

ALMEIDA THEATRE

'The Language of Violence' by Malcolm X

The Speech

- Watch the speech delivered by Cush Jumbo

Duration: 10 minutes 25 seconds

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/language-of-violence>

- Discuss students' initial responses.

Context

Malcom X was an African American political figure, human right's activist and minister for the religious organisation the Nation of Islam. He played a key role in the American Civil Rights Movement and was a powerful public speaker. He was openly critical of the mainstream civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr's methods of non-violent protest and integration.

In 1964 Malcom left the Nation of Islam and following a pilgrimage to Mecca converted to Sunni Islam adopting the Muslim name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.

The same year he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, a secular organisation set up with the aim of connecting African Americans with the people of the African Continent and their African heritage.

During this time tension and hostility between Malcom and the Nation of Islam was growing. He received threats from members of the organisation and on 14 February 1965 his house was firebombed.

A week later on 21 February 1965 Malcom X was assassinated by members of the Nation of Islam while giving a lecture at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem.

- Below is a list of key events in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Ask students to place these events on a timeline and add any additional events they find. They can use the sources listed at the end of this document.

Civil Rights activists attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery campaigning for the rights of black voters. They are prevented from crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge by local police and brutally attacked.

Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest for civil disobedience led to a yearlong boycott of buses by the black community of Montgomery.

Malcom X is assassinated.

President Eisenhower signs a new Civil Rights Act, the first federal civil rights legislation passed by the United States Congress since the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The law is made to protect voter rights.

Nine black students who were due to integrate into an all-white school in Little Rock, Arkansas are blocked from entering by the Arkansas National Guard.

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Civil rights activists campaigning for the rights of black voters successfully complete a march from Selma to Montgomery under the protection of U.S. Army troops and the Alabama National Guard.

A Voting Rights Act is passed banning the use of literacy tests as a requirement for voter registration.

Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated.

Approximately 250,000 people took part in The March on Washington and convened in front of the Lincoln memorial in Washington D.C. where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his 'I have a dream' speech.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs an historic Civil Rights Act preventing discrimination against employees based on race, gender, religion or national origin.

The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing kills four young girls and sparks widespread protests.

Content

- Watch the speech again.
- The table on the next page outlines the different stages in the speech. Ask your students to reflect on what these points make them think and what they make them feel.
- You could also suggest they complete the columns with a consideration of how the speech would have affected people listening to it at the time it was delivered.

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Stages in Speech	What does this make you think?	How does this make you feel?
House bomb		
Coolness vs. Heat point		
Plane anecdote		
His stance		
His plight		
The argument for violence		
Derides counter argument		
Language analogy		
Dismisses alternatives to physical action/ resistance		
List of atrocities - 1963		
Underscores reasons that necessitate violence		

Language

- Ask students to read a copy of the speech and explore the rhetorical devices used. **A transcript of the speech is included at the end of this document.**
- This speech is self-conscious about the importance of utilising emotive language and a passionate appeal in bringing change.
- Ask your students to complete the table below to identify examples of this technique and its impact.

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Language features	Example	Effect
Tone		
Register e.g. informal or formal		
Key Words		
Themes		
Contrasts		

Discussion

- Watch the discussion between Cush Jumbo and Members of Freedom from Torture

Duration: 5 minutes 25 seconds

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/reaction/language-of-violence>

- How does the panel feel that Malcom X's words resonate?
- Is there anything that justifies violence in your opinion? Discuss with a partner?

Extension Task

- Ask students to write an essay comparing the ideologies of Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. and evaluating the effectiveness of their strategies as activists.
- Ask students to write an emotionally driven argument on a topic they feel passionate about.

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Useful Links

Websites

[Malcom X](#) – Official website

[The Malcom X Project at Columbia University](#) – Website including archive films and recordings of Malcom X speaking

[Martin Luther King Jr.](#) – Nobel Prize Biography

[American Civil Rights Movement](#) – Encyclopaedia Britannica

[NAACP](#) – A history of civil rights activism in America

[Reclaiming Malcom X](#) – Article from the National Civil Rights Museum

[The Foundations of Black Power](#) – Malcom X's influence on the Black Power Movement

[Black Lives Matter](#) – Movement fighting for Freedom, Liberation and Justice

[The Age of Rage](#) – An analysis of recent protest movements

[Hate Speak](#) – The language of rage

Films

[Malcom X](#) – directed by Spike Lee and starring Denzel Washington

[Selma](#) – directed by Ava DuVernay

[The Rosa Parks Story](#) – starring Angela Bassett

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THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE

Malcolm X | 14 February 1965

This is an edited version of Malcolm X's speech at the Ford Auditorium in Detroit.

I was in a house last night that was bombed, my own.

It isn't something that made me lose confidence in what I am doing, because my wife understands and I have children, and even in their young age they understand. I think they would rather have a father who will take a stand in the face of any kind of reaction from narrow-minded people, rather than to compromise and later on have to grow up in shame and in disgrace.

Whenever you and I are discussing our problems we need to be very objective, very cool, calm, collected.

But that doesn't mean we should always be.

There's a time to be cool and a time to be hot.

There's a time to love and a time to hate.

I was on a plane between Algiers and Geneva and it just happened that two other Americans were sitting in the two seats next to me. None of us knew each other and the other two were white, one a male, the other a female. And after we had been flying along for about forty minutes, the lady, she says, "Could I ask you a personal question?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, she had been looking at my briefcase, and she said, "What kind of last name could you have that begins with X?"

So I said, "That's it - X."

And she said, "Well, what does the 'M' stand for?" I said, "Malcolm."

So she was quiet for about ten minutes, and she turned to me and she says, "You're not Malcolm X?"

You see, we had been riding along in a nice conversation like three human beings, no hostility, no animosity, just human. And she couldn't take this, she said, "Well you're not what I was imagining". And she ended up telling me that she was imagining horns and all that, and someone who was out to kill all white people, as if all white people could be killed.

So before I get involved in anything nowadays, I have to straighten out my own position, which is clear.

I am not a racist in any form whatsoever. I don't believe in any form of racism. I don't believe in any form of discrimination or segregation. I believe in Islam. I am a Muslim. And there's nothing wrong with being a Muslim, nothing wrong with the religion of Islam.

The yardstick that is used by the Muslim to measure another man is not the man's colour but the man's deeds, the man's conscious behaviour, the man's intentions. And when you use that as a standard of measurement or judgement, you never go wrong. I'm not in a society that practices brotherhood. I'm in a society that might preach it on Sunday, but they don't practice it on any day. It is a society controlled primarily by racists and segregationists who are in positions of power. They exercise forms of brutal oppression against dark-skinned people in any place on this earth where they're trying to exploit and oppress. They are violent when their interests are at stake.

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But when you and I want just a little bit of freedom, we're supposed to be nonviolent.

They're violent.

But when it comes time for you and me to protect ourselves against lynchings, they tell us to be nonviolent. That's a shame. And when somebody stands up and talks like I just did, they say, "Why, he's advocating violence!" Isn't that what they say?

Every time you pick up your newspaper, you see that I'm advocating violence. I have never advocated any violence. I've only said that black people who are the victims of organised violence perpetrated upon us, we should defend ourselves. I wouldn't call on anybody to be violent without a cause. But I think the black man in this country, above and beyond people all over the world, will be more justified when he stands up and starts to protect himself, no matter how many necks he has to break and heads he has to crack.

I saw on the television where they took this black woman down in Selma, Alabama, knocked her right down on the ground, dragging her down the street. You saw it, you're trying to pretend like you didn't see it 'cause you knew you should've done something about it and didn't. It showed the sheriff and his henchmen throwing this black woman on the ground -- on the ground. And negro men standing around doing nothing about it saying, "Well, let's overcome them with our capacity to love."

What kind of phrase is that?

"Overcome them with our capacity to love."

And then it disgraces the rest of us, because all over the world the picture is splashed showing a black woman with some white brutes, with their knees on her holding her down, and full-grown black men standing around watching it.

You can't ever reach a man if you don't speak his language.

If a man speaks the language of brute force, you can't come to him with peace. Why, good night! He'll break you in two, as he has been doing all along. If a man speaks French, you can't speak to him in German. If he speaks Swahili, you can't communicate with him in Chinese. You have to find out what this man speaks. And once you know his language, learn how to speak his language, and he'll get the point. There'll be some dialogue.

You know the language the Klan speaks.

It is a duty, it's your and my duty as human beings, it is our duty to our people, to organise ourselves and let the government know that if they don't stop that Klan, we'll stop it ourselves.

So I don't believe in violence - that's why I want to stop it.

And you can't stop it with love. So, we only mean vigorous action in self-defence and that vigorous action we feel we're justified in initiating by any means necessary. The press call us racist and people who are "violent in reverse." This is how they psycho you. They make you think that if you try to stop the Klan from lynching you, you're practising "violence in reverse."

I hear a lot of you parrot: "I don't want to be a Ku Klux Klan in reverse." Well, if a criminal comes around your house with his gun, it doesn't make you a robber because you grab your gun and run him out.

The press calls us "racist in reverse." Why, this is insane. With skillful manipulating, they're able to make the victim look like the criminal, and the criminal look like the victim.

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In 1963 everyone was talking about the "centennial of progress!" Everyone celebrating how much white and black people have learned to love each other in America. If you had stood up in January that year, and told them that by May, Birmingham would have exploded, that John F. Kennedy would be killed for his role in everything; if you had told them that a church would be bombed with four little black girls blown to bits while they were praying, or that three civil rights workers would be brutally murdered and the government unable to do anything about it - why, they would say you're crazy.

If you tell them what is now in store, they'll think you're crazy for sure. But this year will be the longest and hottest and bloodiest year of them all. It has to be, not because you want it to be, or I want it to be, or we want it to be, but because the conditions that created those explosions are still here; the conditions are still here.

You can't say that you're not going to have an explosion when you leave the conditions, the ingredients, still here.

As long as those ingredients, explosive ingredients, remain, then you're going to have the potential for explosion on your hands.