

The African-American Family

“Information Resources on African-American Studies” (<http://www.accd.edu/pac/lrc/africanam.htm>).

Littlejohn-Blake, Sheila M. and Carol A. Darling. “Understanding the Strengths of African-American Families.” *Journal of Black Studies* 23.4 (1993): 460–471.

Coming to an Awareness of Language

Malcolm X

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm X (1925–1965) was the son of a Baptist minister who espoused the cause of black nationalism. After moving to Lansing, Michigan, the Little family suffered the torching of their home and the murder of their father by white supremacists. In junior high school, Malcolm Little expressed a desire to study law, a dream one of his teachers called “no realistic goal for a nigger.” Eventually, Malcolm settled in New York City and entered the Harlem underworld, where he became known as “Big Red.” In 1946, he was convicted of burglary. While in prison, he took it upon himself to improve his education, as narrated in this selection, and he studied the writings of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. Paroled in 1952, he changed his surname to X to replace his lost African name (he considered Little a “slave name”).

Working with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X established new mosques in Detroit and Harlem, increasing Nation of Islam membership from 500 to 30,000 from 1952 to 1963. In 1964, however, he severed his relationship with Elijah Muhammad, after learning that his spiritual mentor had committed adultery with six women and had fathered several illegitimate children. He then embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam’s holiest city, from which he returned embracing a more peaceful and tolerant form of Islam and abandoning his enmity for white people, whom he had once called “devils.” After a speech in Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom in February 1965, Malcolm X was murdered by three gunmen. All three men, members of the Nation of Islam, were convicted of first-degree murder. This selection is taken from the Autobiography of Malcolm X, which he wrote with the help of Alex Haley, the author of Roots.

I’ve never been one for inaction. Everything I’ve ever felt strongly about, I’ve 1
done something about. I guess that’s why, unable to do anything else, I soon
began writing to people I had known in the hustling world, such as Sammy
the Pimp, John Hughes, the gambling house owner, the thief Jumpsteady, and
several dope peddlers. I wrote them all about Allah and Islam and Mr. Elijah
Muhammad. I had no idea where most of them lived. I addressed their letters
in care of the Harlem or Roxbury bars and clubs where I’d known them.

I never got a single reply. The average hustler and criminal was too 2
uneducated to write a letter. I have known many slick, sharp-looking

hustlers, who would have you think they had an interest in Wall Street; privately, they would get someone else to read a letter if they received one. Besides, neither would I have replied to anyone writing me something as wild as “the white man is the devil.”

3 What certainly went on the Harlem and Roxbury wires was that Detroit Red was going crazy in stir, or else he was trying some hype to shake up the warden’s office.

4 During the years that I stayed in the Norfolk Prison Colony, never did any official directly say anything to me about those letters, although, of course, they all passed through the prison censorship. I’m sure, however, they monitored what I wrote to add to the files which every state and federal prison keeps on the conversion of Negro inmates by the teachings of Mr. Elijah Muhammad.

5 But at that time, I felt that the real reason was that the white man knew that he was the devil.

6 Later on, I even wrote to the Mayor of Boston, to the Governor of Massachusetts, and to Harry S. Truman. They never answered; they probably never even saw my letters. I handscratched to them how the white man’s society was responsible for the black man’s condition in this wilderness of North America.

7 It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education.

8 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. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would *say* it, something such as, “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad—”

9 Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I’ve said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

10 It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn’t contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.

11 I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that

I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's 12 pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know *which* words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet 13 everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks.

I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, every- 14 thing I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—immensely 15 proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

I was so fascinated that I went on—I copied the dictionary's next 16 page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet—and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could 17 for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors . . . and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Content

- a. Explain the process by which the author improved his reading and writing abilities.
- b. What distinction does Malcolm X imply when, in paragraph 8, he says “I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional”?
- c. What is it about Bimbi that makes the narrator wish to “emulate him” (paragraph 10)?
- d. What distinction does Malcolm X draw between being articulate in the “hustling world” and being truly literate?
- e. At first, Malcolm X wanted to improve his ability to communicate in the letters he wrote, “especially to Elijah Muhammad.” Does this motivation change later on? Explain.
- f. Is this essay about a conversion? If so, how do paragraphs 4 and 5 illuminate that conversion?
- g. Define the kind of freedom that the author mentions in his conclusion.

Strategy and Style

- h. What is the effect of the author’s mentioning the names of hustlers such as Sammy the Pimp and of Elijah Muhammad in the same paragraph?
- i. The author’s letters contained statements such as “the white man is the devil.” Do such comments affect his credibility? Why or why not?
- j. What use does this selection make of dialogue? Why is this dialogue important?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

- a. Analyze any two paragraphs in this selection. Evaluate the writer’s command of the language and his believability.
- b. Comment on the narrator’s voice. How would you characterize the personality of the speaker? Play close attention to the street language that he weaves into the fabric of this narrative.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUSTAINED WRITING

- a. Like Malcolm X, tell the story of how you accomplished an important goal in your life. Use specific detail to convey how difficult the task was. Be as detailed when you explain how achieving this goal changed your life, your lifestyle, or your personality.

- b. Read Richard Marius's "Writing Drafts," a selection in Chapter 3. What can Marius tell us about the process by which Malcolm came to "an awareness of language"? In what way does Malcolm's essay shed light on Marius?
- c. Research the life of Malcolm X in greater depth in print sources and on the Internet. Then, write an essay that informs the reader of a limited aspect of that life. For example, explain how and why he accepted Islam, why and how he changed his opinion of white people, his rise to prominence in the Harlem community, or the events that led to his assassination. Another assignment you might choose is to explain the tenets of Islam that attracted Malcolm to this faith.

READ MORE

Malcolm X and His Works

El-Beshti, Bashir M. "The Semiotics of Salvation: Malcolm X and the Autobiographical Self." *Journal of Negro History* 82.4 (1997): 359–367. *An analysis of Malcolm X's powerful ability to use language.*

"Malcolm X Project" (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/mxp/>): *This Web site of the Malcolm X project at Columbia University provides a good place to start.*

"Selected Resources on Malcolm X" (<http://www.library.cornell.edu/Library/MalcolmX.html>): *This Africana library site at Cornell provides a good bibliography on the author.*

The Nation of Islam

"The Birth of the Nation of Islam" (<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/07/11/farrakhan.timeline/>).

"Nation of Islam" (www.answers.com/topic/Nation_of_Islam).

37 Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police

Martin Gansberg

Martin Gansberg (1921–1995) worked for the New York Times for 43 years. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Gansberg took his bachelor's degree at St. John's University and joined the Times as an office assistant in 1942. After becoming a reporter, he rose to the