that I imagine it to be. This is critical, so when you listen to anybody always ask if they portray the world the way it is.

There has been an economic revolution, and every society in the world will have to be reorganized on this new basis. We have been living in the era of industrial society, electro-mechanical technology, whether the society has been capitalist or socialist or

colonial. This is over and we are getting a full revolutionary transformation because of computers, robotics, and the new technologies of biology and chemistry. The demand for labor has been transformed and the work that Black people have done has been eliminated. Just as the mechanical cotton picker and chemical insecticides forced Blacks out of the cotton patch, so the computer and the robot is throwing us out of the factory.

The Black liberation debate was over how to fight our way into the existing society and redefine power. That society and therefore that struggle is now obsolete. Today the debate has to be over social revolution, the fundamental reorganization of the society. This is a historical necessity, and it will be done by the right wing fascists or by us, it'll be one or the other.

Furthermore this is a condition for all of us and therefore there can be no serious consideration of Black liberation without the context social revolution for everybody. Malcolm saw this clearly in the last year of his life, can you get to it now some 27 years later?

I speak as an optimist, as one who was here in the 1960's and I'm proud to be here in the 1990's. Finally, my message to you the youth of this period is to embrace the dialectic of our tradition, STUDY AND STRUGGLE, the twin aspects of Black studies, "Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility." Have you read the Autobiography of Malcolm X? Do it, do it again if necessary. Have you read the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engles? Do it, and if necessary do it again. I've even got a couple of books with me that I would put on that list that you can get after this forum.

This is a wonderful time, a time when we are fighting back, a time when the bent over uncle tom ass kissin' opportunist stepin' fetchit role is being cast aside and once again we are being introduced to Cinque, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, Ida B Wells, John Brown, George Jackson, Malcolm X and those millions of Black Panthers who have always been there waiting, but who hopefully will have to wait not much longer.

This is our time, this is your time, that is if you have the heart to fight as Malcolm X wanted you to, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY!

22

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE!

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE!

(REPEAT UNTIL THEY PICK IT UP)