

Comparative analysis of the autobiography of malcolm x

[Literature](#), [Autobiography](#)



Malcolm X is regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the civil rights era during the 1950's and 60's. His controversial views challenged the mainstream civil rights movement as he opposed integration as championed by MLK and urged his followers to challenge white aggression by any means necessary. His positive impact, however, cannot be ignored as he raised the self-esteem of black Americans, reconnected them with their African heritage and spread Islamic faith throughout black communities.

In the years prior to his assassination, Malcolm X shared his life story to prominent African American author Alex Haley. His journey from Omaha, Nebraska to Boston, Harlem and eventually Mecca is outlined in Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). In this essay, I will explore Malcolm X's autobiography as it is applied to other theoretical models regarding race??" namely, W. E. B Dubois's concept of Double Consciousness from his collection of essays *Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and Omi and Winant's theory on Racial Formation from their book *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986). More specifically, X's failure to parallel woman's rights with black Americans rights necessitates a modern extension to incorporate all minority groups in Dubois's model of Double Consciousness??" thus further understanding Black Americans identity struggle. Additionally, X's description of black oppression at the hands of white America illuminates the absence of white dominated racial oppression and a racial hierarchy in Omi and Winant's racial formation theory. In extending Dubois's model and adding critical discussion to Omi and Winant's theory, can one to better understand the struggle of minority groups in America.

I will first explore X's views towards women in my application of his autobiography to Dubois's double consciousness. Throughout his Autobiography, Malcolm X's apparent sexist and stereotypical attitude towards women undermines his legitimacy as a civil rights leader as he fails to parallel woman's rights to black Americans rights. In the beginning of his autobiography, X's gender confirming stereotypes towards his parents are viewed. When describing, X comments on his masculine traits of bigness, toughness and strength. He goes on to claim he admires his father's occupation as a preacher and nationalist. Whereas, when describing his mother, Malcolm X states: My mother at this time seemed to be always working cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, and fussing over us eight children (86) In these descriptions, X's views are the traditionally binary image of a mother who cooks and an admirable, masculine father. X further solidifies these binary roles by justifying his father's physical abuse. In response to his mother's abuse at the hands of his father, X says, An educated woman, I suppose, can't resist the temptation to correct an uneducated man (82). In X's eyes, his mother education is a threat to a man's sense of manhood and her talking-back permits abuse. By justifying his father's abuse, X subconsciously contradicts his entire argument about the injustice by white society. He fails to see how his own fathers physical abuse is as detrimental to black society as white Americas continual hatred and discrimination. Another instance of X's failure to juxtapose women's rights with black Americans rights is his description of his relationship with Laura and the cause for her societal downfall. X initially describes his girlfriend Laura as bright and having a promising future, but goes on to

clarify that after their relationship she became an alcoholic, drug addict, and prostitute. The startling fact regarding their relationship comes in X's inclination that she had subsurface potential (148) to become a prostitute and he wished had known then [what] to look for in Laura's face (148) before dating her. In these descriptions, X comments that Laura, who initially had a promising future, had some internal tendency to become a prostitute and alcoholic. X completely overlooks the societal and economic pressures that women in deprived communities face which causes them to turn to prostitution. Ironically, a majority of the novel is spent analyzing X's social and economic reasons as to why black men are forced to hustle, pimp and engage in criminal activities but he fails to do the same for women in a similar predicament. This description of Laura's downfall in the autobiography seems to be that racism of the dominating white society turns the black American man into a life of crime, but some internal tendency turns the black American women into prostitution. X's validation towards his mother's abuse and incorrect implications of Laura's future demonstrate that civil rights of minority groups, in Malcolm X's journey, must be extended to include women.

In understanding X's failure to parallel black rights to women's rights, can a modern extension to Dubois's double consciousness to include other minority and discriminated-against groups be investigated. This extension better allows a critical understanding of the plight of minority groups as they struggle with self-identification in America. The concept of Double Consciousness is first introduced in civil rights activist W. E. B Dubois's

collection of essays, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). To Dubois, Double consciousness represents the sensation of twoness felt by black Americans as they struggle with their black identity and their identity as seen by the white American majority. From my previous discussion on X's neglect for woman rights, one can see that Dubois's theory of Double Consciousness can be extended to analyze the identity of women living in a patriarchal society. Like Black Americans oppression at the hands of a white majority, women are oppressed at the hands of a patriarchal society. In his autobiography, X's mother is oppressed by a patriarchal society where domestic violence is permitted. Additionally, X fails to identify the societal pressures that cause his girlfriend, Laura, to turn to prostitution, yet clearly provides an analysis to why he was forced to hustle in Boston and New York. X's failure to incorporate a third identity overlooks. In fact, some recent social analysts have extended double consciousness to not only a third identity, but multiple identities to apply to all minority groups. Some examples in recent events could be the immigrant asylum seeker at the US Southern border or transgender students requesting access to gender inclusive school facilities. This multi-consciousness accurately portrays the self-image difficulties of all minority groups in America and a better understanding of race relations can occur.

In a similar fashion to my analysis of double consciousness, I will first examine the impact of white oppression and racial hierarchy in Malcolm X's autobiography, then apply these instances to justify their inclusion in Omi and Winant's Racial Formation Theory. In the beginning of his autobiography,

X describes the unfortunate predicament of Black Americans: Back when I was growing up, the “successful” Lansing Negroes were such as waiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected (8). In X’s community, janitors and waiters were considered elite and respected occupations, even though they made minimal wages. This quote comments on a racial hierarchy present in the black community, with the black elite as janitors and the less elite as waiters. In a larger scheme, it demonstrates that black Americans were at the bottom of a racial hierarchy. As will be further explored, we soon find out who is at the top. As the autobiography progresses, X describes his primary school years. In his descriptions, X states that he is vastly more intelligent than his fellow white peers yet, when consulting with his white History teacher about his aspirations to become a lawyer, his teacher responds: “A lawyer??” that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You’re good with your hands ” making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? (38). Here, X’s white history teacher dissuades X from pursuing a higher education because of his race and encourages him to instead pursue a more realistic goal as a carpenter. This further exemplifies that black Americans fit into the bottom of the racial hierarchy as carpenters and not at the top as lawyers. Furthermore, this message in coming from his white teacher, represents a larger picture where white authoritative figures (and in general white America) oppress black Americans. A similar instance regarding white America’s oppression and evidence for a racial hierarchy is apparent in X’s predicament of taking shelter in a Harlem nightclub:

In one sense, we were huddled in there, bonded together in seeking security and warmth and comfort from each other, and we didn't know it. All of us??" who might have probed space, or cured cancer, or built industries??" were, instead, black victims of the white man's American social system. (93)

In this quote X is indirectly referring to his acquaintances such as Sammy the Pimp, whose considerable business skills might have helped him build industries instead of a pimping empire. Similarly, his other acquaintance West Indian Archie's could have used his photographic memory and quick math skills to probe space or cure cancer and not in gambling rackets. X concludes with the fact that they are victims of the white man's American social system. This quote explores the racial hierarchy of America as Black Americans are forced to take shelter in a nightclub against the difficult conditions of a Harlem ghetto and could not escape these difficult conditions as they were victims of the white man's social system. Once again, X and his friends are at the bottom of America's racial hierarchy as they seek shelter in a ghetto and are limited in their prospects of achieving a better life because of the white man's American social system. In a critical analysis of race relations in America, the topic of a racial hierarchy and racial oppression at the hands of white America is an important subject to explore, yet is blatantly absent from widely received Racial Formation Theory.

The additional topics of white America's systematic oppression and racial hierarchy, as outlined in Malcom X's autobiography, need be included in Omi and Winant's Racial Formation Theory to accurately describe racial history and race relations in America. To briefly summarize, Racial Formation Theory

was first introduced by Professors of Sociology Michael Omi at UC Berkeley and Howard Winant at UC Santa Barbara. Omi and Winant coauthored *Racial Formation Theory in the United States* (1986) as a means of dissect and understand racial categories and racial projects throughout America. One pitfall of their theory is that they never address and completely leave out the importance of white Americans, European Americans and white elites in their systematic oppression. They only rarely use the term whites. In their only discussion on the white race, Omi and Winant state:

We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed, we become disoriented when they do not. The black banker harassed by police while walking in casual clothes through his own well-off neighborhood, the Latino or white kid rapping in perfect Afro patois, the unending faux pas committed by whites who assume that the non-white colleagues are less qualified persons hired to fulfill affirmative action guidelines. (59)

In another conversation about the white race, Omi and Winant state Whites tend to locate racism in color consciousness and find its absence color-blindness (70). In these very brief discussions, they only address micro-level questions about racial identity and white racial views, but completely leave out white America's role in perpetuating racial oppression. This counters X's claim that he was dissuaded from become a lawyer by his white teacher. And also counters the fact that X and his acquaintances were forced to take shelter in a nightclub and not escape the difficult conditions of Harlem's ghettos due to white America. Another important topic that is never mentioned in Omi and Winant's discussion of racial projects and racial

oppression is the racial hierarchy in America. In fact, throughout their entire description of racial formation theory they only use the term hierarchy once and fail to further develop this idea. However, this concept is readily apparent in X's autobiography in his description of the respected and successful occupations of Lansing Negroes. X also refers to a racial hierarchy when he describes potential futures of his acquaintances in Harlem that are shut down at the hands of white America. The idea of a racial hierarchy?" with the white man at the top and the black man at the bottom??" need be included in an accurate discussion of Racial Formation Theory.

Only then can Omi and Winant conceptualize the Black Americans struggle. Without the additional of these two subjects, Racial Formation Theory fails to describe white Americans role in a perpetuating a racialized society and racial hierarchy.

A close reading of X's autobiography demonstrates that Malcolm X failed to incorporate the rights of women in his description of an oppression culture. The necessary addition of women in X's autobiography as an extension of Dubois's double consciousness allows a superior understanding of self-image and identity struggles minority groups in America face. Without this extension, not only woman, but all minority groups are??"! Additionally, X's autobiography implies a racial hierarchy as he realizes the impossibility of being a lawyer, recognizes the wasted potential of his friends in Harlem and comments on the occupational limitations in Lansing. This addition is necessary in accurately understanding a racial hierarchy at the hands of white America.