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The Influence of Malcolm X:

on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and the Black Panther Party

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Malcolm X was a powerful leader in the Civil Rights movement because of his pro-black views and his ideas about employing self-defense as resistance in the movement. He was an important figure because predating his involvement, the movement was following the path of Gandhian nonviolence. The staggering of the movement away from nonviolence started to occur as protests continued to turn violent and protestors continued to get brutally beaten by the police as well as by white citizens. These events were cause for the creation of organizations like the Black Panther Party. The self-defense sect of the movement becoming more popular forced also white Americans into favoring and cooperating more with the nonviolence movement and Dr. Martin Luther King because they were in fear of the violence that could take place if they did not. He directly elevated Martin Luther King Jr's platform by being more radical and violent in the eyes of white Americans, and he also deeply influenced the creation of many student protest organizations and the Black Panther Party whom adopted many of his teachings as doctrine.

Malcolm Little, also known as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, or mostly commonly known as Malcolm X was an African American leader during the Civil Rights Movement and held an important role in the Organization of Afro-American Unity and in the Nation of Islam. Members of the nation, also referred to as "Black Muslims," often replaced their last names with the letter X to symbolize the loss of their ancestry due to slavery. He was eventually removed from this organization by the founder because of his lack of silence about the assassination of Kennedy. After dropping his NOI theology, his views started to become more secularized and political. In turn they became more popular among the public, especially students.

He was born on May 29, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska but his family moved many times throughout his childhood because his father was a traveling Baptist minister. His father, was an activist in Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement which promoted the escape of African

Americans to Africa to rid themselves of the oppression they face in America.<sup>1</sup> His father was found dead when he was six years old and his family always believed it was done by white supremacists who wanted to silence his activism. This was not unbelievable because his family was subjected to many hate crimes, including the arson of their house. His father's activism definitely contributed to his because for some time, he was also a black separatist and participated in protests about segregation. He later dropped out of school following a teacher telling him that he was never going to be able to amount to his goal of being a lawyer, and that he should choose a path better suited to his race. This caused him to move to Boston and later become incarcerated for burglary, which is how he became affiliated with the Nation of Islam in prison. After his departure from the Nation of Islam he went on to create his own religious group, named the Muslim Mosque, Inc.

Malcolm was an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement, not only in the states but also in African countries. He began his own pan-African movement with his creation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which was a secular group whose goal was to achieve human rights for all people of African descent. He started to share his views and ideas about black national and international unity, self-determination, self-defense, and cultural pride on a national level following his departure from NOI.<sup>2</sup> He was not well received or liked among the white community because his views were unsettling to them. Therefore, his advocacy of black nationalism and black pride were misconstrued by white Americans as him promoting violence and racism. White Americans feared that his ideas would motivate mass violence against them, and some black Americans feared that his militancy would devastate the success of

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<sup>1</sup> X, Malcolm, and Alex. Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1st Ballantine Books Hardcover ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

<sup>2</sup>

the nonviolent movement. However, Malcolm did not advocate for violence or racism. He spoke of race revolutions and riots, but he was not advocating for these things to happen, rather he was warning white people of what was to come if they did not change and give black Americans what they promised by the Constitution. He believed that violence was inevitable if black people continued to be treated in unfair and inhumane ways. Among many other things, he advocated for the use of self-defense in violent situations and was in support of forming a separate black community, and cultural pride (also known as black power), as well as strengthening global unity through the OAAU.

“Black Power” was one of the ideals passed down from Malcolm’s doctrine that was adopted by the Black Panther Party. “Black Power” refers to the mindset that black people have power over themselves and over their destinies.<sup>3</sup> This is an important ideal among the black community because white people told them the opposite for so long. MacDonald makes the argument that black people were taught to believe that their race was inferior and they were taught to associate themselves with negative terms like ugly, lazy, and shiftless.<sup>4</sup> This is proven in the study conducted by Kenneth Clark that explore the ways that society teaches black children to be inferior. An excerpt from the poem by Horace Coleman, “blessed by the black, it is not a lack, but the presence...”<sup>5</sup> signifies the change that the “Black Power movement brought. Black people went from feeling inferior to feeling blessed to have been born into the black community; it brought in a newly found sense of black pride. The “Black Power” movement was extremely important because it called for black people to reclaim themselves and their independence.

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<sup>3</sup> Macdonald, A. P, "Black Power." *The Journal of Negro Education* 44, no. 4 (1975): 547-54.

<sup>4</sup> Macdonald, A. P, "Black Power."

<sup>5</sup> Coleman, Horace, "Black Power." *Negro American Literature Forum* 6, no. 4 (1972): 132.

Black Power was one of the major founding principles of the Black Panther Party, in addition to education and self-defense against police brutality. The Black Panther Party, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was created in October 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and it originated out of Oakland, California. Oakland was the perfect place for this kind of organization because there was plenty of police brutality to challenge. The organization was active for over a decade, dating from its start in 1966 to its finish in 1982. Their creation followed shortly after MLK's assassination, which was a causal factor in the ending of support for the nonviolence movement. The BPP Platform poster from October 1966 showcases the goals and beliefs of the BPP. The first of the beliefs mentioned was that black people could not be free until they are able to determine their own destiny.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the first want was that they wanted the power to determine the destiny of the black community.<sup>7</sup> Both the wants and beliefs show direct correlation to the "Black Power" movement and showcase its importance within the organization. Some of the wants listed on the poster were full employment, freedom, and the immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.<sup>8</sup>

Black Panther Party's foundation in the Black Power movement was derived from Malcolm X's doctrine. Street makes it clear that within the historiography of the Black Panther Party, studies have implied that the BPP was a reaction to the decline of the nonviolent sect of the Civil Rights movement and follows in the footsteps of Malcolm X.<sup>9</sup> They openly referred to themselves to be the ideological children of Malcolm X, which proves that he was a deep-rooted

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<sup>6</sup> Black Panther Party, "What We Want. What We Believe." Black Panther Party Platform and Program, (1966).

<sup>7</sup> Black Panther Party, "What We Want. What We Believe."

<sup>8</sup> Black Panther Party, "What We Want. What We Believe."

<sup>9</sup> Street, Joe, "The Historiography of the Black Panther Party." *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 351-75.

influence in their movement.<sup>10</sup> Jamal Joseph was one of the members of the first chapter of the BPP, and he recalled that he was given a stack of books, which included the Autobiography of Malcolm X, as part of his education on the struggle for civil rights and how to arm himself to fight for the cause. Joseph also credited Malcolm X for their understanding that their freedom could only follow them changing the system. He also says that Malcolm made it clear that they had to “defend [themselves] as a community and think of [themselves] separate and apart from the U.S.”<sup>11</sup>

Malcolm X was also very influential figure among black students is revered as the “single most important influence on black students”<sup>12</sup> by Turner and by Rogers as “probably... the most quoted of all modern black spokesman... among black leaders of high school and college age.”<sup>13</sup> He chose to focus his efforts on black youth because he viewed this portion of the black community as a “vanguard revolutionary force.”<sup>14</sup> Many of the first members of the Black Panther Party were black youth. Members often came from organizations that were already formed, such as the Grassroots Advisory Council and SNCC. An important group that joined the ranks was the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which as previously mentioned, was founded by Malcolm X. Young people were increasingly joining the ranks of the BPP, and most of them had already been molded and influenced by Malcolm X’s teachings and doctrines. A

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<sup>10</sup> Anonymous. "New York Black Panther Party Celebrates 50th Anniversary." New York Amsterdam News (New York, N.Y.), 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, "New York Black Panther Party Celebrates 50th Anniversary."

<sup>12</sup> Turner, J, “Black Students and their Changing Perspective.” Ebony 24 (1969)

<sup>13</sup> Ibram H. Rogers, ““PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE SUPPORTING YOU”:

MALCOLM X, IDEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS, AND BLACK STUDENT ACTIVISM, 1960-1972," The Journal of African American History 96, no. 1 (2011): 14-38.

<sup>14</sup> Rogers, “PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE SUPPORTING YOU”

Tougaloo College faculty member proves this true when stating that “Malcolm X is more popular than Jesus Christ here. The students actually worship him.”<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and his nonviolence movement were also influenced by Malcolm X, but in a different way than the black youth and the BPP. Malcolm was responsible for the new militancy that entered the Civil Rights Movement which was already established non-violent. The beginning of the end of the non-violent era was the Selma-Montgomery march because black activists were starting to grow tired of the brutality that they were facing from the police for simply exercising rights given to them by the Constitution. The media began to break the Civil Rights movement into two different movements; the nonviolent one spearheaded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and the “violent” one spearheaded by Malcolm. This forced competition between the movement which resulted in more white support for Martin Luther King Jr. because he was seen as the lesser of two evils. His nonviolent standpoint made his movement more easily acceptable for whites because they feared any violence against themselves at the hands of, what they perceived to be, violent and radical protesters.

Martin Luther King Jr was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His birth name was Michael Jr, but his father changed their names in honor of the Protestant leader Martin Luther. MLK was a very bright child. He skipped both ninth and eleventh grade at Booker T. Washington High School and continued his education at Morehouse College at the age of fifteen. He was also educated at the Crozer Theological Seminary and received his doctorate from Boston University. Before his involvement in the movement, Martin followed in the footsteps of his father and became a Baptist minister. His nonviolent tactics were deeply influenced by

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<sup>15</sup> The Reflector, 19 March 1968.

Mahatma Gandhi, who he learned more about through Bayard Rustin.<sup>16</sup> He is revered as one of the “Big Four” of the Civil Rights Movement and is also recognized as the face of the nonviolent movement. He was rewarded with the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts and leadership in the movement.

Martin Luther King Jr and the nonviolent movement had many successes. His most famous being the March on Washington, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the campaign in Birmingham. Two of the major legislative gains of the Civil Rights movement, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights act, are often described as successes of the nonviolent mass protests led by MLK. Yet, Nimitz argues that there was another contributing factor to those legislative successes in addition to the nonviolent protests, which were the threats of violence that came from African Americans. He believes that the successes are only fully explained when those factors are combined.

The media played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights movement by broadcasting the efforts both nationally and internationally which aiding in growing the support of the movement. Grimm finds that the media covered Martin Luther King Jr four times as much as they covered Malcolm, and that this was a means to diminish the role that Malcolm played in the movement by completely ignoring it.<sup>17</sup> The media made it much easier for MLK to get his nonviolent platform heard by the masses. The media also created mistrust around Malcolm X because they painted him out to be a radical and dangerous Black Muslim. They even began reinforcing the rivalry between the two leaders in the press, citing the reason for this as them having competing and

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<sup>17</sup> Grimm, Josh. "Hegemonic Framing of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., in Northeastern Newspapers." *Howard Journal of Communications* 26, no. 3 (2015): 313-32.

opposing views. White reporters at the *Times*, *Post*, and *Globe* openly supported King's nonviolent movement because they were in fear of the retaliation that Malcolm X warned of.

As well as the media, Martin Luther King Jr began to pit himself against Malcolm X in Birmingham meetings and in letters to President John F. Kennedy. He said, "we don't love what Brother X advocates, black supremacy ... we love our white brother and we love integration."<sup>18</sup> Whether or not MLK meant these words was not important, the significance was that he was now on record creating distance between himself and Malcolm, and in turn creating distance between the "violent" and "nonviolent" movements. He knew that if the two movements were converged as one, the Civil Rights movement would lose its support from sympathetic whites and increasingly become unsuccessful as a result. There was no hate between him and Malcolm, he simply did what he thought necessary to secure the success of his movement for his people.

Malcolm X was an extremely influential leader within the Civil Rights movement because of his platform and his introduction of militancy into the movement. He elevated Martin Luther King Jr's platform in both the media and in the eyes of whites because he was viewed as more radical and having a violent nature. Without the fear of Malcolm's tactics arming black citizens, the government would not have supported Martin's movement in the end and the media would not have lifted his Gandhian style movement if they did not fear retaliation and violence at the hands of Malcolm's followers. He also deeply influenced the creation of the Black Panther Party whom adopted many of his teachings as doctrine. As well as influencing and the black youth through his speeches and teachings which was important because they were the future.

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<sup>18</sup> Nimitz, August H. "Violence And/or Nonviolence in the Success of the Civil Rights Movement: The Malcolm X-Martin Luther King, Jr. Nexus." *New Political Science* 38, no. 1 (2016): 1-22.

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