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Malcolm X and Martin Luther King: The Interconnectedness of the Civil Rights Movement and  
Black Lives Matter Movement

The Civil Rights Movements is generally believed to have ended with the dismantling of legal segregation; however, the Black Lives Matter movement continued the fight against systemic racism, the byproduct of the gaps left behind by the Civil Rights Movement. The most prominent faces of this period were Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, who were portrayed as two polar opposites. The former advocating for militant and radical action and the latter for peaceful and non-violent resistance. Despite this widely believed binary narrative, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King had the same agenda of achieving Black liberation and ending discrimination against Black people. This paper analyzes Malcolm X's speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, and Martin Luther King's speech, *I've Been to the Mountaintop*, how these were both socio-historical moments that later informed today's Black Lives Matter movement. Through a side-by-side comparison, the paper explores how both speeches called out white supremacy and how it was used to pit Black people against one another which was fueled through the history of discrimination against them, and capitalism's significant role in the ongoing racism against the Black community. The paper seeks to inquire how both speeches set up the foundation for the Black Lives Matter movement, influencing their actions, creating not just an influential relationship between them, but an extension of the Civil Rights movement.

The Black Lives Matter movement first emerged in 2013, which was started by three Black women with a political will to start this project. The murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 was the precursor that sparked the formation of the Black Lives Matter organization, which further grew on social media after the continuous deaths of Black men and boys due to police brutality. A movement that sparked after the continuous deaths of Black people due to police brutality, which then further included the explicit and implicit discrimination Black people faced due to system racism, is reminiscent of what the Civil Rights Movement stood for, and what the most prominent figures from the movement fought for, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. These two figures in history set the foundation for future grassroots social justice movements with how they vocalized and fought against the systemic racism that stemmed from colonialism and slavery. For example, Malcolm X who was deemed to be violent by Western media and was never allowed to be the face of the Civil Rights Movement, was able to congregate the Black community from all different religions and classes. In Malcolm X's speech he stated how,

“Islam is my religious philosophy, my political, economic and social philosophy is black nationalism...if we bring up religion, we'll have differences, we'll have arguments, and we'll never be able to get together. But if we keep our religion at home, keep our religion in the closet, keep our religion between ourselves and our God, but when we come out here we have a fight that's common to all of us against an enemy who is common to all of us” (2).

Malcolm X always gathered the Black community under the premise of fighting against white supremacy, instead of making his religion the forefront of his freedom fighting. In contrast, Martin Luther King incorporated Christianity in his fight for civil rights for Black people. In his speech, *I've Been to the Mountaintop*, Martin Luther King stated how, “We are determined to be

people. We are saying -- We are saying that we are God's children. And that we are God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live” (King). Martin Luther King used religion to strengthen his speeches, and his platform, which one could infer is due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of Black Americans and more importantly, most white Americans were Christians. Thus he not only congregated and captured the hearts of his people but white folks as well. However, both social reformers fought the same battle as both were, “natural law proponents in some important sense. For each believed that breaking a morally unjust or institutional rule was not wrong. In fact, justice and morality require it” (Corlett 192). J. Angelo Corlett highlighted how both figures fought the same battle, and essentially condemned the actions that came with their battle for freedom. Thus, the actions and words put forth by both figures is evident in the Black Lives Matter movement today, as the movement strongly vocalizes their battle on both national headlines and social media, capturing the solidarity and empathy of not just the Black community but with people from all different races and religions, making the movement’s message and mission even more impactful, just as how Malcolm X and Martin Luther King did during the Civil Rights movement.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King’s spirit and message are evident in the Black Lives Matter movement today, through how the movement operates and came about. However, in order for one to truly understand the connection between the two, it is important to understand and acknowledge the history of Black Liberation and how one may view the movement as an extension of the Civil Rights movement. In Malcolm X’s speech, he stated how, “We must know what part politics play in our lives. And until we become politically mature, we will always be misled, led astray, or deceived or maneuvered into supporting someone politically who doesn’t have the good of our community at heart” (3-4). Upon listening to or reading this part of his speech, one may

infer that he is calling out the Black people who are used as puppets or pawns to push the “white” man’s agenda, the ones who compiled or backed the white people who perpetuated systemic racism against Black people explicitly at the time. Similarly, Martin Luther King also called out the Black community who were complacent with white supremacy by stating, “But not only that, we've got to strengthen black institutions. I call upon you to take your money out of the banks downtown and deposit your money in Tri-State Bank...Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we go down together”. While Malcolm X was more general with his delivery, and Martin Luther King was more so calling for a boycott, the message the two made still aligned with one another. In addition to this, bell hooks highlighted how,

“many black people live in the ‘bush of ghosts’ and do not know themselves separate from whiteness...though systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, racism, actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating, and many of us succumb, blacks who imitate whites continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred” (166).

What bell hooks states is applicable to the speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, as they are calling out those who are unable to separate themselves from whiteness. Bell hooks adopted their ideas and added more nuance to it by adding how it is self-hating and that those who appeal to whiteness are suffering from the consequence of slavery and colonialism, as the system placed in society allows for anti-Blackness to be internalized in the Black community as well. This idea is evident in today’s Black Lives Matter, as they call out internalized anti-Blackness in society whether that be opting out of boycotts to strengthen their protests or from hating on Black features without realizing it comes from a system that was made for the Black community to be self-hating. Thus, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King’s calling out of Black people who allow themselves to

be puppets for the white man's agenda, and bell hooks adding nuance by relating it back to colonialism and imperialism, is now evident in Black Lives Matter movement as the movement calls out Black people who succumb to systems of oppression created by white men, and the historical connection by linking it back to systemic oppression.

The overall message sent by both prominent figures from the Civil Rights movement is one that was long lasting, fighting for the liberation and equity of Black people in America, which is fundamentally what the Black Lives Matter movement is fighting for. The Black Lives Matter movement continues the battle of the Civil Rights movement, which is seen through how the protesting is done, making the influence from Malcolm X and Martin Luther King visible, whether it be through a "violent" or peaceful protest, it is justified through the long-lasting discrimination Black people have experienced due to racism, slavery, and colonialism. Malcolm X calls out what is now widely known as capitalists, and the exploitation of the Black community (3), exploring how class comes into play, and most importantly how Black people were living in poverty while spending their money which only benefited the white "man".

Similarly, Martin Luther King also highlighted the economic struggle of Black people in his speech, and his response to helping the Black community was to boycott companies owned by the white man, and those who were against dismantling segregation. It is important to acknowledge this because the battle Black Lives Matter is fighting is also related to capitalism and exploitation, as many Black communities are still overrepresented in low socio-economic communities, lacking access to basic necessities. This all relates back to the long lasting effects from slavery and colonialism as Yeboah highlights how, "To say segregation laws are no longer in existence and so anti-Black racism of the 1960s variant does not exist in the present-day US is to similarly be under the illusion that the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in 1995 was the end of anti-Black

racism” (172). Although legally speaking, segregation has been dismantled, it is still apparent in not only today’s society but also the time before and after the civil rights movement, through red lining and many Black people not having access to generational wealth due to slavery, or not receiving reparations because of slavery. Thus, it is important to understand how capitalism is used by white supremacist and how ingrained it is in systems of oppression, which connects both movements and how both prominent figures from the Civil Rights movement influenced future movements based on their observations and actions.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge how Malcolm X and Martin Luther King call attention to the various systems of oppression that affected Black people such as the economic strains due to capitalism, and highlighting how long lasting effects of colonialism and slavery pit the Black community against each other, and lastly how their voices and actions influenced the social justice movements that are present today, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement. Although both figures from the Civil Rights movement are often pitted against each other as to who should be the face of the movement, their ideals aligned with each other as they both wanted equity and freedom for their community, the Black community. Rather than pitting them against each other as to who had a more effective platform, one should instead focus on the benefits they brought to the Black community, as they used their platform to not only uplift but bring solidarity with Black people from all types of backgrounds. Thus, one can visualize how the Black Lives Matter movement is in actuality an extension of the Civil Rights movement and that the fight for dismantling systemic racism is still ongoing and alive, and that one should amplify these voices fighting against it in order to see a future where there is liberation for all.

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