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Lehigh University Malcolm X Conference

Conference Paper Draft

**From the Prophet Himself:
The Existential Dimensions of Black Rage in Malcolm X's Autobiography
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Violence has always served a pedagogical purpose in black life. Witnessing violence enacted on the black body or hearing stories of white assaults on black humanity teaches the black subject that the ever-present threat of violence defines the black condition in America. Blacks have undoubtedly experienced rage in response to this constant threat of arbitrary violence and terror. Black writers, artists, and activists have employed rage as a means of mediating blacks' relationship to violence; but perhaps no one has more eloquently articulated what Cornel West calls the "existential dimensions of black rage," than Malcolm X. West would hail Malcolm as "the prophet of black rage" in his 1994 *Race Matters*. With the growing unrest and debate about police brutality following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and most recently Michael Brown Jr., black rage has returned to the forefront of American discourse. Malcolm's life, his writings, philosophy, and most importantly his autobiography, offer an important site for theorizing black rage and its association with the black underclass and specifically black males.

My paper examines the ways that Malcolm X redeploys the genre of the autobiography as a both a political intervention and pedagogical exercise to both initiate and implicate the reader into scenes of violence and thereby offers a counterargument to the characterization of black radicals as violent threats to the peace of the nation. Rather, Malcolm locates violence as foremost a tool of the state apparatus. Malcolm's autobiography presents alternative ways of understanding and relating to power.

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Emerging as a practice of life narrative in the Enlightenment, the autobiography (as Sidonie smith and Julia Watson observe, is “privileged as the definitive achievement of the mode of life narrative ... this master narrative of the sovereign self is an institution of literature and culture. The autobiography has functioned in the western tradition in much the way that the eulogy has; it is a genre of writing that seeks to illuminate the distinctiveness of an individual, their worthiness and value to society. Privileging heroic individualism, identifying the self as distinctive and autonomous; it simultaneously constructs an imagined community as it has also been central to the project of nation-making.¹ From its earliest iteration this act of self-writing is constructing the nation as much as the self, particularly the masculine self (For instance, this is certainly at work in Benjamin Franklin’s notable autobiography). The autobiography is a form that is concerned with the nation, nation-belonging and one’s relationship to the nation, it is a political work.

Marginalized peoples redeploy the autobiography to critique this understanding of the “self” and who is considered valuable, worthy of honor and documentation as well as the project of the nation. This is of particular significance in the African American literary tradition that finds its origins in the autobiography in the form of the slave narrative, the autobiography is then what Nellie McKay calls “the genre of preference in the development of black literary culture.” She observes, “Challenging white hegemony, black autobiographers used narrative to fight their battle against chattel slavery and to engage in the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people” (McKay

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96). The slave narrative is a form of self writing that is both a writing of one's personal history and trauma but also seeks to represent the pervasiveness of violence and the shared experience of oppression. Henry Louis Gates describes self-writing as the "ultimate form of protest" for the slave, "If the individual black self could not exist before the law, it could, and would, be forged in language, as testimony at once to the integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African Americans" (4).

While Malcolm in many ways signifies on Douglass and other masculine slave narratives in the emphasis on constructing black masculine identity through the trope of rugged individualism. This is perhaps most evident in the iconic claim of Frederick Douglass "*you have seen the way a man was a slave, you shall see the way a slave was made a man*" (in this moment of which masculine retributive violence as he fights back against Covey, a central turning point in the narrative). There is still a clear departure from the slave narrative in the turn from the appeal to the sympathy of the assumed white audience. The slave narrative is always invested in the affective experience of the reader. A central feature of the slave narrative is to persuade the reader often by way of sympathy that blacks are humans and worthy of God's grace and swift emancipation from slavery. As Toni Morrison notes in "The Site of Memory," the call to objectivity for slave writers causes them to be concerned "not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names;" rage and anger had to be tempered. While sympathy is seen as a more appropriate affect to illicit which is evident in the use of the sentimental conventions of the slave narrative. Morrison further notes

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the ways that “popular taste discourage the writers from dwelling too long or too careful on the more sordid details of their experience.” Hence the common motif of avoidance of scenes thought too excessive in violence with gestures such as “But let us now leave the rough usage of the field ... and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the “house of my childhood” (Douglass). However, I will show that turning the reader’s attention to “the house of my childhood” in Malcolm X’s narrative offers no reprieve for the reader, “the house of childhood” becomes a key site in his work. (I will return to this point later in the talk)

Like many of their Black Power contemporaries, Malcolm X is skeptical of the political efficacy of sympathy. He questions whether “suffering is redemptive” as Martin Luther King suggests in his call to “present the body as a case before nation’s conscience.” Can whites really be moved to compassion through the suffering of blacks? Stokely Carmichael so eloquently asserts this position in his **reflection** on Dr. King’s nonviolent strategy, “He (Dr. King) only made one fallacious assumption, in order for nonviolence to work your opponent must have a conscience, the United States has none!” (at a 1967 speech in Stockholm recorded in Black Power Mixtape). Unconvinced of the transformative potential of white sympathy, these theorists advocate black rage in their calls for Black Power and dignity.

Without the Consolation of Tears: The Pedagogical Impulse of Violence

An important part of this challenge to the form of the autobiography and the affective experience of the reader is the ways that violence is employed in these autobiographies. We can see this turn away from sympathy in protest literature in Richard

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Wright's meditation on the reader's affective experience and his political project of writing in "How Bigger Was Born," where he suggests that he no longer wants to write novels that a banker's daughter can weep at and then feel good about herself. Instead, he pens a violent novel in *Native Son*. One that must be read "without the consolation of tears." Like Richard Wright in the opening scene of *Native Son*, Malcolm X initiates his readers into a scene of violence with these first lines of his ominous birth:

When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children, and my father was away, preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because the "good Christian white people" were not going to stand for my father's "spreading trouble" among the "good" Negroes of Omaha with the "back to Africa" preachings of Marcus Garvey.

Malcolm begins his life story with a scene of violence and terrorism even as he is in the womb. Introducing the narrative in this manner, Malcolm identifies violence (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman) as "the original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born'" (3). Importantly his mother recounts this story for him later in his childhood reaffirming the ways that stories of violence serve a pedagogical function in black life.

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Parents would relay these terrifying stories to their children because they are instructive of the operations of racism; black children were forced to learn these lessons early.

Malcolm recounts that his father was “enraged” when he returned home to learn of the Klan’s threats. This state of being “enraged” is central to Malcolm’s understanding of political consciousness and negotiating the racial trauma and terror of the black condition. His father’s insistence on not hiding his rage, his sense of righteous indignation demonstrates the ways that Malcolm came to understand this affective experience as related to political engagement, moral imperative, and consciousness. Rage is imagined as appropriate response and powerful political tool.

Malcolm continues to reiterate the pervasiveness of violence and racial terror in black life in the opening pages of the autobiography. Of particular interest is his theorizing of the black male as the death bound subject in recounting the violent death of his uncles:

Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. What my father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one, my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar. And my father was finally himself to die by the white man’s hands. (2)

Rhetorically this passage is powerful in its emphasis on enumeration: Malcolm offers a statistical analysis of black death. 1. “four of six brothers die by violence” 2. “three of

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them killed by white men” 3. One of that three by lynching. 4. Of the remaining three, only one dies of natural causes. The emphasis on “Only one .. would die in bed, of natural causes” demonstrates the mundane nature of violence in black life, that violence becomes naturalized, normative and more common than natural death. Rage operates here in the form of enumeration, the recounting of violence, and counting and naming of the dead. This catalogue of violence marks the state as complicit in this violation of black life; as lynch law prevails in the South and police brutality takes the role of the Klan in the North. Or in to borrow from Cornel West, “Malcolm X sharply crystallized the relation of black affirmation of self, black desire for freedom, black rage against American society, and the likelihood of early black death” (96). Malcolm also demonstrates the way this cataloguing of violence can serve to develop one’s political consciousness as it is the unjust killing of his brothers that propels his father towards radicalism and involvement in the Garvey Movement.

Before the reader gains any information on his life, his experiences as a child, any formative memories, the reader is confronted with Malcolm’s own prophesying of his violent death. He reflects, “It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared” (2). *What is the reader to make of this catalogue of violence and prophesy of a violent death?* Here, Malcolm X seems to articulate JanMohamed’s theory of the death bound subject, that that one’s only agency as a subject defined by the threat of arbitrary violence and death is to “prepare” for the inevitability of a violent death and perhaps determine the terms of one’s death. However as Aimee Ellis suggests in his text, *If We Must Die*, this becomes a space both of re-creation and

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resistance to play with this site of being already dead, like a nightmare, black men become like ghosts, invisible and yet terrifying but also with a transgressive potential in this liminal space between life and death, between fully living in the world or in the grave, that allows a kind of roaming, a kind of border crossing, between living and dead. What is the reader to make of this catalogue of violence and prophesy of a violent death? This is a pedagogical exercise; the reader is initiated into the violence of black life and as a voyeur must negotiate his or her positionality to this violence.

Importantly Malcolm's "earliest vivid memory" is not one of an idyllic scene of boyhood adventure and curiosity but that of the "nightmare night" in 1929. He recounts:

I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground.

Significantly, Malcolm is "snatched awake" into a scene of "a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and more smoke flames," more horrifying than any nightmare his young mind could have imagined. Malcolm points to the resistance of his father who both verbally resisted, shouting at the white men as well as firing shots as they absconded. His heroism is in stark contrast to the cowardice of the men who set fire to

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the home and the police officials who offer no protection of this family, revealing the ways that the state reinforced and perpetuated violence against blacks without reprisal. The repetition of “I remember ... I remember “ serves to underscore the ways this scene is central to Malcolm’s construction of his life and identity. The repetition is a matter of insistence on accuracy of the events as well as to enumerate the many horrific aspects of this scene: the pistol shots and screaming and smoke; ‘children in their underwear crying and screaming their heads off;’ the house burning down to the ground. “I remember ... I remember” serves to catalogue the violence of the scene. Importantly, the sonic nature of the scene takes center stage as the sounds of the bullets, screaming, and yelling demonstrates that rage is a sonic affect, as the reader is called to outraged by this scene of violence. The repetition of I remember .. I remember also recalls Douglass’s 1845 narrative where he recalls watching his first master Captain Anthony mercilessly whipping the slaves with perverse pleasure: Douglass observes, “*I remember* the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, *but I well remember* it. I shall never forget it whilst *I remember* any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and participant. It struck me with an awful force.” This scene like the opening scene mark the beginning of his life as one narrated by racial violence, trauma, and terrorism.

Through these depictions of the “house of my childhood” and the way that constant threat of violence narratives black life, Malcolm offers a counterargument to the characterization of black radicals as violent threats to the peace of the nation; they locate violence foremost as a tool of the state apparatus. One of the greatest interventions both

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politically and pedagogically of this autobiography is its counterargument to the accepted historical record in de-familiarizing the reader with notions of where violence originates from. As Margo Perkins suggests, “the state is exposed as the original architect of violence and repression, while the people’s resistance is reclaimed as healthy, reasonable, and just” (73). There is particular emphasis of the right to bear arms as necessary for the protection of the black family. Malcolm X challenges the reading of rage as pathological and self-destructive rather rage is seen as a conscious, thoughtful, and engaged political ethic. He articulates rage as integral to the fight for justice and achieving a beloved and transformed community.

In his essay on Malcolm X entitled “Prophet of Rage,” in 1995’s *Race Matters* Cornell West suggests that there is much we can learn from Malcolm X’s articulation of black rage if “we are as willing as Malcolm X to grow and confront the new challenges posed by the black rage of our day.” I want to consider this challenge posed by West, “to confront the challenges posed by the black rage of our day” and I believe that some key insights to this lay in the lessons of his autobiography.

The growing discontent with race relations following the Trayvon Martin case and most recently the racial riots in Ferguson following the murder of Michael Brown Jr. and the no indictment in the Eric Gardner case brought the subject of black rage and its usefulness back into the forefront of American discourse. The current debate on black rage is an ethical one. It is a contest over what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate behavior, acceptable and unacceptable modes of expression. The language and underlining ideology of this discourse often polices and pathologies black expressions of

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discontent. "*Choking Down that Rage*" seeks to theorize the ethics of rage, its political efficacy, and transformative potentiality. I imagine rage as a fierce instance on the value of black life, and affirmation of black dignity. I consider the words of Audre Lorde in her essay "The Uses of Anger," which I believe are applicable to rage:

My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also.

It is not the anger ... that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment.

The autobiography of Malcolm X calls us to do just that: rather than fear anger or rage, they challenge us to allow it to teach and tutor us. And If, as Lorde suggests, "we listen to its rhythms, learn within it. Then we may be able to tap rage as a source of empowerment."

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