

The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X

I.F. Stone

November 11, 1965 issue

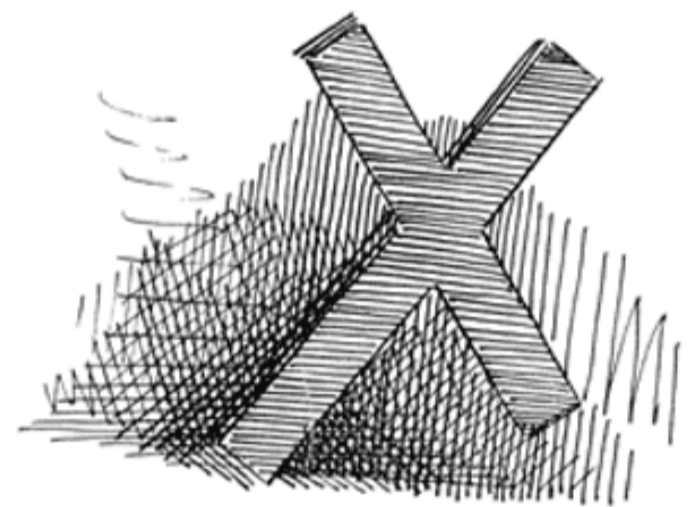
Reviewed:

The Autobiography of Malcolm X
with the assistance of Alex Haley
Grove, 455 pp., \$7.50

Malcolm X Speaks
edited by George Breitman
Merit Publishers, 256 pp., \$5.95

Malcolm X was born into Black Nationalism. His father was a follower of Marcus Garvey, the West Indian who launched a “Back to Africa” movement in the Twenties. Malcolm’s first clash with white men took place when his mother was pregnant with him; a mob of Klansmen in Omaha, Nebraska, waving shotguns and rifles, warned her one night to move out of town because her husband was spreading trouble among the “good” Negroes with Garvey’s teachings. One of his earliest memories was of seeing their home burned down in Lansing, Michigan, in 1929, because the Black Legion, a white Fascist organization, considered his father an “uppity” Negro. The body of his father, a tall, powerful black man from Georgia, soon afterwards was found literally cut to pieces in one of those mysterious accidents that often veil a racial killing.

His mother was a West Indian who looked like a white woman. Her unknown father was white. She slowly went to pieces mentally under the burden of raising eight children. When the family was broken up. Malcolm was sent to a detention home, from which he attended a white school. He must have been a bright and attractive lad, for he was at the top of his class and was elected class president in the seventh grade. Many years later, in a speech on the Black Revolution which is included in the collection, *Malcolm X Speaks*, he was able to boast bitterly, “I grew up with white people. I was integrated before they even invented the word.” The reason for the bitterness was an incident that changed his life. His English teacher told him he ought to begin thinking about his career. Malcolm said he would like to be a lawyer. His teacher suggested carpentry instead. “We all here like you, you know that,” the teacher said, “but you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger.”



Malcolm X; drawing by David Levine

Malcolm X left Lansing deeply alienated and in the slums of Boston and New York he became a “hustler,” selling numbers, women, and dope. “All of us,” he says in his *Autobiography* of his friends in the human jungle, “who might have probed space or cured cancer or built industries, were instead black victims of the white man’s American social system.” Insofar as he was concerned, this was no exaggeration. He was an extraordinary man. Had he been wholly white, instead of irretrievably “Negro” by American standards, he might easily have become a leader of the bar. In the underworld he went from marijuana to cocaine. To meet the cost he took up burglary. He was arrested with a white mistress who had become his look-out woman. In February, 1946, not quite twenty-one, he was sentenced to ten years in prison in Massachusetts. The heavy sentence reflected the revulsion created in the judge by the discovery that Malcolm had made a white woman his “love slave.” In prison, he went on nutmeg, reefers, Nembutal, and benzedrine in a desperate effort to replace the drugs. He was a vicious prisoner, often in solitary. The other prisoners nicknamed him “Satan.” But the prison had an unusually well stocked library to which he was introduced by a fellow prisoner, an old-time burglar named Bimbi. Through him, Malcolm first encountered Thoreau. Prison became his university; there also he was converted to the Nation of Islam, the sect the press calls Black Muslims.

The important word here is conversion. To understand Malcolm’s experience, one must go to the literature of conversion. “Were we writing the history of the mind from the purely natural history point of view,” William James concludes in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, “we would still have to write down man’s liability to sudden and complete conversion as one of his most curious peculiarities.” The convert’s sense of being born anew, the sudden change from despair to elation, bears an obvious resemblance to the manic-depressive cycle, except that the change in the personality is often permanent. But those who experience it must first—to borrow Gospel language—be brought low. James quotes the theological maxim, “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.” It is only out of the depths that men on occasion experience this phenomenon of renewal. The success of the Black Muslims in converting and rehabilitating criminals and dope addicts like Malcolm X recalls the mighty phrases James quotes from Luther. “God,” he preached, “is the God...of those that are brought even to nothing...and his nature is...to save the very desperate and damned.” Malcolm had been brought to nothing, he was one of those very desperate and damned when he was “saved” by Elijah Muhammad, the self-proclaimed Messenger of Allah to the lost Black Nation of that imaginary Islam he preaches.

The tendency is to dismiss Elijah Muhammad’s weird doctrine as another example of the superstitions, old and new, that thrive in the Negro ghetto. It is not really any more absurd than the Virgin Birth or the Sacrifice of Isaac. The rational absurdity does not detract from the psychic therapy. Indeed the therapy may lie in the absurdity. Converts

to any creed talk of the joy in complete surrender; a rape of the mind occurs. "*Credo quia absurdum.*" Tertullian, the first really cultivated apologist for Christianity, is said to have exulted, "I believe because it is absurd." Tertullian was himself a convert. Black Nationalists may even claim him as an African, for his home was Carthage.

There is a special reason for the efficacy of the Black Muslims in reaching the Negro damned. The sickness of the Negro in America is that he has been made to feel a nigger; the genocide is psychic. The Negro must rid himself of this feeling if he is to stand erect again. He can do so in two ways. He can change the outer world of white supremacy, or he can change his inner world by "conversion." The teachings of the Black Muslims may be fantastic but they are superbly suited to the task of shaking off the feeling of nigger-ness. Elijah Muhammad teaches that the original man was black, that Caucasians are "white devils" created almost 6,000 years ago by a black genius named Yakub. He bleached a number of blacks by a process of mutation into pale-faced blue-eyed devils in order to test the mettle of the Black Nation. This inferior breed has ruled by deviltry but their time will soon be up, at the end of the sixth millenium, which may be by 1970 or thereabouts. To explain the white man as a devil is, as Malcolm X says in the *Autobiography*, to strike "a nerve center in the American black man" for "when he thinks about his own life, he is going to see where, to him personally, the white man sure has acted like a devil." To see the white man this way is, in Gospel imagery, to cast out the devil. With him go his values, as he has impressed them on the Black Man, above all the inner feeling of being a nigger. To lose that feeling is to be fully emancipated. For the poor Negro no drug could be a stronger opiate than this black religion.

With rejection of the white man's values goes rejection of the white man's God. "We're worshipping a Jesus," Malcolm protested in one of his sermons after he became a Black Muslim Minister, "who doesn't even *look* like us." The white man, he declared, "has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus." This Black Muslim doctrine may seem a blasphemous joke until one makes the effort to imagine how whites would feel if taught to worship a black God with thick African lips. Men prefer to create a God in their own image. "The Ethiopians," one of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers¹ observed a half millenium before Christ, "assert that their gods are snub-nosed and black" while the "Nordic" Thracians said theirs were "blue-eyed and red-haired." When Marcus Garvey, the first apostle of Pan-Africanism, toured Africa, urging expulsion of the white man, he called for a Negro religion with a Negro Christ. Just as Malcolm Little, in accordance with Black Muslim practice, rejected his "slave name" and became Malcolm X, so Malcolm X, son of a Baptist preacher, rejected Christianity as a slave religion. His teacher, Elijah Muhammad, did not have to read Nietzsche to discover that Christianity was admirably suited to make Rome's slaves submissive. In our ante-bellum South the value of Christian teaching in making

slaves tractable was widely recognized even by slaveholders themselves agnostic.² The Negro converted to Christianity was cut off from the disturbing memory of his own gods and of his lost freedom, and reconciled to his lot in the white man's chains. Here again the primitivistic fantasies of the Black Muslims unerringly focus on a crucial point. It is in the Christian mission that what Malcolm X called the "brainwashing" of the blacks began.

Racism and nationalism are poisons. Sometimes a poison may be prescribed as a medicine, and Negroes have found in racism a way to restore their self-respect. But black racism is still racism, with all its primitive irrationality and danger. There are passages in the *Autobiography* in which Malcolm, recounting some of his Black Muslim sermons, sounds like a Southern white supremacist in reverse, vibrating with anger and sexual obsession over the horrors of race pollution. There is the same preoccupation with rape, the same revulsion about mixed breeds. "Why," he cried out, "the white man's raping of the black race's woman began right on those slave ships!" A psychoanalyst might see in his fury the feeling of rejection by the race of his white grandfather. A biologist might see in the achievements of this tall sandy-complexioned Negro—his friends called him "Red"—an example of the possibilities of successful racial mixture. But Malcolm's feelings on the subject were as outraged as those of a Daughter of the Confederacy. He returned revulsion for revulsion and hate for hate. He named his first child, a daughter, Attilah, and explained that he named her for the Hun who sacked Rome.

But hidden under the surface of the Black Nationalist creed to which he was won there lay a peculiar anti-Negroism. The true nationalist loves his people and their peculiarities; he wants to preserve them; he is filled with filial piety. But there is in Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslim creed none of the love for the Negro one finds in W. E. B. du Bois, or of that yearning for the ancestral Africa which obsessed Garvey. Elijah Muhammad—who himself looks more Chinese than Negro—teaches his people that they are Asians, not Africans; that their original tongue is Arabic. He turns his people into middle-class Americans. Their clothes are conservative, almost Ivy League. Their religious services eschew that rich antiphony between preacher and congregation which one finds in Negro churches. The Nigerian, E. U. Essien-Udom, whose *Black Nationalism*, is the best book on the Black Muslims, was struck by their middleclass attitudes and coldness to Africa and African ways. In Black Muslim homes, when jazz was played, he writes that he was "often tempted to tap his feet to the tune of jazz" but was inhibited because his Black Muslim hosts "listened to it without ostensible response to the rhythm." In their own way the Black Muslims are as much in flight from Negritude as was Booker T. Washington. Indeed Elijah Muhammad's stress on Negro private business and his hostility to trade unionism in his own dealings with Negroes are very much in the Booker T. Washington pattern. The virtues of bourgeois America are what Elijah Muhammad seeks to

recreate in his separate Black Nation. This is the banal reality which lies behind all his hocus-pocus about the Koran, and here lie the roots of his split with Malcolm X.

For Elijah Muhammad practices separation not only from American life but from the American Negro community, and from its concrete struggles for racial justice. Malcolm X was drawn more and more to engagement in that struggle. In the midst of describing in the *Autobiography* his happy and successful years as a Black Muslim organizer, Malcolm X says:

If I harbored any personal disappointment, whatsoever, it was that privately I was convinced that our Nation of Islam could be an even greater force in the American black man's overall struggle—if we engaged in more *action*. By that I mean I thought privately that we should have amended or relaxed, our general non-engagement policy. I felt that, wherever black people committed themselves, in the Little Rocks and Birminghams and other places, militantly disciplined Muslims should also be there—for all the world to see, and respect and discuss. It could be heard increasingly in the Negro communities: “Those Muslims *talk* tough, but they never *do* anything, unless somebody bothers Muslims.” [Italics in original.]

This alone was bound to divide the prophet and disciple. But there were also personal factors. Elijah Muhammad won Malcolm's devotion by his kindness in corresponding with the young convict when Malcolm was still in prison. But Malcolm's intellectual horizons were already far wider than those of the rather narrow, ill-educated, and suspicious Messenger of Allah. In the prison library Malcolm X was finding substantiation for the Black Muslim creed in *Paradise Lost* and in Herodotus; this passionate curiosity and voracious reading were bound to make him outgrow Elijah's dream-book theology. On the one side envy and on the other disillusion were to drive the two men apart. The crowds drawn by Malcolm and his very organizing success made Elijah Muhammad and his family jealous. On the other hand, Malcolm, who had kept the sect's vows of chastity, was shocked when former secretaries of Elijah Muhammad filed paternity suits against the prophet. Malcolm had nothing but a small salary and the house the sect had provided for him. Elijah Muhammad's cars (two Cadillacs and a Lincoln Continental), his \$200 pin-striped banker-style suits, his elegantly furnished 18-room house in one of the better sections of Chicago's Hyde Park, began to make a sour impression on Malcolm. The hierarchy lives well in practically all religions, and their worldly affluence fosters schism. Malcolm was too big, too smart, too able, to fit into the confines of this little sect and remain submissive to its family oligarchy. He began to open up a larger world, and this endangered Elijah Muhammad's hold on the little band of unsophisticated faithful he had recruited.

Muhammad Speaks, the weekly organ of the Black Muslims, had begun to play down Malcolm's activities. The break came over Malcolm's comment on Kennedy's assassination. Within hours after the President's killing, Elijah Muhammad sent out a directive ordering the cult's ministers to make no comment on the murder. Malcolm, speaking at Manhattan Center a few days afterward, was asked in the question period what he thought of the assassination. He answered it was a case of "the chickens coming home to roost." Malcolm explains in the *Autobiography*, "I said that the hate in white men had not stopped with the killing of defenseless black people but...finally had struck down the President." He complains that "some of the World's most important personages were saying in various ways, and in far stronger ways than I did, that America's climate of hate had been responsible for the President's death. But when Malcolm X said the same thing it was ominous." Elijah Muhammad called him in. "That was a very bad statement," he said. "The country loved this man." He ordered Malcolm silenced for ninety days so that the Black Muslims could be "disassociated from the blunder." Malcolm agreed and submitted. But three days later he heard that a Mosque official was suggesting his own assassination. Soon after, another Black Muslim told him of a plan to wire his car so that it would explode when he turned the ignition key, Malcolm decided to build a Muslim Mosque of his own, and open its doors to black men of all faiths for common action. To prepare himself he decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

This visit to Mecca was a turningpoint for Malcolm. His warm reception in the Arabic world, the sight of white men in equal fraternity with black and brown, marked a second conversion in his life. "For the past week," Malcolm wrote home, "I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people *of all colors*." The italics were his. The man who made the seven circuits around the Ka'ba and drank the waters of Zem-Zem emerged from his pilgrimage no longer a racist or a Black Muslim. He took the title of El Hajj earned by his visit to Mecca and called himself henceforth El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He turned Muslim in the true sense of the word. How indelibly he also remained an American go-getter is deliciously reflected in a passage of the *Autobiography* where he says that while in Mecca:

I saw that Islam's conversions around the world could double and triple if the colorfulness and the true spiritualness of the Hajj pilgrimage were properly advertised and communicated to the outside world. I saw that the Arabs are poor at understanding the psychology of non-Arabs and the importance of public relations. The Arabs said "Inshah Allah" ("God willing")—then they waited for converts, but I knew that with improved public relations methods the new converts turning to Allah could be turned into millions.

He had become a Hajj but remained in some ways a Babbjtt, the salesman, archtype of our American society. A creed was something to *sell*. Allah, the Merciful, needed better merchandising.

Malcolm returned from abroad May 21, 1964. Several attempts were made on his life. On February 21, 1965, he was killed by gunmen when he got up to speak at a meeting in New York's Audubon Ballroom. He was not quite forty when he died. The most revealing tribute paid him was the complaint by Elijah Muhammad after Malcolm was killed. "He came back preaching that we should not hate the enemy...He was a star who went astray." What nobler way to go astray? In Africa and in America there was almost unanimous recognition that the Negro race had lost a gifted son; only the then head of the U. S. Information Agency, Carl Rowan, immortalized himself with a monumental Uncle Tomism. "All this about an ex-convict, ex-dope peddler who became a racial fanatic," was Rowan's obtuse and ugly comment; it ranks with his discovery, as USIA Director, of what he called the public's "right *not* to know."

From tape-recorded conversations, a Negro writer, Alex Haley, put together the *Autobiography*; he did his job with sensitivity and with devotion. Here one may read, in the agony of this brilliant Negro's self-creation, the agony of an entire people in their search for identity. But more fully to understand this remarkable man, one must turn to *Malcolm X Speaks*, which supplements the *Autobiography*. All but one of the speeches were made in those last eight tumultuous, months of his life after his break with the Black Muslims when he was seeking a new path. In their pages one can begin to understand his power as a speaker and to see, more clearly than in the *Autobiography*, the political legacy he left his people in its struggle for full emancipation.

Over and over again in simple imagery, savagely uncompromising, he drove home the real truth about the Negro's position in America. It may not be pleasant but it must be faced. "Those Hunkies that just got off the boat," he said in one of his favorite comparisons, "they're already Americans. Polacks are already Americans the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that comes out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet. They don't have to pass civil rights legislation to make a Polack an American." In a favorite metaphor, he said "I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on the plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American." He often said, "Don't be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means—prison." Who can deny that this is true for the black man? No matter how high he rises, he never loses consciousness of the invisible bars which hem him in. "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock," Malcolm was fond of saying. "It landed on us."

He counselled violence but he defended this as an answer to white violence. "If they make the Klan nonviolent," he said over and over again, "I'll be non-violent." In another speech he said, "If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her." He taunted his people in the same speech that "As long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled... You bleed for white people, but when it comes to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven't any blood." In a speech he made about the brutal beating of Fannie Lou Hamer of Mississippi, he said of the white man, "if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle. If he only understands the language of a rope, get a rope. But don't waste time talking the wrong language to a man if you really want to communicate with him." In preaching Pan-Africanism, he reached down into the aching roots of Negro self-hatred as few men have ever done. "You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself," he said in one speech. "This is what the white man knows. So they make you and me hate our African identity... We hated our heads, we hated the shape of our nose, we wanted one of those long dove-like noses, you know; we hated the color of our skin, hated the blood of Africa that was in our veins. And in hating our features and our skin and our blood, we had to end up hating ourselves." No man has better expressed his people's trapped anguish.

Malcolm's most important message to his people is muted in the *Autobiography*, perhaps because Alex Haley, its writer, is politically conventional, but it comes out sharply in *Malcolm X Speaks* which was edited and published by a group of Trotskyists. This was the idea that while the Negro is a minority in this country, he is part of a majority if he thinks of common action with the rest of the world's colored peoples. "The first thing the American power structure doesn't want any Negroes to start," he says in the *Autobiography*, "is thinking internationally." In a speech at Ibadan University in Nigeria, he relates in the *Autobiography*, he urged the Africans to bring the American Negro's plight before the United Nations: "I said that just as the American Jew is in political, cultural, and economic harmony with world Jewry, I was convinced that it was time for all Afro-Americans to join the world's Pan-Africanists." Malcolm persuaded the Organization of African Unity at its Cairo conference to pass a resolution saying that discrimination against Negroes in the United States was "a matter of deep concern" to the Africans, and *The New York Times* in August 1964 reported that the State and Justice Departments had begun "to take an interest in Malcolm's campaign because it might create 'a touchy problem' for the U. S. if raised at the UN." In the UN debate over U. S. intervention to save white lives in the Congo, African delegates at the UN for the first time accused the U. S.

of being indifferent to similar atrocities against blacks in Mississippi. This is what Malcolm wanted when he spoke of putting the Negro struggle in a world context.

An Italian writer, Vittorio Lanternari, published a remarkable book five years ago, which appeared here in 1963 as *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*. It suggests that wherever white men have driven out or subdued colored men, whether in the case of the American Indians, or in Africa, or with the Maoris in New Zealand, as with the Tai-Pings in China and the Cao Dai in Vietnam or among the uprooted blacks and harried Indians in the Caribbean and Latin America, Messianic cults have arisen, rejecting white men's values and seeking the restoration of shattered cultural identities as the first step toward political freedom. He did not include in his survey the cults which thrive in our Negro ghettos though they are of the same character. One striking common bond among all these sects of the oppressed has been their effort to free their people from drinking the white man's "firewater" or (in China) smoking his opium. To see the Black Muslims and Malcolm's life in this perspective is to begin to understand the psychic havoc wrought around the world by white imperialism in the centuries since America was discovered and Afro-Asia opened up to white penetration. There are few places on earth where whites have not grown rich robbing the colored races. It was Malcolm's great contribution to help make us all aware of this.

His assassination was a loss to the country as well as to his race. These two books will have a permanent place in the literature of the Afro-American struggle. It is tantalizing to speculate on what he might have become had he lived. What makes his life so moving a story was his capacity to learn and grow. New disillusion, and a richer view of the human condition, lay ahead for the man who could say, as he did in one of his last speeches, when discussing the first Bandung conference, "Once they excluded the white man, they found they could get together." Since then India and Pakistan, Singapore and Malaysia, the rebellion against the Arabs in Zanzibar and the splits in Black Africa itself have demonstrated that fratricide does not end with the eviction of the white devil. Various Left sects, Maoist and Trotskyist and Communist, sought to recruit him, but he was trying to build a movement of his own. He was shopping around for new political ideas. He was also becoming active in the South instead of merely talking about a Dixie Mau-Mau from the relative safety of Harlem. I believe there was in him a readiness painfully to find and face new truths which might have made him one of the great Negroes, and Americans, of our time.