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On Malcolm X

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 5th, 2018

It is axiomatic, if clichéd, that to be an adolescent is to be rebellious, is to 'fight the powers that be'. We felt ourselves, deep in the suburbs of Perth, to be under the thumb of a shadowy repressive authority. And though we sought out 'play' in a natural environment, be that time at the beach or out bushwalking, we were impressed by urban pop culture. To us, alienated and oppressed, that meant black America. Our music was 'black', our movies were 'black', our slang was 'black'. Or it tried hard to be. We made our way through Spike Lee's catalogue, but more than ever we were searching for good beats like historians moving backwards in time, trying to find the essence of what it was to move. We started with NWA then went to Run DMC to Grandmaster Flash to Parliament, Funkadelic, Sly & the Family Stone to the Meters to Miles Davis to Charlie Parker all the way back to Robert Johnson. But, no matter the era, we had a fetish for 'black' culture, thinking of ourselves as oppressed in a way that 'they' only spoke to. The twentieth century imagination belonged to that America.

But, one always has to come out of the other side of history, which is a fine vocation as long as you give it up. What one gives that up for depends on the lessons one finds in the archive, but needless to say, one must be present for the future. The lesson I learned from this particular canon was a type of political consciousness of decolonisation, a type of liberation theology that aspired to freedom. From Public Enemy I made my way to Martin Luther King to Mahatma Gandhi to Nelson Mandela to Robert Sobukwe to Jose Marti to bell hooks to Angela Davis to Maya Angelou to Toni Morrison. And alongside all of these people there was Malcolm X.

Malcolm X was dangerous, thrilling, radical for a teenager on the loose, the political gloss to what we were doing as we were tagging train stations, popping and locking, drinking gin and juice as we terrorised our own middle class suburbs. He was the intellectual outgrowth of a dissatisfaction that we felt even as our material circumstances would suggest there was nothing to complain about. X had a hold on our imagination. And yet, in the life of Malcolm, there was that hinge moment, that moment he went to Mecca and entered into a different future that was rainbow in colour. It was through the particularity of his own body that he was led to the universal as a world of possibility.

It returned me to my own body. I had not, still do not sometimes, think of my body as being that of a 'man of colour'. This is even as my mother is a beautiful brown, this is even as my cousins are a chocolate box, this is even as my grandparents were unfree subjects in colonial India. But I have that consciousness, and that memory, of what it is like to be spat at, to be told to go back to where you come from, to be hassled by the cops as you walk home. And those realities are raced, even as they are not raced alone. There are other privileges, other intersections and identities, other

valences of the power that matter. If we free our selves from the chains of slavery, we should not want to be bonded into something else, or at least, not so quickly and not so violently. Liberty might be a shadow dream, it might be caves further still, but my hope is that we can reach a light on the hill through hard work and collective effort no matter where we find ourselves.

As W E B Du Bois stated about being black in America:

> One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self–conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

The man with double consciousness is already a ‘Negro’ and an ‘American’, and will always be a ‘Negro’ and an ‘American’. But to be a ‘Negro’ is in some sense bound up with America and to be American is bound up with the ‘Negro’. From this though, we might ask: what is a ‘Negro’? What is ‘America’? And from those new foundations, from that year zero we could well map out a revolution because of our ‘dogged strength’ that connects the dots between bodies that are oppressed in a kind of archipelago that links my suburbs to Harlem itself. Perhaps, as raced peoples, people who are both hypervisible and disappeared in the surveillance state, we must learn not only to double our consciousness but to refract and multiple it in infinite ways. This is about the ‘self-conscious merging’ that Du Bois gestures towards.

After I finished high school I spent six weeks in LA, shuttling between Westwood and South Central. There the dreams of my solidarity hit the brick wall of reality, and though I ordered catfish and drank 40s, there was something inauthentic. This is not only because of the verisimilitude that one must enter into when one hits something so represented, when one goes to ‘America’ even as one has already lived inside its soft power. It was also because there is a barrier between life and representation. I was made out to be an ambassador for ‘Australia’, an Australia my new homies knew from *Crocodile Hunter*. They had missed out on the suburban anxiety of my searching teenage self even as I knew it was a good day if they didn’t have to use their AKs. It was an imbalance, and the complexities of what the new empire looked like, colonising its own insides meant that raced understandings of who we were met national ones in a complex dance that could only be solved by kicking back to the music we all loved and shared and ignoring for a moment the classics of the world.

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