

**The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
The New York Public Library**

Malcolm X: A Search for Truth

May 19, 2005 – December 31, 2005

Introduction

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, is pleased to present *Malcolm X: A Search for Truth*, an exhibition in commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Malcolm X/El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The exhibition is based in part on the collection of personal and professional papers and memorabilia of Malcolm X that was rescued from auction in 2002 and placed on deposit at the Schomburg Center by the Shabazz family. This exhibition provides the first opportunity for the public to view significant aspects of this collection.

Complemented by an epilogue focusing on courtroom evidence from the New York City Municipal Archives and courtroom images by Tracy Sugarman in the Schomburg Center's Art and Artifacts Division, *Malcolm X: A Search for Truth* uses the materials from this extraordinary collection as well as other collections from the Center. These never-before-exhibited materials present a provocative and informative perspective on the life of the person known variously as Malcolm Little, "Detroit Red," Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. More significantly, the exhibition poses questions about the nature of the developmental journey that Malcolm Little pursued to become El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The subtitle *A Search for Truth* focuses the interpretive dimensions of the exhibition on the process and products of his driving intellectual quest for truth about himself, his family, his people, his country, and his world.

Messengers of Hope and Liberation

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in the midst of one of the most dynamic periods of political, cultural, and spiritual transformation in African-American history. After almost a half century of racial segregation, political disfranchisement, and racial terrorism, the African-American community in the United States had begun the search for alternative political, economic, cultural, and religious paths. Ten years before Malcolm X's birth, Booker T. Washington, the national leader of black people since the last decade of the nineteenth century, died, leaving a leadership vacuum. Into this void came new political and religious formations that competed for the loyalty and allegiance of the black masses. Marxists, socialists, the African Blood Brotherhood, and a few communists emerged on the political scene, jockeying with storefront preachers, the NAACP, the Urban League, grassroots community organizers, black nationalists, and Christian and non-Christian religious bodies for leadership roles in the New Negro Movement of the time.

Marcus Garvey, founder and President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and so-named Provisional President of Africa, won the allegiance and support of millions of African peoples in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. From his base in Harlem, Garvey, the dominant political figure in the New Negro Movement, had organized and managed the largest mass movement and self-help economic enterprise in African diaspora history and had established the model for

twentieth-century independent black economic and political action. Malcolm X's father, a Baptist preacher, was an organizer for Garvey's UNIA, and his mother reported for Garvey's newspaper, *The Negro World*. Elijah Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam from the 1930s to his death in 1975, was also a Garveyite who built his self-help program on the UNIA model. Noble Drew Ali's earlier Islamic organization, the Moorish Science Temple, likely provided the initial inspiration for Elijah Muhammad's religious program. In turn, Malcolm X was drawn to his teachings, which wove the philosophies of Garvey and Drew Ali into the Nation of Islam.

“...before long, my nickname happened. Just when, I don't know—but people, knowing I was from Michigan, would ask me what city. Since most New Yorkers had never heard of Lansing, I would name Detroit. Gradually, I began to be called “Detroit Red”—and it stuck.”

— *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Growing Up: Malcolm Little to “Detroit Red,” 1925–45

During the first twenty years of his life, Malcolm Little was shaped by social, familial, and personal forces that forged his identity as an independent thinker with a strong personality and innate leadership abilities—although he lost his way during his adolescence and young manhood.

Malcolm's parents, Earl and Louise Little, had met in Montreal, Canada, at a UNIA convention, and they remained devoted to the international black worldview and political stance of the movement. White supremacists harassed them because of their politics, and when Malcolm's father was killed in East Lansing, Michigan, black neighbors felt the local racists were responsible.

After Earl Little's death, Malcolm's mother sank into desperate poverty. The children, especially Malcolm, became increasingly difficult to handle, and the racist social service authorities hounded Louise Little. Despite her valiant efforts, she lost control and suffered a nervous breakdown that sent her to a mental institution, and her younger children to foster homes and a juvenile facility. Malcolm was an adolescent too young to understand all the forces at work on his family. Though his behavior strayed further and further from his parents' standards, he and his siblings managed to maintain close ties throughout their separation.

Then an older sibling from Earl Little's first marriage, Ella Little Collins, came to visit from Boston in 1940 and invited Malcolm to spend some time with her there. His foray to the big city exhilarated him, and he ended up dropping out of school after the eighth grade and living with her. He loved the relative freedom Boston offered, and he found ways to express his resistance to white power. For the next five years he escalated his involvement in Boston's black criminal underworld and tried to master the street life of the black mecca, Harlem. There he became known as “Detroit Red.” But he got caught after a string of burglaries in Boston and, in January 1946, was convicted and sentenced to up to ten years in prison.

Timeline

1925

May 19—Born Malcolm Little, Omaha, Nebraska, to Louise and Earl Little.

Alain Locke edits and publishes *The New Negro*, anthology of literary works by blacks.

1926

December—Little family moves to Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1929

Little home in Lansing, Michigan, set on fire and destroyed. Earl Little builds new home in East Lansing.

October 24—Stock market crashes, leading to Great Depression.

1930

Wallace D. Fard (aka W. Fard Muhammad) founds Nation of Islam in Detroit, Michigan.

1931

September 28—Earl Little run over by streetcar and dies.

1934

May 28—Betty Sanders (later Betty X and Betty Shabazz) born; grows up in Detroit.

Wallace D. Fard (aka W. Fard Muhammad) disappears. Elijah Muhammad succeeds him as leader of Nation of Islam.

1938

June 22—Heavyweight champion Joe Louis defeats German Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium, New York City.

1939

January—Louise Little declared legally insane and committed to state mental hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan, remaining there twenty-six years.

Spring—Placed in juvenile home.

1940–1941

Lives in various foster homes in Lansing.

1941–1944

Goes to live with sister Ella in Boston. At age sixteen, takes job on the New York to Boston train route. Moves to Harlem and works at Small's Paradise on 135th Street. Gets involved in New York City hustling and returns to Boston. Gets involved in petty crimes in Boston.

1941

December 7—U.S. enters World War II. More than 1 million African-American women and men serve in armed forces throughout war.

1943

October—Classified 4-F and disqualified for service in U.S. Army.

1943–1944

Becomes more involved in hustling and selling drugs and bootleg whiskey. Gains name “Detroit Red.”

1945

December—Involved in string of thefts in Boston.

1946

January—Arrested in Boston on charges of larceny, breaking and entering, and possession of firearms.

“...the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive.... My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America.”

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Becoming Malcolm X: Incarceration and Conversion, 1946–52

The “Detroit Red” who entered prison in February 1946 gained a place for himself there as the angry, irreligious “Satan,” as Malcolm X describes him in the *Autobiography*. But an older prisoner, John Elton Bemby, recognized Malcolm’s intelligence and encouraged him to read. Then his older siblings Hilda, Wilfred, and Philbert, and the younger Reginald, brought him word of a way of looking at the world that was new—and yet not so. They coaxed him back to his beginnings.

They had all converted to a small religious group called the Nation of Islam (NOI), and eventually Malcolm started to pay serious attention to its practices. The Nation had a *familiar* philosophy: self-determination, pride, and cultural and economic independence from white society. This approach to life had been built into their formative years through the Marcus Garvey/UNIA philosophy of their parents. The Nation offered Malcolm the Honorable Elijah Muhammad—a father figure, protector, mentor, and guide through the trials and tribulations of life as a black man in the United States. At the same time, Malcolm began a dedicated quest for knowledge that he pursued to the end of his life. He turned prison into a university. Reading broadly and constantly, always writing and thinking, he also began to hone his natural intellect and verbal skills through the debate club. Prison became the training ground for his coming ministry in the Nation of Islam. Brought back to his roots by his new life, spurred by his utter faith in and devotion to the Islam he had embraced, Malcolm, at his parole in August 1952, was being pushed forward into a world he couldn’t have imagined.

Timeline

1946

February—Begins serving ten-year sentence at Charlestown (Massachusetts) Prison.

June 3—U.S. Supreme Court bans segregation in interstate motor travel.

1947

Moved to Concord Reformatory. Begins process of self-education that lasts throughout his term. Converts to Nation of Islam under influence of his siblings.

1948

July 26—President Harry S. Truman issues executive order prohibiting discrimination in armed forces.

1948–1950

Moved to Norfolk Prison Colony. He and Malcolm Jarvis (“Shorty”) join debate club.

1950–1952

Returned to Charlestown.

1952

August—Paroled. Moves to Michigan with brother Wilfred.

September—Earns “X” surname from Nation of Islam.

“The black man in the ghettos, for instance, has to start self-correcting his own material, moral, and spiritual defects and evils. The black man needs to start his own program to get rid of drunkenness, drug addiction, prostitution. The black man in America has to lift up his own sense of values.”

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Being Minister Malcolm X: Growing the Nation, 1953–63

The Malcolm who emerged from imprisonment became Malcolm X in September 1952. Within twelve years, the Nation of Islam had mosques all over the United States and sympathizers in every segment of the black population. Malcolm X’s dynamism as a minister, teacher, and organizer spurred this phenomenal spread of what had been a tiny organization into a major force in black life.

Through the 1950s, Elijah Muhammad’s vision of a separate black nation guided by Islam reached the hearts and minds of those living with the most limited possibilities. It offered a worldview that put them at the center, one that separated them from and placed them above the society that despised them. It offered them a set of well-defined rules by which to live. The Nation bought land, ran farms, opened businesses, held mass gatherings in small and large cities, and provided a training ground for manhood and womanhood in a new kind of society. Malcolm X organized and ministered in service to this vision.

The minister had married Betty X (Sanders) in 1958, and they were living in East Elmhurst, Queens, with their daughters Attallah, Qubilah, and Ilyasah. Family life gave him the base from which to take his Nation mission to an ever wider world. First the broader black community and then mainstream America took increasing note of the bold message and leadership of the Nation—as did various local and national government intelligence agencies. Malcolm X traveled at a frenetic pace, speaking on college campuses and debating civil rights leaders on radio and television. He founded *Muhammad Speaks* as the Nation’s official newspaper. He started work with writer Alex Haley on an autobiography. His ideas were being constantly tested and honed—and expanded—by extensive exposure to hostile as well as receptive audiences.

Not surprisingly, high-placed Muhammad family members and others running the Nation from Chicago headquarters began to scheme against Minister Malcolm X. Beneath the surface, turmoil and increasing signs of corruption in the NOI hierarchy provided the opportunity for the FBI to infiltrate and fan the flames of discontent. Then rumors surfaced of Elijah Muhammad fathering several children with young women who worked as his secretaries. Although Minister Malcolm X remained devoted to the Nation’s leader, this turn of events shook him to his core. Some political issues had already begun to eat at his certainties. The Nation’s policy of non-involvement in politics and the civil rights movement increasingly disturbed him, because he was coming to see black nationalism and political unity under Nation leadership as the most powerful way to struggle against the white supremacist system.

Timeline

1953

June—Appointed assistant minister at Detroit Temple No. 1.

Winter—Named first minister of Boston Temple No. 11.

1954

March—Named acting minister of Philadelphia Temple No. 12.

May 17—U.S. Supreme Court rules segregation of public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

June—Named minister of New York Temple No. 7.

July 11—White Citizens Council organized in Indianola, Mississippi.

1955

August 28—Emmett Till, fourteen, kidnapped and lynched in Money, Mississippi.

December 5—Bus boycott begins in Montgomery, Alabama, sparked by Rosa Parks and led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

1956

February—Autherine Lucy, first black student admitted to University of Alabama, expelled after white students riot.

November 13—U.S. Supreme Court rules segregation in public transportation unconstitutional, resulting in end of Montgomery bus boycott in December.

1957

Organizes Los Angeles Temple No. 27.

March 6—Led by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana is first sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence. (South Africa is last one, in 1994.)

April—Calms angry crowd and negotiates with New York City police at 23rd Precinct after Nation member Hinton Johnson severely beaten by police and taken into custody. Police take note of him, and black press reports of incident bring him and Nation to notice of wider Harlem and black community.

September—Angry white mobs and Arkansas National Guard prevent nine African-American students from integrating all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; federal troops escort children into school.

1958

January 14—Marries Betty (Sanders) X in Lansing, Michigan. They move to East Elmhurst, Queens (New York City).

November 16—Family’s first child, Attallah, born.

1959

Berry Gordy, Jr., founds Motown Records in Detroit, Michigan.

March 11—Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* is first play by a black woman produced on Broadway.

July—Travels for three weeks as Elijah Muhammad’s ambassador to Middle East and Africa. Visits Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana; meets with Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.

July 13–17—Mike Wallace’s report, “The Hate That Hate Produced,” airs on New York television (and then nationally), bringing first widespread notice of Nation of Islam. Membership booms.

December 25—Family’s second child, Qubilah, born.

1960

Founds *Muhammad Speaks*, Nation of Islam official newspaper.

January 1—Revolution led by Fidel Castro takes power in Cuba.

February 1—Four black college students stage sit-in at whites-only Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, sparking wave of protest actions in nearly 100 cities by year’s end.

April—Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) established.

September 20—Meets with Fidel Castro at Hotel Theresa in Harlem.

November—John F. Kennedy, Jr., elected president.

1961

C. Eric Lincoln publishes *The Black Muslims in America*, a sociological study.

May 4—Widespread Freedom Rides movement begins in Deep South to desegregate buses and terminals; met with arrests and violence from law enforcement and white segregationists.

December—Small number of U.S. troops in Vietnam begins to climb; by end of 1968 peaks at more than 500,000. War ends April 30, 1975.

1962

April 27—When Ronald Stokes killed and six other Muslims wounded by police in Los Angeles mosque, becomes closely involved in controversial case for next year or more.

July 22—Family's third child, Ilyasah, born.

September–October—Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett defies Supreme Court ruling that University of Mississippi must admit James H. Meredith, who registers; federal troops deployed.

October–November—Cuban missile crisis.

1963

Early—Begins work on autobiography with Alex Haley; proceeds to go to Nation of Islam (NOI) Chicago headquarters.

Spring—Elijah Muhammad admits to him affairs with secretaries. Had earlier investigated rumors of six illegitimate children and talked with three women to confirm situation.

May—*Playboy* publishes candid interview with him by Alex Haley, reaching broad white male audience; creates basis for Haley's involvement in autobiography.

May 22–25—Leaders of African independent states meet in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to sign charter for Organization of African Unity (OAU).

May–June—Garners more mainstream national attention when *Life* publishes articles on him and the Nation, with photographs by Gordon Parks.

June—Alabama Governor George Wallace defies integration of University of Alabama by standing at the “schoolhouse door”; President John F. Kennedy federalizes Alabama National Guard.

June 12—NAACP leader Medgar W. Evers murdered outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

July—*New York Times* reports Malcolm X is second most sought-after speaker for U.S. college campuses (after Republican presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater).

July 3—Newspapers, radio, and television report on secretaries filing paternity suits against Elijah Muhammad.

August 28—250,000 demonstrators gather for March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers “I Have a Dream” speech.

August 28—Travels to observe March on Washington; calls it “Farce on Washington.”

September 15—Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombed in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls and injuring twenty others.

Mid-September—Appears at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue rally in Harlem in response to Birmingham church bombing.

November 10—Gives “A Message to the Grass Roots” speech at Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference in Detroit.

November 22—President John F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

December 1—Last speech representing Nation of Islam. Says, in response to reporter’s question, that Kennedy assassination is case of the “chickens coming home to roost.”

December 4—Suspended from ministry and “silenced” by Elijah Muhammad, supposedly for ninety days.

“...on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to *re-arrange* much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to *toss aside* some of my previous conclusions. ...I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.”

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, 1964–65

By January 1965, Minister Malcolm X had been “silenced” and stripped of his ministry (supposedly for ninety days) by Elijah Muhammad for his comment after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He had used the phrase “chickens coming home to roost” in his response to a reporter’s question after a speech. By the time those days passed, Malcolm X had made the momentous decision to strike out on his own because he knew the forces against him in the Nation of Islam were now insurmountable—Elijah Muhammad believed he had betrayed him. But he had to have an organizational foundation from which to do his work.

First he formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI), in March. By June he realized he needed a secular political organization to attract the broad group of non-Muslim supporters he’d always had. This became the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which he saw as spearheading a drive to charge the United States, before the United Nations, with violating the human rights of black people—a move the U.S. government considered dangerous to its interests. Personally, he was looking to traditional Islam for answers to the spiritual quest on which he found himself now that he was out of the Nation.

Malcolm X traveled to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and in letters and interviews he shared his experiences, at times shocking even his followers in the U.S. He made the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, where his vision of humanity was transformed, as he saw that Islam could unite Muslims of every race and nationality. He himself was transformed: having made the hajj, he became El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Back home in Harlem, through both of his organizations, he tried to strengthen ties to the civil rights movement and local community leaders struggling around issues such as housing and education. Something much more sinister also occupied him. Threats, assaults, and murder attempts on his and his followers’ lives had become a regular occurrence, escalating as time went on. He had publicly revealed Elijah Muhammad’s transgressions, and the Nation was in a retaliatory mood. On February 21, 1965, the day he was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom, Malcolm X was also under surveillance by local and federal authorities.

The search for truth, on which this global man of politics and faith embarked, continues.

Timeline

1964

January—Visits Cassius Clay training camp in Miami, Florida, with family.

January–February—Cassius Clay defeats Sonny Liston for World Heavyweight Championship. Clay goes public as Muhammad Ali.

February—Former assistant at New York mosque says mosque official asked him to wire bomb in Malcolm X’s car; beginning of ongoing series of threats and harassment until end of his life.

February 26—Petitions Elijah Muhammad by letter and telephone for reinstatement.

March—Starts visiting Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, director of Islamic Center of New York, for instruction in Islam.

March 8—Announces break with Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad.

March 10—Nation requests family vacate East Elmhurst, Queens, house and return all property.

March 12—Announces formation of Muslim Mosque, Inc., as religious and political organization.

March 16—Starts getting involved in local black New York City political struggles.

March 26—Meets Martin Luther King, Jr., for only time, at U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

March 29–April 12—Delivers “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech in New York City, Cleveland, and Detroit.

April 8—Nation files for eviction of family from East Elmhurst house.

April 10—*Muhammad Speaks* runs cartoon showing Malcolm X’s decapitated head rolling toward a pile of skulls. In same issue his brother Philbert X denounces him.

April 13–May 21—Travels to nine Middle East and African countries. Makes the hajj in Mecca and sends letter describing his move beyond black/white perspective to more humanistic vision; signs letter “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.” Guest of Prince Faisal in Saudi Arabia and meets with President Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.

May 29—FBI visits him, and he tape records encounter.

June–August—Freedom Summer project in Mississippi, led by Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), launches voter registration and education campaign with help of hundreds of volunteer students and others. James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner disappear, later found murdered by Ku Klux Klan members.

June 26—Writes open letter to Elijah Muhammad calling for peace; published in *New York Post*.

June 28—Announces founding of secular group, Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), separating political from religious activity, to appeal to broad black constituency.

July 1—Family's fourth child, Gamilah Lamumba, born.

July 2—President Lyndon B. Johnson signs 1964 Civil Rights Act, providing legal protection against discrimination in all aspects of public life.

July 9–November 24—Tours Africa, Middle East, and London. Visits fourteen nations and meets with at least eight heads of state and numerous other leaders. Petitions Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit in Cairo to bring cause of American blacks to United Nations as human rights issue.

July–August—Riots break out in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

August 22—Fannie Lou Hamer delivers televised testimony to Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, demanding right of new Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to represent disfranchised people of her state.

Late November—Reunites with mother and family in Michigan, after her release from Kalamazoo State Hospital.

November 30—Travels to London for debate on “extremism” at Oxford Union on December 3.

December 16—Speaks at Harvard Law School forum.

December 20—OAAU rally, Audubon Ballroom, in support of Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

1965

January 19—In Toronto, Canada, for television appearance.

February 3–4—Speaks at Tuskegee Institute and at SNCC event at Brown Chapel, Selma, Alabama.

February 5–13—Visits London to address First Congress of Council of African Organizations on February 8 and London School of Economics on the 11th.

February 9—Flies to Paris to address Congress of African Students, but is refused entry; returns to London.

February 14—Family home in East Elmhurst firebombed in early morning hours. Flies to Detroit to make what will be his last major speech.

February 15—OAAU rally, Audubon Ballroom; 600 attend.

February 18—Evicted from home in East Elmhurst; moves household out. Gives last speech, “The Black Revolution and Its Effects Upon the Negroes of the Western Hemisphere,” at Barnard College, Columbia University.

February 21—At 3:10 p.m., gunned down as he begins speaking at Audubon Ballroom. Talmadge Hayer (aka Thomas Hagan) arrested.

February 23—New York Mosque No. 7 burns in early morning hours.

February 27—Ossie Davis delivers eulogy at funeral service at Faith Temple Church of God in Christ in Harlem. Buried at Ferncliff Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York.

March—Betty Shabazz performs the hajj in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

March 11—Grand jury indicts Talmadge Hayer, Norman 3X Butler, and Thomas 15X Johnson for murder of Malcolm X.

September 30—Family’s twin daughters, Malaak and Malikah, born.

November—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with Alex Haley, published.

Epilogue: The Trial

1966

April 14—Three accused men sentenced to life imprisonment for murder of Malcolm X, after two-month trial and despite testimony from Hayer that does not implicate either Butler or Johnson.

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Exhibition Hall

Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Monday.

Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Hours: Wednesday and Thursday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Sunday through Tuesday.

EXHIBITION RULES

- To help preserve the exhibition materials, please do not touch or bump into the panels or cases.
- No photographing or videotaping of the exhibition is permitted.

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