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Malcolm X's daughters speak at the Schomburg Center. Adrienne Haywood-James

Malcolm's Papers: Home to Harlem

Off the auction block! "Today we are happy to announce that the collection has found a home," said the Shabazz family attorney.

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The year-long legal dispute over the papers of Malcolm X ended last week when the collection of writings, photographs, and memorabilia was placed on deposit at New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The agreement is a victory for the Schomburg Center, which competed against several universities for rights to house the collection, and a happy ending to a saga that threatened to feature some of the civil rights leader's papers sharing eBay space with Pez dispensers and Charlies Angels' lunchboxes.

The agreement, announced at the Schomburg January 7, grants the library possession of the collection for a period of 75 years. The collection will be made available to scholars and the general public in May 2004, after the Schomburg staff archives and catalogues the material, though the collection will remain the property of Malcolm X's six daughters.

"Today we are happy to announce that the collection has found a home," said Shabazz family attorney Joseph Fleming, flanked by two of Malcolm's daughters (Attallah and Malaak) and Howard Dodson, director of the Schomburg. "Of all the institutions that expressed an interest in the collection, it was the Schomburg that had the natural relationship with both Malcolm's legacy and Dr. Betty Shabazz. Here on Malcolm X Boulevard, the institution that understands the practical and historical value of Malcolm

X and his contribution to the world order - it is the Schomburg that understood how to balance the family's desire to maintain the integrity of the collection with the desire of scholars and researchers to consume it."

Schomburg director Dodson agreed. Gesturing towards the two wooden crates placed onstage, Dodson told the crowded auditorium, "It is significant that the collection will be located in Harlem - on Malcolm X Boulevard - in the neighborhood where much of his life unfolded."

The family's presence at the ceremony was strong and united. And proud. "We as a family don't mind sharing Malcolm. We're proud of Malcolm," said Attallah Shabbaz, the eldest daughter of the slain civil rights leader, describing emotionally how she had gone through her father's possessions last year and discovered his personal Koran - which she hadn't seen since her father's assassination, when she was just ten years old. She said she welcomed the opportunity for the collection to show how her father was "ever evolving, always growing."

Donning white curator's gloves, Dodson gave a sneak peek at what he called "an extraordinary treasure trove" :a memo written by Malcolm X on March 8, 1964 announcing his departure from the Nation of Islam after his fall-out with Elijah Muhammad, a draft of the speech (with handwritten edits) delivered following President Kennedy' assassination (it was just after this speech that the black leader made his famous "chickens have come home to roost" comment) and photos of Malcolm with Fidel Castro at the Teresa Hotel during the Cuban leader's first visit to Harlem in 1960.

Scholars are particularly interested in the five diaries contained in the collection, in which Malcolm recorded his travels through Africa and the Middle East, a journey that would be deeply transformative politically and spiritually. It was after he returned to the US that Malcolm renounced the Nation of Islam's race theology and established the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

"To the best of my knowledge," Dodson said, "no one except the family has seen these materials, with the possible exception of Alex Haley, who may have seen the diaries while working on the autobiography."

The recovery of the papers, which arrived at the Schomburg on December 31, ended a long legal tussle between Malcolm X's family and Butterfields Auctioneers, a San Francisco auction house owned by the online giant eBay.

Butterfields got the material after Malika Shabbaz, another of Malcolm's daughters, neglected to make a payment on her Florida storage locker where she kept the collection. In September 2001, the storage company put the locker's contents up for sale in a public auction. The documents were bought by James Calhoun, a Florida junk dealer who eventually took the package to Butterfields. The house has an unsavory history of pursuing Malcolm X memorabilia; according to the New York Times, Butterfields tried in 1999 to auction off a blood-stained, bullet-riddled book allegedly found in Malcolm's pocket after he was gunned down. (Following family protests the book was removed from the auction; it was later discovered that it had been stolen by a court clerk from an evidence safe at the Manhattan State Supreme Court.)

Attorney Fleming did not discuss the legal wrangling, except to say, "we stopped eBay by threatening eBay. First you threaten, then you talk, then you reach agreement."

For their own part, the sisters deflected questions about how the material ended up in an auction house, especially those focusing on in-family fighting.

"I am absolutely in love with my mother's daughters," Attallah responded sharply. "Am I clear? We, the Shabbaz family, are always put in the headlines, as a traumatic family, as a family of tragedy, as a saga of woe. But there's always enlightenment in the process."

Speaking later on Tavis Smiley's NPR show, Attallah explained that she hoped the papers would make the public more aware of the human side not only of her father but of the entire Shabbaz family.

"People don't even know the human side of my parents," she said. "We have lived our lives, and my sisters included, in works of service... When they excerpt my father, it's that fire and brimstone. But they have it devoid of the passion, devoid of the real root of compassion, and my father was a very accessible human being." She added that she was excited about the collection going to the Schomburg, adding that she hoped the curators there could help people "understand who he was before the headline and around the headline, and the textures that made him a human being."

Going through the material before turning it over to the Schomburg, she told Smiley, had been an emotional experience. The Koran "happened to have been the last item that we had come across while going systematically through two large crates, and it broke me up a bit, I must say, and I needed it for a host of reasons...I chose to take it home with me that evening, and I, in my general state of meditation, put it against my chest, opening it up to a page and went to sleep and reclaimed a kind of spiritual place with my parents."

The redemption of such significant connections to one of Black America's most enduring heroes — and in particular their rescue from a degrading online auction house — lent the press conference an air of defiant celebration.

Scholars, activists and Harlem residents milling about the Schomburg after the presentation. Edwin Enriquillo Reyes, a Dominican-American public school teacher, said he's looking forward to bringing classes to see the collection

"Malcolm was a hero to all of us. He is a hero to Spanish people too — the way he went from drug dealer and convict to an international political leader, and a humanist is so inspiring. He was a very unique leader, of great integrity. Look how he denounced and left Elijah Muhammad. I'll definitely bring my students to see his legacy."

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