

# 'By Any Means Necessary': The Life of Malcolm X

By: [Oisin Curran](#) | Updated: Nov 1, 2022



Malcolm X served as Nation of Islam leader from 1953 to 1964, expanding the organization's membership astronomically. [BETTMANN/BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES](#)

In the [summer of 1963](#), a young Sudanese student at Dartmouth College named Ahmed Osman was walking through Harlem with a friend when he decided to pop into Muhammad's Temple No. 7. There he encountered a charismatic, 38-year-old minister named Malcolm X, who was delivering a passionate talk on the theology of the [Nation of Islam](#).

At the time, Malcolm X was expounding the philosophy of his spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad, who, among other things, asserted that the [white man was the devil](#). After

the talk, there was a Q&A session and Osman challenged Malcolm X, noting that the [Islamic faith](#) was a religion that welcomed people of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

It was the beginning of a long friendship, which would see Malcolm X through his pivotal rejection of Elijah Muhammad and his conversion to Sunni Islam. And it was Osman who arranged for his friend to perform hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. The hajj was a watershed moment in Malcolm X's life — a multi-ethnic gathering of peoples united not by culture or skin color, but by faith. This was a revelatory experience for someone who had grown up in a society permeated by racism.

## **Malcolm's Early Life**

Malcolm X was born [Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925](#). It's a lesser-known fact that he could just as easily have been born in Montreal, Quebec. That's where his parents met in 1917. His mother, Louisa Langdon Norton, was a recent immigrant from Grenada, who had moved to the Little Burgundy neighborhood of Montreal to live with her uncle. Malcolm's father, Earl Little, had left his first wife and three children in small-town Georgia and joined the [Great Northward Migration](#), eventually landing in the City of a Hundred Steeples.

Earl and Louisa met after joining the [Universal Negro Improvement Association \(UNIA\)](#), founded by the Jamaican visionary, Marcus Garvey. Garvey's Pan-African perspective would have a life-long influence on Malcolm's thought. As activists in the movement, his parents moved first to Philadelphia, and then to Omaha to man an outpost of the organization there. It was dangerous work. Earl Little received numerous death threats and one night, when he was out of town, hooded Klansmen bearing torches came looking for him. When a pregnant Louise informed them that he was away, they shattered every window in the house before leaving.

After Malcolm's birth, the family moved several times, eventually taking up residence in Lansing, Michigan. There, despite being burned out of the family's new house — mostly

likely by white neighbors — Earl continued his activism on behalf of the UNIA, taking his favorite child, 5-year-old Malcolm to meetings.

In [September 1931](#), Earl died after being cut nearly in two by a street car. Although his death was ruled as accidental, many suspected that he'd been murdered by a local white supremacist organization.

Earl's death was a pivotal event in Malcolm's childhood. His mother never fully recovered from the shock of it and the sudden burden of becoming an impoverished single parent. She suffered a breakdown and her children ended up in foster care and orphanages. By 1946, Malcolm was in Boston, where he was arrested for burglary and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Malcolm X was considered the radical voice of the civil rights movement, offering a different solution for those who wanted an alternative to Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent approach.

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## **Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam**

He spent seven years behind bars before being paroled. During that time, he read widely and joined the Nation of Islam, the sect of Black Muslims his brother Reginald had joined. They preached and embraced an ideology of Black nationalism that pushed for Black Americans to establish a state separate from white Americans. He changed his name to Malcolm X before he was released from prison in 1952.

Once out of prison, Malcolm X quickly established himself as the Nation of Islam's most articulate and successful spokesman. He worked with Elijah Muhammad to further expound the Nation of Islam's message from Temple No. 7 in Harlem and Temple No. 11 in Boston where he was a minister.

His teachings and speeches were militant in style — he preached that whites were not to be trusted. He suggested Black people use "any means necessary," including violence, to gain their freedom.

His electrifying speeches rang true with Black crowds, and by the 1960s, he became the radical voice of the [civil rights movement](#). Malcolm X offered a different solution for those looking for an alternative to Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent approach.

Under Malcolm X's leadership, national membership in the Nation of Islam increased from [1,200 in 1953 to as many as 75,000 by 1961](#). But that influence also earned him the unwanted attention of the FBI, which infiltrated the Nation of Islam with agents who bugged and wiretapped members. It later emerged that one of Malcolm's bodyguards was, in fact, an FBI agent.

MALCOLM X WE WANT FREEDOM BY ANY MEANS...



## His Journey to Mecca

All this time, Malcolm X strictly adhered to the teachings of the Nation of Islam, including his commitment to celibacy until his marriage to Betty Shabazz in 1958. This made it even more painful when he learned in 1963 that his spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad, was secretly [carrying on illicit relationships](#) with six different women, some of whom had borne his children, violating his own teachings.

It was at this point that Malcolm [broke with Muhammad](#) and the Nation of Islam, founded his own organization, Muslim Mosque, Inc. and went on hajj. It was in Saudi Arabia that he also converted to Sunni Islam and changed his name again to El-hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He returned to the United States with a renewed faith in the civil rights movement and race relations.

But because of his enormous influence on the Nation of Islam, such a cataclysmic shift was bound to create dangerous waves. The FBI agents in his circle learned that he was marked for death by elements of the Nation of Islam. His house was firebombed, though none of the family was injured.

After his split from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X had a renewed faith in working with civil rights leaders. Here he's seen in 1964 with (from left) Lawrence Landry (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Chicago), Gloria Richardson (Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee), comedian Dick Gregory and Stanley Branche (Committee for Freedom Now).

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## His Assassination

But the net was closing in. [On Feb. 21, 1965](#), as he was preparing to give a talk in the packed Grand Ballroom of the Audubon in Washington Heights, Manhattan, a disturbance broke out in the crowd. As two men tussled in the audience, Malcolm's security guards moved to intervene, leaving him alone on stage. A man in the front row stood, walked quickly to within 15 feet (4.5 meters) of Malcolm X, pulled a sawed-off shotgun from under his winter coat and opened fire. Two other gunmen followed him. In all, [they shot Malcolm X 15 times](#). He was dead by the time he got to the hospital. He was just 39.

Tens of thousands of people viewed Malcolm X's body and at his funeral, his friend, the actor Ossie Davis delivered the eulogy. Three men were arrested for the assassination and eventually sentenced to life in prison. One of them, Tommy Hayer, was caught at the

scene and confessed to the crime, but he insisted that the other two men convicted were actually innocent. Years later, after the death of Elijah Muhammad, Hayer revealed the names of his four other co-conspirators, all members of the NOI. None of them had been paid, he insisted. They believed at the time that they were doing right thing.

In the wake of his assassination, Malcolm X only gained more fame. His autobiography, co-written by Alex Haley, became an international bestseller and an enormously influential work. Years later, Spike Lee's feature film treatment of Malcolm's story reignited interest in the life and teachings of one of the 20th century's most important cultural figures.

After his assassination, thousands of mourners lined up outside of Unity Funeral in Harlem to pay their respects to Malcolm X.

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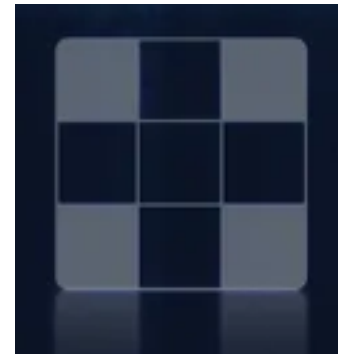
On Oct. 30, 2022, New York City [agreed to pay](#) \$26 million to settle lawsuits filed on behalf of two men whose convictions in the assassination of Malcolm X were [overturned](#) in 2021 after a judge found “serious miscarriages of justice,” according to the city and federal court records. The two men, Muhammad A. Aziz and Khalil Islam, each spent more than 20 years in prison. Mr. Islam died in 2009.

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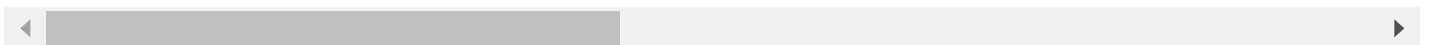
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