out of the isolation that was being imposed upon them as they refused to cease their struggles. A class program that posed issues in terms of economic equality might, he hoped, create a new spirit of unity. King and the SCLC embarked upon a serious campaign that involved them in strikes and union organizing in Atlanta; Memphis; Detroit; Birmingham; St. Petersburg, Florida; and Charleston, Georgetown, and Florence, South Carolina. His murder in Memphis took place when he was involved in such activity. That was part of his alternative to what he considered the blind alley of black power.

The new alliance, however, never emerged. King's death cut short his efforts to create it, so we can never know what might have happened. But there is no indication that in those prosperous times any substantial section of whites would have heeded his call. If black power was a blind alley, King does not appear to have had an approach that at that time was more likely to be successful. The Black Panther party attempted to create such a coalition, within the framework of black power, in 1968 and 1969. While it was able to gain some white support from the anti-Vietnam War movement, it was not sufficiently powerful to have any major impact on the structure of American society. The black movement appeared to have gone about as far as it was capable of going at that time, given the political alignments.

5.3

Michael Eric Dyson

Meeting Malcolm

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> *First, I don't profess to be anybody's leader. I'm one of 22 million Afro-Americans, all of whom have suffered the same things. And I probably cry out a little louder against the suffering than most others and therefore, perhaps, I'm better known. I don't profess to have a political, economic, or social solution to a problem as complicated as the one which our people face in the States, but I am one of those who is willing to try any means necessary to bring an end to the injustices that our people suffer.*
>
> —Malcolm X, in *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter, by Malcolm X*

Malcolm X, one of the most complex and enigmatic African-American leaders ever, was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. Since his death in 1965, Malcolm's life has increasingly acquired mythic stature. Along with Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm is a member of the pantheon of twentieth-century black saints. Unlike that of King, however, Malcolm's heroic rise was both aided

and complicated by his championing of black nationalism and his advocacy of black self-defense against white racist violence.

Malcolm's ideas of black nationalism were shaped virtually from the womb by the example of his parents, Earl and Louise Little, both members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). As president of the Omaha branch of the UNIA, Earl Little, who was also an itinerant Baptist preacher, vigorously proclaimed the Garveyite doctrine of racial self-help and black unity, often with Malcolm at his side. Louise Little served as reporter of the Omaha UNIA. A native of Grenada, Louise was a deeply spiritual woman who presided over her brood of eight children even as she endured the abuse of her husband, and together they heaped domestic violence on their children.

According to Malcolm, his family was driven from Omaha by the Ku Klux Klan while he was still an infant, forcing them to seek safer habitation in Lansing, the capital city of Michigan eighty miles northwest of Detroit. Their respite was only temporary, however; the Little family house was burned down by a white hate group, the Black Legionnaires, during Malcolm's early childhood in 1929. This experience of racial violence, which Malcolm termed his "earliest vivid memory," deeply influenced his unsparing denunciation of white racism during his public career as a black nationalist leader.

When Malcolm was only six, his father died after being crushed under a streetcar. It is unclear whether Earl died at the hands of the Black Legionnaires, as Malcolm reports in his autobiography, or whether his death was accidental, as recent scholarship has suggested. In either case, his loss bore fateful consequences for the Little family because Louise Little was faced with raising eight children alone during the Great Depression. She eventually suffered a mental breakdown, and her children were dispersed to different foster homes.

Malcolm's life after his family's breakup went from bleak to desperate, as he was shuttled between several foster homes. Malcolm stole food to survive and began developing hustling habits that he later perfected in Boston, where he went to live with his half-sister Ella after dropping out of school in Lansing after completing the eighth grade. Before leaving school, Malcolm had become eighth-grade class president at Mason Junior High School. But a devastating rebuff from a teacher—who discouraged Malcolm in his desire to become an attorney by claiming that it was an unrealistic goal for "niggers"—finally sealed Malcolm's early fate as an academic failure.

It was in Boston that Malcolm encountered for the first time the black bourgeoisie, with its social pretensions and exaggerated rituals of cultural self-affirmation, leading him to conclude later that the black middle class was largely ineffective in achieving authentic black liberation. It was also in Boston's Roxbury and New York's Harlem that Malcolm was introduced to the street life of the northern urban poor and working class, gaining crucial insight about the cultural styles, social sufferings, and personal aspirations of everyday black people. Malcolm's hustling repertoire ranged from drug dealing and numbers running to burglary, the last activity landing him in a penitentiary for a six- to ten-year sentence. Malcolm's prison period—lasting from 1946 to 1952—marked the first of several extraordinary transformations he underwent as he searched for the truth about himself and his relation to black consciousness, black freedom and unity, and black religion.

While in prison, Malcolm read widely and argued passionately about a broad scope of subjects, from biblical theology to Western philosophy, voraciously ab-

sorbing the work of authors as diverse as Louis S. B. Leakey and Friedrich Nietzsche. Malcolm read so much during this period that his eyesight became strained, and he began wearing his trademark glasses. It was during his prison stay that Malcolm experienced his first religious conversion, slowly evolving from a slick street hustler and con artist to a sophisticated, self-taught devotee of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, the black nationalist religious group that Muhammad headed. Malcolm was drawn to the Nation of Islam because of the character of its black nationalist practices and beliefs: its peculiar gift for rehabilitating black male prisoners; its strong emphasis on black pride, history, culture, and unity; and its unblinking assertion that white men were devils, a belief that led Muhammad and his followers to advocate black separation from white society.

Within a year of his release from prison on parole in 1952, Malcolm became a minister with the Nation of Islam, journeying to its Chicago headquarters to meet face to face with the man whose theological doctrines of white evil and black racial superiority had given Malcolm new life. Through a herculean work ethic and spartan self-discipline—key features of the black puritanism that characterized the Nation's moral orientation—Malcolm worked his way in short order from assistant minister of Detroit's Temple Number One to national spokesman for Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. In his role as the mouthpiece for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm brought unprecedented visibility to a religious group that many critics had either ignored or dismissed as fundamentalist fringe fanatics. Under Malcolm's leadership, the Nation grew from several hundred to a hundred thousand members by the early 1960s. The Nation under Malcolm also produced forty temples throughout the United States and purchased thirty radio stations.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, enormous changes were rapidly occurring within American society in regard to race. The momentous *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, delivered in 1954, struck down the "separate-but-equal" law that had enforced racially segregated public education since 1896. And in 1955, the historic bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama—sparked by seamstress Rosa Parks's refusal to surrender her seat to a white passenger, as legally mandated by a segregated public-transportation system—brought its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., to national prominence. King's fusion of black Christian civic piety and traditions of American public morality and radical democracy unleashed an irresistible force on American politics that fundamentally altered the social conditions of millions of blacks, especially the black middle classes in the South.

The civil rights movement, though, barely affected the circumstances of poor southern rural blacks. Neither did it greatly enhance the plight of poor northern urban blacks, whose economic status and social standing were severely handicapped by forces of deindustrialization: the rise of automated technology that displaced human wage earners, the severe decline in manufacturing and in retail and wholesale trade, and escalating patterns of black unemployment. These social and economic trends, coupled with the growing spiritual despair that beginning in the early 1950s gripped Rust Belt cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Baltimore, did not initially occupy the social agenda of the southern-based civil rights movement.

Malcolm's ministry, however, as was true of the Nation of Islam in general, was directed toward the socially dispossessed, the morally compromised, and the economically desperate members of the black proletariat and ghetto poor who were unaided by the civil rights movement. The Nation of Islam recruited many of its

members among the prison populations largely forgotten by traditional Christianity (black and white). The Nation also proselytized among the hustlers, drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, and thieves whose lives, the Nation contended, were ethically impoverished by white racist neglect of their most fundamental needs: the need for self-respect, the need for social dignity, the need to understand their royal black history, and the need to worship and serve a black God. All of these were provided in the black nationalist worldview of the Nation of Islam.

Malcolm's public ministry of proselytizing for the Nation of Islam depended heavily on drawing contrasts between what he and other Nation members viewed as the corruption of black culture by white Christianity (best symbolized in Martin Luther King, Jr., and segments of the civil rights movement) and the redemptive messages of racial salvation proffered by Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm relentlessly preached the virtues of black self-determination and self-defense even as he denounced the brainwashing of black people by Christian preachers like King who espoused passive strategies of resistance in the face of white racist violence.

Where King advocated redemptive suffering for blacks through their own bloodshed, Malcolm promulgated "reciprocal bleeding" for blacks and whites. As King preached the virtues of Christian love, Malcolm articulated black anger with unmitigated passion. While King urged nonviolent civil disobedience, Malcolm promoted the liberation of blacks by whatever means were necessary, including (though not exclusively, as some have argued) the possibility of armed self-defense. While King dreamed, Malcolm saw nightmares.

It was Malcolm's unique ability to narrate the prospects of black resistance at the edge of racial apocalypse that made him both exciting and threatening. Malcolm spoke out loud what many blacks secretly felt about racist white people and practices, but were afraid to acknowledge publicly. Malcolm boldly specified in lucid rhetoric the hurts, agonies, and frustrations of black people chafing from an enforced racial silence about the considerable cultural costs of white racism.

Unfortunately, as was the case with most of his black nationalist compatriots and civil rights advocates, Malcolm cast black liberation in terms of masculine self-realization. Malcolm's zealous trumpeting of the social costs of black male cultural emasculation went hand in hand with his often aggressive, occasionally vicious, put-downs of black women. These slights of black women reflected the demonology of the Nation of Islam, which not only viewed racism as an ill from outside its group, but argued that women were a lethal source of deception and seduction from within. Hence, Nation of Islam women were virtually desexualized through "modest" dress, kept under the close supervision of men, and relegated to the background while their men took center stage. Such beliefs reinforced the already inferior position of black women in black culture.

These views, ironically, placed Malcolm and the Nation of Islam squarely within misogynist traditions of white and black Christianity. It is this aspect, especially, of Malcolm's public ministry that has been adopted by contemporary black urban youth, including rappers and filmmakers. Although Malcolm would near the end of his life renounce his sometimes vitriolic denunciations of black women, his contemporary followers have not often followed suit.

But as the civil rights movement expanded its influence, Malcolm and the Nation came under increasing criticism for its deeply apolitical stance. Officially, the Nation of Islam was forbidden by Elijah Muhammad to become involved in acts of civil disobedience or social protest, ironically containing the forces of anger

and rage that Malcolm's fiery rhetoric helped unleash. This ideological constraint stifled Malcolm's natural inclination to action, and increasingly caused him great discomfort as he sought to explain publicly the glaring disparity between the Nation's aggressive rhetoric and its refusal to become politically engaged.

Malcolm's growing dissatisfaction with the Nation's apolitical posture only deepened his suspicions about its leadership role in aiding blacks to achieve real liberation. Malcolm also became increasingly aware of the internal corruption of the Nation—unprincipled financial practices among top officials who reaped personal benefit at the expense of the rank and file, and extramarital affairs involving leader Elijah Muhammad. Moreover, there is evidence that Malcolm had privately forsaken his belief in the whites-are-devils doctrine years before his widely discussed public rejection of the doctrine after his 1964 split from the Nation of Islam, his embrace of orthodox Islamic belief, and his religious pilgrimage to Mecca.

The official cause of Malcolm's departure from the Nation of Islam was Elijah Muhammad's public reprimand of Malcolm for his famous comments that President John F. Kennedy's assassination merely represented the "chickens coming home to roost." Malcolm was saying that the violence the United States had committed in other parts of the world was returning to haunt this nation. Muhammad quickly forbade Malcolm from publicly speaking, initially for ninety days, motivated as much by jealousy of Malcolm's enormous popularity among blacks outside the Nation of Islam as by his desire to punish Malcolm for a comment that would bring the Nation undesired negative attention from an already racially paranoid government.

In March 1964, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam after it became apparent that he could not mend his relationship with his estranged mentor. He formed two organizations, one religious (Muslim Mosque) and the other political (Organization of Afro-American Unity, or OAAU). The OAAU was modeled after the Organization of African Unity and reflected Malcolm's belief that broad social engagement provided blacks their best chance for ending racism. Before establishing the OAAU, however, Malcolm fulfilled a longstanding dream of making a hajj to Mecca. While there, Malcolm wrote a series of letters to his followers detailing his stunning change of heart about race relations, declaring that his humane treatment by white Muslims and his perception of the universality of Islamic religious truth had forced him to reject his former narrow beliefs about whites. Malcolm's change of heart, though, did not blind him to the persistence of American racism and the need to oppose its broad variety of expressions with aggressive social resistance.

After his departure from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm traveled extensively, including trips to the Middle East and Africa. His travels broadened his political perspective considerably, a fact reflected in his new appreciation of socialist movements (though he didn't embrace socialism) and a new international note in his public discourse as he emphasized the link between African-American liberation and movements for freedom throughout the world, especially in African nations. Malcolm didn't live long enough to fulfill the promise of his new directions. On February 21, 1965, three months shy of his fortieth birthday, Malcolm X was gunned down by Nation of Islam loyalists as he prepared to speak to a meeting of the OAAU. Fortunately, Malcolm had recently completed his autobiography with the help of Alex Haley. That work, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, stands as a classic of black letters and American autobiography.

Malcolm lived only fifty weeks after his break with the Nation of Islam, initiating his last and perhaps most meaningful transformation of all: from revolu-

tionary black nationalist to human rights advocate. Although Malcolm never gave up on black unity or self-determination—and neither did he surrender his acerbic wit on behalf of the voiceless millions of poor blacks who could never speak their pain before the world—he did expand his field of vision to include poor, dispossessed people of color from around the world, people whose plight resulted from class inequality and economic oppression as much as from racial domination. Had he lived, we can only hope that vexing contemporary problems from gender oppression to homophobia might have exercised his considerable skills of social rage and incisive, passionate oratory in giving voice to fears and resentments that most people can speak only in private.

During the last year of his life, Malcolm's social criticism and political engagement reflected a will to spontaneity, his analysis an improvisatory and fluid affair that drew from his rapidly evolving quest for the best means available for real black liberation—but a black liberation connected to the realization of human rights for all suffering peoples. In the end, Malcolm's moral pragmatism and experimental social criticism linked him more nearly to the heart of African-American culture and American radical practices than it might have otherwise appeared during his controversial career. Malcolm's complexity resists neat categories of analysis and rigid conclusions about his meaning.

It is this Malcolm—the Malcolm who spoke with uncompromising ardor about the poor, black, and dispossessed, and who named racism when and where he found it—who appealed to me as a young black male coming to maturity during the 1970s in the ghetto of Detroit. I took pleasure in his early moniker Detroit Red, feeling that our common geography joined us in a project to reclaim the dignity of black identity from the chaotic dissemblances and self-deceptions instigated by racist oppression.

But the riots of 1967—with their flames of frustration burning bitterly in my neighborhood, a testament to the unreconciled grievances that fueled racial resentments—had already confirmed Malcolm's warnings about the desperate state of urban black America. And the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., one year later ruptured the veins of nonviolent response to black suffering, evoking seizures of social unrest in the nerve centers of hundreds of black communities across the nation. King's death and Malcolm's life forced me to grapple with the best remedy for resisting racism.

As a result, I turned more frequently to a means of communication and combat that King and Malcolm had favored and that had been nurtured in me by my experience in the black church: rhetorical resistance. In African-American cultures, acts of rhetorical resistance are often more than mere words. They encompass a complex set of symbolic expressions and oral interactions with the "real" world. These expressions and interactions are usually supported by substantive black cultural traditions—from religious worship to social protest—that fuse speech and performance. Much of the ingenuity and inventiveness of black rhetorical resistance was evident in the church-based civil rights movement and in black nationalist struggles for self-determination in the 1960s.

One form of rhetorical resistance that has been prominently featured throughout black cultural history is the black sermon, the jewel in the crown of black sacred rhetoric. Here, a minister, or another authorized figure, thrives in the delivery of priestly wisdom and prophetic warning through words of encouragement and comfort, of chastening and challenge. Martin and Malcolm, of course, were widely

acknowledged masters of black sacred rhetoric—as well as brilliant political rhetoricians whose deft weaving of spiritual uplift and secular complaint forged a powerful basis for black action in a bruising white world. The excellent examples of Martin and Malcolm—along with the more immediate impact of my pastor, Frederick G. Sampson—brought me to believe that words can have world-making and life-altering consequences.

In the years following Malcolm's and Martin's deaths, I participated in all manner of black public oral performance—from church plays and speeches to poetry recitations and oratorical contests—that whetted my appetite for the word. At eleven, I wrote a speech for the local Optimist Club that won me a first-place trophy and a photograph and headline in the *Detroit News* that read "Boy's Plea Against Racism Wins Award." Martin's and Malcolm's spirit hovered intimately around my performance. Their presence in word also inspired my decision to become an ordained Baptist minister, and sustained me as I became, in quick succession, a teen-age father, a welfare recipient, a wheel-brake-and-drum-factory laborer, and a pastor in the South.

As I have matured, journeying from factory worker to professor, it is the Malcolm who valued truth over habit who has appealed most to me, his ability to be self-critical and to change his direction an unfailing sign of integrity and courage. But these two Malcolms need not be in ultimate, fatal conflict, need not be fractured by the choice between seeking an empowering racial identity and linking ourselves to the truth no matter what it looks like, regardless of color, class, gender, sex, or age. They are both legitimate quests, and Malcolm's career and memory are enabling agents for both pursuits. His complexity is our gift.

5.4

Malcolm X

The Ballot or the Bullet

Malcolm X was a Black Muslim minister who, in contrast to the philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience, advocated liberation of blacks by any means necessary. Appealing to a segment of Northern urban poor and working-class blacks with critical rhetoric, Malcolm became a leader emphasizing self-determination for blacks. His ideas had a profound influence on many black students involved in the civil rights movement. He was assassinated in 1965.

Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters, friends and enemies: I just can't believe everyone in here is a friend and I don't want to leave anybody out. The question tonight, as I understand it, is "The Negro Revolt, and Where Do We Go From Here?" or "What Next?" In my little humble way of understanding it, it points toward either the ballot or the bullet.

Before we try and explain what is meant by the ballot or the bullet, I would like to clarify something concerning myself. I'm still a Muslim, my religion is still Islam. That's my personal belief. Just as Adam Clayton Powell is a Christian minister who heads the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, but at the same time takes part in the political struggles to try and bring about rights to the black people in this country; and Dr. Martin Luther King is a Christian minister down in Atlanta,