

Malcolm X: truth seeker

Bonnie Greer

Malcolm X for me became and remained, even after his assassination, a deeply intellectual man, driven to activism and witnessing. But speculation and assumptions and attributions assigned to him, especially from those who did not see and know him in life, is always interesting to me. I read them with respect. Yet I can still see and hear the man in real time.

He made irregular appearances on a late night chat show when I was a young teen growing up on the Southside of Chicago. The host was a man named Irv Kupcinec who wrote a major showbiz column and knew everyone. When our father was not working Saturday nights on the assembly line – which was rare – I would sit with him and watch the man called Malcolm X. Dad was what used to be called a ‘race man’, so any Black man on TV was an occasion for him. I’m talking about 1963 or 4, maybe later, so for Kupcinec to even have Malcolm on his show must have meant that he

considered him not only good television – but there must have been something about him. And there was.

Malcolm would come on set with a notebook full of research, dressed in a very serious and rather chic suit, and glasses. Incredibly elegant and what we would call 'clean'. He would always fight back with the words of the Constitution itself, leaving his opponents stunned.

Dad loved intelligent Black folks, and if they were articulate too, he would light one of his cigars and toast them. Malcolm was that and more. His resistance was to mis-information and ignorance, no matter what hue the person was who spouted them. He said 'The White Man' a great deal, which made his co-combatants squirm because out of Malcolm's mouth it was clear and concise. He was talking about power.

You were a 'white man', above all, when you perpetrated The System and a 'Tom' if you were Black and helped. Even unwittingly. He would point out, sometimes even to Irv himself, that being working class Jewish, or Italian or Irish, for example, allowed you to vanish within the great matrix of America, the Land Of Opportunity. No matter what your ancestors had suffered. No matter from where they had fled.

He was clear and concise and his anger, at least to me, was always part of his passion. His insistence. Malcolm could be called anti-Semitic then, a horrible feature of some aspects of the Movement. But later on he would reference The Holocaust on a visit to Britain and I think that he had moved on. Beyond. He never stopped discovering just what exactly the true story was, what exactly the truth was and some extent that maybe got him killed.

Maybe killed by people who actually stopped searching for the truth; or for answers or for anything; maybe by people who would have hit the brick wall of their own, point of view and having hit that brick wall turned around and saw Malcolm coming toward them and maybe even going through that wall to the next level. Whatever that level was.

Now he's a kind of saint and that's OK because sometimes sainthood is necessary before people begin to hear and to think. And to feel. He was no saint. Not by any definition of the word. Nor a prophet, not to me. To me he had enormous courage; a great heart; and he was a seeker. Now was never enough.

Like Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, Malcolm became one of the Three M's who James Baldwin revered. He did not live long enough to become the 'has been' that my fellow Black Baby Boomers rendered Jimmy. We did not have enough time to cancel Malcolm like we did MLK before his assassination. An early, untimely death can be a kind of luck.

The innate nobility of Malcolm X has always shown through. He was, in the end, a preacher of his own religion, one that went beyond the parameters of The Nation Of Islam towards embracing all people who wanted to know the truth. And live it. He hated enslavement of any kind , not only of the body but of the mind and heart. Malcolm X spoke it as he saw it; as he felt it, but in his way, he gave quarter to all those who truly wanted and want-to seek. To find. To grow. To not accept the 'official version'.

When he was assassinated, I was not surprised. There was something in him – like MLK – that made you feel that he would never become an elder. An old man. Maybe he knew that, too. The hajj was a light for him, a passage for him and that experience should never be overlooked.

Malcolm X was an artist in the creation of a deeper reality; not only for us Black people, but for all human beings. His Mecca was just at the beginning of becoming ours too. Especially us young people on the verge of a tumultuous decade going forward. His centenary shows us that he is a man for all seasons.

Bonnie Greer's plays, books and novels are concerned with the lives of minorities within majority cultures, particularly those of women. She has been Arts Council playwright in residence at the Soho Theatre, and at the Black Theatre Co-operative. She was awarded the Verity Bargate Award for Best Play by the Soho Theatre Company. She has had over a dozen plays produced for BBC Radio, one short film for BBC2, and she co-produced, wrote and presented a documentary on Black art in the West: *Reflecting Skin* (2004) for the BBC. Her books include *Hanging by Her Teeth* (1994), *Entropy* (2009) and *Obama Music* (2009).

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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