

arose after the large influx of black people from the South. All of this is not to deny the fact that some church leaders have misdirected their congregations or that others have done very little in the struggle for political liberation. But don't forget that the current surge of national self-determination has very often been sparked by black church leaders. The nationalist system builders are going to have to reassess their attitudes toward the church. They are going to have to understand precisely why this institution continues to serve as a wellspring of energy and truth, in spite of the rapid changes in our community.

One thing is certain. In spite of the turning toward African and Eastern religions, there are millions of black people in America who consider themselves Christians. These millions are not going to make quick conversions to any current ideological trend, however contemporary and relevant that trend seems to be; nor is their faith going to disappear in the face of some vague rhetoric. Furthermore, I am not quite sure that such a conversion is even necessary or desirable. The black church, however, finds itself in the same position as the Algerian nationalists who had to confront both the positive and negative tendencies in Islam in order to unify national consciousness. The revolutionary black churchman must take the implicit values of Christianity and shape them according to the cultural needs of his people.

He must alter the racist symbology of the European Christian, and propose a system of images that affirms the essential humanity of his congregation. He must move, in his sphere, to sharpen their social consciousness. He can do this better than most activists because he commands a base of operations, while most activists, however pertinent their ideas, don't control anything. In the coming years, the black church will face a major challenge. Young black people everywhere are demanding that religion and education be relevant to the struggle. Black people will be undergoing far-reaching changes in religious attitudes. These changes will parallel the rise in national consciousness. The black church will either accommodate their changes, or become an artifact of the past. But I don't believe the latter will ever come about. I believe that we'll all be working together, building the Nation.

1970

## **On Malcolm X from "New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties"**

What I liked most about Malcolm was his sense of poetry: his speech rhythms, and his cadences that seemed to spring from the universe of black music. Because I was not reared in the black church I was something of an anomaly among Northern blacks. I did not have ready access to the rhetorical strategies of Martin Luther King [Jr.]. My ears were more attuned to the music of urban black America—that blues idiom music called jazz. Malcolm was like that music. He reminded many of us of the music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane—a music that was a central force in the emerging ethos of the black artistic consciousness. Malcolm was in the tough tradition of the urban street speaker. But there was a distinct art in his speeches, an interior logic that was highly compelling and resonant.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in Upper Manhattan. It was a very un-February-like day; I recall a hot sun. The sister I was with was accompanied by her daughter, who was about twelve years old. We belonged to an organization that supported Malcolm after his break with the Black Muslims. The split began with Malcolm's statement that the Kennedy assassination was an example of "chickens coming home to roost." At the time, he asserted that the sins of white America had caused Allah to visit this calamity of the assassination on the country. But it was such a startling statement, made while the nation was still in mourning, that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad put Malcolm

on probation. He was forbidden from public speaking for three months. This was, in itself, quite a startling development because Malcolm was very popular in the Afro-American community at large.

Meanwhile, the Muslims were undergoing an internal struggle over the question of political activism. The Muslims generally existed outside of the civil rights struggle. They were strongly opposed to integration. They did not support any political movements outside of their structure. Malcolm, on the other hand, often addressed himself to struggles of the civil rights workers, particularly the so-called militant wing of the movement. He found himself drifting closer and closer to the nationalistic elements. He found himself speaking more and more about the murders and the beatings that some of the young organizers were experiencing in the South and in the urban communities of the North. He wanted the Nation of Islam to become more involved in the political struggle as activists, and not just as enlightened commentators on the side lines.

I lived on 105th Street off Central Park West then; so the three of us, I, Ahada, and her twelve-year-old daughter, Amina, headed for the Eighth Avenue local, which would take us to 165th Street where Broadway and St. Nicholas intersect. The Audubon Ballroom was opposite a small park. We carried bundles of our newspaper, *Black America*, to sell at the rally where Malcolm was speaking. We were a little late, which was bad. It meant that we'd missed the opportunity to sell the paper to the crowd that usually milled outside the auditorium before the rally. It was strange and eerie when we emerged from the subway at the park. Most of the time when Malcolm spoke at the ballroom there were policemen everywhere. But on this particular afternoon, nothing; just the weird February sun. We made our way up the stairs to the ballroom, and no one searched us at the door. That too was surprising. Inside, we quickly slid into one of the booths that surrounded the perimeter of the dance floor, near the back, on the left side of the aisle facing the stage. The meeting hadn't quite started.

It was the kind of Sunday that made church-going people put on their finest. There were flowered hats of all colors and

descriptions. There were children too, a lot of children like Amina. Some of the women wore African head wraps, called *geles*. There was something churchlike about the whole ambience, but there wasn't any organ music to entertain this congregation as it fidgeted through a speech by Brother Benjamin X, which, if I recall, was about the liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Then he said the following: "And now, without further remarks, I present to you one who is willing to put himself on the line for you, a man who would give his life for—I want you to hear, listen, to understand—one who is a Trojan for the Black man!"

We responded, "Wa-laikum salaam."

We all knew that there had been several attempts on Malcolm's life. A premonition of impending violence passed over me. Guards moved into place. I remember thinking: If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen now. The sun was shafting through the windows. The audience had quieted down in anticipation of Malcolm; and after what seemed like two or three long minutes Malcolm came out.

"As salaam alaikum, brothers and sisters."

"Wa-laikum salaam," we answered.

Count about ten beats, after the sound of the response dies down.

An obvious commotion had started down in the front rows. Malcolm was standing at a podium. He stepped from behind the podium to quiet the commotion. He said something like, "Peace, be cool, brothers." Then it came. The strongest possible message, direct. The shots came rapid fire. Malcolm fell back, his arms flung outward like wings from the impact of the bullets hitting him square in the chest. Then there was the tumbling of scuffling feet, and chairs were overturned. After it happened there seemed to be a pause, then the fear was everywhere. People scrambled for cover on the floor under the tables in the back, shouting. Screams came from the women and children. It seemed like the shots were coming from all over the ballroom (a smoke bomb in the rear, found later, didn't go off). Security guards were trying to reach Malcolm, trying to stop the assassins who now were safely escaping in the

confusion. Ahada's daughter bolted out of the seat beside us. Ahada managed to catch the child before she could be trampled by the mob. A gunman ran by us, shooting and hurdling over chairs in his way. He twisted and turned, and fired at a knot of black men chasing him. The man was still firing as he ran out of the door toward the 165th Street entrance. He was being chased by several of Malcolm's men. They caught him at the top of the steps, and he was wounded in the thigh. Another assassin left by the side door, waving his gun, daring anyone to follow him. The whole room was a wailing woman. Men cried openly.

Malcolm's death was an awesome psychological setback to the nationalist and civil rights radicals. The established Negro leadership lamented his death, but qualified their lamentations by asserting that he "preached by the sword, now he has died by the sword." The militants and the nationalists, on the other hand, felt guilty. They felt that they had not done enough to support Malcolm while he was alive. Hence, they had not protected him, and, somehow, they felt responsible for his assassination. After all, had Malcolm not said that his life was in danger? Had not the man's home been bombed only a week before his assassination? How we gonna build anything if we let our leaders get shot down like dogs? We were ready to retaliate, but everything was fuzzy. The assassins were Negroes, and we really couldn't get that together. Malcolm had broken with the Muslims, and had previously accused them of trying to kill him. But we could not understand why the Muslims would want to kill Malcolm, considering that they would be the prime suspects. No, that didn't make sense.

We considered the CIA, the right wing, the Zionists, and the Mafia. Lacking facts and a clear orientation, we found these considerations merely led to interminable days of agonizing arguments, and charges, and countercharges.

But even though Malcolm's death—the manner of it—emotionally fractured young black radicals, there were two central facts that all factions of the movement came to understand. And they are: that the struggle for black self-determination had entered a serious, more profound stage; and that for most of us,

nonviolence as a viable technique of social change had died with Malcolm on the stage of Audubon.

Some of us did not survive the assassination. Strain set in. Radical black organizations came under more and more official scrutiny, as the saying goes. The situation made everyone paranoid, and there were often good reasons for being so. People were being set up, framed on all kinds of conspiracy charges. There was a great deal of self-criticism, attempts to lock arms against the beast that we knew lurked outside.

Some people dropped out, rejecting organizational struggle altogether. Some ended up in hippie cults in the East Village. Some even started shooting smack again. Some joined the poverty program; some did serious work there, while others disillusioned and, for now, weak, became corrupt poverticians. Malcolm's organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), after being taken over very briefly by Sister Ella Collins, Malcolm's sister, soon faded. But the ideas promulgated by Malcolm did not. Malcolm's ideas had touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism: the relationship between black America and the Third World; the development of a black cultural thrust; the right of oppressed peoples to self-defense and armed struggle; the necessity of maintaining a strong moral force in the black community; the building of autonomous black institutions; and finally, the need for a black theory of social change.

After Malcolm's death, thousands of heretofore unorganized black students and activists became more radically politicized. The Black Arts Movement started in Harlem with the opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School under the direction of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). The Black Arts school attempted to effect a union between art and politics. Not since the thirties had such a union been attempted with such intensity. Never before had black artists entered into such a conscious spiritual union of goal and purpose. For the first time in history there existed a "new" constellation of symbols and images around which to develop a group ethos. What was happening in Harlem was being repeated all over the United States. Black people were shaping a new concept of themselves both in the national and international sense. Where we were going, we did not know. But one thing was certain, we knew

that, as James Brown says, we were a "New Breed." At first we were smug and self-righteous in this newfound knowledge of ourselves. We were often arrogant and pushy. Underneath these negatives, we knew that much of what we were about was concertedly related to the total liberation of black people. We knew that without a strong sense of nationalism black people would not survive America. There was no way to survive America fragmented and in general confusion about who we were, and what we wanted.

All of the development of our remembered and unremembered history began to weigh down on us. And the more of our memory that returned to us, the sharper, the more acute the pain became. The more we probed our history and the history of the Third World, the more angry we became, the more nourished our hate for the white world. It had to go down that way. There was a concrete historical reason for everything that we felt. White people deserved to be hated uncritically. Sometimes in our perception of them, they even ceased to be people. They were the "Big White Fog" of the Ted Ward play. They became like the snow falling in Richard Wright's *Native Son*—a dead natural phenomenon that contaminated the entire planet. We reversed the Manichean dualism that placed the symbolism of blackness on the side of Evil, and whiteness on the side of Good.

This was a necessary reversal. But it led to some contradictions, the most important of which was that our nationalism could not exist primarily in contradistinction to white nationalism. We could never hope to develop a viable concept of self if that concept were purely based on hating crackers. The primary focus of our emotional energies would have to be black people. If we made the mistake of constantly addressing scorn and venom to white people, we would fall into the moribund category of the Negro leaders who seemed to be constantly affirming the black man's humanity to white people, and thus constantly implying that somehow black people would gain their humanity when the benevolence of white people finally asserted itself.

It did not matter the style of the address. Even if it was one of scorn and vindication, or if, as in the case of James Baldwin, it was rooted in compassion and an ardent desire to make one's

self felt as a human being, this approach still implicitly fortified the white man's sense of power in the world. We could historically trace this tendency among black leaders, a tendency that has blurred vision and shattered energies. We had to dig each other, for each other, on our own terms, and on the basis of the common emotional history that we shared; a history that had shaped us both positively and negatively. Somewhere in the maw of that history we will find the means of redeeming ourselves, of "vindicating the blues," as Askia [Toure] says. It had to be that way. Accepting this reality, we can now begin to deal from a strong emotional base.

We will take a stand in the history primarily on the basis of our own emotional history. We have become synthesizers, bringing to bear upon the struggle all of the accumulated knowledge of the world. We can only deal realistically if we know where we are coming from. So we got to start dealing with specifics, each to each. That's not an easy thing to do. Black people know how to relate to white people; that part of the survival kit is cooled out. But relating to each other, that's another thing. We have still to get that together. Witness our brothers in the Black Panthers struggling for liberalism like everybody else, but so caught up in addressing themselves to the white community that they, in spite of their deaths and harassments, have become objects of art for jaded folks like Leonard Bernstein and Mrs. Peter Duchin. "It's exciting," the bitch says. And all the time our brothers in the black berets know that it is not exciting. In fact, it's some rather serious shit. Even though it may have started as a dimly perceived game, when you get right down next to it, up under its skin, it ain't no game. No kind of way.

Cut loose from a unified center, we become freaks, confused, driven from without rather than from within. The Eubank has found his balls only to become the object of wholesale masturbation. Revolution becomes a talk show, the maudlin chatterings of some Hollywood actor. You become just another object of glamour. Slick white boys manage your most private affairs. The swiftness that is you, your essence, becomes mechanized, a glib part of a dead game. Outside of the ethos, you have to become bitchy and perverted, 'cause you ain't holding

on to nothing. You are being squeezed spermless, your seed scattered among the ice and rocks.

Think about a nation, a place where, as much as natural laws will allow, you can shape your face. Like:

visions/all forms/actual life is the poem  
 your song bodies/life faces  
 your face/your child's face  
 save something Brother/but let the dead thing go/  
 com' on now/shape the face/and space/yes Father  
 and space/yes/save space/give breath to words  
 make a world/com' on now/move/give fire to deeds  
 love your millions/make a place for all of the faces/  
 but mostly your own/be change/love no dead things  
 give flesh to energy/do it with style/nigger elegance/  
 com' on now Brother/shape a space/  
 love your face/make a place. . . .

## Black Power in the International Context

The struggle for black liberation has come to a significant turning point. Currently, the most advanced elements of the Black Power movement are beginning to understand the international implications of the struggle of black liberation. It is becoming increasingly clear that the struggle cannot be contained within the bounds of national life. As a matter of fact to continue to do so is a tendency that must be strongly fought. The African-American struggle is inextricably linked to the worldwide struggles of oppressed peoples against decadent political and economic systems.

The present-day attempts to put the struggle on an international basis have their roots in the writings of such nineteenth-century thinkers as Martin R. Delany who was the first Afro-American to raise the question of self-determination for the Africans. In the twentieth century, Garvey, DuBois, Malcolm X, and Harold Cruse have examined the relationship between the Afro-American struggle and the international situation in more precise details.

During the twenties, Garvey used Delany's slogan "Africa for the Africans" as the rallying cry for the United Negro Improvement Association. DeBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, the Americas, and the islands of the seas." Malcolm X, extracting from both Garvey and DuBois, constantly urged the movement to internationalize itself.

Therefore, the current internationalist tendencies of groups