

MUSEUM REVIEW

The Personal Evolution Of a Civil Rights Giant

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

In the 1940's, Malcolm Little a.k.a. Detroit Red (and, later, a.k.a. Malcolm X, a.k.a. El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) wanted to impress co-conspirators in petty crime with his ruthlessness and daring. He loaded his pistol with a single bullet, twirled the cylinder, put the muzzle to his head and fired. The gesture demonstrated that he was unafraid of death and therefore not afraid of much else. And when he recounts the story in his 1965 autobiography ("as told to" Alex Haley), the reader is also impressed — though evidence of his brilliance, fury and self-destructiveness is, by then, hardly necessary.

A new exhibition about Malcolm X

opens at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture today (which would have been his 80th birthday). And though it doesn't mention this theatrical gesture in its survey of one of the most significant black leaders in American history, Malcolm's public displays of passion and position sometimes seem as courageous, dangerous, and even, yes, foolish, as his game of Russian roulette.

The exhibition, "Malcolm X: A Search for Truth," seeks to map out the major themes of his life in a "developmental journey" reflecting his "driving intellectual quest for truth." It offers evidence that has been unavailable: personal papers, journals, letters, lecture outlines — rescued from being sold at auction in San



Laurence Henry/Schomburg Center

An exhibition on Malcolm X features his journals and letters.

Francisco and on eBay in 2002.

Those papers, which the Shabazz family had lost control of when monthly fees for a commercial storage facility were left unpaid, were returned to them, and then lent for 75 years to the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center in Harlem. The documents are lightly sampled in this first public showing, but they will eventually offer greater insight into Malcolm X's developmen-

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tal journey: from child of a Black Nationalist father murdered in his prime, to a star elementary school pupil in a largely white school; to a hustler and criminal; to a convert, while in prison, to Elijah Muhammad's eccentric brand of Islam; to a radical minister who built Muhammad's Nation of Islam into a major national movement, declaring the white race to be the devil incarnate; and finally, to a political leader who, cut off by Muhammad, turned to traditional Islam and was rethinking his views, just as he was assassinated in New York's Audubon Ballroom in 1965 at the age of 39.

His brief life stands as a challenge no matter one's perspective, an overweening presence in the roiling currents of American racial debates. After all, Islam is a force in the American black community partly because of Malcolm X (who, after his 1964 hajj to Mecca, changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz). Advocates of reparations for slavery echo his arguments. Less radically, so do believers in the encouragement of black-run businesses and schools. And by seeking to internationalize race, particularly in the mid-1960's, Malcolm X helped set the stage for the doctrines of Third Worldism, which asserts that Western enslavement of dark-skinned peoples is played out on a world scale.

Even those who dissent from such views can recognize in Malcolm X's fearsome intelligence and self-discipline a kind of a developmental quest, ultimately left incomplete. The exhibition, which also includes material from the Schomburg and other collections, tells that story chronologically, using textual summaries and photographs to create a

"Malcolm X: A Search for Truth" is at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 515 Lenox Avenue, at 135th Street, Harlem, (212) 491-2200, through Dec. 31.

context for the personal papers.

Those papers include letters from Malcolm to his brother, Philbert Little, describing his first embrace of the Nation of Islam, as well as a disturbing sequence of letters about his final embrace, suggesting how Muhammad tried to rein him in. And above the display cases, the walls are lined with photographs chronicling the life: an elementary-school photograph of Malcolm, glimpses of the bodies of Nation of Islam followers killed by Los Angeles police in 1962, views of halls packed with devoted listeners, and finally, glimpses of the fallen chairs and stark disorder of the Audubon Ballroom after Malcolm X was murdered. An epilogue to the exhibition displays court drawings of the trial of the accused

From Malcolm Little to Detroit Red to Malcolm X.

assassins, along with objects found on his body, including a North Vietnamese stamp showing an American helicopter getting shot down.

But, despite the new personal documents, there is something familiar about the exhibition, which does not offer new interpretations and misses an opportunity to delve more deeply into the difficulties in Malcolm's quest. In his autobiography, Malcolm X spoke of the importance of speaking the "raw, naked truth" about the nature of race relations. He also recognized one of the tragic consequences of enslavement: the erasure of the past. The name "X" was provided to initiates as a stand in for a lost original name. Names could also be readily changed because they were little more than expressions of newly formed identities.

In fact, invention became crucial. For Malcolm X, it was a matter of

control: mastering one's past, determining one's character and, finally, controlling one's future. Documents describe how members of the Nation of Islam were expelled for any backsliding, including adultery. In one letter, Malcolm almost provides a motto for his kind of charismatic discipline:

"For one to control one's thoughts and feelings means one can actually control one's atmosphere and all who walks into its sphere of influence."

But this also means that the truth can seem less crucial than the kind of identity being constructed, the kind of past being invented. After reading the autobiography, we learn from Alex Haley's epilogue that Malcolm actually confessed that his story of Russian roulette was not what it seemed: he had palmed the bullet. Everybody had been hustled, the readers included. The adoption of Nation of Islam ideology, with its invented history and its evil scientist named Yacub breeding the white race, is another kind of hustle.

Curiously, the exhibition itself doesn't make enough of such distinctions. In a wall display, labeled "Messengers of Hope and Liberation," major figures like W. E. B. Du Bois have no more stature than such figures as Wallace D. Fard. Fard was the greater influence on Malcolm X, since he created the Nation of Islam mythology, but he may not have had any African heritage at all and, as Karl Evanzz argues in his recent book, "The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad," he had even encouraged the practice of human sacrifice.

As if reluctant to be too judgmental, there is also not enough explanation of the quarrel with Elijah Muhammad, though the photographer Gordon Parks quoted Malcolm X saying, just before his death: "I did many things as a Muslim that I'm sorry for now. I was a zombie then — like all Muslims — I was hypnotized, pointed in a certain direction and told to march. Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me 12 years."

That kind of statement is too blunt for this exhibition, which makes suggestions but seems reluctant to draw too many distinctions. But even the differing interpretations of Malcolm's final transformation might have been outlined with more clarity. It is intriguing to read, in one 1964 letter from Malcolm's office to Martin Luther King Jr., an expression of apology for "unkind things" said in the past. And the trial of the accused assassins from the Nation of Islam merits more explanation, particularly because a conspiracy theory of F.B.I. involvement has long simmered, even as Muhammad was known to have encouraged threats against Malcolm X and had already sent one disciple to kill him. The quest for truth, surely, goes on, but part of it means facing squarely the extent of certain kinds of hustle.

Alexandria, Egypt — UAR
August 4, 1964

My Dear Wife: as Salam Alaikum

I pray Allah that you and the children are well and happy, and that you are all thinking of me as much and as often as I am thinking of you. I miss you and the children very much, but it looks like another month at least may pass before I see you. I have made a great deal of progress, but still have not accomplished the main thing, and I may have to visit Kuwait & Mecca etc do it.

I received the biggest and warmest reception of my life from over 80 Muslim students representing over 73 different countries at a reception given here in my honor Sunday by the