



TEACHING TOLERANCE

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
TOLERANCE.ORG

VIOLENCE PREVENTION // RECONSIDERING MALCOLM X

Handout 1: Rethinking Malcolm X

When most people think of Malcolm X, a few phrases come immediately to mind: *by any means necessary*; *blue-eyed devils*; *militant black leader*. One of the dominant images of Malcolm X in the popular imagination depicts him standing beside a window, rifle in hand. The media portrayed him as an angry and violent man, an advocate of race war, although a textual analysis (<http://www.walterlippmann.com/mx-nyt.html>) of his statements on violence suggests that, particularly in the later years of his life, he advocated only self-defense.

Born in 1925 as Malcolm Little in Omaha, Neb., Malcolm X endured many transformations during his short life. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* begins with a rather salacious description of Malcolm's fast lifestyle as a zoot-suiter (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/eng_sf_feature/sf_zoot_mx.html). The structure of *Autobiography* devotes the first 10 chapters to Malcolm's criminal persona — what he later referred to and condemned as a “glamour image” of the hustler. He believed the hustler image endangered impressionable youth because it glorified vice, so he wanted people to know how treacherous and depressing a hustler's life really is.

At the age of 21, after hustling in New York, Boston and Detroit, Malcolm was sentenced to eight to 10 years in prison for armed robbery. While incarcerated, he read dictionaries and encyclopedias and became a member of the nation of Islam, which encouraged him to lead a clean, drug-free and chaste lifestyle. Chapters 11-16 of *Autobiography* detail the views of this very dogmatic, often angry Malcolm.

Outspoken and controversial yet highly charismatic, Malcolm X became notorious in the public eye when he characterized President Kennedy's assassination as “the chickens coming home to roost.” Claiming the epidemic of racial hate against blacks in the United States had spread unchecked until it struck down the chief of state, Malcolm compared the presidential assassination to the murder of Medgar Evers. Taking the claim somewhat out of context, newspapers quoted only the “chickens coming home to roost” statement, which seemed to dismiss or justify the tragedy. Many considered Malcolm the antithesis of the nonviolent civil rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.

Elijah Muhammad officially silenced Malcolm X in the aftermath of this statement, but many people believe the silencing had to do with personal rivalry. As Malcolm X lost faith in Elijah Muhammad as a moral, mental and spiritual reformer, he began to plan for a new civil rights organization embracing black men of all faiths. His vision for the future receives the least attention and explanation in *Autobiography*.

After making a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, Malcolm changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He converted to “true Islam” (http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/MSA/find_more/m_x).

[html](#)) and retracted his previous racial statements about whites. He refused to rescind his statements about violence and nonviolence (<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/33993.html>) and rearticulated his stand that self-defense was justifiable in the face of violent attacks. By this point, Malcolm spent as much time speaking about his goals of unity among all people who worked for justice and peace.

While Malcolm never embraced Martin Luther King Jr.'s position on nonviolence because he believed in self-defense, he had great respect for King's work. As early as 1963, Malcolm tried to form a coalition (<http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxwords/letters/lettertomartin.gif>) among civil rights organizations. After Malcolm's assassination in 1965, Dr. King sent a telegram (<http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Telegram-to-Mrs-MX-full.jpg>) to his widow, Betty Shabazz, expressing his admiration for the work and commitment to racial issues that characterized Malcolm's life.

Beyond what some history books, or even *The Autobiography*, tell us, Malcolm X was a multifaceted leader whose strategies for change were dangerous only to the racist status quo. New studies of his personal papers and speeches focus on the last year of his life — his final transformation — and reveal a Malcolm X familiar to very few people. As you read or listen to some of the following statements, you can determine for yourself the significance of Malcolm X's controversial statements on violence.