Malcolm X: chronology of change

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"My whole life had been a chronology of change."

When a man dies, especially a man like Malcolm X, those who survive him often feel compelled to study his life. My own reading of The Autobiography of Malcolm X indicates that the most important factor in his career may have been his ability to modify his own life greatly. This man made conscious changes in his existence. The four names he used symbolize these changes.

The four distinct yet interrelated lives, and the names he lived them under, make up the pattern of his life. The man who was born (1) Malcolm Little became, in turn, (2) "Detroit Red" and "Satan," (3) Malcolm X, and (4) El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. His gradual change from Malcolm Little, son of a preacher, to "Detroit Red," dope pusher and pimp, and "Satan," convicted criminal, is the story of a man trapped in a corrupt and dehumanizing society. His whole life was a journey toward truth that ended with his burial as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz—the name he earned in 1964 by making his pilgrimage to Mecca.

By now his life story is familiar: his Michigan childhood when it seemed to him that his future was hopeless; the initiation into the underworlds of Boston and New York; the conversion in prison to the Nation of Islam, and the introduction to previously unthought of uses of his intelligence; the twelve years as minister of the Muslims; the break with Elijah Muhammad; and the enlightening journey to Mecca. Each event was an attempt to find truth.

After his death in 1965, his friends remembered him above all as a man. He had accepted manhood for all blacks. But his life was incomplete—
in transition—at a critical state in his own personal hajj. More precisely, he was a man in search of a definition of himself and his relationship to his people, his country, and the world.

His life was one of change, of growth and maturity. Malcolm's views of himself, the black man, the white man, and humanity in general, all altered. The purpose of this paper, then, is twofold:

1. to attempt to trace the significant changes in his life and to seek the causes for them, and

2. to emphasize that all of these metamorphoses were equally significant; the philosophical difference between Malcolm X and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz was just as great as that between Malcolm Little and "Detroit Red."

Although a number of articles, newspaper accounts, and book length studies began appearing during the early sixties and are still appearing, none of them treat the notion of Malcolm's life as a chronology of change, although the idea has been hinted at by John Henrik Clarke and Charles E. Wilson. It seems, then, appropriate to examine these two issues.

I

He was born Malcolm Little on May 9, 1925, the son of Louise and Earl Little. Louise was a mulatto of Grenada, British West Indies, and Earl, a very black Negro from Reynolds, Georgia. Malcolm, their fourth of eight children, was born in Omaha, but soon after his birth the family moved briefly to Milwaukee. Next, they journeyed to Lansing, Michigan, where in 1929, their home was burned to the ground by whites—probably the Black Legionnaires (an organization similar to the Ku Klux Klan)—
who had been harassing Preacher Little because of his crusading for Marcus Garvey.

After the fire the father built the family a four-room house two miles outside of Lansing. It was in this house that Malcolm began to form a personality. Here, for instance, he developed the notion that if one wants something, he had better speak out loudly:

I learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things. My older brothers and sister had started to school when, sometimes, they would come in and ask for a buttered biscuit or something and my mother, impatiently, would tell them no. But I would cry out and make a fuss until I got what I wanted. I remember well how my mother asked me why I couldn't be a nice boy like Wilfred; but I would think to myself that Wilfred, for being so nice and quiet, often stayed hungry. So early in life, I had learned that if you want something, you had better make some noise.

Malcolm's father was a Baptist preacher who had been an organizer for Marcus Garvey's Negro Improvement Association. He was killed in 1931—presumably by whites—and his body thrown under a trolley. His death was officially listed as a traffic fatality. But death by violence was part of the family's history: three of Preacher Little's brothers were killed by white men, one by lynching.

Soon after Malcolm's father's death, the family broke up. Malcolm blamed the social agencies, and judging from their fiendish harassment of the widow and her children, he was correct. "Our home didn't have to be destroyed. But the Welfare, the courts, and their doctor, gave us the one-two-three punch . . . . Hence I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight." (pp. 21-22)

These are some of the early reasons Malcolm came to view the white
man as "devil." Certainly it is a repugnant notion, but a minute's reflection reveals that it is a natural conclusion to Malcolm's experiences with Mr. Charlie and Miss Ann. A child born into a "closed environment" in which his self-esteem is crushed even before he knows what the phrase means is bound to react in this manner. Injustice surrounded him and the constructive options that should have been open to him were not.

Each decision, each step in the long process of self-realization, only affirmed to him that he was an enemy of society. As James Baldwin put it: "The Negro's experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claims to live . . . . A Negro has to find a gimmick to lift him out of his peril. And it does not matter what the gimmick is." The options, according to Baldwin, are religion, crime, dope, and drink. Malcolm chose all but the last.

As Malcolm grew up in Lansing, he did meet some whites who were kind to him—in reform school, and later, in junior high school. But even they never really acknowledged him as a human being. They denied his existence by talking about "niggers." Mr. Williams, Malcolm's history teacher, liked to tell "nigger" jokes. "One day during my first week at school, I walked into the room and he started singing to the class, as a joke, 'Way down yonder in the cotton field, some folks say that a nigger won't steal.' Very funny." (p. 29)

This denial of the black man's existence is portrayed by W. E. B. DuBois by comparing blacks to prisoners in a cage who "may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment
that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. . . . "5 Malcolm was experiencing the invisibility described by Ralph Ellison in Invisible Man: "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful."6 Malcolm wasn't as yet doing any cursing or swearing, but he did attempt to make his presence known by getting good grades in school and being elected president of his class. He became the school's mascot.

A part of this invisibility was the notion whites had of the impropriety of Negroes entertaining professional ambitions. When he told a teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, that he wanted to become a lawyer, the man reminded him he was a "nigger." "Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. 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? People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work." (p. 36)

This episode seems to mark the beginning of Malcolm's sense of alienation, of conscious hatred of whites. It is bitterly reported in the Autobiography. Malcolm was shocked into reticence. In the face of Mr. Ostrowski's remarks, Malcolm became silent and secretive. He began drawing inward—almost as an admission of defeat—and there was no more
talk of being a lawyer, except in a wistful comment later in his career. Everyone wondered at the change in him. But he refused to answer any questions about it. He states in the Autobiography: "It was then that I began to change--inside." (p. 37)

Toward the end of the previous school year (1940), Ella Mae Collins, Malcolm's half-sister, had come to Lansing from the Roxbury district of Boston for a visit. He had spent that following summer with her there. For the first time in his life, he had a sense of being a real part of his own race. That next year he wrote asking if he might live with her permanently. Somehow, Ella arranged for official custody of Malcolm to be transferred to Massachusetts, and the week he finished the eighth grade he boarded a bus for Boston. "No physical move in my life has been more pivotal or profound in its repercussions." (p. 38) For Malcolm it was the end of childhood and the beginning of his "Detroit Red" period.

These are the significant events of the Malcolm Little years. The growing knowledge that he was a "nigger" in a society which shoved him into a stereotype of inferiority encouraged him to seek a change. Because he had identified with the blacks that previous summer in Roxbury, he consciously sought to alter his status by returning there. What happened, of course, is that he became immersed in the ghetto world which offered him outlets for his intelligence—even if those outlets were illegal. Therefore he interpreted his successful career of crime as growth, not decline. I view it as neither, but rather one stage in his development of a definition of himself and his world.

Malcolm sought, then, to withdraw both physically and psychologically from the white world. His life had been mutilated by the early
experiences, for he and his family had been victims of racism. These mutilations were the basis for his close identification with the dispossessed and downtrodden ghetto blacks of Boston and New York.

In addition, that early notion of making loud demands for things he wanted, which I referred to earlier in the paper, is extremely important. Although it did not become fully realized until the Malcolm X era, when he became known as a vocal Muslim leader, the seed was planted early. It only needed time to germinate. When he made himself heard he made adamant demands of both blacks and whites and his forthright manner was shocking to men of all colors.

II

It was 1941 when Malcolm went to Boston to live with Ella. She was part of the new middle class that had migrated to Roxbury about 1914. But Malcolm's interest lay in the hustler society of Roxbury. The hustlers' world fascinated him. Shorty, whom he met in a pool hall, was his first teacher of crime. He got Malcolm a job as shoeshine boy at the Roseland State Ballroom. Freddie, whom he was to replace, told him: "The main thing you got to remember is that everything in the world is a hustle."

(p. 48) Soon he discovered that he was doing more than shoeshining: pimping, selling rubbers and booze at enormous profits were more lucrative. He bought a zoot suit and conked his hair for the first time that year, too. The conk job, he claimed, was his first step toward self-degradation. It was a way of conforming to white standards of appearance.

His first visit to New York was mesmerizing. He felt he belonged there. "New York was heaven to me. And Harlem was Seventh Heaven!"
Gambler, dope pusher, hustler, and thief—he was all of them.

The rules of the Harlem hustler society are described this way:

I was a true hustler—uneducated, unskilled at anything honorable, and I considered myself nervy and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself. I would risk just about anything . . . [A hustler knows] that if he ever relaxes, if he ever slows down, the other hungry, restless foxes, ferrets, wolves, and vultures out there with him won't hesitate to make him their prey. (pp. 108-109)

The hustlers in Small's Paradise Bar, which he frequented, began to call him "Red" in view of his bright red conk. When he had been around Harlem long enough to show signs of permanence, he got the nickname that would distinguish him from the other two red-conked "Reds." One of them was "St. Louis Red," the other "Chicago Red." People who knew he was from Michigan would ask what city. Since most New Yorkers had never heard of Lansing, he would say Detroit. And gradually he began to be called "Detroit Red." To the superstitious, red-haired Negroes were literally sons of the Devil, quick-tempered and capable of cruel violence.

Commenting on a restaurant ritual at Small's, where he had begun work as a waiter, he said:

Many times since, I have thought about it, and what it really meant. 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. (p. 90)

Years later he commented, "Through all of this time of my life, I really was dead—mentally dead." (p. 125)

Possibly what Malcolm remembered most vividly from his pre-prison days was the sexual depravity of the white world which used Harlem
as its brothel. He cooperated with the whites as they used the blacks of both sexes to satisfy their perverted lusts. Meanwhile, he took mental notes: "I got my first schooling about the cesspool morals of the white man from the best possible source, from his own women. And then as I got deeper into my own life of evil, I saw the white man's morals with my own eyes. I even made my living helping to guide him to the sick things he wanted." (p. 91)

In New York things were going badly. Malcolm was high all the time and the police were after him. They shook him down one day and his hustler friends wisely suggested he get out of town. That same day his old Boston buddy, Shorty, turned up in town, and so "Detroit Red" returned to Boston with him.

Blinded by the success he felt he had attained, Malcolm grooved himself deeper and deeper into a criminal rut. He was convinced that he had to continue. Unskilled and uneducated, it never occurred to him to try anything else; so after nearly a month of "laying dead," as inactivity was called, "Detroit Red" decided he had better find another hustle. Eventually he organized a burglary team which included two white girls. When he was caught in February, 1946, he was not quite twenty-one. He was sent to the state penitentiary with a warning from the judge to stay away from white girls. Later on he remembered it as another convincing argument to prove that the white man was a "devil." He also called his sentencing an event that "completely transformed" (p. 150) his life. In prison the men eventually began calling him "Satan," for his anti-religious attitude. The name stuck.
While in the penitentiary Malcolm became a prolific reader—especially of non-fiction works. His readings and his participation in the weekly debates held between inmate teams, prepared him for his future. He called the debate experience his baptism into public speaking.

The time in prison changed him, prepared him for the Malcolm X years. The introduction to the world of learning—both secular and religious—transformed him into an educated man. Up until that time Malcolm had allowed himself to indulge in self-pity as well as hatred and bitterness toward whites. He was prepared to believe in the doctrine of white men as "devils."

The second phase of his career had been characterized by deceit and self-delusion. Corruption had distinguished the "Detroit Red," "Satan" years, just as hopelessness had typified the Malcolm Little period. No doubt Malcolm was intelligent, but the uses he had found for his intelligence were far from constructive. Such options simply had not been available to him, so he became steeped in crime and corruption.

III

But a new career was imminent. The Black Muslim religion offered what Malcolm thought was a constructive use for his life. He latched onto the ideas of the "devil" white man and the supremacy of blacks as a tool to vent his feelings of bitterness.

His introduction to the Muslim religion in 1948 marked the beginning of the Malcolm X era. Just as his corruption had been social, so was his transformation into Malcolm X. Desperately searching for some-
thing to give value to his life, he reached for yet another "gimmick"—this time it was religion. It all began in 1948 with a letter from his brother Philbert, who told Malcolm that he would show him how to get out of prison, if he stopped eating pork and smoking cigarettes. Malcolm thought it was a hoax, but obeyed. Soon other members of the family began writing and visiting him telling him about the Nation of Islam and the Messenger Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad himself wrote him explaining the tenets of the religion. Before long Malcolm began to believe in Allah.

The Muslim religion made him whole again by making him human, getting him to accept himself as a human being and to be proud of his blackness. But the transformation was a long dynamic process that began with a proud man acknowledging Allah. He was released from "Detroit Red," and "Satan." He himself was shocked at the suddenness of his conversion. He said it was "like a blinding light." (p. 164) He was renewed by the experience of religious awakening. The character of the conversion is testified to by his uncompromising adherence to Muslim laws in his later life. The addict and the thief was to make himself a monument to sobriety and disciplined energy.

The third phase of his life—the life of Malcolm X—began in earnest when he was released from prison in 1952, at the age of twenty-seven. He went directly to Detroit to take a job as furniture salesman in a store his brother Wilfred managed. That same year he went to Chicago to hear and meet the leader of the Nation of Islam—Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm was accepted into the movement officially and given the name
Malcolm X—the X symbolizing his lost tribal name. By the time the next year ended he had gone to Chicago to live and to train for the ministry. He organized the Philadelphia mosque and later was sent to head the Harlem mosque.

He was still relatively unknown except among Muslims. But he was soon to be acknowledged as a radical spokesman. His first formal speech, before the Detroit mosque, shows the seeds of the style that was to develop to such significant effect. What he said in that first speech was what he continued saying for the next twelve years—until his break with Muhammad:

My brothers and sisters, our slavemaster's Christian religion has taught us black people here in the wilderness of North America that we will sprout wings when we die and fly up into the sky where God will have for us a special place called heaven. This is white man's Christian religion used to brainwash us black people! We have accepted it! We have embraced it! And while we are doing all of that, for himself, this blue-eyed devil has twisted his Christianity, to keep his foot on our backs... to keep our eyes fixed on the pie in the sky and heaven in the hereafter... while he enjoys his heaven right here... on this earth... in this life.

(pp. 200-201) -- -- --

The style is Malcolm's but the words are those he had been hearing since he first came into the Muslim movement.

Throughout those twelve years his devotion to Elijah Muhammad was complete. During that period he was calling Muhammad "This little, gentle, sweet man!... he has sacrificed for you and me... I have pledged on my knees to Allah to tell... the true teachings of our Honorable Elijah Muhammad. I don't care if it costs my life... ."

(p. 210) In the years to come Malcolm would have to face another psycho-
logical and spiritual crisis.

Malcolm worked hard through those years. Nearly exhausting himself he tried to increase the Muslim membership—and succeeded. Due to his efforts many new mosques were opening all the time—in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Atlanta. Soon he would be achieving national acclaim as the number two man in the movement. The first important incident in his rise to fame—and infamy—was the arrest of two Muslim brothers during a street scuffle in Harlem. One of the brothers was brutally beaten by a policeman. Somehow word reached other Muslims, and in less than half an hour, fifty Fruit of Islam men were standing outside the police precinct house. Malcolm went in as the minister of the Temple and demanded to see the injured man. At first the police denied he was there. Then they admitted he was. An ambulance was called and when it came the Muslims followed in loose formation for about fifteen blocks along Lenox Avenue in Harlem. Blacks had never seen anything like that before. Later a suit was brought against the police and an all-white jury awarded $70,000 to Brother Hinton for police brutality. It was then that the press began to pay attention to the Muslims and to Malcolm in particular. The Amsterdam News began carrying a weekly column by him, which was later transferred to the Los Angeles Herald Dispatch.

Brother Hinton's case had made the Harlem black ghetto extremely aware of the Muslim movement—and of Malcolm X. Then Louis Lomax arranged for a television documentary on the movement—"The Hate That Hate Produced." Around the same time, C. Eric Lincoln decided to select as his doctoral dissertation topic the Nation of Islam. In 1961 it
appeared in book form under the title *The Black Muslims in America.* All
of these events contributed to bringing the movement to the attention of
the country. Soon Malcolm was defending the Nation in panel discussions
and debates. His previous debate experience in prison served him well.

He usually introduced himself at those discussions by saying:

"I represent Mr. Elijah Muhammad, the spiritual head of
the fastest-growing group of Muslims in the Western
Hemisphere. We who follow him know that he has been
divinely taught and sent to us by God Himself. We believe
that the miserable plight of America's twenty million
black people is the fulfillment of divine prophecy... I
am privileged to be the minister of our Temple Number Seven
... of Islam, under the divine leadership of The
Honorable Elijah Muhammad—" (p. 245)

His devotion to Muhammad is obvious in this statement. And his utter
acceptance of the tenets of the movement is expressed as well.

He added that no sane black or white man really wanted integration
— that the only solution was complete separation from the white man.
Since the Muslims saw white society as a corrupt society, they believed
that separation was the only solution. They rejected segregation in
favor of separation. Malcolm's attitude on this subject changed after
the split with Muhammad, as we will see later.

During the same year (1961) Muhammad uttered a prophetic state-
ment: "'Brother Malcolm, there is something you need to know. You will
grow to be hated when you become well known. Because usually people
get jealous of public figures.'" (p. 265) Not too long after that
Malcolm X began to become a target for attack. The press called him
"demagogue," or "devious," or an "impractical, suicidal racist." The
press comments were almost entirely critical.
Yet his speeches to colleges and Muslim audiences were rarely reported—at least until about 1963, when M. S. Handler began covering him for the New York Times. But the negative comments were not restricted to the press. Within the Nation itself it was being said that he was "trying to take over the Nation," and that he was "taking credit" for Muhammad's teaching (p. 290). And in 1962 he began to notice that less and less about him appeared in Muhammad Speaks, the Muslim newspaper he had founded.

Critics often bring up the question of whether or not Malcolm believed the tenets of the Nation of Islam. Did he, for example, believe "Yacub's History"—a history of how the white race was created as a branch of the black race? Did he believe Muhammad was the Messenger of Allah? These concepts have no place in the Islam religion of the East. Nevertheless, he surely believed them at the start. At least he repeated them obediently. These things were problems about which he may have chosen not to think. "One of the characteristics I don't like about myself" (p. 393), he noted, was shutting out problems that he didn't feel he could solve. It was inevitable that he would eventually see the major weakness of the movement, the escapist method it used to offer identity to blacks, and try to grapple with this weakness.

Toward the end of 1962 Malcolm concluded that Elijah Muhammad had violated the sexual code of the movement. Paternity suits had been brought against the Messenger by two of his former secretaries. This undoubtedly helped to destroy Malcolm's confidence in the Messenger. But the split itself was precipitated by Malcolm's remark on President
Kennedy's assassination. On December 2, 1963, the New York Times quoted Malcolm as saying the assassination was an instance of "the chickens coming home to roost." He added: "Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad; they've always made me glad."10

The next day Muhammad silenced him for ninety days. The suspension was humiliating. On February 26, 1964, Malcolm telephoned Muhammad asking for clarification of his status. Muhammad left the question unanswered. It was then that Malcolm decided that his suspension for the "chickens coming home to roost" remark was merely an excuse for removing him from the Nation. He had been making statements just as shocking all along. Later he remarked that that statement had been misinterpreted. He meant that the assassination had been made possible by an atmosphere of spreading hatred. On March 8, 1964, he announced he was leaving the movement and establishing a new organization: a politically oriented black nationalist party. M. S. Handler covered that press conference and said that Malcolm planned to seek supporters and convert them from non-violence to active self-defense against white supremacists all over the world. "'I remain a Muslim,' Malcolm said, 'but the main emphasis of the new movement will be black nationalism as a political concept and form of social action against the aggressors.'" At the time of the split Malcolm also asserted the 'right of man to defend himself against attack. "'It is legal and lawful to own a shotgun. We believe in obeying the law.'"11

Little note has been made of another influence on the split. Akbar Muhammad, youngest son of Elijah, had returned to America after two
years of study at Egypt's famed Al-Azhar University. It was late 1963, less than a month after his return, when he gave his first speech expressing the idea of unity among blacks. In addition, the speech denied the concept of the collective white man, and included no references to his father.

Certainly Malcolm was influenced by Akbar's ideas. Malcolm had introduced Akbar at that meeting, and after Akbar concluded that two-hour long speech Malcolm said: "Today we have heard a new teaching, and we are all going to abide by it . . . ." A month later Malcolm was silenced by Elijah.

During the next several months Malcolm began finally to think for himself. He began to understand that through his evangelistic zeal he had believed fanatically and blindly in Muhammad's teaching. He had been a faithful disciple who had defended Muhammad beyond the level of intellect and reason, but in March of 1964 he announced his split with Muhammad. He announced at the same time the new organization was established.

IV

The next step in his transformation was his pilgrimage to Mecca when he realized that not all white men were devils and that all men could be brothers. It marked the beginning of the fourth and final phase—the emergence of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. In a letter to his Harlem mosque he wrote: "We [Moslems of the East] were truly all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the "white" from their minds, the "white" from their behavior, and the "white" from
their attitude. I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of god, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their "difference" in color." (pp. 340-341)

Everyone was interested in this new change in Malcolm's thinking. C. Eric Lincoln, in an article for Christian Century, commented that some leaders, upon Malcolm's return from the hajj, saw signs of a constructive change in his attitudes toward racial goals and the proper techniques for attaining them. Wiley, too, claimed that he had mellowed between 1957 and 1963. And Handler, who covered Malcolm extensively in the New York Times in the early sixties, said that Malcolm's attitude toward the white man had undergone a change in 1964. Malcolm had come to recognize the black man as an integrated part of the American scene.

Carl T. Rowan, head of the United States Information Agency at the time, and a black, said, however, that Malcolm was still nothing but an "ex-convict, ex-dope peddler, who had become a racial fanatic." What Rowan failed to understand was that Malcolm was also a man on a journey toward understanding; he was a man with a mission.

Malcolm lived on the edge of death in those days. His life was being threatened constantly. His home had been burned, and some Muslims still loyal to him warned him that the Fruit of Islam was plotting his death. He was distraught but refused to discontinue his efforts in the cause of Afro-Americans. Sincerity still governed his ideas and his actions. Shortly before his assassination, the following scribble was
retrieved by Alex Haley from a table at which Malcolm had been sitting:
"My life has always been one of changes." (p. 404) He was a man in constant search of truth--no matter what the cost.

This view of change in his life has been denounced by some people such as the Reverend Albert Cleage and Malcolm's widow. They say it is a myth. But the evidence shows clearly that he did change and was still changing when he was shot down in the Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965. Perhaps Malcolm's actions during those last traumatic months were misunderstood. To deny that Malcolm was trying to internationalize the black man's struggle in America and to ignore the change that took place in his concept of white people is to deny the facts. Malcolm's entire scope of understanding had been broadened. The one thing that did not change was his basic goal--he was totally committed to freedom for oppressed blacks.

When he established his new organization, he began to make statements that were later distorted by his critics. In a news conference on March 12, 1964, for instance, Malcolm said: "It is criminal to teach a man not to defend himself when he is the constant victim of brutal attacks. It is legal and lawful to own a shotgun or a rifle. We believe in obeying the law." Ten days later he was quoted as having said that rifle clubs should be organized to "execute on the spot."

Various critics, such as Cleage, denied that Malcolm X was heading in the directions of integration, internationalism, and socialism. One of the questions raised is, if Malcolm did change why didn't he join the NAACP or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The reasons seem
obvious. Why should a leader of Malcolm's stature join an already established organization which preached a different ideology? Malcolm's emphasis on self-defense would have been out of place next to Martin Luther King's passive resistance program. Malcolm called for extreme measures for extremely serious situations. His call to blacks to join the world struggle was hardly inappropriate. To deny that Malcolm was attempting to internationalize the black man's struggle in America is to ignore Malcolm's actions and statements.

He presented his case to the government officials of Africa and Asia and requested they bring the matter to the attention of the United Nations. He said: "The deteriorating plight of American Negroes is definitely becoming a threat to world peace... We assert the right of self-defense by whatever means necessary and reserve the right of maximum retaliation against our racist oppressors no matter what the odds against us are." The Organization of Afro-American Unity—the name he chose himself—reflects his interests. Malcolm had clearly become an international man—a leader and spokesman of the oppressed and exploited blacks of the world.

Malcolm was also heading in the directions of integration, and, for the first time in his career, toward socialism. While in Africa he noticed that the newly formed nations were turning to socialism rather than capitalism, and he was impressed; he brought up the idea of socialism to his followers and urged them to buy The Militant; he spoke before the Militant Labor Forum several times; in general, he began expressing an anti-capitalist position. His attitude toward integration and inter-
marriage had changed considerably. "I believe in recognizing each human being—neither white, black, brown, or red; and when you are dealing with humanity as a family there's no question of integration or inter-marriage." This was a reversal of his earlier view that intermarriage would lead to the disintegration of both races.

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz was a man in the process of trying to understand his plight, and to find salvation. He was a black man who looked the white man in the eye and forgave nothing. As I read the Autobiography I felt that his story had permanence as well as tragic intensity and meaning for all men. He underwent remarkable changes in his lifetime; he had experienced bigotry and hatred that is sometimes difficult for whites to comprehend. His emergence as a compassionate, thoughtful man is remarkable. "I feel what I'm thinking and saying now is myself ... Now I think with my own mind, sir." After years of spouting Muhammad's dogma he realized the value of his own mind.

Certain points can be summarized about the changes in Malcolm Little's life:

1. The early years were extremely important in that he learned he could achieve goals by being persistent and outspoken, but he discovered that his persistence did not alter the hopelessness of his existence. And this discovery encouraged his hatred.

2. The "Detroit Red" and "Satan" period illustrates the paucity of options available to a black American in a constrictive society. The bitterness he felt molded his thinking into that of a hoodlum who lived
by his wits.

3. However, he rose above the errors of his youth—to make adult errors. The Malcolm X years, too, were marked by self-delusion. He affirmed his belief in the Messenger and the tenets Muhammad taught at the risk of suppressing his own intelligence.

4. Only during the year prior to his death did Malcolm begin to know himself and value his own intellect and abilities. The break with the Muslim movement was a necessary precondition for his intellectual and ideological transformation because it released him from the constrictive doctrines of the quasi-religion that had straitjacketed his growth.

5. Those who denied he changed that last year misunderstood his behavior. His goal never altered; his methods did.

Each phase of his life was precipitated by a conscious effort to seek a change in his life. Each time he succeeded—whether for ill or good. But El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz emerges as a man of worth as well as wrath. More importantly, he emerges as a man with the ability to alter himself rather than submit to his heredity and various environments. And so he died, but his memory lives on in the soul of America's black man and in the gut of Mr. Charlie.
Notes

1 I suppose my definition of "truth" needs to be considered here. I think Malcolm's whole life illustrates an attempt to relate himself to the world. I view this as a journey toward truth because in the end he had attained an understanding of that relationship.

2 John Henrik Clarke, ed., "Introduction," Malcolm X: The Man and His Times (New York, 1969), p. xiii; and Charles E. Wilson, "Leadership: Triumph in Leadership Tragedy," in Clarke's Malcolm X . . . , p. 27. Both conceive of three lives rather than four. I would also like to note here that few of the studies completed to date can be considered scholarly works. For the most part they are repetitious and negative—whether the author is black or white. Readers' Guide lists some forty-four articles on Malcolm X in magazines such as Ebony, Life, The Saturday Evening Post, Yale Review, Christian Century, and US News. By far the best are C. Eric Lincoln, "The Meaning of Malcolm X " (see bibliography), and Robert Penn Warren, "Malcolm X: Mission and Meaning," Yale Review, LVI (Winter 1966), 161-171. Press reports were few and critical until M. S. Handler began his coverage for the New York Times. Several book length studies appeared after his death and they are all good—especially those by Clarke, Epps, and Breitman, which are listed in the bibliography.


8 C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America (Boston, 1961).


List of Works Cited


