CHAPTER 13.

"NOW I THINK WITH MY OWN MIND": MALCOLM X, EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE EXTRACURRICULUM

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In her essay "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Anne Gere examines some of the "multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing" (80), particularly acts of literacy that occur outside academic settings. Gere describes this writing as "legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects" (86). Framing her essay with Simone Weil's image of two prisoners communicating through the wall that separates them, Gere argues for the importance of self-sponsored literacy activities—the extracurriculum. She suggests that paying attention to the extracurriculum "can lead us to tap and listen to the messages through the walls, to consider how we can learn from and contribute to composition's extracurriculum in our classrooms" (86). These "messages through the walls" often originate from people who, for various reasons (poverty, poor academic preparation, racism, sexism, homophobia, other life experiences or moral commitments), are absent from our field's history, our classrooms, and our scholarship. And yet the messages they are tapping out are as important today as they were when Gere first challenged us to pay attention because, if we have the courage to listen, we can learn much about what encourages people to write as if writing matters. Writers, including those in our classrooms, root their identity in and tell the truth of people and places beyond our knowledge, understanding, or control. An analysis of Malcolm X's "Message to the Grass Roots" demonstrates the importance of continuing to pay attention to the extracurriculum.

In her essay, Gere highlights features of the extracurriculum, including these three: that the extracurriculum is sponsored by many different people and groups, that it is fueled by desire, and that it provides an alternative route to social or political power. In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes his education as including key features of the extracurriculum that Gere identifies. His

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speech "Message to the Grassroots" showcases another: Malcolm X's extracurriculum, especially Nation of Islam (NOI) theology and his wide reading in global politics, sanctioned and sustained his epistemic disobedience. Malcolm X wielded ways of knowing that were as familiar to the "wretched of the earth," to borrow Fanon's term, as they were unfamiliar to the powerful to indict the logic used by white American power brokers to control people of color in America. Understanding how the extracurriculum fueled Malcolm X's epistemic disobedience is particularly valuable at this moment, when those who worship differently or accept a range of sexual orientations or even acknowledge the historical facts of slavery and its aftermath face ridicule, economic reprisals, or physical harm.

Malcolm X must be one of America's most famous beneficiaries of an extracurricular education, though for Malcolm X, the extracurriculum *was* his education; it was "extra" only in the sense that most of his teachers were not academics, most of his learning occurred in non-academic settings, and much of what he learned would not be sanctioned as "academic" knowledge. Gere notes that the extracurriculum "acknowledges a wide range of teachers" (80), and Malcolm X had many. From his Garveyite parents, he learned self-respect, self-sufficiency, and the importance of his membership in a global community of people who trace their ancestry to Africa (DeCaro 42). From people on the streets of Harlem he learned to hustle (X, *Autobiography* 101). From books and correspondence courses and fellow inmates during his time in prison, he learned traditional academic subjects and how to debate (198). From Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the NOI, Malcolm X learned to bifurcate humanity into Black and white, with "white people" including Europeans and people of European descent, and "Black people" including everyone else (Muhammad 49). After his conversion to the NOI, Malcolm X taught others as he had been taught.

Gere identifies desire as an important element of the extracurricular writing groups she studied; indeed, she describes the extracurriculum as "constructed by desire, by the aspirations and imaginations of its participants" (80). Malcolm X identifies desire as an essential component of his extracurricular education, recalling, "I had come to Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even those motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did" (*Autobiography* 198). For Malcolm X, his conversion to the NOI and his budding relationship with Elijah Muhammad were instrumental to improving his writing skills: "I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad" (197). And his religiously motivated pursuit of literacy awakened in Malcolm X an intrinsic desire to learn, "some long dormant craving to be mentally alive" (206). In prison, Malcolm X honed

his rhetorical skills by writing letters daily to his siblings; he also wrote to Elijah Muhammad, to those from his former hustling life, and even to Boston's mayor, Massachusetts' governor, and the president of the United States (197).

After he was paroled, Malcolm X's religious fervor propelled him into an active and varied life of words. He preached on street corners and taught in NOI temple schools. He founded and penned articles for the NOI's newsletter, *Muhammad Speaks*, which NOI adherents sold in temples and on the street (Collins and Bailey 115), and he preached in Elijah Muhammad's stead on NOI Sunday radio broadcasts (X, *Autobiography*). Malcolm X offered innumerable public lectures, participated in debates, and gave many interviews; all these opportunities, especially the college lectures, nourished his desire to learn and expanded his extracurricular education. Malcolm X recalls, "The college sessions never failed to be exhilarating. They never failed in helping me further my own education" (*Autobiography* 324). When he introduced himself to the students and faculty members in the audience, Malcolm X emphasized the extracurricular nature of his education: "Gentlemen, I finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan. My high school was the black ghetto of Roxbury, Massachusetts. My college was in the streets of Harlem, and my master's was taken in prison" (325). In this way, Malcolm X defines himself as the intellectual equal of those in the room and his extracurricular education as equal to their advanced academic degrees.

Despite Malcolm X's relish for intellectual debate, Benjamin Karim writes, "Malcolm seemed to me to be most comfortably himself, and most at home, in the temple. In my mind's eye I see him again standing at the blackboard with the chalk between his thumb and forefinger. I hear him teaching, I recall him ministering" (129). At the temple schools, Malcolm X introduced new converts to the NOI by challenging how they understood themselves. Karim recalls how Malcolm X opened the first NOI class Karim attended: "'And now I'll tell you why you're here,' he said. 'You are here because you are black. It doesn't matter how light or how dark your complexion is because if you're not white, you're black, and the fact that you are here proves you're black'" (55). Malcolm X began with identity because the NOI taught that "the true knowledge of the black man" would provide adherents with the motivation to learn a new way of understanding themselves and their world and to unite with others who were like them (*Autobiography* 108). According to Elijah Muhammad, "Gaining knowledge of self makes us unite into a great unity. Knowledge of self makes you take on the great virtue of learning" (39). This NOI-sponsored education provided adherents with an "alternative literacy" (Miller 213) which, along with other daily practices noted by Keith Miller, such as "economic separatism and self-sufficiency" (212), "conversational signifiers," and the publication of their

own newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks* (213), promoted a self-identity that was untainted by messages of inferiority.

Even a relentless schedule of preaching, teaching, and lecturing could not douse Malcolm X's desire to learn: "Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read—and that's a lot of books these days. If I weren't out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity…" (*Autobiography* 207). Malcolm X's curiosity led him to read widely in literature, theology, political science, and world events. He had great aspirations for people of color in America, and he relied on his extracurricular reading and writing to help them "learn to unlearn," to use Mignolo's term, to motivate them to delink from the colonial epistemology that continued to suppress them, and to encourage them to unite with other Americans of color ("Delinking" 485).

Gere argues that in addition to engaging human desire, extracurricular literacy provides an alternative route to social or political power for people who otherwise have very little. In "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms," Gere traces the scholarly history of the term "extracurriculum," noting that it is first used by scholars examining the extracurricular literacy practices of white male students in privileged academic settings. As she notes, Frederick Rudolph uses the term to describe "the literary clubs, the fraternity systems, and the organized athletics instigated by undergraduate students during the nineteenth century," and Arthur Applebee uses the term to describe "eighteenth and nineteenth century literary clubs" in which undergraduate students discussed "vernacular literature that was deemed not worthy of academic study" (79). In contrast, in her research Gere pays attention to the extracurricular literacy practices and epistemologies of disenfranchised people, people like Malcolm X, who live in places where higher education does not reach, people whose lives are hobbled by the monotony of manual labor or threatened by the dangers of homelessness. Malcolm X's extracurricular education introduced him to a new and powerful epistemology: a decolonial understanding of history and his place in it. From NOI theology, Malcolm X learned to see the social and political dominance of white people as transitory: NOI taught "that the white man was fast losing his power to oppress and exploit the dark world; that the dark world was starting to rise to rule the world again, as it had before" (X, *Autobiography* 186). If the white man's power was on its way out, Malcolm X would do everything possible to hasten its demise.

In his speech "Message to the Grass Roots," Malcolm X challenges his audience to rightly understand themselves, their enemies, and the strategies that their enemies use to control them. Miller, who uses whiteness theory as a lens for examining Malcolm X's oratory, argues that Malcolm X "repeatedly and thoroughly exposed, interrogated, theorized, critiqued, and debunked whiteness as an epistemology and a rhetoric. He did so through a project that amounted to

nothing less than dismantling and reconstructing African American identity" (200). To do so, Malcolm X relies on his "homemade education" (*Autobiography* 113). As outlined in his speech, this education consists of what he learned from his Garveyite parents and NOI theology as well as from his reading about world politics, specifically, the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, a conference that Walter Mignolo describes as the point of origin for decoloniality among Third World countries (Mignolo, *Darker* xi-xii). In this speech, Malcolm X introduces his audience to decolonial thinking, which Mignolo describes as "a relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality" (10). To identify and repudiate the ongoing colonization of Black people in America generally and in the civil rights movement particularly, Malcolm X uses his speech to challenge his audience to engage in a disobedient epistemology—to find the minds they left in Africa—that will empower them to overthrow the white political power brokers who continue to colonize them.

Malcolm X delivered "Message to the Grass Roots" on November 10, 1963, in Detroit to an audience of militant Black Americans who "rejected the gradualism of the NAACP and SCLC and the nonviolent activism of Rustin and Farmer and were sharply critical of the Negro bourgeoisie" (Marable 264). He delivered the speech at a pivotal moment in his life: he was a few weeks away from being silenced by Elijah Muhammad, less than four months away from his break with the NOI, and five months away from the pilgrimage to Mecca that would radically alter (again) his understanding of white people. It was also a pivotal moment in the modern civil rights movement, occurring less than three months after the March on Washington and less than two months after the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church that took the lives of four children. Historian Manning Marable contends that praise for the March on Washington from President Kennedy and other political leaders overshadowed a growing rift in the civil rights movement evident in the events of that day. Marable argues that "the success of the March on Washington generated great dissension inside the Black Freedom Movement. The suppression of John Lewis' controversial speech highlighted the deeper issues that divided black activists, and as 1963 wore on, the split between the conservative old guard and the militants bubbled to the surface" (263).

One of those bubbles popped when the moderate civil rights leaders who were planning the Northern Negro Leadership Conference in Detroit denied Black nationalists a place on the program. In protest, Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., organized a Grass Roots Conference also in Detroit for the same weekend and invited Malcolm X to be the conference's final speaker. Marable describes the audience's response to Malcolm X's speech as "electrifying" in no small part because "Malcolm appeared to have broken free politically" from the NOI (265). An analysis of "Message to the Grass Roots" in the context of Malcolm X's extracurricular

education, however, suggests that while Malcolm X was indeed nearing a separation from the NOI, he mainly relied on his homemade education, particularly what he had learned from Elijah Muhammad, to exhort his audience to think decolonially by recognizing the strategies of management and control that white people used to oppress them and to act decolonially by rebelling against that control.

Malcolm X begins his argument in "Message to the Grass Roots" by establishing the identity of "our people" (4), using an NOI strategy of expanding the scope of the term "Black people" to include all non-Europeans. Malcolm X tells his audience, "Every time you look at yourself, be you black, brown, red or yellow, a so-called Negro, you represent a person who poses such a serious problem for America because you're not wanted. … So we're all black people, so-called Negroes, second class citizens, ex-slaves" (4). Again echoing Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X argues that rightly understanding one's identity is the first necessary step to achieving a disobedient epistemology: "Once you face this as a fact, then you can start plotting a course that will make you appear intelligent instead of unintelligent" (4). And like Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X defines Americans as the descendants of Europeans: "You didn't come here on the 'Mayflower.' You came here on a slave ship. In chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the 'Mayflower,' you were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers" (5). Malcolm X then identifies "the white man" as the "common enemy" of all Black people: "We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have a common enemy, then we unite—on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy—the white man" (5). In reiterating the division of Black/Aboriginal people and white/American people that he learned from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X creates an opportunity to apply the disobedient epistemology of global struggle for decolonization to the American civil rights movement.

After establishing the identity of his audience and "the white man," Malcolm X introduces the Bandung Conference, a gathering in Indonesia of representatives from 29 nations. He describes the Bandung Conference as "the first unity meeting in centuries of black people. And once you study what happened at the Bandung conference, and the results of the Bandung conference, it actually serves as a model for the same procedure you and I can use to get our problems solved" (5). Malcolm X continues by describing how the participants of the Bandung Conference understood the enemy they had in common: "They realized all over the world where the dark man was being oppressed, he was being oppressed by the white man; where the dark man was being exploited, he was being exploited by the white man. So they got together on this basis—that they had a common enemy" (6). Alluding to tensions in the civil rights movement that lead to competing

conferences in Detroit, Malcolm X calls contemporary Black Americans to focus less on what divides them and more on who is oppressing them:

> When you and I here in Detroit and in Michigan and in America who have been awakened today look around us, we too realize here in America we all have a common enemy, whether he's in Georgia or Michigan, whether he's in California or New York: He's the same man: blue-eyes and blond hair and pale skin—the same man. So what we have to do is what they did. They agreed to stop quarreling among themselves. … We need to stop airing our differences in front of the white man, put the white man out of our meetings, and then sit down and talk shop with each other. That's what we've got to do. (6)

Like the decolonizers from around the world who gathered at the Bandung conference and then fought for their freedom, Malcolm X believed that the only way to upend the colonial matrix of power was for those who were its victims to put aside their differences and separate completely from their oppressors. Although his subsequent conversion to Islam would cause Malcolm X to soften his views on accepting help from white Americans, at this point he believed that any help from white Americans reinforced the colonial matrix of power; any cooperation with white Americans undermined the unity of those who had been colonized.

Toward the end of his speech, Malcolm X offers an account of the recent March on Washington, one that contrasts moderate Black civil rights leaders who operated at the behest of white power brokers within the colonial matrix of power and "the grass roots," people of color who thought decolonially and were primed for a "black revolution" (14). Interestingly, and consistent with decolonial thinking, here Malcolm X shifts from condemning white people generally to indicting powerful white politicians. Malcolm X's decolonial history of the March on Washington cites the origin of the march in plans for disruptive protests by "the grass roots out there in the street":

> They were going to march on Washington, march on the senate, march on the White House, march on the Congress, and tie it up, bring it to a halt, not let the government proceed. They even said they were going out to the airport and lay down on the runway and not let any airplanes land. I'm telling you what they said. That was revolution. That was revolution. That was the black revolution. (14)

According to Malcolm X, the increasing power of the grassroots "scared the white power structure in Washington DC to death," so President Kennedy and other

white political power brokers directed moderate Black civil rights leaders to stop these disruptive plans (14–15). Malcolm X parodies the reply of moderate civil rights leaders, emphasizing their subservient status: "'Boss, I can't stop it because I didn't start it.' I'm telling you what they said. 'I'm not even in it, much less at the head of it'" (15). Malcolm X describes President Kennedy and other white leaders advancing the colonial matrix of power by taking control of the march: "And the old shrewd fox, he said, 'Well if you all aren't in it, I'll put you in it. I'll put you at the head of it. I'll endorse it. I'll welcome it. I'll help it. I'll join it'" (15). As a result, according to Malcolm X, the March on Washington "was a sellout. It was a takeover. … They controlled it so tight—they told those Negroes what time to hit town, how to come, where to stop, what signs to carry, what song to sing, what speech to make, and what speech they couldn't make; and then told them to get out of town by sundown" (16–17). Malcolm X is aware that his narrative of events does not match the "crooked narrative" told by white power brokers and their collaborators in news outlets (see Mignolo, "Delinking" 461). Consequently, more than ten times in "Message to the Grass Roots" Malcolm X stresses the factual basis for his narrative, asserting, for example, "I'm telling you what they said" (15) and, later, "I can prove what I'm saying. If you think I'm telling you wrong, you bring me Martin Luther King and A. Philip Randolph and James Farmer and those other three and see if they'll deny it over a microphone" (16).

Malcolm X's description of how white American power brokers controlled the March on Washington enacts another key observation about colonial power: that deciding *who* will be included and *when* is the purview of those in power. Using an analogy, Malcolm X introduces a "new logic to tell the story" (Mignolo, "Delinking" 461). He explains:

> It's like when you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream; you make it weak. If you pour too much cream in, you won't even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it'll put you to sleep. This is what they did with the March on Washington. They joined it. They didn't integrate it; they infiltrated it. They joined it, became a part of it, took it over. And as they took it over, it lost its militancy. They ceased to be angry. They ceased to be hot. They ceased to be uncompromising. Why, it even ceased to be a march. It became a picnic, a circus. Nothing but a circus, with clowns and all. ("Message to the Grass Roots" 16)

According to Malcolm X, as a result of the interference of President Kennedy

and other white politicians, what had begun as a Black revolution was reduced to mere entertainment: "It was a circus, a performance that beat anything Hollywood could ever do, the performance of the year" (17).

Malcolm X delivered "Message to the Grassroots" shortly before he left the NOI and undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca that changed him once again, that opened him to a new understanding of racism in America. In his last speeches, Malcolm X scholar Robert Terrill writes, Malcolm X tried "to break his audiences free from the confines of the dominant white culture while at the same time helping them avoid becoming trapped within another set of restrictions" (110). On his pilgrimage, Malcolm X encountered devout Muslims of every race; according to Malcolm X, the experience "broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight" (*Autobiography* 416). Returning home, Malcolm X responded to his experience by publicly recanting his adherence to Elijah Muhammad's condemnation of all white people: "In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I will never be guilty of that again—as I know now that some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man" (416). As a result of his on-going extracurricular education and consistent with a decolonial mindset, Malcolm X condemned the actions of specific, racist white politicians and the racist society that emboldened them. Describing a conversation he had with an American ambassador in Africa, Malcolm X recalls, "That discussion with the ambassador gave me a new insight—one which I like: that the white man is not inherently evil, but America's racist society influences him to act evilly. The society has produced and nourishes a psychology which brings out the lowest, most base part of human beings" (427). In an interview upon his return to the United States, Malcolm X summed up the revolution in his thinking: "I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control. I feel what I'm thinking and saying now is for myself. Before, it was for and by the guidance of Elijah Muhammad. Now I think with my own mind, sir" (226).

It must be noted that while Malcolm X's homemade education enabled him to think decolonially, in "Message to the Grass Roots" and throughout his life, Malcolm X expressed sexist and heteronormative ideas consistent with the colonial matrix of power and NOI theology. Furthermore, other issues, including Malcolm X's use of language and images that, while provocative in his time, would now be considered offensive, create real challenges for those who would consider including Malcolm X on a syllabus. But Malcolm X still has much to teach us about the people and ideas that shape our writing and the important role that disobedient epistemology plays in a democracy. And Malcolm X offers a way to respond to Gere's call to assign the extracurriculum a more prominent place in our classrooms. We might start where Malcolm X left off by simply

asking our students to describe a time when they thought with their own mind and encouraging them to celebrate the people and communities that sponsored their disobedient epistemic.

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