

**Magnus O. Bassey (ed) Malcolm X and African American Self-Consciousness,
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The man who was assassinated on February 19, 1965 in Harlem at the Audubon Ballroom was known as El Hajj Malik el-Shabazz after his Hajj to Mecca. He was born as Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925 in Omaha Nebraska, became Detroit Red on the streets of Harlem, converted to Islam in Norfolk State Prison in Massachusetts, applied for and received his “X”, which represented his true African family name, from the Nation of Islam in Detroit after he had been paroled from prison.

Dr. Magnus O. Bassey describes the context of Malcolm’s life and the will, intellect, perception, and emotional intelligence that enabled this man to transform himself from someone who thought this, “I believed that a man should do anything that he was slick enough, or bad and bold enough to do and that a woman was nothing but another commodity” (Haley, 1983, p. 134) to someone who Ossie Davis described this way in his eulogy,

*Consigning these mortal remains to earth, the common mother of all,
secure in the knowledge that what we place in the ground is no more
now a man - but a seed - which, after the winter of our discontent, will
come forth again to meet us. And we will know him then for what he was
and is - a Prince - our own black shining Prince! - who didn't hesitate to
die, because he loved us so. (The Official Web Site of Malcolm X, par 5)*

Dr. Bassey uses several different prisms to view Malcolm X: the historical context of his life, the existence and consciousness of Blacks in American life, Malcolm’s articulation of African American Consciousness, faith and consciousness, Malcolm X on human

rights, Malcolm X on gender, and Malcolm X's political philosophy. What he reveals is a man who was what Schon (1987) called a reflective practitioner. Malcolm demonstrated the reflection-in-action that is the necessary condition for an educator who wishes to effectively educate all students (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007). I will return to the lessons for educators in *Malcolm X and African American Self-Consciousness*. Now, let's look through the various prisms that Dr. Bassey supplies.

Historical Perspective

Malcolm Little's parents were Garveyites. They struggled against racism and segregation in their communities, they were driven out of town, and one of their homes was burned. Malcolm's father, a clergyman, was murdered and his mother's mental health was broken by poverty and the oppression of the welfare system. When you look at Malcolm's life, it is remarkable how much of it recapitulates his father's life. He was talented in school, but his teachers let him know that certain careers, e.g. law, were not for him (Bassey, 2005). The alienation and internalized rage began to grow and he became the stereotypical statistic that the majority society expected him to become, an uneducated, black prisoner. However, while he was learning to become a hustler in New York, he worked at Small's Paradise, part of the infrastructure of the Harlem Renaissance, which was winding down when Malcolm came to New York. This is the same infrastructure that influenced Leopold's Senghor's development of Negritude. One can only wonder what impact the vestiges of the Harlem Renaissance had on young Malcolm. Throughout his descent to prison and while he was in prison his family members reached out to him and he displayed the ability to honestly look at himself and his surroundings and to take actions based on what he saw.

Existence and Consciousness of Blacks in America

Bassey (2005) reports that Malcolm became interested in educating himself in prison. "I've never been one for inaction. Everything, I've felt strongly about, I've done something about" (Haley, 1973, p. 170). Through his education he began a program of self analysis and reflection. He reached the conclusion that the most important thing was

to accept what you are. “It should therefore be no surprise that Malcolm X was later to take up the challenge of African American *being*, *self-consciousness*, and *self-identity* by arguing that blacks in America were African Americans” (Bassey, 2005, p. 36). This was an alternative to the double-consciousness that Du Bois described as an essential part of being a Negro in America. This double-consciousness accepted negative definitions that even impacted how blacks in America viewed their physical selves. This viewpoint can be seen in our young people today. In June, 2007, in the weight training area of a local YMCA, I overheard three young black high school students discussing pejoratively the area of town where the “dark-skinned” people and the “nappy-headed” girls lived. When I looked at them, I noticed that the most vocal of the three young people had the darkest complexion.

Although Malcolm knew that the unsympathetic power which whites exercised over blacks had emasculated black self-esteem, bankrupted their dignity and obscured their humanity, he still insisted that the black man must hold a “liberating point of view, self-reliance, wisdom that comes from his own life, the struggles and heritage of his people”. (Bassey, 2005, p. 42)

His strategy was to urge black people to make a romantic identification with Africa (Bassey, 2005).

Malcolm’s Articulation of an African American Consciousness

The romantic identification with Africa was a strategy to ameliorate the “ghetto” mentality, i.e., accepting the negative definitions of the dominant society, viewing the other members of your community simply as competitors, predators, or prey. The African American consciousness that Malcolm articulated focused on the individual’s relationship to the community and the individual’s responsibility to that community, to respect and to defend the members of that community. This is a constructive sublimation of the rage that occurs in many black men the first time they understand that someone wants to destroy them simply because of who they are. Many people are still uncomfortable with Malcolm because they believe that he was anti-white. Bassey (2005) quotes this statement from Malcolm, “We are not anti-white, we are anti-exploitation, we

are anti-degradation, and we are anti-oppression” (p. 77). Bassey (2005) argued that Malcolm was the first black spokesman who looked racism in the eye, did not blink, and lived long enough to tell America the truth.

Venture in Faith and Consciousness

Malcolm attacked Christianity because he argued that religion had brainwashed black people to accept their subordination to the dominant society. However, Nat Turner, a Christian minister, led a bloody slave rebellion, because he believed that as a child of god he should be free. Malcolm argued that Islam is the natural religion for African Americans. There is little doubt of the power and impact of organized religion to influence beliefs, behavior, and values of those who embrace a particular faith. Malcolm felt that the influence of Islam would be more effective than Christianity had been in supporting African Americans in their pursuit of self-awareness, self-esteem, and equal rights. However, I would paraphrase William R. Jones statement about God (Bassey, 2005) and state that any organized religion is the function of its acts.

Malcolm X on Human Rights

After his return from the pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X began to argue very openly that African Americans will not receive their civil rights until they have obtained their human rights; rights that belongs to every individual by virtue of being human. (Bassey, 2005, p. 91)

This development led to the evolution of Malcolm’s perception of gender roles in our society.

Malcolm X on Gender

Many black women from urban areas were attracted to the Nation of Islam because of the respect they received within the Nation, but the doctrine of the Nation still classified them as valuable property (Bassey, 2005). “After Malcolm had broken away from the Nation of Islam, performed the hajj and visited Africa, Malcolm showed even more respect for women” (Bassey, 2005, p. 110). His respect for women grew out of his

deeper understanding of his role as a black man in America and the critical role that women played in any healthy society.

Malcolm's Political Philosophy

Malcolm's political philosophy was rooted in a long tradition of struggle:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will. (Douglas, F, [1849] (1991), par 6).

The philosophy was shaped by Noble Drew Ali's Moorish-American Science Temple Movement, the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm's critical reflection of the events in the world. He was moving toward a more humanistic perception when he was assassinated, i.e., his world view was evolving beyond Black Nationalism. If he had lived, Malcolm would have been 82 in May 2007. Given his intellect, discipline, and ability to influence through rhetoric, I wonder what type of political philosophy he would espouse now. You can infer that it would be different than it was in the 1960's and that it would be grounded in the reality that he observed in the world around him.

Challenges and Implications for Teachers

The first challenge is how can you continually keep your self-reflection and analysis balanced, i.e., be honest with yourself about who and what you are and be optimistic that you can do what Malcolm did, "Everything, I've felt strongly about, I've done something about" (Haley, 1973, p. 170).

How do you begin to understand and deal with the black or brown students who have internalized the dominant society's negative perceptions of them? How do you begin to understand and deal with students, whose rage has turned into a rejection of everything offered by the dominant society, including your teaching? What Dr. Bassey's analysis of Malcolm X and African American self-consciousness suggests is you provide these students with the critical thinking skills so that they can realistically see themselves in their context. "Indeed, Maxine Greene in her book, *Landscapes of Learning*, argued that any education worthy of its name must be involved with individual perception and consciousness." (Bassey, 2005, p. 43)

How can you begin to understand what is going on when your students want to respond violently to what they see as oppression or disrespect. Remember Bassey's (2005) point, "Paulo Freire reminds us that whenever a person is so exploited by another person that the exploited person loses his or her sense of self-affirmation, such exploitation constitutes violence" (p. 78).

Does the curriculum, explicit or hidden (Anyon, 1980), that you teach define human beings' potential in terms of their ethnicity and gender? If it does, what can you or should you do about it?

Is your political philosophy determined by what you see happening to your students or the other people around you that you care about?

Conclusion

I believe that Dr. Bassey has produced a book that is valuable for pre-service teachers who are exploring the social and political foundations of education and beginning the development of their philosophy of education. It is valuable for the lateral entry teachers who need a way to begin understanding the perspectives of the "Other". It is valuable for graduate students who are exploring the history of American thought and education. It is valuable for experienced educators to remind us why we teach. "Everything, I've felt strongly about, I've done something about" (Haley, 1973, p. 170).

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