

MALCOLM X KEYNOTE ADDRESS MAY 19, 1987

First Symposium-Studies on Malcolm X

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I consider this a great honor, --being selected to give the keynote on this—the first of what will be an annual event, --a tradition, --initiated by the Malcolm X Work Group, of honoring and perpetuating the legacy of one of the most outstanding persons in the decade of the '60's, Malcolm X! If you are wondering why I consider this such an honor you should know that Malcolm X, more than any other person I know was responsible for the development of my Afro-centric mode of thinking, and that phrase can readily be translated into thinking Black.

The first time I saw and heard Malcolm, at Cornell University in the early '60's, in one speech he crystallized for me all the fragmented ideas and vacillating feelings about being Black in America—into a social and political construct that left no doubt as to who were the victims, who were the oppressors and that racism is an integral part of the root system of America's liberty tree. In that speech that evening his wit and genius inspired and energized me and gave me unconditional strength to be able to look white corporate America dead in the eye and respond to its shenanigans with a political analysis as to why there is oppression based on race, class and later I added sex and heterosexism.

I was thoroughly fascinated with the spirited confidence with which he fielded questions from the audience.

I left that auditorium that evening feeling very proud. There were three of us, three Blacks, and we were all filled with pride and in addition I had that sense of growth that comes from newly acquired knowledge that has real meaning. Since that initial exposure to Malcolm, every future contact was an additional learning experience. For example, I distinctly remember his saying on one occasion, with regard to questions, "deal with the intent of the question, not just the well phrased words." This has helped me deal with many questions from white racists and feminists.

When I referred to the fact that Malcolm influenced by Afro-centric conceptual thought, and used the term "Thinking Black," well that simple phrase is absolutely critical—it is the kernel—of Black liberation theory. Without this consciousness an individual is like a fortress with no weaponry for battle. It looks the part, has the right label, but is relatively meaningless, and definitely harmless. Thinking Black is not something new. It embodies African epistemology—that branch of philosophy that deals with origin of knowledge, the methods and limits of knowledge—or more simply put—how we know what we know.

We have been given messages and information about how to think Black ever since there have been Black people. For example: W.E.B Dubois told us that African-

American people had to become wed with truth to dwell above the veil. He was talking about thinking Black; Johari Amini says that we have to develop a new concept of what is and what is not. That is thinking Black; Lerone Bennett says that we have to develop a radical re-evaluation about our ideas of history. That is thinking Black. Molifi Asante has said that we have to look out from our OWN center, through our OWN Afro-centric eyes. That is thinking Black. Wade Nobles, a Black psychiatrist, said that we must overcome conceptual incarceration. That is thinking Black. Thinking Black is applying an Afro-centric or African orientation to reality that is rooted in a history, a reality that is informed by history and is informed by an understanding of the surface as well as the deep structure of African culture. It is of utmost importance that Blacks internalize Afro-centric thought and Malcolm must be credited for providing Blacks in America with the political and spiritual ammunition—Black thought—that enabled them to become confident, and self-assured, --a Black consciousness which prepared, primed and provided them with a foundation for fighting for their liberation with a dignified, perspicacious righteousness!

This was one of Malcolm's greatest contributions to the movement and it did not go unnoticed. His ability to empower Blacks was part of the reason he was considered so dangerous. There were other reasons of course, such as the white power guys fear and hatred of Black male leadership that they cannot control or manage, but this particular Black consciousness re-awakening was a recognizable potential explosive!

It has been over 22 years since I experienced that re-awakening but the memories are still very much alive. Malcolm remains a role model and a major source of inspiration, motivation and confidence. —A confidence is knolling that I have the correct politics for the spiritual and economic and social liberation of the oppressed.—Correct in my determination to put an end to the might, greed, brutal, exploitative methods of our oppressors.

During his lifetime of 40 years, Malcolm received no foundation grants nor invitations to ceremonial awards at the White House, but his memory is cherished more than many other Black leaders in history. He met the emotional needs of Blackfolks. On the personal level his inspiration and influence has enabled me to instill in others, the roots, the foundation of Black Thought, the need for Black struggle and to never let that Black spirit become dormant.

So enamored was I by Malcolm that one of the greatest tributes/compliments paid me occurred after I had given a lecture at a college and a woman come over to me and said how much she enjoyed my talk, especially the question and answer period. Then she said, "You know, you sounded just like a female Malcolm X." That made my day. On another occasion, a student told me, mid-way through one of those student-faculty confabs, "You know Gloria, you and Malcolm are the only two people I know that can insult a person and make it sound like you're giving them an important lesson. You say it with a smile and with humor, but if anyone else said the same thing it would be considered an insult." This occurred in the late '60's, after Malcolm's death and my students were well informed about him. In those days I did not speak of Malcolm in terms of African epistemology, I was too busy preaching his words and fighting for the cause! But over the years I have come to realize the extent to which Malcolm's conceptual messages have been suppressed by the politics of the Eurocentric masculine knowledge-validation process. i.e. Black knowledge being validated by Eurocentric

masculine thought and criteria which is based on white experiences. Malcolm's Afro-centric style, behavior, thought process, was in a sense unfathomable to the white male dominated media. They were unable to understand or comprehend Malcolm and therefore incapable of appreciating and valuing the man, his works and deeds. Indeed, some intuitive sense plus their ingrained fear and hatred of Black male leadership that could not be manipulated, also contributed to their attempts to de-evaluate and dis-credit him. However, it is important to recognize and discuss those specific Afro-centric qualities that due to ignorance on the part of the media, were mis-interpreted.

Even now there are writers who insist upon using Euro-centric masculinist knowledge claims for validation of Malcolm and construct behavioral theories based on white cultural values.

Chandra Talapade Mohanty, a sociologist, in her outstanding paper on, *Alternative Epistemology*, speaks of four criteria used by Afro-Americans in evaluating knowledge-claims from a Black point of view. These characteristics are: 1) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge-claims; 2) the centrality of personal expressiveness; 3) the ethic of personal accountability; 4) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning. I shall discuss how Malcolm epitomized these characteristics and hence part of the reason for his popularity among Blacks

First, the use of dialogue in assessing how we as Blacks, know what we know: Contemporary Afro-American communities place a high value on the spoken word. There is a call and response discourse mode among Afro-Americans—composed of spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener. Geneva Smitherman points out... “We are talking... about an interactive network in which the fundamental requirement is the active participation of all individuals. This is best illustrated in traditional Black church services. Malcolm and his audiences exemplified this discourse. The claps, a-men corners, laughter and shouts of encouragement and expressions of pleasure, all validate the spoken word. Smitherman continues, “...for ideas to be tested and validated, all parties must engage in the process. To sit there and disagree and say nothing is considered “cheating.” Connectedness rather than separation is an essential component in the process of validation of Black leaders and followers.

The second characteristic-The Centrality of Personal Expressiveness-Black culture allows its members considerably greater freedom to assert and express themselves than does white culture. Black culture values individual regulated self-assertion. It also values spontaneous expression of feeling. A major component of personal expressiveness is the appropriateness of emotion in dialogues. Rather than judging an emotional speaker as being irrational or out of control, the use of emotions and feelings is seen as an indication of sincerity. When you see the white press showing pictures of Black with mouth wide open, supposedly ranting and raving, they present this as an indication of irrationality. This is a case of their trying to validate our behavior on their rules. Another component of personal expressiveness is the expectation of personal style or individual uniqueness. Black speakers frequently use rhythms and vocal inflections to convey meanings. The sound of what is being said is just as important as the sense of words. Both sound and sense are used to deliver the word. The effect achieved is the conveyance of a psycho-cognitive message. It is nearly impossible to filter out the strictly linguistic-cognitive abstract meaning from the sociocultural psycho-emotive meanings. In one of his speeches the subject of violence came up and Malcolm said to

his audience: "...so I don't believe in violence, uh, that's why I want to stop it." To fully appreciate this comment you would have to *hear* it. It is loaded with the sound and sense of the words.

The third characteristic: The ethic of personal accountability. Not only must individuals work out their knowledge-claims through dialogue, and present those claims in a style proving their concern for their ideas, individuals are expected to assume personal accountability for the knowledge – claims they propose. Or, "practice what you preach." Blacks disagree with the white belief that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion. This is because they feel that all views expressed and actions taken derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal. From this perspective, knowledge-claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical values will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures. Elijah Muhammad spoke one brand of morality and practiced another, and this was unacceptable to Malcolm.

The final feature of this Afro-centric epistemology is the importance placed on concrete lived experience in assessing knowledge-claims. Those individuals who have lived the things they claim to be "experts" about are more believable and have more creditability than those who have merely experienced them through books or reason that such things must exist. Blacks are quick to ridicule "educated fools" who have knowledge but not wisdom. So Malcolm was very believable to all of us who have: struggled through racist education systems: incomes below the poverty level: lived in urban ghettos: been in jail: gained religion; hustled, pimped and been self-educated.

The charisma, charm, and deep attraction that Malcolm possessed had its roots in African epistemology and African culture. His messages were easily and readily understood by those Black audiences who did not deny their Black culture, and were able to get past the Eurocentric masculinist imposed mode of thinking.

On February 21, 1965, Professor Lewis Michaux of Harlem, wrote these words, "Man, if you think Bro. Malcolm is dead, You are out of your cotton picking head. Just get off your slumbering bed, and watch his fighting spirit spread. Every shut eye ain't sleep. Every good bye ain't gone." The spirit of Malcolm will never be gone and to the extent of keeping the man and his deeds alive, I am in the process of writing an historical novel: On Time and In Step; Malcolm X Meets Sojourner Truth on the Road."

The philosophies of both Sojourner Truth and Malcolm X advocate radical solutions (solutions that will benefit and serve all of humankind) to the radical problems that oppress and plague humankind. Sojourner and Malcolm were great humanitarians who should be measured by what they accomplished within the framework of their opportunities, and should be recognized for their greatness. Their words and deeds made the world take notice. Their impact on and importance to American's socio-political scene should be recorded history within the radical, revolutionary, humanitarian framework that it deserves. This essay serves that purpose. Sojourner and Malcolm were visionaries, outstanding orators and role models, leaders who stood out like giants among their contemporaries, as they changed the landscape for Blacks and women with their courageous struggles. Carrying out that theme, let's listen in on Malcolm and Sojourner as they stroll along Cloud Boulevard, high above the pollution, untroubled by acid rain and nuclear fallout.

Sojourner,bonnet, her usual white, but with a black, yellow and red trim, walked besides Malcolm. Two tall figures, a majestic pair, remarkable, fearless and with arresting dignity, they headed for Cumulus Celebration Center.

Passing the erudite cloud structure of the home of W.E.B. Dubois, prompted Sojourner to say, "Brother Malcolm, another year.....since your last birthday and I recalls on your last birthday how you replied after, you got to talkin' 'bout the Contras in Nicaragua, Botha in South Africa and Reagan still in the White Folks House. You got the party folks so riled up I thought Chief Joseph, Sitting Bull and Geronimo were 'bout to bring out their peace pipes. And brother Paul Robeson was sitting next to Ghandi and Mahalia Jackson who had journeyed all the way over from Pacifists Paradise. Well he and Mahalia started singing an up beat duet of Bob Marley's song, "Don't Worry 'bout a Thing, Three little birds on my door step", to get the party spirit going again. And Mahalia was justifying signing Bob Marley by saying that his songs were basically religious ones. I remember it all like it was yesterday."

Malcolm gave his characteristic grin and said, "Sister Sojourner, I remember talking about the Contras being backed by the U.S. last year and look what's happening this year. The United States is supposed to be backing Iraq in the war between Iran and Iraq. Now listen to this!

They are supporting Iraq, selling arms to Iran, to get money to illegally send to the Contras. Then a few days ago, Iraq fires on one of their ships!me.

Without waiting for an answer, Malcolm continued, "And as for Botha and South Africa, well, Blacks are still voteless, still being put in to detention at the will of the beast, - yes, Botha is a beast by any definition, - and he was *re-elected* and in his election speech emphasized political segregation, and Nelson Mandela is still in jail. Since last May, 1986, things are escalating-the wrong things are escalating like lies, weapons, violence and racism."

Sojourner paused, faced Malcolm and responded. "Seems to me that every time there is so much escalatin', you should look around for some sort of desperation. And the escalation comes from both sides,- the side doing the escalatin' and those being escalated upon. Like in South Africa. The police escalatin' violence and the people's desperation escalatin'.

You know, I been up here since 1883, some 104 years, and this racism still seems to run beyond the control of well sounding people. Used to be lynchin's making headlines, now citizens and lawmen or the police force, shootin' down young Black men regularly. Like that white man shooting four teen-age Black youths on the subway. The Klan, cops and citizens alike, acting like they got the shootin' fever for Blacks."

Sojourner concluded, "But Malcolm, let's try to make this a joyful birthday celebration.

"Sister Sojourner," responded Malcolm, "this year I have an idea that I am going to let you in on. Sister Ella Baker, one of our latest arrivals was telling me all about this newly formed Malcolm X Work Group and they are holding a symposium today.

"Yes, it sure is good to have Ella on board. I always did want to ask her 'bout her revolutionary patience with all those young SNCC workers.-Sittin' thru all those long meetings-listenin' and a strategizin'. Now what about this meeting today?

Well, I figured it would be my birthday treat to have a ringside seat and see how this particular group of mortals are celebrating my birthday."

“How you so sure it’s going to be a treat? You know now a days down there they got this thing called a “roast” rather than a “toast” and they say all sorts of foolishness ‘bout a person. Like diggin’ up old secrets or talkin’ ‘bout peoples shortcomings and behaviors in a way that sounds disrespectful to me.”

Malcolm gave Sojourner a studied look and was about to answer when a hearty chorus of, “Birthday greetings, Brother”, interrupted him. There in front of Caribbean Corners was Maurice Bishop, Nanny the Maroon, Fire Burn Mary and Walter Rodney. The quartet exchanged pleasantries and promised to join them later at the celebration. Malcolm continued his conversation with Sojourner. “Sister, those are some serious scholars in that group.”

Sojourner countered with, “Seriousness don’t mean righteousness nor correctness. Klan members serious. And many of them white feminists writers are serious and in my ‘pinion most of what they write isn’t fittin’ for Black wimmen. How you so sure all the people in that work group righteous? I don’t want this birthday party to turn into you giving a tirade ‘gainst those workers.”

“Sister, that’s a good reason for us to look and listen in?” Malcolm was also spruced up for the day. He departed somewhat from his usual conservative dress by wearing a guayabera shirt and had a fresh haircut and well trimmed beard which sported a few gray strands. As they strolled along the boulevard they passed a bank of full bloom azaleas which graced the entrance to the Insurgent Sisters domain. Lorraine Hansberry and Fannie Lou Hamer who were tending the flowers stopped and said their, Good mornings. Fannie Lou said, “Well birthday brother, we were planning a floral arrangement for your celebration and we were wishing we could send some of these sweet smelling flowers to that garbage barge with 3000 tons of garbage that’s floating all over the world. You know it’s a shame for any city to have that much garbage.”

“Well Fannie, you see, America’s having a problem with garbage is nothing new”, explained Malcolm. And flowers on top of garbage can hide the garbage but it don’t change the garbage. Even if it smells sweet, it is still garbage. Selling sweet smelling “garbage” has been a trick of America for years. Camouflaging it’s dirt! That barge of garbage is symbolic of the rot, trash, deceit and conjuration, (got that word from Nanny) that the United States has been peddling and imposing on other countries for years. But now-a-days the other countries are waking up. They are no longer taking any more of America’s garbage. They are saying, ‘no, sir, America, take your garbage right back home. And I’m warning those little nations, particularly the Caribbean ones, to watch out. Don’t continue to be the dumping grounds for America.’

Lorraine joined in by saying, “I think that Baby Doc, Marcos and Botha should have seats of honor on that barge. They are as undesirable as that garbage.”

“Yeah and all three of those puppets were, is in Botha’s case, supported by the United States. I’ve been telling folks that the roots of American politics are so contaminated that we need a new root system. America’s politics are like hoof and mouth disease. You have to kill the host to protect the pure.” Fannie Lou chuckled loudly at Malcolm’s out pouring.

Sojourner intervened, “Malcolm, what time is that conference that we ‘posed to be looking in on?”

“What conference?” asked Lorraine.

“Well, that’s what we’re going to see about. It’s supposed to have something to do with my being born, and I want to check out the so-called scholars and the audience.” Malcolm and Sojourner said their good byes and headed toward the viewing room, a most popular cloud.

The couple boarded the Cirrus Shuttle which would take them to the viewing room, which was especially designed to allow the revolutionaries to beam in on whatever events they desired. “Where is this conference being held, Malcolm?”

“In the city.”

“What city? There are quite a few of them you know.?”

“New York City, Sister.”

“You New Yorkers think that there is only one city.”

“Well that’s where all the action used to be. Savoy Ballroom, Apollo.”

“Seems like there’s pretty much action in Atlanta these days.

“Sister Sojourner, didn’t you just remind me to make this a joyful day.”

“You right brother, now what time *does* this thing start?”

“Oh, it started this morning but with all this high tech business we can see a re-run.”

So the two traveled to the appropriate section of the viewing room, and settled comfortably in their seats. Malcolm smiled at Sojourner, saying, “Now lets see what these mortals are going to say, now that Sister Gloria has finished.”