WRITERS MOSAIC

Straightening out the kinks

Ella Sinclair

My mother never let me have hair straighteners. At the time, I thought this was incredibly unfair. An unjust attack on my liberty. I grew up in Brighton, a predominantly-white, seaside city on the south coast of England, and I wanted to have gravity-obeying hair like everyone else at school. I didn't understand how having straight hair could possibly be as catastrophic as she made it out to be. After all, she had the straight blonde hair I would have killed for back then.

At fourteen, I got a job in a café and bought my own pair of GHDs. They were sleek, glossy, and black, symbolic of how I wanted my own unruly, dark-brown hair to look. For three years, I was delighted by my hair straighteners. Everyday, I could have a close-enough hair-do that mirrored my white peers. I didn't even mind the bready smell of burnt hair that suffocated my bedroom and clothes. At seventeen, I'd finally succeeded in my mission for dead straight hair. It had started falling out in lifeless,

brown clumps. Horrified, I vowed to never touch hair straighteners again, a vow I've kept to this day.

I wish I could say that my discovery of Malcolm X was what led me to finally put down my hair straighteners. Perhaps it was the first step I took towards him. I knew why I straightened my hair, and it wasn't because I wanted to be Black.

It was around this time that I picked up my father's weathered copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I wonder whether, having watched my painful endeavour for straight hair, he silently slipped it onto my bookshelf, or whether I picked it up myself, intrigued as to why my parents would own a book about a man I only knew of vaguely as controversial, an extremist, and not as good as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Rereading this same book ten years later, I noticed that seventeen year-old me had passionately underlined in thick pencil whole sentences on pages 138–139, where X describes the initial glee, and then reflective horror, of getting his first 'conk' (hair relaxer). 'This was my first really big step toward self-degradation', he wrote, 'when I endured all that pain … to have it look like a white man's hair.'

I've carried the lessons from this book with me into my adult life entirely unknowingly, without realising that Malcolm taught me that. He woke me up to the deliberate, effective, and catastrophic whitewashing of history. In my own adult life, I've gone out in the pursuit of the knowledge made purposefully hard to find. I've dedicated myself to learning about Britain's history of colonialism and slavery, overcoming the tricky nuances of Britain's deliberate 'forgetting' of its gloomy past. Sixty years on from his murder, it's still almost impossible to do this work unscathed. The Black leader's unabashed grip on his country's history and how it affected his present is still sorely needed now. We cannot move forward from a past we do not know, or do not understand.

When I first read his autobiography, like so many of the people he lectured to, I didn't know my own history. I didn't know the history of my own country. I thought for the first time about my surname, Sinclair and its Scottish slave-owning origins. Should there be an X there instead? I questioned what I'd been taught in school about the transatlantic slave trade. This consisted of one dreaded history lesson where we re-enacted a scene from Alex Haley's *Roots* (yes, I played Kunta Kinte). This didn't seem too far off from a modern-day equivalent of X's lesson in 1937 on 'Negro history', which was 'exactly one paragraph long.' I started to understand what people meant when they said *knowledge is power*. Knowledge was transforming Malcolm right there on the page in front of me.

Engaging with Malcolm X requires utilising one of his own facets – an open mind. I've chosen to reject many things, but to cherish others – his anger, bravery, passion for knowledge, and, not least, his deep care: an often forgotten trait snubbed in characterisations of the feared Black 'demagogue'.

Malcolm X's acute understanding of the world-ordering system of white supremacy and its impacts on all of our lives, and this system's gritty colonial, imperial, and slave-trading history is still radical today. Eyebrows will continue to be raised and fingers pointed if someone dares to speak so candidly about white supremacy. About how it bleeds into our own psyches in ways we are blind to, making people hate something seemingly as innocuous as their own head of hair. These are 'extreme' and 'controversial' lessons from Malcolm that I hold on to. Lessons that (to borrow from Marcus Garvey) started to straighten out the kinks in my mind, and not my hair.

Ella Sinclair is a writer and researcher based in London. Her work covers history, politics, race, and racism, and is broadly committed to social justice. She has written for the *Guardian, The Voice, The Lead, gal-dem, Cosmopolitan*, and *Shado-Mag*. Sinclair is a researcher across public history projects engaging with British legacies

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

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