

What contributions did Malcolm X make with respect to black history, politics, and culture, and what makes Malcolm X an exemplary of Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic'?

This essay will look at his life story, and contributions to black history, politics, and culture of Malcolm X, and will also examine how Malcolm X is an example of Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic'. Finally, a contrast and comparison will be made in relation to other important figures such as Martin Luther King Jr who are associated with Black Atlantic history, politics, and culture, before concluding on Malcolm X's overall contribution to African American lives and history.

Malcolm Little was born on May 19th, 1925, in Nebraska, America. He spent his childhood in foster homes and with relatives after the death of his father and the hospitalisation of his mother.¹ In 1946, Malcolm was sentenced to prison for ten years for larceny and breaking and entering.² Here, he joined the Nation of Islam, a religious and political organization founded in America in 1930, and legally changed his surname from Little to X, symbolising his unknown African ancestry.³ After his release in 1952, X became the most influential figure and leader of the Islamic organisation, second after Elijah Muhammad.⁴ Islam offered the idea of black self-reliance and an African diaspora, where in Africa all black peoples would be free from white Americans and European domination and influence.⁵ In 1958, Malcolm married Betty Sanders and they went on to have six children together.⁶

Malcolm X wrote a letter to President Truman in 1950 expressing his opposition to the Korean War and declaring himself a communist, resulting in the FBI opening a file on him.⁷ X continued to recruit black people for the Nation of Islam, opening temples in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Atlanta.⁸ In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly in New York City invited Malcolm X to the official meetings of several African Nations, where he met leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea and Kenneth Kaunda of the Zambian African National Congress.⁹ This proved X to be a very influential and important black figure within the African American community. Eventually, Malcolm broke away from the Nation of Islam and in 1964, he officially announced he had converted to Sunni Islam.¹⁰ It was later revealed he broke away due to many things, including the fact Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the organisation, prevented and held back Malcolm from working with other civil rights activists.¹¹ However, X continued to promote beliefs of the Nation of Islam, including the ideas that black people are the original people of the world,¹² that white people are "devils"¹³ and that the demise of the white race

¹ Watson; Akhtar, p.120

² Marable, p.67-68

³ Malcolm X, p.229

⁴ Cone, p.91

⁵ Natambu, p.127-128, 132-138

⁶ Rickford, p.95

⁷ Marable, p.95

⁸ Marable, p.122-123

⁹ Natambu, p.231-233

¹⁰ Handler

¹¹ Handler

¹² Lomax, p.55

¹³ Perry, p.155

is imminent.¹⁴ Malcolm X was very critical of the civil rights movement and its leaders that were fighting against racial segregation, one being Martin Luther King Junior.¹⁵ He also rejected the nonviolence strategies and ideas that Martin Luther King Jr. preached, believing that black people should defend themselves “by any means necessary”.¹⁶ X advocated for complete separation of African Americans from white people and believed that those descended from Africa should return, and that America should create a separated country for black people only.¹⁷ Malcolm X provided another perspective for black people, and an opportunity for those with like-minded thinking to have a leader to follow, elevating and giving options to the community.

Malcolm X has been described as one of the greatest and most influential African Americans in history.¹⁸ X has also been credited with the elevation of self-esteem for black Americans and assisting them in reconnecting with their African heritage.¹⁹ He is also responsible for the spread and increase in popularity of Islam among the black community in the United States.²⁰ During the 1960s, a birth of radical black activists emerged based on Malcolm X’s teachings, including the Black Power Movement,²¹ the Black Arts Movement,²² and the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’ which can be traced back to the influence of X.²³ The 1980s and 1990s saw the revival of interest in X’s life among young people, and he became an icon for the hip-hop group Public Enemy.²⁴ His life has also inspired countless films, including the 1992 motion picture ‘Malcolm X’, where Denzel Washington portrayed X and was listed as one of the greatest films of the Nineties.²⁵ This demonstrates the impact and relevance Malcolm X had not only in his lifetime, but for many decades to come. X inspired many generations of African Americans, forever affecting black history, politics, and culture.

It can be said that Malcolm X was an exemplary of Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic. The defining characteristics of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic include the internal struggle of African Americans with their identity. These individuals struggle with the culture, languages, ways of thinking and acting of both their American and African heritage. Many black people feel the need to change for white communities around them, in order to make them feel more comfortable, presenting a form of suppression that has derived from slavery.

In the Nineteenth century, there were a large number of free black people and this provoked white American politicians to introduce a policy called ‘Back-to-Africa’. This scheme aimed to send descendants of slaves that had been freed by an owner, or those whose freedom had been bought back, to their homeland in Africa. This scheme massively failed, with only a few members of the black community leaving America. However, this idea was revived in the 1960s due to the racial unrest of the civil rights movement. Malcolm X

¹⁴ Lomax, p.57

¹⁵ Lomax, p.149-152

¹⁶ Lomax, p.173-174

¹⁷ Lomax, p.149-152

¹⁸ Marable; Frazier; McMillan, p. 251

¹⁹ Cone, p. 291-292

²⁰ Perry, p. 379

²¹ Marable, 2009, p. 301

²² Marable, 2009, p. 301

²³ Cone, p. 291

²⁴ Sales, p.5

²⁵ Anderson

and the Nation of Islam's leader Elijah Muhammad believed in black separation.²⁶ X made a speech in 1963 called 'Racial Separation', in which he expressed the anger that many African Americans felt towards their treatment by white Americans and the American government.²⁷ He announced to the audience that "The Honourable Elijah Muhammad has the only permanent solution. Twenty million ex-slaves must be permanently separated from our former slave master and placed on some land we can call our own."²⁸ The idea was that in this land black people could set up their own farms, factories, businesses and a government, leading to them being an independent nation separated from white America. During X's visit to England in 1964, he expressed an admiration for the way Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Asians all worked together, however, he did not believe white people in America could effectively replicate this.²⁹

Malcolm is a perfect example of a black individual that has identified the Black Atlantic issues that Paul Gilroy raises in his book. X's solution for the survival of black culture, freedom, and their way of life is by separating themselves into a black only nation, both within the content of Africa and a country inside America. This is an idea and notion that was never successful, and a black only nation within the United States did not emerge.

An obvious comparison to Malcolm X is another very important figure in the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Junior (MLK), born Michael King on the 15th of January 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia.³⁰ King grew up in a Christian household, his father being a pastor, and witnessed his father standing up against segregation and discrimination.³¹ Compared to Malcolm X, King had influential parents that brought him up and guided him through the Christian faith. However, it has been said that King's father would regularly whip his children as a form of discipline.³² MLK was educated and began his doctoral studies in systematic theology at Boston University in 1951.³³ This is something that Malcolm X never had the access to. It is apparent that these two activists had very different childhoods, education, beliefs, and lives, but on the other hand, both had their struggles and the principle that all peoples should be equal. King believed in a nonviolent protest, whereas X believed in defending oneself if necessary. Both also had a huge following but different approaches to the civil rights movement. X wanted racial separation, but King wanted a future in America where people of all backgrounds, colour, and race could live together and become a progressive society. MLK and X were both assassinated, X in 1965³⁴ and King in 1968.³⁵

Another prominent figure in X's life was Elijah Muhammed, the leader of the Nation of Islam. Born Elijah Robert Poole on the 7th of October 1897, he was a firm believer in black separatism and proclaimed himself the Messenger of Allah.³⁶ Like X, Elijah Muhammad served jail time, but Muhammad went for failing to register for the draft during World War

²⁶ Schmaltz, p.119-121

²⁷ X, Malcolm

²⁸ X, Malcolm

²⁹ Burnett, 2015

³⁰ Biography, 2015

³¹ Frady, p. 15

³² Oates, p. 8

³³ Radin, p. 1

³⁴ Kihss, p. 1

³⁵ National Archives

³⁶ Curtis, p. 5

II. X and Muhammad had a close friendship, as well as a teacher and student relationship within their shared religion. He preached that the Nation of Islam and its follower's aims was to return to Africa, have their own community, and claim land stolen by the "inferior whites".³⁷ Eventually, a rift occurred between Muhammad and X due to rumours spreading among the Nation of Islam community. These rumours claimed that Elijah was having affairs with young members of the Nation of Islam, a very serious violation against the teachings of the Nation.³⁸ Malcolm X publicly accused Muhammad of "having eight children with six different teenage girls. Six different teenage girls that were his private secretaries".³⁹ X believed the rumours after speaking to Elijah's son, Wallace Delaney Muhammad, and many of the girls making the accusations. In 1963, Muhammad confirmed he had done what was accused, but he tried to justify his behaviour by referring to biblical prophets.⁴⁰ Although Muhammad was the leader of the Nation of Islam, it can be argued that Malcolm X was the most influential and popular of the members. They shared similar views towards the civil rights movement, however, in the end, X parted ways with the Nation of Islam due to Muhammad's illegal and morally corrupt actions towards women and teenage girls. Due to X's departure from the group, it severed his relationship with famous boxer Muhammad Ali, also a member of the Nation.⁴¹ This is something that Ali later said to be one of his greatest mistakes and regrets in his life.⁴²

In conclusion, Malcolm X contributed a lot to the development of the civil rights movement as well as black history, politics, and culture. He empowered young black Muslims in America to stand up for themselves and continued to inspire black political movement groups after his death. X's influence expands beyond America, to European countries and Africa. Malcolm provided a new perspective and view on the civil rights movement and black culture. His legacy continues to live and thrive through black Muslim communities, memories, film adaptations of his life, and books.

³⁷ Mamiya

³⁸ Smithsonian Channel

³⁹ Smithsonian Channel

⁴⁰ Perry, p.230-234

⁴¹ Handler

⁴² Ali; Ali

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