

rapher. "I combed not only the bright-light areas, but Harlem's residential areas from best to worst, from Sugar Hill up near the Polo Grounds, where many famous celebrities lived, down to the slum blocks of old rat-trap apartment houses, just crawling with everything you could mention that was illegal and immoral." Such a thorough investigation of society, from the most privileged to the warts-and-all of everyday life, would become a hallmark of his travels.

Although pleasure and profit were on his mind at this stage of his life, Malcolm learned the history of Harlem—a history, in his understanding, of "immigrant musical chairs," when each national group from Europe would leave Harlem when a new group arrived, and where "today, all these same immigrants' descendants are running as hard as they can to escape the descendants of the Negroes who helped to unload the immigrant ships." He learned of Harlem's many generations of protest, including recent black boycotts—inspired by a Housewives League—of white merchants for "refusing to hire a Negro even as their stores raked in Harlem's money." He gained a sense of Harlem's strategic place in international black politics, too, overhearing a salesman explain that the "Negro and white canvassers" who sold copies of the Communist Party newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and called for justice for the Scottsboro boys (nine wrongly accused black youths in a widely publicized trial for the rape of two white women in Alabama) were "somehow . . . tied in with the Russians."

The lessons he learned in Harlem would frame his understanding of white people. He was appalled by the rich "white men—in their sixties, I know, some maybe in their seventies—" who snuck up to a Harlem brothel "to cringe on their knees and beg and cry out for mercy under" the whip of a black prostitute.

News from abroad seemed to confirm his views. A decade or so later, now going by the name Malcolm X, he would compare the sexual antics of rich white New Yorkers to those of the British establishment during the Profumo scandal of 1963, in which a cabinet minister had an affair with a woman who was the lover of a Russian spy. He also commented on American and British white women's lust, "particularly 'taboo' lust" across the color line: "After England's leaders [in the Profumo scandal] had been with those white girls, those girls, for their satisfaction, went to Negroes, to smoke reefers and make fun of some of England's greatest peers as cuckolds and fools."

To his mind, then, British and American race relations were both absurd, cruel systems. As Malcolm X, traveling to Britain would thus provide an opportunity to tackle the same enemy that he despised at home. But he was quite clear about which of the two countries was most to blame: "America is subsidizing what is left of the prestige and strength of the once mighty Britain," he wrote in his autobiography. "The sun has set forever on that monocled, pith-helmeted resident colonialist, sipping tea with his delicate lady in the non-white colonies being systematically robbed of every valuable resource. Britain's superfluous royalty and nobility now exist by charging tourists to inspect the once baronial castles, and by selling memoirs, perfumes, autographs, titles, and even themselves."

For Malcolm Little in postwar New York, though, it was particularly the poverty and despair he encountered on so many Harlem streets, in sight of Manhattan's skyscrapers, that fueled his anger against white America. There may have been exciting "blam-blam" by night, but by day there was "dirt, garbage cans overflowing or kicked over; drunks, dope addicts, beggars." In later life he thought often about those friends of his who tried,

and so often failed, to eke out a living. “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.”

#### DESTINY

Out there in the streets, hustling, pushing dope, and robbing, I could have had the dreams from a pound of hashish and I’d never have dreamed anything so wild as that one day I would speak in coliseums and arenas, at the greatest American universities, and on radio and television programs, not to mention speaking all over Egypt and Africa and in England.

—Malcolm X, *Autobiography*

Harlem may have seemed a Seventh Heaven when he first arrived, but it quickly transformed into a personal hell. As Malcolm put it in his autobiography, he became “one of the most depraved parasitical hustlers among New York’s eight million people.”

In Malcolm’s breathless and sensational telling, he got into trouble for putting a soldier—who turned out to be an undercover detective—in touch with a prostitute. He started dealing marijuana and “sold reefers like a wild man. I scarcely slept.” After running foul of the narcotics squad and being placed under surveillance, he began to carry a gun. When he was summoned to an army draft interview, he told the military psychiatrist that he couldn’t wait to be conscripted so he could turn his gun on white racist American soldiers. He wasn’t called up. To pay for his drug habit and flashy clothes, he started stealing; he also brought white clients to a brothel and supplied drugs to a woman he described as “the white lesbian who lived downtown.” He got involved in fights—with gamblers and with his

best friend's lover. The problems escalated. He became hooked on hard drugs and took other risks that he thought would leave him dead. Within a couple of years he found himself on the run from the police, a hustler, Italian mobsters, and a West Indian man called Archie. He was not yet twenty-one.

"Recalling all of this," he wrote in his autobiography, "I don't know, to tell the truth, how I am alive to tell it today." Now as Malcolm X, he attributed his seemingly superhuman turn of fortune to Allah's care. In fact, though, the reason for his survival was rather less epic: according to a recent biographer, his underworld life was most likely not the dramatic one that he later described so colorfully, but rather a fairly common one of petty crime.<sup>12</sup> Without a doubt Malcolm's version made for a much more gripping narrative than the actual facts would have, and perhaps more important, his grand tale sought to achieve a higher purpose. As Malcolm put it in his autobiography, he hoped the stories of his life would show just how low "the American white man's society" would allow the black man to fall.

Still, minor crime was enough to get him into major trouble. At the end of 1945, he was part of a team that went on a stealing spree in the smarter white areas of Boston. Not long thereafter, he was arrested for burgling a house in the wealthy suburb of Newton. To make matters worse, in a time when adultery and interracial relationships were taboo, one of his team was a married white woman who was also his lover. He was sentenced to jail for eight to ten years.

For a man who needed to be on the move and liked to keep his own company as and when he chose, jail was harsh punishment. So initially, he caused trouble in order to be sent to solitary confinement, where "I would pace for hours like a caged

leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself.” At that point in his life, it seemed inconceivable that the small-time thief and long-term jailbird Malcolm Little would end up an American leader, global traveler, and sought-after speaker.

Yet his time of confinement proved to be a time of learning, even transformation—for in the rage of jail, he gained spiritual peace. “I found Allah and the religion of Islam,” he wrote later, “and it completely transformed my life.” It was in the confines of prison that he developed his world vision and learned to debate; it was also where he first read about Britain and, most likely, first heard about the Oxford Union.

#### PRISON

Debating was a weekly event there at the Norfolk Prison Colony. My reading had my mind like steam under pressure. Some way, I had to start telling the white man about himself to his face. I decided I could do this by putting my name down to debate.

—Malcolm X, *Autobiography*

During a visit from his brother Reginald, who had recently joined the Nation of Islam, prisoner Malcolm learned of the religious movement, and he soon struck up a correspondence with its leader, Elijah Muhammad. The Nation of Islam had started during the Great Depression as one of many religious sects that particularly appealed to confused or impoverished Americans (both white and black Americans, though in this case black). The Nation’s early theology was somewhat confused and impoverished too. As far as Malcolm Little understood it, Allah had created the first human beings, who were black. But an evil scientist, Yacub, had bred white people on the Island of Patmos. This devil race had then lived as savages in European caves for two thou-

sand years, before Moses civilized them. Allah then sanctioned white domination for six thousand years, as punishment and to cleanse the black race through suffering, until a mighty representative should lead black people to restored spiritual purity, and then to freedom and dominion. That mighty man was Wallace Fard, who founded the Nation in Detroit in the 1930s. Fard disappeared almost as quickly as he appeared, leaving a successor, Elijah Muhammad, whom Malcolm came to know and serve and, for a time, adore.

Malcolm had long rejected Christianity, dismissing it as “the white man’s religion.” As he would later often say, “All it’s done for black men is help keep them slaves.”<sup>13</sup> He had entered prison an atheist. Joining the Nation would be the start of a religious journey that within a decade would lead him to Mecca in search of true Islam and eventually to England to meet with other Muslims. But at Concord Reformatory and then Norfolk County Prison, both in Massachusetts, he took his first steps into his new faith—and he did so with gusto. Like other members of the Nation, Malcolm dropped his surname, because it was a white man’s name inherited from slaveowners, replacing it with an X to underline the point. He enthusiastically followed the Nation’s strict moral code on matters of sex (only within heterosexual marriage, which should only be to other members of the Nation), diet (one main meal a day, no pork), lifestyle (regular fasting and no tobacco, alcohol, or gambling), prayer (five times daily, facing toward Mecca), self-reliance (no acceptance of state benefits), and, on leaving prison, dress code (suit and bow tie). And he embraced the Nation’s theology of black supremacy. Reflecting on his encounters with white people, he found that the Nation’s teaching that “the white man is the devil” rang true.

Being stuck in prison proved to be a blessing for the new con-