

**“I’ve had enough of someone else’s propaganda . . . I’m for truth, no matter who tells it. I’m for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I’m a human being first and foremost, and as such I’m for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.”**

—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

## 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 to celebrate the life and times of Malcolm X. The exhibition is based in part on the extraordinary collection of personal and professional papers and memorabilia of Malcolm X held at the Schomburg Center and now available for research.

*Malcolm X: A Search for Truth* uses the materials from this collection as well as other collections from the Schomburg Center to present a provocative and informative perspective on the 20th-century icon known variously as Malcolm Little, “Detroit Red,” Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. More significantly, the exhibition poses and, we hope, begins to answer some questions about the nature of the developmental journey that transformed Malcolm Little into 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 following the end of the Civil War in 1865, 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 folk since the last decade of the 19th century, died, leaving a leadership vacuum of enormous proportions. 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 even communists emerged on the political scene, jockeying with storefront preachers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, grassroots community organizers, black nationalists, and Christian and non-Christian religious bodies for leadership roles in what became known as the New Negro Movement.

Marcus Garvey, an immigrant from Jamaica, founder and President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and self-proclaimed “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, organized and managed



Robert L. Haggins, Robert L. Haggins Collection, Photographs and Prints Division

the largest mass movement and self-help economic enterprise in the history of the African Diaspora, establishing the model for 20th-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 Elijah Muhammad’s teachings, which wove the philosophies of Garvey and Drew Ali into the fabric of the Nation of Islam.

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

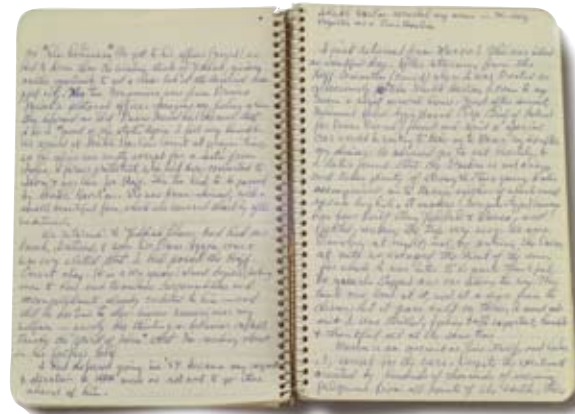
During the first 20 years of his life, Malcolm Little was shaped by social, familial, and personal forces that forged his identity as an independent thinker with a strong personality and innate leadership abilities—although he lost his way during his adolescence and young manhood.

Malcolm’s family had qualities that made them stand out. His parents, Earl and Louise Little, had met in Montreal, Canada, at a



Photographer: Unknown, Malcolm X Collection, Photographs and Prints Division

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Malcolm X with Minister Isaiah Kareem of Baltimore mosque, Howard University, circa 1961; Malcolm X’s handwritten journal detailing journey to Mecca; Malcolm X at Harlem rally, circa 1963.



Malcolm X Collection, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

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 run over by a streetcar and killed in East Lansing, Michigan, black neighbors were convinced that local racists were responsible.

Malcolm’s mother, only 34 at the time, sank into desperate poverty, as the country suffered through the Great Depression of the early 1930s. The children, especially Malcolm, became increasingly difficult to handle, and the racist social service authorities hounded Louise Little. Despite her valiant efforts, she suffered a nervous breakdown that sent her, in early 1939, to a mental institution, and her younger children to foster homes and a juvenile facility. Malcolm was an adolescent of 13, too young to understand all the forces at work on his family. Although 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 moving in with his half-sister. He loved the reckless zoot-suit culture and relative freedom Boston offered, and he found ways to express his

resistance, rather than acquiescence, to white power. For the next five years he escalated his involvement in Boston’s black criminal underworld, while also trying to master the street life of the black Mecca, Harlem. But he got caught after a string of burglaries in Boston, and, in January 1946, was convicted and sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. “Detroit Red” was about to undergo a metamorphosis.

## 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 in the *Autobiography*. But an older prisoner whom he began to admire for his knowledge and self-assurance, John Elton Bemby, recognized Malcolm’s intelligence and encouraged him to read. Then, with loving attention, 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 in fact not so new. 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 those stories and practices. After all, the Nation had a *familial* philosophy: self-determination, pride, and cultural and economic independence from white society. This approach to life had been built into the members’ formative years through the Marcus Garvey/UNIA philosophy of their parents. The Nation offered Malcolm the Holy Apostle, the Messenger, 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 intellectual 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, when he was paroled in August 1952, was being pushed forward into a world he could not have imagined.

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

The twenty-seven-year-old Malcolm who emerged from six-and-a-half years of imprisonment became Malcolm X in September 1952. Within 12 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 the phenomenal transformation of what had



Photographer: Richard Saunders. Richard Saunders Collection, Photographs and Prints Division

**Malcolm X, wife Betty Shabazz, and daughters Attallah and Qubilah, circa 1962.**

been a tiny organization into a major force in black life.

Through the 1950s, while for the most part the Civil Rights Movement agitated for voting rights and the desegregation of public facilities, 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. The Nation of Islam offered a worldview that put the disenfranchised 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 cities large and small, 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 married Betty X (née Sanders) in January 1958. Between 1958 and 1962 their daughters, Attallah, Qubilah, and Ilyasah, were born. Family life gave Malcolm 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. He traveled at a frenetic pace, speaking on college campuses and debating civil rights leaders on radio and television. Malcolm X founded *Muhammad Speaks* as the Nation's official newspaper, which became the best-selling black paper. 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, leaders, and journalists.

Not surprisingly, leaders of the Nation from Chicago headquarters began to scheme against Minister Malcolm. Beneath the surface, turmoil and increasing signs of corruption in the NOI hierarchy provided the opportunity for the FBI to infiltrate the organization 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 remained devoted to the Nation's leader, this turn of events shook him to his core. Some political issues had already begun to undermine his certainties. He found the Nation's policy of non-involvement in politics and the Civil Rights Movement increasingly disturbing, because he was coming to see the alliance of black nationalism with a broader political unity under the Nation's leadership as the most powerful way to struggle against the white supremacist system.

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

By January 1964, Minister Malcolm had been “silenced,” stripped of his ministry (supposedly for 90 days) by Elijah Muhammad for his comments after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Malcolm used the phrase “chickens coming home to roost” in his response to a reporter's question; this was the ostensible reason for his “silencing.”

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 had always had. This became the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), which he saw as spearheading a drive to indict 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 also looking more and more to traditional Islam for answers to the questions provoked by 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. 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, Malcolm tried to strengthen ties with the Civil Rights Movement and with local community leaders who were struggling with 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 nasty, retaliatory mood. By the time he entered Harlem's Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965, Malcolm X had considerable opposition—from both city and federal agencies as well as from within the Nation of Islam itself.

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

#### EXHIBITION HALL

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

#### 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.

## Malcolm X

### A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

#### CURATORIAL AND RESEARCH CONSULTANT

Cheryll Y. Greene

#### 2005 CURATORIAL COMMITTEE

Howard Dodson  
Roberta Yancy  
Christopher P. Moore  
Mary Yearwood

#### 2005 EXHIBITION COMMITTEE

Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf  
Laini Madhubuti  
Bokar Ture  
Tessa Hamilton  
Andre Elizée  
Jacqueline Dowdell

#### 2011 CURATORIAL COMMITTEE

Howard Dodson  
Diana Lachatanere  
Mary Yearwood  
Sylviane A. Diouf  
Christopher P. Moore

#### 2011 EXHIBITION COMMITTEE

Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf  
Deirdre Hollman  
Ann-Marie Nicholson  
Kenneth Benson  
Ashley Bowden

#### EXHIBITION DESIGNER

Sanders Design Works, Inc.

#### SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE

##### The New York Public Library

515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, NY 10037

Support the work of the Center... become a member!  
[www.schomburgcenter.org/support](http://www.schomburgcenter.org/support)

In January 2003, the Estate of Betty Shabazz placed the Malcolm X Collection on long-term deposit at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

*The 2005 exhibition was funded in part by Altria Group, Inc., J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation, Tommy Hilfiger Corporate Foundation, Inc., Beverly Stewart, Cora T. Walker, and the City of New York.*



## Malcolm X

### A SEARCH FOR TRUTH

July 15, 2011 – January 7, 2012