

Malcolm X from the Grassroots to the African Revolution

Three Speeches in Detroit (1963-1965). Lessons delivered then have implications for the 21st century

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Author’s note: These remarks were delivered at an African American History Month virtual webinar hosted by the Moratorium NOW! Coalition on Monday February 22, 2021. The event was held in honor of Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik Shabazz, on the 56th anniversary of his martyrdom. Other speakers and performers at the meeting included Detroit educator and poet, Wanda Olugbala; Sara Torres, musician and member of Moratorium NOW! Coalition; Julie Hurwitz, Vice President of the Michigan Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild; Sammie Lewis, a leading organizer for Detroit Will Breathe; Derek Grigsby, an organizer for Moratorium NOW! Coalition; Kenya Fentress, organizer for Racial Profiling Across 8 Mile; Anthony Ali of Detroit Will Breathe served as moderator; and David Sole of Moratorium NOW! Coalition delivered a proclamation honoring organizational member Walter Knall for his years of service to the African American struggle and the peoples’ movement as a whole.

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February 21 marked the 56th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X, also known as El Hajj Malik Shabazz.

With this annual commemoration coinciding with African American History Month, it provides opportunities to continue the study of the significance of his life and the times in which he lived.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, during a period of awakening and renewal among the African American people. The Harlem Renaissance was well underway while the Universal Negro Improvement Association, African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) was struggling against the United States government over the fate of its founder the Hon. Marcus Garvey.

Garvey had been indicted and convicted on federal mail fraud charges and began to serve a sentence in 1925. He would spend two years in prison before being deported to the Caribbean island-nation of Jamaica where he was born in 1887.

Image on the right: Malcolm X parents were UNIA members (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)



Malcolm's parents Louise and Earl Little

Both of the parents of Malcolm X, Earl and Louise Little, were members of the UNIA. The couple had met at a UNIA convention in 1919 held in Montreal, Quebec (Canada). Earl Little was a Baptist preacher and Louise was a writer for the Negro World newspaper published by the UNIA.

This was a pan-African marriage with Earl being from the southern state of Georgia and Louise was born in the Caribbean island-nation of Grenada. The ideology of Garveyism brought them together in the cause of the emancipation of African people worldwide.

Malcolm was born in Omaha, Nebraska and would leave the city with his family after their home was burned down by the Ku Klux Klan. They later moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and then to Lansing and Mason, Michigan. Racist violence would follow the family due to the character of national oppression in the U.S. and the militancy of the family.

In 1931, during the Great Depression, Earl Little was killed by a racist vigilante organization in Michigan. Malcolm X in later years said the group responsible was the Black Legion, a violent right-wing organization which was funded heavily by industrialists to suppress labor organizers, African Americans and other peoples.

Eventually, after the death of Earl Little, Louise was committed to a mental hospital while the family was broken up, young Malcolm was sent to foster care. He excelled in school in Michigan and later went to live with an older sister Ella Collins in Boston in 1941. Malcolm had already left school after the eighth grade due to racism and in Boston he worked menial jobs. Later he became involved in petty criminality and was sentenced to prison in 1946.

By 1952, Malcolm had joined the Nation of Islam (NOI) prior to him being paroled from prison in Massachusetts. Immediately after leaving prison he came to live in the Detroit metropolitan area. He was appointed as Assistant Minister of the Detroit Temple of Islam and began to work in retail and in automobile factories.

Malcolm rapidly accelerated in the NOI and was assigned to several temples on the east coast before landing in New York City to head the NOI's operations in Harlem. The Hon. Elijah Muhammad eventually designated Malcolm X and the national representative of the organization. He appeared regularly on radio and television along with being written about in print media, speaking on behalf of the NOI.

By 1959, the NOI had gained national exposure through a number television reports and newspaper articles. The organization was often portrayed negatively in the press as a hate

group at odds with the views of “mainstream” African Americans. Yet, the NOI continued to gain grassroots support while the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local police agencies monitored their activities through infiltration, wiretaps and attempted intimidation of members.

Three Speeches in Detroit (1963-1965)

Number One: Message to the Grassroots, November 10, 1963

The life of Malcolm X, his wife Betty Shabazz, who was from Detroit, and their six children, cannot be fully covered in the time frame allotted for this presentation. Since this meeting is being held in Detroit, I want to focus on three major addresses within the public career of Malcolm X which were delivered in the city between November 1963 and February 1965.



Malcolm X greeted by Atty. Milton Henry during his final trip to Detroit on Feb. 14, 1965 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Just weeks prior to his suspension and later departure from the NOI, Malcolm X visited Detroit to participate in a Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference held at King Solomon Baptist Church on the westside. Malcolm would deliver an historic speech at the gathering, dubbed “Message to the Grassroots.” The speech was recorded by the Afro American Broadcasting Corporation owned by Attorney Milton Henry. Malcolm would also speak at Wayne State University (WSU) during this trip.

The purpose of the November conference was to extend the African American struggle

beyond the acquisition of Civil Rights with a more militant character. 1963 had been a monumental year with the outbreak of mass demonstrations and civil unrest in numerous cities in the South and other regions of the U.S. Birmingham had exploded with mass youth demonstrations and one of the first urban rebellions of the period in April and May.

Medgar Evers, the NAACP Field Secretary in Mississippi, was gunned down outside his home in Jackson. In Detroit, the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the U.S. was organized on June 23, twenty years after the deadly race riot of 1943. The Detroit Walk to Freedom attracted an estimated 125,000 to 250,000 people. The event had been spearheaded by progressive clergy and community organizations with figures such as Rev. C.L. Franklin of New Bethel Baptist Church, educator and businessman James Del Rio, the Rev. Albert Cleage of Central United Church of Christ, among others.

Nonetheless, the alliance which led the march on June 23 had begun to fracture in the subsequent weeks and months. Differences between Rev. Franklin, who was a leading member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Rev. Cleage gained public attention through the news media. The Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference competed with another gathering at Cobo Hall that same weekend which attracted U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem.

The speech delivered by Malcolm X proved to be a signature ideological statement related to the emerging struggle within African American communities. Detroit, with its extensive history of resistance to African enslavement, labor recognition and Black Nationalism, became a focal point for the radical and revolutionary thinking which was rising in evidence during the period.

In the early minutes of the Message to the Grassroots address, Malcolm X says:

“What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences. When we come together, we don’t come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don’t catch hell ’cause you’re a Baptist, and you don’t catch hell ’cause you’re a Methodist. You don’t catch hell ’cause you’re a Methodist or Baptist. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Democrat or a Republican. You don’t catch hell because you’re a Mason or an Elk. And you sure don’t catch hell ’cause you’re an American; ’cause if you was an American, you wouldn’t catch no hell. You catch hell ’cause you’re a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason. So we are all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You are nothing but a [sic] ex-slave. You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the Mayflower. You came here on a slave ship — in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the Mayflower. You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers. They were the ones who brought you here.”

Such a public statement in 1963 was a call for unity within the African American community. A broad-based united front would be essential in any revolutionary activism seeking long term solutions.

Later Malcolm would challenge the use of the term Revolution in regard to the tactics being employed by many Civil Rights organizations. The NOI leader believed that the emphasis on nonviolence as a principle within the movement should be rejected. He emphasized self-defense against racist violence being carried out against African Americans whether being

perpetuated by the police or vigilantes.

According to Malcolm in the same speech:

“I would like to make a few comments concerning the difference between the Black revolution and the Negro revolution. There’s a difference. Are they both the same? And if they’re not, what is the difference? What is the difference between a Black revolution and a Negro revolution? First, what is a revolution? Sometimes I’m inclined to believe that many of our people are using this word ‘revolution’ loosely, without taking careful consideration [of] what this word actually means, and what its historic characteristics are. When you study the historic nature of revolutions, the motive of a revolution, the objective of a revolution, and the result of a revolution, and the methods used in a revolution, you may change words. You may devise another program. You may change your goal and you may change your mind.”

These words are designed to challenge activists to think deeper in regard to the actual meaning of social transformation. Malcolm X had concluded that many people claiming to be leaders of the African American struggle were not genuinely committed to making the adequate sacrifices needed for a real revolution.

He then goes on to cite historical occurrences involving revolutionary change. Of course, as an organizer, Malcolm X knew that in order to win people over to a position they must be convinced of some reasonable certainty of the possibility of achieving the objectives of a movement.

Malcolm goes on to direct the listeners and later readers to:

“Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. Number one, it was based on land, the basis of independence. And the only way they could get it was bloodshed. The French Revolution — what was it based on? The land-less against the landlord. What was it for? Land. How did they get it? Bloodshed. Was no love lost; was no compromise; was no negotiation. I’m telling you, you don’t know what a revolution is. ‘Cause when you find out what it is, you’ll get back in the alley; you’ll get out of the way. The Russian Revolution — what was it based on? Land. The land-less against the landlord. How did they bring it about? Bloodshed. You haven’t got a revolution that doesn’t involve bloodshed. And you’re afraid to bleed. I said, you’re afraid to bleed. [As] long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled. He sent you to Germany, you bled. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled. You bleed for white people. But when it comes time to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls being murdered, you haven’t got no blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it’s true. How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your churches are being bombed, and your little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you’re going to violent with Hitler, and Tojo, and somebody else that you don’t even know?”

Although these are references which do not require much detailed knowledge of historical processes, the tone is properly suited for grassroots activists, many of whom were youth

living in an urban environment. Malcolm X, through his travels across the U.S. and his readings related to current events in 1963, that the general psychological make-up of the African American people was shifting at a rapid pace. The eruption of the mass Civil Rights Movement during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56, ushered in a new era of consciousness.

Yet he felt strongly that there was a need for more militant action and organizational activity. By the conclusion of 1963, the intransigence of the racist system of national oppression was intensifying. Many were outraged at the brutality utilized by the police and racist groups to intimidate and halt the forward trajectory of the African American people. On September 15, 1963, four Black girls died from a bomb explosion set off by the Ku Klux Klan at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Two other children died the same day due to racist attacks. These developments would portend much for the coming years where urban rebellion and self-defense formations came into the broader existence.

Second Speech: The Ballot or the Bullet, April 12, 1964

On December 1, 1963, Malcolm X addressed a crowd at the Manhattan Center in New York City. The theme of the address was centered on what he described as "God's Judgment of White America". Elijah Muhammad had directed all ministers for the NOI to refrain from comments on the November 22 assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Malcolm X had been a staunch critic of the Kennedy administration for its failure to uphold the rights of the African American people and to apprehend and prosecute incidents of racist violence. Over two months had passed and yet nothing had been done to punish those responsible for the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. Hundreds of activists were still being beaten and jailed even in the aftermath of the upsurge in demonstrations in Birmingham and other cities during 1963.

A question-and-answer period after the speech at the Manhattan Center brought up the issue of the assassination of JFK. In his response, Malcolm seemed to suggest that the assassination was the product of the atmosphere of violence carried out inside and outside the country by the U.S. government. Consequently, the death of Kennedy was a case of the "Chickens Coming Home to Roost." Noting that there were many Africans who had been assassinated at the aegis of the U.S. while no corrective punitive legal actions were taken.

Four days later it was announced by John Ali of the Chicago headquarters of the NOI, that when Malcolm X made those statements, he was speaking for himself and not Elijah Muhammad. Ali then said that Malcolm X had been suspended for 90 days from speaking and organizing on behalf of the NOI.

Malcolm X said he had written to Elijah Muhammad several times during the suspension however no response was received. After the 90 days were over, Malcolm X was notified that his suspension would be extended indefinitely. The time was early March 1964 when the Civil Rights Movement prepared for another summer of demonstrations and other political work. The NOI has remained aloof from the direct action, marches and legal challenges carried out by the SCLC, NAACP, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), among others.

Ferment was being generated in the northern and western urban areas demanding quality education, open housing, decent jobs, and the eradication of legalized and de facto

segregation. This was no time to remain silent about the burning questions of the period. Therefore, Malcolm X made a decision to break publicly with the NOI.

On March 8, 1964, Malcolm held a press conference in New York City to announce that he was leaving the NOI permanently and establishing an alternative mosque in Harlem. The organization was called the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and was a precursor to the founding of a political group known as the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) by late June.

Just one month later Malcolm would return to Detroit for a public address again at the King Solomon Baptist Church. This speech became known as “The Ballot or the Bullet.” In the address Malcolm warns the rulers of the U.S. that if complete freedom, justice and equality was not granted to the African American people, no one would have freedom inside the country.

1964 was an election year with the then President Lyndon B. Johnson seeking to win a full term after inheriting the position in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. SNCC and allied organizations were recruiting hundreds of students to enter the South in Mississippi and other areas to engage in a Freedom Summer project. Malcolm X was determined to enter the popular struggles of the period while authenticating himself as an orthodox Muslim with political connections throughout Africa and the world.

During the second speech in Detroit during this period entitled “The Ballot or the Bullet”, Malcolm said:

“Just as it took nationalism to remove colonialism from Asia and Africa, it’ll take Black nationalism today to remove colonialism from the backs and the minds of twenty-two million Afro-Americans here in this country. And 1964 looks like it might be the year of the ballot or the bullet. [applause] Why does it look like it might be the year of the ballot or the bullet? Because Negroes have listened to the trickery and the lies and the false promises of the white man now for too long, and they’re fed up. They’ve become disenchanted. They’ve become disillusioned. They’ve become dissatisfied. And all of this has built up frustrations in the Black community that makes the Black community throughout America today more explosive than all of the atomic bombs the Russians can ever invent. Whenever you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap, you’re in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting in your lap. When a racial powder keg goes off, it doesn’t care who it knocks out the way. Understand this, it’s dangerous.”

These words foresaw the urban rebellions which would erupt later that summer in 1964 in New York, cities within New Jersey, Philadelphia, etc. In the years to come, hundreds of urban rebellions would take place in cities from the west to the east of the country. Malcolm X suggested in the Ballot or the Bullet that the numerical odds within the U.S. would not determine the outcome of a revolutionary struggle for political power. He noted the victories of the revolutionary forces in China, Korea and what was unfolding in Vietnam, first against the French and then, at that time in 1964, the U.S.

During the address, Malcolm went on to illustrate that:

“This is why I say it’s the ballot or the bullet. It’s liberty or it’s death. It’s freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody. [applause] America today finds herself in a unique situation. Historically, revolutions are bloody, oh yes they

are. They have never had a bloodless revolution. Or a non-violent revolution. That don't happen even in Hollywood. [laughter] You don't have a revolution in which you love your enemy. And you don't have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into it. Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems. A revolution is bloody, but America is in a unique position. She's the only country in history, in the position actually to become involved in a bloodless revolution. The Russian Revolution was bloody, Chinese Revolution was bloody, French Revolution was bloody, Cuban Revolution was bloody. And there was nothing more bloody than the American Revolution. But today, this country can become involved in a revolution that won't take bloodshed. All she's got to do is give the Black man in this country everything that's due him, everything. [applause]

Just days after delivering this address in Detroit, Malcolm flew out of the U.S. to Mecca in Saudi Arabia for the annual Hajj. It is important to recognize that this was not the first time Malcolm X had visited West Asia and Africa. In 1959, he had accompanied Elijah Muhammad to several countries. Malcolm himself traveled to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Ghana and Sudan.

Nonetheless, the first trip he took during 1964 represented an entire new horizon for Malcolm. He was able to speak his mind fully while totally embracing Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism. After his religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm visited several other countries including Egypt, Nigeria and Ghana. After being abroad for six weeks, he returned to much media fanfare in May 1964.

At the returning press conference in New York, Malcolm was questioned about his efforts to have the U.S. brought before the world court for violations of the human rights of African Americans. Malcolm noted that other oppressed peoples had sought similar remedies and that the people of African descent in the U.S. were no different.

On June 28, 1964, Malcolm X announced the formation of the OAAU at the Audubon Ballroom in New York. The aims of the organization were to unite African people in the U.S. with their counterparts on the continent and around the globe. The objective was full total freedom to be achieved by any means necessary.

In a matter of weeks during July, Malcolm had again left the U.S. for Africa and Asia. He spent considerable time in Egypt where he attended the second annual summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). While in Cairo he strengthened communications and contacts with the national liberation movements and anti-imperialist governments on the continent.

On behalf of the OAAU, Malcolm circulated an eight-page memorandum to the heads-of-state, requesting solidarity with the African American struggle. As a direct result of his work and the support of anti-imperialist and Pan-African governments, a resolution was passed condemning racial discrimination in the U.S. This same resolution was utilized during the summer of 2020, when people throughout the U.S. were demonstrating and rebelling in the aftermath of the brutal police execution of George Floyd in Minneapolis. As a result, the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland held hearings on the racial unrest in the U.S. The brother of George Floyd addressed the UN hearing where he implored the international body to take action in support of the African American people.

The Last Message Towards the African Revolution: February 14, 1965

Malcolm X would spend nearly five months abroad between July and November of 1964. He studied Islam and politics in Egypt at the invitation of then President Gamal Abdel Nasser. He traveled to Ghana for the second time that year to meet with African Americans living and working there as part of the First Republic of President Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. In addition, Malcolm visited Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and other countries, seeking to build alliances with Islamic and progressive forces.

Yet a major impediment to the realization of his organizational objectives was the ongoing feud with his former organization. The leadership of the NOI had been concerned when Malcolm departed the organization only to begin another one. Several attempts had been made on Malcolm's life and his followers. When he arrived back in New York City during late November 1964, he was prepared to move forward with the OAAU and other projects.

Malcolm maintained a rigorous schedule of speaking engagements, OAAU meetings, Islamic classes taught by the MMI, along with traveling to cities around the U.S. In early February, he traveled to Britain to speak at the London School of Economics and meet with Black organizations. He was also invited to speak in Paris before a number of African organizations residing in France. Nonetheless, the French customs officials denied him admission to the country. He was turned around and went back to England where he addressed the meeting by telephone.

After returning to New York City on February 13, Malcolm was preparing for yet another speaking engagement in Detroit. However, during the early morning hours of February 14, his home was firebombed. The entire family was able to exit the home without injury. The bombing of the house, which was owned by the NOI and the subject of an eviction order, was an ominous sign of worse things to come.

However, Malcolm was determined to honor his speaking engagement in Detroit on the afternoon of February 14. After securing his family, he took a plane to Detroit and checked into the Statler-Hilton Hotel downtown. He was seen by a physician and would later address a meeting at Ford Auditorium on the riverfront.

His comments during the final visit to Detroit at Ford Auditorium focused on the interrelationship between the struggles of people of African descent in the U.S. and around the world. He discussed his travels in Africa and the Middle East while pointing to the necessity of global unity.

Some of his remarks included this passage:

“So we saw that the first thing to do was to unite our people, not only unite us internally, but we have to be united with our brothers and sisters abroad. It was for that purpose that I spent five months in the Middle East and Africa during the summer. The trip was very enlightening, inspiring, and fruitful. I didn't go into any African country, or any country in the Middle East for that matter, and run into any closed door, closed mind, or closed heart. I found a warm reception and an amazingly deep interest and sympathy for the Black man in this country in regards to our struggle for human rights. While I was traveling, I had a chance to speak in Cairo, or rather Alexandria, with President [Gamal Abdel] Nasser for about an hour and a half. He's a very brilliant man. And I can see why they're so afraid of him, and they are afraid of him — they know he can cut off their oil [laughter and applause]. And actually, the only thing power respects is power. Whenever you find a man who's in a position to show power against power then that man is respected. But you can take a man

who has power and love him all the rest of your life, nonviolently and forgivingly and all the rest of those oft-time things, and you won't get anything out of it."

Malcolm would deliver three other speeches in that coming week. He would address a public meeting and press conference on February 15 at the Audubon Ballroom where he discussed the bombing of his house and various political issues. On the following day he would speak at an African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Rochester, New York. Two days after, February 18, he would speak at Barnard College in New York.

A public meeting of the OAAU was scheduled for Sunday February 21, 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom. After being introduced by one of his assistants, several men emerged from the audience and shot Malcolm X to death. His death has been commemorated every year since 1965 in the U.S. and around the planet.

Lessons from the Life, Times and Contributions of Malcolm X

The strength of Malcolm X's message remains with us today some 56 years since his assassination. African Americans remain under national oppression, economic exploitation and institutional racism. They are still subjected to U.S. military service in order to carry out the political and economic imperatives of imperialism.

A resurgence in Black Consciousness and anti-racism is a healthy development in the U.S. The national response to the police and vigilante killings of African Americans has alerted the international community that racism remains alive and well in the U.S. despite its claims of being a defender of human rights and social justice.

Malcolm X was hated and feared by the ruling class in the U.S. and the entire imperialist system. Consequently, his assassination was carried out in a failed attempt to arrest the African American liberation movement.

In recent days, news related to the assassination of Malcolm X and the involvement of the New York police and the FBI, has been raised again. Ray Wood, a former undercover New York City police officer, from the BOSS division (intelligence unit), claimed in a death bed confession letter that he was sent to infiltrate the OAAU.

An article published recently in News One says of the latest revelation:

"The recent accusations echo theories raised in the 2020 Netflix documentary, 'Who Killed Malcolm X?' The series followed Abdur-Rahman Muhammad, an activist and self-trained investigator who dedicated his life work to solving the civil rights icon's murder. In the documentary Muhammad interviews several important figures involved in the investigation, explores different conspiracy theories including possible federal and state law enforcement involvement. Muhammad also attempts to explore an accusation that Malcolm X's alleged killer was a Newark community leader who worshipped at a local Mosque. After the documentary aired, the Manhattan District Attorney's office announced it reviewed the case, with the possibility to reopen if leads proved sufficient."

Of course, this is not the first time that confessions have been offered in regard to culpability and involvement in the assassination. These claims should be thoroughly investigated independently. Any reliance on the police and FBI, who are the accused parties,

will bear no fruitful results.

What is important to understand is that the only real tribute to Malcolm X will be administered by those who believe in his message and objectives. Justice will be achieved when the systems of exploitation and oppression are completely eradicated, and a new society is built on the basis of freedom, self-determination and social emancipation.

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Featured image: Malcolm X speaks at Wayne State University Nov. 1963 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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