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On Generation X by Samuel F. Reynolds

In 1965, Ossie Davis eulogized Malcolm X as "our shining, Black prince...and our manhood, our Black manhood." But when I picked up the leather-bound black sneaker, outlined with red stripes and the bright green X on the sides, I wondered why our prince had fallen so low and whether we were wearing our manhood on the soles of our feet. However, to be honest, the "X" sensation was really nothing new to me. I knew that Spike Lee would soon grace us with Malcolm X, the movie; that we already had Malcolm X T-shirts, hats, jackets, schoolbags, watches, and potato chips; and that we were only missing Malcolm X action figures, a Malcolm X float during Macy's Thanksgiving parade--and sneakers. But when I saw the X on the sneakers, I wondered what other spots that X marked.

The X in Malcolm's name has been made to be a lot of powerful things to many people. Malcolm X's earthly exit acted as an inspiration for the creation of the Black Panther Party, one of the most noted Black radical groups of the twentieth century. Malcolm's staged photograph of him looking out his window with a rifle in hand has been reproduced (with the added caption of "By Any Means Necessary") on almost enough posters and prints to take over that X on the wall of many homes that was once marked for the Jesus portrait; and with a fitting gesture of poetic irony it's usually placed right next to some print of Martin Luther King, Jr., probably headlined with something about America and a dream. According to Paula Giddings, author of When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women On Race and Sex in America, and a host of other women "revolutionaries" from the 60s and early 70s, that X was room enough for many Black male "revolutionaries" to make Black nationalism synonymous with Black

manhood and chauvinism. White radicals, usually socialists, have made use of that X by publishing most of the books we have on Malcolm to propagate their ideas that Malcolm was moving toward being a socialist and belongs to all comrades in the Revolution, not just the Black ones. And even still, those who know little about Malcolm X (White or Black) take the X to point toward a man who crossed out all hope of Blacks and Whites achieving cooperation and integration. They feel he steadfastly believed, to his death, that Whites were blue-eyed devils and that Blacks should be free "by any means necessary," including by acts of violence (although Malcolm never led a revolt and was involved in far fewer violent situations than was M. L. King). And for that shopkeeper who was selling the "X" sneaker, the X equals its price.

However, Malcolm's X may indeed indict all of us and serve as a symbol of our times. In fact, this generation, my generation, has been marked "Generation X." On closer examination, however, the X encompasses more than just one generation: it could be said to mark an era. Many *avant-garde* academics, critics and artists proclaim our era the postmodern era: the era that has exposed modernism--structuralism, marxism, nationalism, romanticism, and most other -isms (except postmodernism)--as fraudulent. The most critical scholars of our time have come to realize that the Western Enlightenment "project" and the triumph of rational thought toward progress was really nothing of the kind. It was at best a dreamy, romantic prelude to a horrible nightmare that would buttress the most virulent forms of oppression in this millenium: racist slavery, colonialism, industrial capitalism, fascism, Nazism, and the Reagan/Bush years. Postmodernism, essentially, is the Western moment of the "X": the moment of indecision (What do we do now in a post-industrial/post-colonial world?) and the

moment of dread ("At the point when we are most able to destroy ourselves and the planet, that is to face global extinction, how do we find meaning and community now that God, Marx, and even Plato are dead?"). Post-modernism, especially in America, is faced with the horror, as Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual states, that "[t]he 'crisis in black and white' is also a crisis in social theory wherein American capitalism, the racial exploiter, has, by its own inner dynamic, swept everything before it by its power of rapid development and ability to recover, adjust, and absorb and institutionalize *even anti-capitalistic features* [italics in original]."

At bottom, and thus at risk, our country has pushed its insistence on material gain and acquisition to such an end that all our best ideological opiates--religion, Marxism, and even liberalism--are almost so exhausted (perhaps from our over-consumption of the rhetoric of each ideology) that our urban areas have become mucous bundles of raw drives and nerves. In fact, post-modernism, by its very intention to relentlessly usurp and upset all manner of "power games" and structures that secure privilege, is predicated on a sort of violence and has paved the way for a harder violence.

In fact, if postmodernism, this great X, crosses out the necessity to embrace previous "truths" such as Christianity, Socialism, and, even ideology itself, then it's not hard to understand why many urban Black youth, those who cherish the "X" most, would be so nihilistic--so blatantly without hope of adding meaning to their lives. In this "reign of quantity," as the mystic Rene Guenon calls it, why shouldn't a homeboy blow your head off to get your \$75.00 sneakers? He's getting his like you're getting yours. In such a world marked by an X, we would, logically, have such young souls who are atheists before they know they are, as Richard Wright points out in The Outsider , and who succumb to satisfying their drives for reckless

sex and violence because they have no reason not to. In such a world, we would, logically, have minds which choose to abandon pursuing tightly wrapped ideological opiates in relative safety to use hands to market real ones on street corners at herculean risk, because they know they still will be able to take home as much cash as any bourgeoisie, Black nationalist or socialist academic; and, most horribly, because they realize that this congenital condition, Blackness, marks them for life and can only make them cross--and crossed out.

However, the postmodern age attached to our metaphor, the X, should not be viewed as the source for all our urban evils. In fact, the "X" paves the way for us to have a unique kind of experience that has not been afforded to previous generations: the chance to become what every fanatical Christian has dreamed of being in (but not part of)--the Last Generation. Since the X called postmodernism allows for no truths (including the tongue-in-cheek one I just gave), then there are no correct histories and there can be no more "one" ways--the very heart of the racist ideas like Eurocentrism (the supposed consistency of the ideas that form Western history, starting with ancient Greece to the present) and Afrocentrism (its response). History is more like a CD player than a cassette player: it's all about random access and not going from side A to B. Our differences, our multiplicities--the hallmarks of postmodern thought--do not allow for making sweeping generalizations or homogenizing communities. So how can we still seriously talk about generations, especially a "Generation X"? And how can we seriously talk about a "lost generation", as Betty Shabbazz calls this "generation" in a recent USA TODAY article?

We are not lost. This X does not mark a loss, but the place where a great treasure waits to be excavated. However, there are some things to which we

are lost. We are lost to shrill Afrocentrists whose insistence upon "correcting history" and reconstituting the Black community outweighs their ability to be sympathetic to and respectful of its internal differences and the needs, drives and pains of each individual in it. We are lost to Marxists and other "rhetorutionaries" who abuse their powerful laser-like insights into the class dimension of American hegemony to cut around or dismiss the critical issues of race and racial formation in American politics. And we are lost to Post-modernists who take multiculturalism and difference as an occasion to test the boundaries of their banal palates and to determine whether their intellectual stomachs can digest the vertiginous assortment of people who have been spewed out by too many monsters to name. They should learn to be strong enough to swallow their own pain and stop being afraid in the name of being sensitive, *^ la* political correctness.

But besides these things, one grave matter must not be lost in our discussion about the X: Malcolm. Yes, we can celebrate our X and the implications of it; but we have again put another man on a cross to pay the penalty for our pain, and again, we, like Roman soldiers, sit at the foot of it casting lots and selling the man's garments to each other. Malcolm was no sellout, but we sure are. In our enthusiasm for his story, we have forgotten that, ultimately, Malcolm's story is his own. True, we often identify with him, but he had his own personal mission and had to find his own meaning-- his own answer to his X. He did. He died El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He was willing to take risks, suffer his own personal pain and anguish, and die while trying to live his own life. But the X granted to us by the shattering of rigid ideologies like racialism, Eurocentricity/Afrocentricity, Marxism, and the like, forces us to acknowledge that our communities are as diverse as each of our own personal psychological wounds and tragedies. Malcolm

had his X and each of us has his own, which probably has nothing to do with the man who died El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

At this juncture (the X again) we should have enough courage and strength to bear our own pains and heal ourselves. We shouldn't have to sell out brothers and crucify them on crosses, and then put on "his" sneakers at the foot of them. We should be able to bear our own crosses and be "hard" enough to give meaning to our own X's.