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Thiel, Betty Jean

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TEMPLE RELATIONSHIPS. Elijah Muhammed* taught that the Nation of Islam (NOI)* was not an organization but a world. The accepted social norms and religious practices within the confines of the temple or mosque where services were held were numerous. The religion of the NOI, as taught by Muhammad, was based, in part, on issues of race and the relationships of power among different racial groups.

Appearance and mannerisms within the temples were very stern. Men dressed tastefully in dark suits, pressed white shirts, and ties. The women, or sisters as they were referred to in the temple, wore ankle-length gowns and no makeup and covered their heads with scarves as a sign of modesty. The children in the temples were not exempted from temple etiquette. Muslim* men and children treated Muslim sisters with honor and respect. When inside the temples, men sat on one side of the room and women on the other.

In addition to the strict codes of manners and dress, NOI members were also punished for violating rules, such as eating more than one meal a day, drinking alcohol, and taking drugs. These rules were internally enforced by the Fruit of Islam (FOI),* the paramilitary wing of the NOI.

In his early days as a member of the NOI, Malcolm spent many hours in the temples listening to ministers and leaders speak to the followers. Understandably, he came to respect the mosques with great reverence. The temples were not only places to pronounce Muslim doctrine and worldviews; they were first and foremost religious structures. Malcolm himself became a minister and leader who attracted many followers to temples across the nation. As such he held to the NOI standards. Meetings began promptly. Messages and lessons had specific goals and objectives, as Malcolm always sought to teach his followers "the duty of a civilized man." Inside the temple he emphasized modes of conduct, adherence to morality and decency, and commitment to the Muslim laws and principles.

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Friedly, 1992; Goldman, 1979; Karim with Skutches and Gallen, 1992; Lincoln, 1961; Malcolm X with Haley, 1965.

Terri Earnest

THIEL, BETTY JEAN. As a Muslim* minister Malcolm X blamed women for the woes of men and often preached against the seductive ways of women. It is ironic that he would have held such attitudes. He had numerous positive relationships with women, including several females with the given name Betty (Thiel, Girven, Kennedy, and Sanders, the latter who became his wife). One of the first of these relationships occurred during his childhood with Betty Jean Thiel. Thiel was a white girl who lived across the street from the Littles in Lansing, Michigan.* Like Malcolm, she had a wide gap between her two front teeth. Apparently she and Malcolm were constant playmates in their youth.

Despite happy childhood playtimes with Thiel, Malcolm developed a negative

white race consciousness. His very dark father seemed to favor Malcolm over the other children because Malcolm was light in complexion; conversely, his very light-skinned mother apparently beat Malcolm more because he was lighter than his siblings. In addition, he had negative experiences at school with white students and teachers. Strangely, Malcolm X did not mention Thiel or any other childhood white friends to Alex Haley.* Perhaps this was because when he began writing his autobiography, his antiwhite feelings were still strongly negative, though his dislike of whites simply because of their color was beginning to change.

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Malcolm X with Haley, 1965; B. Perry, 1991.

Brenda Ayres

THOMAS, CARY (Cary 2X; Abdul Malik). In the months following his break with the Nation of Islam (NOI),* Malcolm X seemed keenly aware of the likelihood of his murder. Predictions about his death notwithstanding, Malcolm and those close to him understandably took precautionary measures to safeguard his life by establishing a security force. Composed of several bodyguards, the security around Malcolm was most prominent during his weekly Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU)* speaking engagements at the Audubon* auditorium. Cary Thomas, also known as Cary 2X and Abdul Malik, was one of the men who served as Malcolm's bodyguard. Thomas, who was on duty the evening of Malcolm's assassination, played a central role in identifying the three men arrested in Malcolm's murder as the perpetrators and provided the prosecution with the most damaging testimony of the trial against them.

Thomas was regarded as a rather mysterious character. A native New Yorker, he was a former heroin addict, drug dealer, and convicted felon. Except for marital problems that had caused a four-year separation from his family of five, his rehabilitation seems to have paralleled the story of many converts to the NOI. He officially joined the Black Muslim* sect in 1963, acquiring his "X"* as a member of New York's Temple Number Seven.* In 1963, however, he suffered from a mental breakdown and was briefly held at New York's Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric evaluation. Although Thomas's background is vague about the extent of his association with Malcolm and the New York temple, apparently he left the next year after the Elijah Muhammad*-Malcolm X rift to support Malcolm. Reportedly, however, Thomas knew little about either the NOI and their practices or what Malcolm had come to represent in the months after his break with the NOI. Hence, if there was much of a relationship between him and Malcolm, it was apparently not a close one.

Despite his background, however, Thomas was, nevertheless, considered so important to the success of the murder case that he was arrested as a material witness and, for security reasons, detained for nearly a year until the trial began. In the interim as a detainee, he continued his bizarre behavior, on one occasion