

Speaking Freely: A Memoir

~Nat Hentoff
Alfred A. Knopf

REMEMBERING MALCOLM

In the 1950s, such influential intellectuals as Daniel Bell and Norman Podhoretz had discovered that the ideological wars were over in the United States. President Eisenhower was a symbol of the calming of the nation, except for certain troublesome minorities who, after all, had no other place to go.

But soon the black labor leader A. Philip Randolph began speaking of the "unfinished revolution" of blacks claiming their constitutional-and economic-rights. Embodying his words were Freedom Riders, black and white, in the South; black students sitting at white lunch counters; and biracial civil rights demonstrations in the North.

It was before Malcolm X's picture had been in the white press. Indeed, when I first went to see him in the mid-1950s, very little about the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's Lost-Found Nation of Islam in North America had appeared in the white media. I knew something of the Black Muslims because I read the black press and because many jazz musicians had been telling me about the growing, disciplined numbers of Elijah Muhammad's straightbacked legions. And they had talked about this tall, lean prince of the Nation of Islam, this Malcolm X, who was one hell of a soloist.

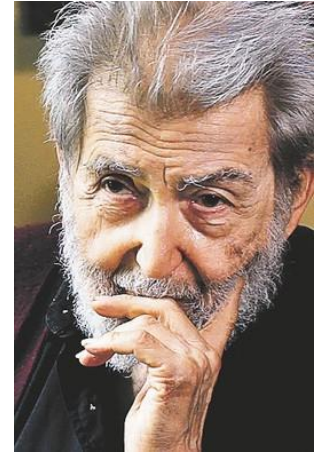
I was freelancing at the time, and often wrote for The Reporter, which, in addition to the usual back-of-the-book arts section, focused on covering what had not previously been reported in national and international politics. My editor there had never heard of Malcolm or Elijah Muhammad, so he told me to go ahead.

Having called Temple Number 7, of which Malcolm was minister, I was told to meet him at a luncheonette on Lenox Avenue. It was owned and operated by the Nation of Islam, which had been increasingly involved in trying to establish a self-supporting black economy.

The appointment was for late afternoon, and when I got there, I wasn't there. Not to the blacks behind the counter, or the customers. I was the only white on the premises. I finally asked for a cup of coffee. There was no response. A few minutes later, when I looked up from the Times, there was a cup of coffee before me on the counter. Nobody had served me. The cup had just decided to fill itself.

There was a jukebox in the luncheonette, and throughout the hour or so I was waiting for Malcolm, only one song was played. Continually. "A White Man's Heaven Is a Black Man's Hell." The rhythms were sinuously West Indian, and the male singer was a high tenor-supple in phrasing and pleasing in texture. It was somewhat less pleasing if you were white and listened to the words. I walked over to the jukebox to read the name of the singer. Louis Farrakhan. It didn't mean anything to me then.

I kept on reading the Times and looking up expectantly whenever the door opened. Not knowing what Malcolm looked like, I was willing, indeed eager, to believe that he was everyone who came in. He never was.



After an hour, it began to occur to me that either Malcolm X wasn't going to show up at all or I was being tested in some way. In any case, I'd had enough. I jammed the newspaper into my coat, and walked toward the door. A tall, lean man with glasses and an amused look, who had been sitting at a corner table reading and making notes, looked up and said to me, "You looking for somebody?"

"Malcolm X."

He smiled. Not in any friendly way. "You've found him," he said. Malcolm motioned to a chair across the table from him.

We talked for a couple of hours. That is, he talked. His voice never rose, but his intensity was such that the words kept coming at me like the quick, hard left jabs of a well-tuned boxer. He spoke of the necessity of black separation, from which would come self-respect and self-sufficiency. And he talked of the North being "up South." Walking down Lenox Avenue, I still felt the cool, sharp breeze of his wit. And his merriment. Malcolm had been having a good time.

The Reporter printed my piece and, later, a long letter from an NAACP official protesting that so much space had been given to a minor cult. The official prophesied that long after the Nation of Islam and Malcolm had gone, the NAACP would still be responsibly here. (Actually, I had also greatly underestimated Malcolm and, for that matter, the Nation of Islam. At the end of my article I had written: "Malcolm X may yet be an executive in the Urban League, but Elijah Muhammad is more likely to end as Marcus Garvey did—with little left but pictures of himself addressing huge crowds years before.")

After our first meeting, I would occasionally call Malcolm in connection with various civil rights pieces I was doing for the Voice, Commonweal, and other places. If he wasn't in, he would invariably call back. Malcolm was well organized. Occasionally he would initiate a call to get my reactions to the way in which the press was playing a story about him, or to read me part of a speech he was going to deliver. He figured I might want to use some of it. My wife, Margot, ordinarily unafraid of anything, never got used to answering a call from a "Mr. X."

I'd see him on occasion at press conferences, and we were on a couple of radio and TV panels together. I enjoyed watching him outmaneuver reporters and academics who either were convinced that he was an irredeemable racist or felt that with sufficient cultivation he might eventually see the light and join the editorial board of the New York Times.

On one television show, Malcolm and I had a particularly sharp exchange about violence. Neither of us yielded ground. He seemed to enjoy the jousting. As we became friendlier, we argued more. I was, and am, an imperfect disciple of the radical pacifist A. J. Muste. Malcolm could never have been mistaken for a pacifist in terms of strategic theory—although he himself was among the least violent men I have known and, so far as I know, was never directly involved in any violent actions, despite his rhetoric. Anyway, we argued a lot about force, the effective threat of force, and its therapeutic and political uses.

I didn't realize it during my first meeting with him at the luncheonette, but Malcolm was a man of considerable and piercing wit. If someone used a word imprecisely, or in a way that revealed what he really meant, Malcolm would pounce with delight. He was also a stinging analyst of the print and broadcast press, none of which intimidated him in the least.

His broader sense of humor manifested itself when he invited me and my wife to a pantomime put on by the Nation of Islam at Town Hall. We were the only whites there, and

were seated in the middle of an orchestra row, surrounded by empty seats. It was as if we were in quarantine.

The pantomime had to do with the indictment, in the Nation of Islam scriptures, of "white devils"-created by an eerie black scientist, Yakub, 6,000 years ago-as the originators of all evil. It ended with a vivid prophecy of the imminent terminal punishment of the white man for all the destruction and pain he had caused. Watching from our place of internal banishment, I felt as if I were back in the luncheonette on Lenox Avenue. I saw Malcolm, in the wings, watching us and laughing heartily. He asked me afterwards, with as straight a face as he could muster, if I had enjoyed the afternoon.

On one occasion I became quite angry at something he had said. It seemed gratuitously mean-spirited at a time of much anticipation. The place was a hotel in Washington on the eve of the 1963 March on Washington. In the lobby, reporters were cornering various civil rights dignitaries. On assignment from Westinghouse Radio, I had just come in, bearing, with pride and discomfort, a god-awfully heavy Nagra tape recorder.

But there was such good feeling in the air that the Nagra almost became weightless. Across the room, I noticed Malcolm surrounded by members of the press, and he saw me. Smiling mischievously, he waved and shouted across the room, "Hey, Nat Hentoff, I bet you think you're here for a real historic event! You've been fooled, like everybody else."

He was wrong, of course, in terms of such results of that day-and the force behind it-as the Civil Rights Acts. On the other hand, I would not now relish a debate with Malcolm on the state of the majority of blacks in the ghetto-with a recording, in the background, of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

I heard from Malcolm again in 1964, during his pilgrimage to Mecca. He was very proud of having made that journey, writing to Alex Haley: "I think I'm the first American born Negro to make the actual Hajj. . . ." The pilgrimage also effected a profound change in his ideas about race and racial separateness. As he wrote in a letter to an assistant, "I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors."

Written on his way home, Malcolm's postcard to me said: "In my recent travels into the African countries and others, I was impressed by the importance of having a working unity among all peoples, black as well as white. But the only way this is going to be brought about is that the black ones have to be in unity first."

The last time I saw Malcolm was a few days before he was killed on February 21, 1965. It was by chance. I had come to radio station WBAI in New York to tape a program, and Malcolm had just finished one. At first he seemed in good spirits. Laughing, he told me some gossip about a writer we both knew who was notorious for his ability to talk publishers into sizable advances for books that usually were never heard of again.

Rather suddenly, Malcolm turned somber. His house in Queens had been firebombed on February 14. He told me that soon after, needing a few hours of quiet to finish an article, he had checked into a hotel under an assumed name. He thought he had taken more than sufficient care not to be followed, but as soon as he entered his room, the phone rang, and a voice said, "Hello, Malcolm."

I had never seen Malcolm afraid before. But fear was in him that afternoon at the radio station. He said he did not expect to live much longer. And the last thing he said was, "Whatever happens, it won't be Elijah."

He didn't say any more. What I thought he meant then, and what I still think he meant, was that the CIA had targeted him. Malcolm had been wiretapped and surveilled by the FBI in the interests of "national security" from the time he had become reasonably prominent, and probably before. He had said he was certain the CIA was on his trail when he was in Africa. Malcolm was, after all, becoming more and more of a figure of symbolic significance in the Third World, and he planned to become a familiar presence, pillorying the United States, at the United Nations.

Twelve days before his assassination, Malcolm was scheduled to speak at a meeting in Paris, but the French government refused him entrance to the country as an "undesirable." French authorities explained that Malcolm's speech could have provoked demonstrations undermining "the public order." It did not say whether an American agency had asked that Malcolm be kept out.

There was another theory. In his 1973 book, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Harper & Row), Peter Goldman speculates that Malcolm was barred from France because the French had "acted on the representation of two of their lately liberated colonies, Senegal and the Ivory Coast, that Malcolm-aided and abetted by Nasser and Nkrumah-might try to overthrow moderate pro-Western governments like their own."

Did the CIA also believe that?

I have been a journalist too long to be ensorcelled by conspiracy theories. I cite the CIA possibility here because of what Malcolm said to me and because of what the CIA's record during the 1960s says about that obsessive agency. In those years the CIA was a nation unto itself, accountable to no one. We shall probably never know if there was any CIA involvement in the murder of Malcolm X. This is not the kind of information that comes pouring forth when you make a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

It is true that the shots were fired by emissaries of the Nation of Islam. But the real question is: who sent them?

Despite what Malcolm said about not having long to live, his murder stopped me cold. I heard about it on a portable radio in Washington Square Park, while pushing the carriage of my younger daughter. Looking up, she thought something had happened to me.

All that intelligence, energy, passion, and capacity for evolving leadership-gone. In the years since, I have often thought of what might have been if Malcolm had still been alive-organizing, analyzing, and teaching.

There has been much speculation about why Malcolm was cut down, but I doubt there will ever be a definitive investigation, since so much time has passed. What does stay in my mind-having seen a number of replays on television of the murder at the Audubon Ballroom-was the inertness of nearly all the armed local and federal undercover cops in the audience. (Their presence was confirmed two days later by the *New York Herald Tribune*.) As the fatal shots were fired, the cops just sat there, as if they were watching a show.

There was a widely disseminated photograph in *Life* magazine of Malcolm's bodyguard, Eugene Roberts, leaning over him, earnestly giving his leader artificial respiration. Roberts, as it

turned out, was at the time an undercover member of the New York Police Department's Red Squad. Malcolm had even more enemies than he knew.

Over the years, when lecturing at colleges where at times adherents of the Nation of Islam have been in the audience, I have told of a college appearance in upstate New York that Malcolm made a year or so before he died. After he spoke, a student was to field the questions from the audience. A young black man rose. He didn't have a question; instead he unleashed a brutal philippic against Jews—all Jews, from the beginning of time, and then some: They sucked the blood out of blacks, out of black communities. They controlled everything—the White House, the press, the banks, the music business. All whites were oppressors, but Jews were the particularly relentless and remorseless cause of black misery—from the teachers they sent to make black kids think they were dumb to the rotten meat they sold in their stores in the ghettos.

Malcolm had had enough. He rose, pushed past the student moderator, and said to the young black man, "What you're doing is what has so long been done to us. Bigotry doesn't help anybody, including the bigot. It's a waste of energy, a waste of your mind. Listen, I don't judge a man because of the color of his skin, I don't judge people because they're white. I don't judge you because you're black. I judge you because of what you do and what you practice. I'm not against people because they're Jews. I'm against racists."

Malcolm told me a story one day. Before his trip to Mecca, when he was still a total black separatist, he had been interviewed by Dr. Kenneth Clark, an unyielding integrationist, for a book. Clark's research on the psychological damage done to black children in segregated schools had contributed to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the interview Malcolm had said to Clark, "If you are born in America with a black skin, you're in prison. . . . The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that integration is only a trick on the part of the white man . . . to lull Negroes to sleep, to lull them into thinking that the white man is changing. . . ."

Dr. Clark's son, Hilton, had been much taken with Malcolm X, whose presence was such that his entrance into a room or onto a platform riveted attention. It was partly because of his reputation—he was a man of such "disciplined power," as Kenneth Clark had said, that he could face down the police, as he had done during a confrontation in Harlem between black Muslims and the cops. Except when I saw fear in him just before he died, Malcolm had developed an air of command, of crisp authority.

The younger Clark was also becoming more and more interested in the separation Malcolm was preaching. His father was quite disturbed.

"Dr. Clark shouldn't worry," Malcolm told me with a smile, a large smile. "I won't take his son away. I wouldn't do that."

Aside from what might have happened nationally if Malcolm had lived, I miss the man—his wit, his swift intelligence, his warmth, when he wasn't in the arena. And, quiet as it was kept, his tenderness. He was indeed a dangerous man.