

Black Minded

Black Minded

The Political Philosophy
of Malcolm X

Michael E. Sawyer

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 2020 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Michael E. Sawyer 2020

The right of Michael E. Sawyer to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4073 9 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4074 6 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0601 7 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0603 1 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0602 4 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Contents

| | |
|------------------------|------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | viii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1. Ontology | 31 |
| 2. The Body | 55 |
| 3. Geographic Space | 80 |
| 4. Revolution | 103 |
| Conclusion | 122 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 133 |
| <i>Index</i> | 138 |

Introduction

“Many will ask what Harlem finds to honor this stormy, controversial and bold young captain – and we will smile.”

Ossie Davis

This book came to be from a sudden awareness of my unconscious erasure of Malcolm X from the intellectual genealogy I was assembling to complete my dissertation in graduate school. The work of Frantz Fanon had driven me to graduate school and my studies focused on the complexity of W. E. B. Du Bois to the point that Malcolm X occurred to me, but never in the same way that I approached other thinkers. This is likely because the “thought” of Malcolm had been overcome by his acts. Or, perhaps more troubling, the speeches of this Black American just didn’t seem to fit among the pantheon of philosophers, theorists, historians, writers and artists I was studying. As I was attempting to resolve a difficult section of writing, I had come across the iconic photo of H. Rap Brown with Stokely Carmichael and Amiri Baraka, *née* LeRoi Jones, and I decided to write to Rap, who is now known as Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, in prison to get his take on what I was trying to pull together with respect to Fanon.

I included a large sample of the dissertation and a few weeks later I received a kind note from him; a week or so after that, he phoned. During one of our first conversations I raised the question of Fanon and his import to the intellectual tradition I was working through and Al-Amin stated the following:

El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz is significant in that his example is the watermark of the struggles we experience over here. We’re the only group on the planet that [sic] an African-American male, by the time he reaches 12 years old, has to make life and death decisions every time he leaves his home.¹

I had not asked Al-Amin about Malcolm X in that my focus was on Fanon and I understood *Wretched of the Earth* to be the urtext for the

radical political tradition that Al-Amin exemplifies. Jamil Al-Amin sped by the question of Fanon's thought and settled on what he called the "example," what I took to be something I have chosen to call "the embodied philosophy in motion of Malcolm X," as the critically important touchstone for the ethical practice of radical politics. This caused me to realize that there was something that needed to be done in considering the embodied praxis of radical politics by Malcolm X for its philosophical intentionality. Further, it required me to understand that privileging the written word or the pronouncement of specific philosophical or theoretical intent is not the limit of what can be considered "serious" philosophy. I was selling Malcolm X short in an effort to be considered a person who took up serious intellectual complexity: that was a profoundly irresponsible position. Malcolm X is obviously not the only example of this unconscious marginalization. I am aware that this goes, probably more poignantly, for feminist and queer thinkers who are also labeled as "activists," as if that moniker renders "philosopher" an impossibility. Malcolm X, among others, deserves better: the ambition of this book is to propose a different way to think about this life and its "example," in the parlance of Jamil Al-Amin.

The conversations with Al-Amin were generative for this text but what remained (and remains) unsaid between us is perhaps the most provocative element of the manner in which the example of Malcolm X has framed the political praxis and life choices of an "absolute" radical like Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. Readers may be familiar with the fact that Jamil is serving life in prison for the murder and attempted murder of police officers who he asserts were coming to murder him. He was convicted of the murder of one officer and the attempted murder of another after being taken into custody fleeing the state of Georgia. The question that I have *never* asked Al-Amin, in deference to censoring the nature of our correspondence to preserve his telephone privileges while imprisoned, is quite simply: how did he allow himself to be arrested relatively without incident, after a shootout with officers who were putatively trying to serve him with a warrant?

The answer to the question is of course one that has to come from Al-Amin and he, perhaps, may not have a clear response in that there are likely many circumstances surrounding both encounters that are difficult to keep track of, let alone assemble into a coherent, explanatory narrative. But isn't that the business of philosophy and theory? Endeavoring to find abstract systems of understanding to establish a cause and

effect relationship between thought and action? There is a way in which we can distill this concern down to the utility of social structures of oppression as, on one hand, recognized as legitimate, and on the other, useful for radical politics, for those engaged in projects of revolutionary alteration of ways of being. The question for Al-Amin would be: how did he allow himself to be taken into custody and held to account for an action that was literally designed to prevent him from being taken into custody, if we allow ourselves to take the police account as true?

The answer, in one sense, might be as simple as the desire to live under conditions of incarceration rather than to die in an attempt to avoid being locked up. That is satisfying in one register, but things are likely more complex and I will indulge my own ideas about how this works.

This seems to revolve around the “legitimacy” of a system that the person in question has spent years opposing as illegitimate. The question seems to be, and this paradox will haunt all of this consideration of the thought of Malcolm X, what elements of an illegitimate system might be employed in the practice of radical politics without doing violence to the project *in toto*. There is an example of this in the biography of Malcolm X that presents the same type of paradox that surrounds this unspoken element of my interaction with Jamil Al-Amin.

On February 9, 1965, Malcolm X tried to visit France but was denied entry into the nation by what he described as higher-ups in the French Foreign Ministry. Further, Malcolm X asserted at the time that he was certain that the French were acting upon the direction of the State Department of the United States. Both of these claims make sense. What I find difficult to understand is that Malcolm X further contends that the French authorities did not allow him to contact the US State Department to solve the problem. This is difficult to square with several of the foundational understandings that inform the political praxis of Malcolm X. He believes, axiomatically, that the United States government is corrupt and anti-Black by design. He believes that the corruption of the United States is born of a direct relationship to European imperialism. He believes that the United States government is intent upon assassinating him physically and ideologically. In spite of all of this, and in the face of understanding that the United States government, in coordination with the French government, have barred him from entering France, Malcolm X is frustrated by his inability to contact the State Department for redress. I understand this as a species of the same genus of subjective confusion as it relates to radical politics that seeks to develop practices that allow the subject

to function within a hostile system of governance. This will be explored in detail in this text, but it should be marked as one of the primary questions that preoccupy this project: what of the materials of the state available to Malcolm's "so-called Negro" are useful for radical politics? Tracing this complex political project amounts to the creation of a literal *pharmakon*, poison, cure and scapegoat, by this philosophical endeavor. This understanding of the nature of the product of this philosophical system exposes the multiple layers of difficulty that face the work of Malcolm X and, in some sense, establish what can best be labeled as the *Idea of Malcolm X* versus the *Ideas of Malcolm X* that have represented the common way we access this figure. The purpose here is to examine the complexity of this political project and in some sense what I have come to label as the "Idea of Malcolm X" simultaneously.

Upon reflection, the "Idea" of Malcolm X, if not the details of his life, entered my consciousness as a very young child growing up on the far south side of Chicago during the 1970s and 1980s. Much of this was likely due to the omnipresence of the Nation of Islam (NoI) in the Black community during that time. Whatever deadly rift that existed between Malcolm X and the Nation was beyond my awareness; the members of the NoI that I encountered selling copies of the *Final Call* and bean pies on crowded corners in the summer were analogous to Malcolm X in my mind. I vividly recall being in the homes of Black people when I was a child and noting the almost ubiquitous presence of the calendar on the wall and I was always interested in what it meant for the household that marked the progress of time and planned future events beneath the placid image of Elijah Muhammad. Having no idea of the content of the politics of the Nation of Islam, I was profoundly aware of the structurally radical nature of their ambition for the Black community and understood Malcolm X to exemplify a type of Blackness that was oppositional to the popular understanding of Dr King, as the exemplar of the most ethical way forward.

It was not until I was in college, probably my second year, that I got my hands on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*.² The book remains one of three or four texts that I was literally unable to put down and, even with the flaws that have been revealed over the decades since its publication, it remains the first text I recommend to anyone who asks me what they should have on a list of books to help them to "understand" Black America.

It occurs to me, as I reflect on the complexity of attempting to account for the philosophical thought of Malcolm X, that there is a way in which the preoccupation with his biography extracts the robust philosophical content of his journey from our collective consciousness. What I mean is that the foundational concepts of something like the political philosophy of Malcolm X – economic and social justice, strident opposition to white supremacy, Black internationalism, etc. – finds itself hidden as the journey through that intellectual thicket is overwhelmed by the furious motion that attends his travels. This is at some distance from other important thinkers in the Black radical tradition who are known for their complex theoretical (if not philosophical) interventions, Frantz Fanon, in *my* thinking, being a prime example of this phenomenon. I have come to understand that my reading of the intellectual complexity of Fanon, or almost anyone else for that matter, is accomplished through the lens created by Malcolm X. I take this to be an improvisation on Ossie Davis' well-known eulogy of Malcolm, that I will quote here for its clarity.

Here – at this final hour, in this quiet place – Harlem has come to bid farewell to one of its brightest hopes – extinguished now, and gone from us forever. For Harlem is where he worked and where he struggled and fought – his home of homes, where his heart was, and where his people are – and it is, therefore, most fitting that we meet once again – in Harlem – to share these last moments with him. For Harlem has ever been gracious to those who have loved her, have fought her, and have defended her honor even to the death.

It is not in the memory of man that this beleaguered, unfortunate, but nonetheless proud community has found a braver, more gallant young champion than this Afro-American who lies before us – unconquered still. I say the word again, as he would want me to: Afro-American – Afro-American Malcolm, who was a master, was most meticulous in his use of words. Nobody knew better than he the power words have over minds of men. Malcolm had stopped being a “Negro” years ago. It had become too small, too puny, too weak a word for him. Malcolm was bigger than that. Malcolm had become an Afro-American and he wanted – so desperately – that we, that all his people, would become Afro-Americans too.

There are those who will consider it their duty, as friends of the Negro people, to tell us to revile him, to flee, even from the presence

of his memory, to save ourselves by writing him out of the history of our turbulent times. Many will ask what Harlem finds to honor in this stormy, controversial and bold young captain – and we will smile. Many will say turn away – away from this man, for he is not a man but a demon, a monster, a subverter and an enemy of the black man – and we will smile. They will say that he is of hate – a fanatic, a racist – who can only bring evil to the cause for which you struggle! And we will answer and say to them: Did you ever talk to Brother Malcolm? Did you ever touch him, or have him smile at you? Did you ever really listen to him? Did he ever do a mean thing? Was he ever himself associated with violence or any public disturbance? For if you did you would know him. And if you knew him you would know why we must honor him.

Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves. Last year, from Africa, he wrote these words to a friend: “My journey”, he says, “is almost ended, and I have a much broader scope than when I started out, which I believe will add new life and dimension to our struggle for freedom and honor and dignity in the States. I am writing these things so that you will know for a fact the tremendous sympathy and support we have among the African States for our Human Rights struggle. The main thing is that we keep a United Front wherein our most valuable time and energy will not be wasted fighting each other.” However we may have differed with him – or with each other about him and his value as a man – let his going from us serve only to bring us together, now.

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.³

I am preoccupied here with expanding our understanding of what Davis means by marking the “manhood” of Malcolm X, what he understands as “our living, black manhood.” There is a way in which this can reductively be understood as a form of masculinity that can be regarded as problematic. I believe Davis and Malcolm X to be gesturing at something very different. One really need look no further than some

of the trenchant critique from some quarters around the publication of Manning Marable's text, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*,⁴ and a recent "revelation" about the personal life of Malcolm X and his wife, Betty Shabazz.

In the edited volume, *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X*,⁵ the essay entitled "Malcolm X: What Measure of a Man? – Assessing the Personal Growth and Social Transformation of Malcolm X from an African-Centered Social Work Perspective," the author, Patricia Reid-Merritt, proposes the following:

Marable's references to Malcolm X's sexual orientation *must be viewed as direct attacks on Malcolm's manhood* [my italics], which Marable believed the Black community had embraced as the ultimate symbol of the strong, masculine, defiant image of a Black man. For example, when offering insights to Malcolm's supposedly secret sex life, Marable writes the following: "Based on circumstantial but strong evidence, Malcolm was probably describing his own homosexual encounters ..."

Several things present themselves here beyond the question of the historical methodology proposed by Reid-Merritt that revolves around the notion of a reductive understanding of "manhood" that I believe is contra to what Davis means in his eulogy. What I mean is that sexual orientation and "manhood" are not related concepts. To the extent that the work of Malcolm X might be marginalized because someone thinks he might have been queer is disappointing at best, and at worst begins to define the notion of toxic masculinity, Black or otherwise. Stated simply, the reason one might be deemed lacking with respect to representing "strong, masculine, [and] defiant" Black manhood could only have to do with sexual orientation, which empirically it does not. The same is exemplified by a recently-auctioned letter from Malcolm X to Elijah Muhammad:

In the 1959 typed note, up for sale for \$95,000 at MomentsInTime.com, X writes to his mentor, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, that his wife, Betty Shabazz, had complained that he had "never given her any real satisfaction" and "said to me that if I didn't watch out she was going to embarrass me and herself" (which under questioning she later said she was going to seek satisfaction elsewhere).

The letter goes into detail about the problems between X and Shabazz.

The main source of our troubles was based upon SEX. She placed a great deal more stress upon it than I was physically capable of doing. One day, she told me that we were incompatible sexually because I had never given her any real satisfaction ... [She] outright told me that I was impotent ... and I was like an old man (not able to engage in the act long enough to satisfy her) ... Her remarks like this were very heartbreaking to me.⁶

In this instance, the fact that someone would be willing to spend \$95,000 to assemble archival “proof” of the insufficiency of Malcolm X’s manhood speaks to another form of reductive masculinity that depends upon sexuality.

I do not understand the formulation by Davis to be this type of sexually-charged notion of manhood but rather to be a type of radical intellectualism that is grounded in what we can understand as “Black-Humanhood.” The manner in which this thinking endeavored to do so is, in many ways, the plot of this story, but here in the Introduction we should pause and consider the “Negro.”

The term “Negro,” specifically, Malcolm X’s modification of the term to “the ‘so-called’ Negro,” will appear repeatedly in this book in order for us to demarcate the boundaries of the Negro, the notion of what he means by “so-called” and how that recedes into the more appropriate understanding of African–American to mark the complexity of the subject in question. As Ossie Davis proposed, this is a mind-set. To exceed the boundaries of the imposition of the marginalized subjectivity of the Negro, Malcolm X embarks on a complex intellectual project that I suggest is best labeled by his own framework, Black Minded.

In reviewing Malcolm X’s public statements, the notion of being “Black Minded” appears in only two instances of which I am aware. The first time the concept appears is in response to a question from the audience on July 5, 1964 at the second Organization of African Unity (OAAU) rally and then, more formally, on January 7, 1965, in his speech “Prospects for Freedom in 1965.” Unlike many other concepts Malcolm X presents during the various public forums in which he presented his ideas (speeches, interviews, debates and responses to questions from the public), he does not unpack what he means by “Black Minded” and it is framed here as more than the title for this text but rather the overrid-

ing goal and structure of his thinking. What I mean here by “goal” is to understand being Black Minded as a thought experiment that recaptures Blackness as an intellectual project for the purpose of restructuring the “so-called Negro” into what Malcolm understands as the Afro-American that I will attempt to reveal here as a complex, transnational form of radical political subjectivity.

The idea first appears during the question and answer period after the second OAAU rally, when Malcolm X has the following dialog with a member of the audience:

Questioner: You once stated that the only solution for the “so-called” Negro was ultimately to return to Africa. Then at the last meeting, you said we should turn to Africa culturally and spiritually, but politically should stay in this country.⁷

This question/statement succinctly articulates the core problem confronted by Malcolm X as a political thinker (who I intend to examine by employing the academic discipline of political philosophy) and as himself a unique philosopher who spends much of his short adult life in a complex struggle with the core principles informing this individual’s question: *How do displaced political subjects who are politically and economically marginalized members of a societal order establish themselves as sovereign actors without forming a completely separate and self-authorized system of governance?* Malcolm X answers the question with the following statement that exposes an evolution in his thinking on this foundational problematic:

Malcolm: Hold it right there. The first statement that I made, I made before going to Africa myself. I spent about five weeks over there speaking to every kind of African leader that I could gain access to. And the net result of that trip was that if our people go, they’re welcome. *But those who are politically mature over there say that we would be wise to play a role at this time right here* [my italics].⁸

This discussion illustrates important elements of the intellectual project pursued by Malcolm X: first, he is open to the possibility of altering fundamental elements of his thinking and second, that alteration is based upon a phenomenological experience that is processed through the lens of particular epistemological predilections. This inter-

action is a primary exemplar of what I have labeled as the philosophical practice of Malcolm X that is identifiable by this “Thinking in Motion.”

It is important here to pause and clearly set up the way in which I am proposing that “Black Minded” is both an epistemological tendency and a radical political subjectivity.

Stated succinctly, Black Minded is a way of knowing about the self and, in so doing, understanding the self to be a necessarily radical political subject as the threshold condition of that knowing. What that means, in this instance, is that in spite of the negative framework of white supremacy that reinforces the existence of Blackness as a wholly negative way of being, to navigate that labyrinth to find what Malcolm X proposes as a form of objective truth, is radically to reestablish the political existence of a subject that is, in this context, only political. Specifically, Blackness in the form of radically political/aware Black Mindedness is a political claim that, in its enunciation, is a cry for true subjectivity in the form of Being Human.

Returning to the discussion, the conversation moves forward through Malcolm providing his interlocutor with the current state of his thinking on the matter. The questioner is somehow dissatisfied with the answer he has received and asks a follow-up that is lost to distortion on the recording, but we have access to Malcolm X’s answer that in fact poses several questions of his own as elements of the response.

Malcolm: Brother, if all of us wanted to go back to Africa – you wouldn’t be satisfied to go back all by yourself, I know that. Your desire would be to see all of us go back if I am judging you correctly. Then how would you create a situation, number one, *that would make all of us black-minded enough to want to go back* [my italics], or make all of us have a thorough enough knowledge of what it is like over there to want to go back, or make this man so fed up with us he’d want to send us there?⁹

Malcolm X presents a series of options that would serve to satisfy his interlocutor’s desire to facilitate a separation of people of African descent from conditions of oppression in the United States by returning to Africa. The first of these is the notion of being “*Black Minded*” enough to desire separation, which I am reading as the most desirable (in the thinking of Malcolm X) of the options he proposes, which include a knowledge base that draws people of African descent to Africa or, finally, a way of

being in the United States that becomes so disruptive of societal order that Black people find themselves expelled from the nation.

The notion of being or becoming *sufficiently* Black Minded recurs several months later, as referenced above, and in an arguably more disciplined fashion in that it is part of the prepared remarks delivered by Malcolm X in the speech we know by the title “Prospects of Freedom.” Here he proposes the following:

It is only when the nationalist-minded or *black-minded* [my italics] Afro-American goes abroad to the African continent and establishes direct lines of communication and lets the African brothers know what is happening over here, and know that our people are not so dumb that we are blind to our true condition and position in this structure, that the Africans begin to understand us and identify with us and sympathize with our problems, to the point where we are willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to see that their long-lost brothers get a better break than we have been getting up to now.¹⁰

Malcolm establishes an analogous relationship between nationalism (Black Nationalism) and the notion of being Black Minded. There is a possible reading of this formulation that views this as two distinct paths to the same goal: Nationalism or Black Minded. I would argue that these are substantively overlapping concepts that, at this stage of the evolutionary nature of this thinking, are synonyms that illustrate the fact of this “Thinking in Motion,” that Malcolm X employs to get at what he frames as the goal of his theory and praxis which is “... freedom, justice, [and] equality.”¹¹ Malcolm X understands these goals as the necessary correction to a social context of broad-based oppression that he frames as suffering based upon “political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.”¹² The political, the economic, and the social represent the trilateral concerns of Malcolm X’s thinking and what this text intends to address is the manner in which the metaphysical notion of “Being” or “Becoming” sufficiently “Black Minded” serves to provide the tools for satisfying the political, economic and social concerns of Malcolm X, who elaborates a complex understanding of a “nationalist” project.

It is important to be aware of the manner in which the unique understanding of what is meant by Black Nationalism by Malcolm X is situated

here within the broad cultural phenomenon of Black Liberation that ranges from something like the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement to projects of nationalism as diverse as the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa to Black separatists in the United States and, of course, Pan-Africanist thought. George Fredrickson's text, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, provides an entry into establishing these distinctions that relies upon Malcolm X as the embodied exemplar of an alteration in Black Nationalist thought. Fredrickson writes:

This repudiation of a strictly genetic view of blackness paralleled a subtle and little noticed difference between African-American nationalism of the 1960s and the earlier varieties associated with Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummel, and Marcus Garvey. As we have seen, these forerunners were men of dark complexions who distrusted mulattoes and at times openly disparaged them. But in the 1960s, the foremost champion of blackness could be the light-skinned and red-haired Malcolm X. The implicit message was that one was as black as one felt, and that people of African ancestry who retained the integrationist view that white culture was superior to black culture continued to be "Negroes" rather than "blacks", however dark complexioned they happened to be ... Whether or not the new American affirmation of a non-genetic blackness influenced the racial thinking of Black Consciousness, there can be no doubt that both movements innovated significantly in making race consciousness more a matter of existential choice and political awareness than of biological determination.

Another way that Black Consciousness departed from Pan-Africanist precedent and drew closer to American black nationalism of the 1960s was its emphasis on psychological rehabilitation as a precondition of political resistance.¹³

This notion of how to understand Malcolm X's employment of nationalism as a political ideology will be a recurring problem in this text in that it serves, in many ways, as the *telos* of his thinking. But here, the important matter of existentialism as the central thematic of the embodied notion of a broadly-defined "Blackness" is foundational to the intellectual innovation of Malcolm X's philosophical system and the reason the detailed analysis here begins with ontology.