

MALCOLM X

“Not just an American problem, but a world problem”

(Speech delivered in the Corn Hill Methodist Church, Rochester, New York, 16 February 1965)

FIRST, brothers and sisters, I want to start by thanking you for taking the time to come out this evening and especially for the invitation for me to come up to Rochester and participate in this little informal discussion this evening on matters that are of common interest to all elements in the community, in the entire Rochester community. My reason for being here is to discuss the Black revolution that is going on, that's taking place on this earth, the manner in which it's taking place on the African continent, and the impact that it's having in Black communities, not only here in America but in England and in France and in other of the former colonial powers today.

Many of you probably read last week I made an effort to go to Paris and was turned away. And Paris doesn't turn anybody away. You know anybody is supposed to be able to go to France, it's supposed to be a very liberal place. But France is having problems today that haven't been highly publicized. And England is also having problems that haven't been highly publicized, because America's problems have been so highly publicized. But all of these three partners, or allies, have troubles in common today that the Black American, or Afro-American, isn't well enough up on.

And in order for you and me to know the nature of the struggle that you and I are involved in, we have to know not only the various ingredients involved at the local level and national level, but also the ingredients that are involved at the international level. And the problems of the Black man here in this country today have ceased to be a problem of just the American Negro or an American problem. It has become a problem that is so complex, and has so many implications in it, that you have to study it in its entire world, in the world context or in its international context, to really see it as it actually is. Otherwise you can't even follow the local issue, unless you know what part it plays in the entire international context. And when you look at it in that context, you see it in a different light, but you see it with more clarity.

And you should ask yourself why should a country like France be so concerned with a little insignificant American Negro that they would prohibit him from going there, when almost anybody else can go to that country whenever they desire. And it's primarily because the three countries have the same problems. And the problem is this: That in the Western Hemisphere, you and I haven't realized it, but we aren't exactly a minority on this earth. In the Western Hemisphere there are — there's the people in Brazil, two-thirds of the people in Brazil are dark-skinned people, the same as you and I. They are people of African origin, African ancestry — African background. And not only in Brazil, but throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada, you have people here who are of African origin.

Many of us fool ourselves into thinking of Afro-Americans as those only who are here in the United States. America is North America, Central America, and South America. Anybody of African ancestry in South America is an Afro-American. Anybody in Central America of African blood is an Afro-American. Anybody here in North America, including Canada, is an Afro-American if he has African ancestry — even down in the Caribbean, he's an Afro-American. So when I speak of the Afro-American, I'm not speaking of just the 22 million of us who are here in

the United States. But the Afro-American is that large number of people in the Western Hemisphere, from the southernmost tip of South America to the northernmost tip of North America, all of whom have a common heritage and have a common origin when you go back to the roots of these people.

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So I had to give you that background, in order for you to understand some of the current problems that are developing here on this earth. And in no time can you understand the problems between Black and white people here in Rochester or Black and white people in Mississippi or Black and white people in California, unless you understand the basic problem that exists between Black and white people — not confined to the local level, but confined to the international, global level on this earth today. When you look at it in that context, you'll understand. But if you only try to look at it in the local context, you'll never understand. You have to see the trend that is taking place on this earth. And my purpose for coming here tonight is to try and give you as up-to-date an understanding of it all as is possible.

As many of you know, I left the Black Muslim movement and during the summer months, I spent five of those months on the — in the Middle East and on the African continent. During this time I visited many countries, first of which was Egypt, and then Arabia, then Kuwait, Lebanon, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zanzibar, Tanganyika — which is now Tanzania — Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Algeria. And then the five months that I was away I had an opportunity to hold lengthy discussions with President Nasser in Egypt, President Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Milton Obote in Uganda, Azikiwe in Nigeria, Nkrumah in Ghana, and Sékou Touré in Guinea.



[. . .]

So we're not against people because they're white. But we're against those who practice racism. We're against those who drop bombs on people because their color happens to be of a different shade than yours. And because we're against it, the press says we're violent. We're not for violence. We're for peace. But the people that we're up against are for violence. You can't be peaceful when you're dealing with them. [Applause]

They accuse us of what they themselves are guilty of. This is what the criminal always does. They'll bomb you, then accuse you of bombing yourself. They'll crush your skull, then accuse you of attacking him. This is what the racists have always done — the criminal, the one who has criminal processes developed to a science. Their practice is criminal action. And then use the press to make you victim — look like the victim is the criminal, and the criminal is the victim. This is how they do it. [Applause]

[. . .]

The racists, that are usually very influential in the society, don't make their move without first going to get public opinion on their side. So they use the press to get public opinion on their side. When they want to suppress and oppress the Black community, what do they do? They take the statistics, and through the press, they feed them to the public. They make it appear that the role of crime in the Black community is higher than it is anywhere else.

What does this do? [Applause] This message — this is a very skillful message used by racists to make the whites who aren't racists think that the rate of crime in the Black community is so high. This keeps the Black community in the image of a criminal. It makes it appear that anyone in the Black community is a criminal. And as soon as this impression is given, then it makes it possible, or paves the way to set up a police-type state in the Black community, getting the full approval of the white public when the police come in, use all kind of brutal measures to suppress Black people, crush their skulls, sic dogs on them, and things of that type. And the whites go along with it. Because they think that everybody over there's a criminal anyway. This is what — the press does this. [Applause]

This is skill. This skill is called — this is a science that's called "image making." They hold you in check through this science of imagery. They even make you look down upon yourself, by giving you a bad image of yourself. Some of our own Black people who have eaten this image themselves and digested it — until they themselves don't want to live in the Black community. They don't want to be around Black people themselves. [Applause]

It's a science that they use, very skillfully, to make the criminal look like the victim, and to make the victim look like the criminal. Example: In the United States during the Harlem riots, I was in Africa, fortunately. [Laughter] During these riots, or because of these riots, or after the riots, again the press, very skillfully, depicted the rioters as hoodlums, criminals, thieves, because they were abducting some property.

[. . .]

But again, the press is used to make the victim look like the criminal and make the criminal look like the victim. . . . This is imagery. And just as this imagery is practiced at the local level, you can understand it better by an international example. The best recent example at the

international level to bear witness to what I'm saying is what happened in the Congo. Look at what happened. We had a situation where a plane was dropping bombs on African villages. An African village has no defense against the bombs. And an African village is not sufficient threat that it has to be bombed! But planes were dropping bombs on African villages. When these bombs strike, they don't distinguish between enemy and friend. They don't distinguish between male and female. When these bombs are dropped on African villages in the Congo, they are dropped on Black women, Black children, Black babies. These human beings were blown to bits. I heard no outcry, no voice of compassion for these thousands of Black people who were slaughtered by planes. [Applause]

Why was there no outcry? Why was there no concern? Because, again, the press very skillfully made the victims look like they were the criminals, and the criminals look like they were the victims. [Applause]

[. . .]

They're able to do all of this mass murder and get away with it by labeling it "humanitarian," an act of humanitarianism. Or "in the name of freedom," "in the name of liberty." All kinds of high-sounding slogans, but it's cold-blooded murder, mass murder. And it's done so skillfully, so you and I, who call ourselves sophisticated in this twentieth century, are able to watch it, and put the stamp of approval upon it. Simply because it's being done to people with black skin, by people with white skin.

[. . .]

During the months when bombs were being dropped on Black people by the hundreds and the thousands, you said nothing. And you did nothing. But as soon as a few — a handful of white people who didn't have any business getting caught up in that thing in the first place — [Laughter and applause] — as soon as their lives became involved, you got concerned.

I was in Africa during the summer when they — when the mercenaries and the pilots were shooting down Black people in the Congo like flies. It wouldn't even get mentioned in the Western press. It wasn't mentioned. If it was mentioned, it was mentioned in the classified section of the newspaper. Someplace where you'd need a microscope to find it.

It's imagery. They use their ability to create images, and then they use these images that they've created to mislead the people. To confuse the people and make the people accept wrong as right and reject right as wrong. Make the people actually think that the criminal is the victim and the victim is the criminal.

Even as I point this out, you may say, "What does this all have to do with the Black man in America? And what does it have to do with the Black and white relations here in Rochester?"

You have to understand it. Until 1959 the image of the African continent was created by the enemies of Africa. Africa was a land dominated by outside powers. A land dominated by Europeans. And as these Europeans dominated the continent of Africa, it was they who created the image of Africa that was projected abroad. And they projected Africa and the people of Africa in a negative image, a hateful image. They made us think that Africa was a land of jungles, a land of animals, a land of cannibals and savages. It was a hateful image.

And because they were so successful in projecting this negative image of Africa, those of us here in the West of African ancestry, the Afro-American, we looked upon Africa as a hateful place. We looked upon the African as a hateful person. And if you referred to us as an African it was like putting us as a servant, or playing house, or talking about us in the way we didn't want to be talked.

Why? Because those who oppress know that you can't make a person hate the root without making them hate the tree. You can't hate your own and not end up hating yourself. And since we all originated in Africa, you can't make us hate Africa without making us hate ourselves. And they did this very skillfully.

And what was the result? They ended up with 22 million Black people here in America who hated everything about us that was African. We hated the African characteristics, the African characteristics. We hated our hair. We hated our nose, the shape of our nose, and the shape of our lips, the color of our skin. Yes we did. And it was you who taught us to hate ourselves simply by shrewdly maneuvering us into hating the land of our forefathers and the people on that continent.

As long as we hated those people, we hated ourselves. As long as we hated what we thought they looked like, we hated what we actually looked like. And you call me a hate teacher. Why, you taught us to hate ourselves. You taught the world to hate a whole race of people and have the audacity now to blame us for hating you simply because we don't like the rope that you put around our necks. [Applause]

When you teach a man to hate his lips, the lips that God gave him, the shape of the nose that God gave him, the texture of the hair that God gave him, the color of the skin that God gave him, you've committed the worst crime that a race of people can commit. And this is the crime that you've committed.

Our color became a chain, a psychological chain. Our blood — African blood — became a psychological chain, a prison, because we were ashamed of it. We believe — they would tell it to your face, and say they weren't; they were! We felt trapped because our skin was black. We felt trapped because we had African blood in our veins.

This is how you imprisoned us. Not just bringing us over here and making us slaves. But the image that you created of our motherland and the image that you created of our people on that continent was a trap, was a prison, was a chain, was the worst form of slavery that has ever been invented by a so-called civilized race and a civilized nation since the beginning of the world.

You still see the result of it among our people in this country today. Because we hated our African blood, we felt inadequate, we felt inferior, we felt helpless. And in our state of helplessness, we wouldn't work for ourselves. We turned to you for help, and then you wouldn't help us. We didn't feel adequate. We turned to you for advice and you gave us the wrong advice. Turned to you for direction and you kept us going in circles.

But a change has come about. In us. And what from? Back in '55 in Indonesia, at Bandung, they had a conference of dark-skinned people. The people of Africa and Asia came together for the first time in centuries. They had no nuclear weapons, they had no air fleets, no navy.

But they discussed their plight and they found that there was one thing that all of us had in common — oppression, exploitation, suffering. And we had a common oppressor, a common exploiter.

If a brother came from Kenya and called his oppressor an Englishman; and another came from the Congo, he called his oppressor a Belgian; another came from Guinea, he called his oppressor French. But when you brought the oppressors together there's one thing they all had in common, they were all from Europe. And this European was oppressing the people of Africa and Asia.

And since we could see that we had oppression in common and exploitation in common, sorrow and sadness and grief in common, our people began to get together and determined at the Bandung Conference that it was time for us to forget our differences. We had differences. Some were Buddhists, some were Hindus, some were Christians, some were Muslim, some didn't have any religion at all. Some were socialists, some were capitalists, some were communists, and some didn't have any economy at all. But with all of the differences that existed, they agreed on one thing, the spirit of Bandung was, from there on in, to de-emphasize the areas of difference and emphasize the areas that we had in common.

Post-Reading Activity

(We will continue this activity when we meet on Tuesday.)

1. Pick 2-3 main ideas from Malcolm X's speech that you would like to include in your research project.
2. Find images (photographs, memes, art, etc.) that represent each of those main ideas.
3. Write 2-3 sentences about each of the images you've selected explaining how the image reflects the main ideas in Malcolm X's speech.