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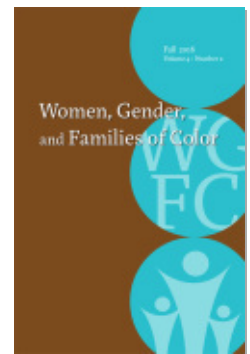
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# The Diasporic Journeys of Louise Little: Grassroots Garveyism, the Midwest, and Community Feminism

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates the importance of women in leading Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) at the grassroots level, the ways Garveyite women forged "community feminism," and the understudied importance of the U.S. Midwest and Canada as key sites of diasporic protest through the life, activism, and legacy of Malcolm X's mother, Louise Langdon Norton Little. Born in Grenada in 1900, Little stands as a major figure in twentieth-century black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and the African Diaspora. Passionately committed to black self-determination and fiercely proud of African-descended people, she emerged as an important grassroots leader in the UNIA, which claimed six million members in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Central America, Africa, and Europe during the 1920s. She joined the UNIA in Montreal, Canada, after she emigrated there after World War I in search of a better life. In the coming years, Little served as an officer in the UNIA division in Omaha, Nebraska, and avidly discussed politics with Garvey when he visited the Littles' home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1922. However, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* portrays Louise Little one-dimensionally as a wretched figure, while historian Manning Marable's biography on Malcolm X minimizes her active role in developing his political consciousness and in leading broader black freedom struggles. These prevailing narratives affirm literary scholar Carole Boyce Davies's observation about the ways black women have been erased from scholarly analysis of the black radical tradition. Tracing the history of Louise Little provides a lens for appreciating the importance of women in leading Pan-Africanist movements, the making of community feminism at the grassroots level, and the importance of the U.S. Midwest and Canada as sites of diasporic protest.

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## Introduction

On July 3, 1926, the *Negro World*, the official newspaper of the Jamaican nationalist Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), published a 65-word report from Louise Little about the organization's recent activities in Omaha, Nebraska. The *Negro World* featured news about the Garvey movement and black people globally. At its peak in the

early 1920s, the UNIA claimed six million members in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Central America, Africa, Europe, and Australia. The organization understood itself as a provisional government-in-exile committed to building self-reliant black institutions, an independent Africa, and a global black empire capable of protecting the rights and dignity of African-descended people everywhere (Issa 2005; Martin 1976, 14–16). Garvey's call for race pride, self-reliance, African redemption, and black self-determination galvanized black people across the African Diaspora, not the least Louise Little. She was born on the Caribbean island of Grenada. She left her homeland in 1917 and eventually made her way to Omaha with her African American husband, Earl Little. A brilliant and resourceful activist-intellectual steadfastly committed to Garveyism, Louise Little is best known today as the mother of the preeminent black nationalist Malcolm X.<sup>1</sup>

In the opening sentence of her report, Little noted that the UNIA division (local) in Omaha had met in June at Liberty Hall at 2578 Lake Street, with "E. Little presiding." She did not mention that the Omaha division president was her husband. The meeting began with prayer and the singing of "From Greenland's Icy Mountains." UNIA gatherings around the world opened with this hymn adopted by nineteenth-century abolitionists (Grant 2009, 173). Little closed the report by noting the Omaha UNIA had launched "a membership drive." The report contained neither biographical information about Little and her husband nor details about the size of the local's membership. This short report stands as the only known document in the historical archive of the Garvey movement written by Little.

Although she disappeared from the official record of the UNIA, Little remained actively involved within the transnational organization at the grassroots level and struggled against global white supremacy for years to come. In 1926, Little and her husband moved from Omaha and, by 1929, had settled outside Lansing, Michigan. She raised and instilled the principles of Garveyism in her eight children in the urban and rural Midwest. The 1930s marked a challenging time for her. The violent murder of her husband in 1931 under suspicious circumstances, the burden of raising a large family on her own, and her struggle against white state officials who sought to place her children in foster care initiated a mental breakdown. In 1939, she was committed to the Kalamazoo State Hospital, a psychiatric institution.<sup>2</sup> She remained there until 1963, released due to the efforts of her children. Living for nearly thirty more years, she resided with family members in Michigan. Although she never returned to Grenada, Little's spirit and intellect remained strong until her passing at the age of 97 in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

Despite her achievements and long life, scholars of Malcolm X, Garveyism, and Pan-Africanism have until recently neglected Little's brilliance as an activist-intellectual and her importance in nurturing black radical sensibilities in Malcolm X. Arguably, Little's defiance of the gender, racial, and class protocols of her day, together with the masculinist scholarly framings of Malcolm X and black movements, explains her erasure from the historical record. As Guyanese-born writer Jan Carew emphasized,

The biographers of Malcolm X . . . have never portrayed his Grenadian mother, Louise Norton Langdon Little, as the remarkable women [*sic*] that she was. She is instead, invariably depicted as a distraught, tragic figure who after her husband's murder succumbed to madness and was committed to a mental hospital. From then onward, she disappears from the pages of history. (1994, 109).

Carew is right. Following *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ghost-written by black journalist Alex Haley, most scholars have, unfortunately, portrayed Little one-dimensionally as a wretched figure. The *Autobiography* frames Little as passive and apolitical; it focuses exclusively on her alleged physically abusive marriage, her struggles with mental illness following the gruesome murder of Earl Little at the hands of a lynch mob, and the hardships of a widowed mother, all of which contributed to her institutionalization in a psychiatric hospital (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 2–22). Manning Marable's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) minimizes Little's active role in cultivating Malcolm X's political consciousness (McDuffie and Woodard 2013, 512). Similarly, many Grenadians and black people around the world remain unaware of Little's extraordinary life and that she was the mother of the internationally renowned U.S. black nationalist of the 1960s.

This essay recovers the life and work of Little from historical obscurity. An indefatigable organic activist-intellectual attuned to the "freedom dreams" of the communities in which she lived, Little was deeply committed to Pan-Africanism, a range of beliefs and practices that frame the African-descended on the continent and diaspora as one people who share a common history and destiny, as well as a commitment to liberation and human dignity.<sup>4</sup> I begin with a discussion of her early years in Grenada. Coming of age in Grenada, in a community that possessed a rich culture of opposition, prepared the ground for her Garveyite activism as an adult.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of this essay focuses on her life and struggles in urban and rural Midwestern communities. It was in the American heartland where she carried out her most

important work advancing what historian Mary Rolinson (2007) has called “grassroots Garveyism,” the organizational work performed by Garveyites at the local level to achieve global black freedom.<sup>6</sup> Little’s efforts in forging grassroots Garveyism in the Midwest, through building UNIA locals and cultivating the principles of self-determination in her children, stand as her most significant achievements.

More broadly, Little’s journey from Grenada to Canada to the American heartland, as well as her grassroots Garveyite activism in the region, sheds light on what I call the “diasporic Midwest.” I use this term “diasporic Midwest” as an empirical and theoretical framework to extend the study of the African Diaspora, to appreciate the gendered contours of Pan-Africanism, and to chart a genealogy of black protest by tracing the underappreciated significance of the American heartland as a center of black transnational political activism. The diasporic Midwest encompasses the American industrial heartland, a region that includes states north of the Ohio River between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains, as a single yet complex geographic, political, historical, and discursive formation linked to Africa, the black diaspora, and the world. Little’s practice of grassroots Garveyism in the American heartland, together with her diasporic journey from Grenada to Canada to the Midwestern United States, highlights the transnational linkages between the Midwest and the black world (McDuffie 2015).

The unique interplay in the American heartland between heavy industry, gender, migration, world war, global depression, white supremacy, U.S. empire, and black resistance created fertile ground for Garveyism to take root in cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Omaha, and Lansing. The Midwest was home to the most advanced industrial manufacturing on the planet. The region’s globally connected automobile and steel industries and stockyards came to symbolize American prosperity and opportunity. African-descended people from around the world came to the Midwest in search of jobs and a better life. Blacks in Midwestern industrial cities earned incomes higher in the region’s heavy industries than their counterparts anywhere else. Unlike in the Jim Crow South, blacks could vote in the Midwest. Cities such as Detroit and Chicago emerged as centers of militant black protest and labor organizing. At the same time, black Midwesterners encountered virulent racial oppression in these urban industrial settings (Hine and McClusky 2012; Phillips 1999, 98–126, 161–89).

The industrial character of these cities profoundly shaped the social relations of black communities in the region. A significant portion of the UNIA’s male rank-and-file in Midwestern cities worked in heavy industries, while the

vast majority of Garveyite women toiled back-breaking hours as domestics in the homes of white women. While the practice of Garveyism was similar in the Midwest as elsewhere, the offshoots of the UNIA were different than in other parts of the world. With their location in the industrial American heartland, Midwestern Garveyites, with their comfortable incomes and opportunities to vote, were uniquely positioned to agitate for black liberation both within and without the organizational structure of the UNIA (Bates 2012; Stein 1986, 229).

We can see the unique character of Midwestern Garveyism in the life and struggles of Louise Little. Although Louise and Earl Little did not work in heavy industries, the couple lived in Midwestern communities whose social relations and militancy were profoundly shaped by the region's factories. Lessons learned in the Caribbean, together with her encounters in the Midwest, shaped her activism and family life. Excavating Little's life and activism counters the common perception of the American heartland as provincial and extends the study of the African Diaspora by highlighting the industrial Midwest as a unique site of diasporic protest. Her work and legacy challenge the declension narrative of the Garvey movement in which many scholars have argued that the UNIA and Garveyism ceased to be of any significant importance in the black world after Garvey's death in 1940 (Jolly 2013, 1–20; Lauck 2013, 1–12).

If the diasporic Midwest framework elucidates the transnational connections between the Caribbean, Canada, and the U.S. Midwest through Little's activism, this paradigm also highlights the gendered contours of grassroots Garveyism in the American heartland. Little practiced what historian Ula Taylor (2002) has termed "community feminism," a distinct black feminist politics formulated by Garveyite women combining feminism and nationalism. Believing women were best suited for nation building, Garveyite women rejected masculinist claims of women's intellectual inferiority to men and oppressive power relations between women and men (Taylor 2002, 64–90). Little most likely would not have called herself a "community feminist," and it is unclear whether she was involved in championing women's involvement in the Garvey movement. What is certain is that Little was keenly aware of the multiple oppressions she faced as a Caribbean-born woman living in the United States. Confident and defiant, Little refused to submit to the male chauvinism of her husband and to the racism and sexism of white state officials who sought to break up her family and to institutionalize her. Her efforts to maintain her dignity, to protect her family, to lead the UNIA at the local level, and to nurture Garveyism in her children illustrate the ways black

women were at the forefront in building diasporic communities and protest. Little's work paralleled the activism of other women involved in the UNIA and neo-Garveyite organizations. These women include Amy Ashwood Garvey, the co-founder of the UNIA; Amy Jacques Garvey, the Pan-African journalist and activist; Maymie Turpeau De Mena, UNIA international organizer; and Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, the Chicago-based leader of African American emigration to Liberia.<sup>7</sup>

Recovering the story and voice of Louise Little is no easy task. Much of what we know about her was written or recorded by someone else. She did not write a memoir. No book or scholarly article focused exclusively on her life has been published. However, Little's erasure from the historical record is beginning to change. Work by Jan Carew (1994); scholar-activist William Strickland and journalist Cheryll Greene (1994); and Ilyasah Shabazz, the third child of Malcolm X and his wife, Betty Shabazz (Shabazz and McLarin 2002) have called attention to Little's historical importance. A blog "More Louise Little/Less Malcolm X," started by British-based independent scholar Jessica Russell in June 2011 seeks to excavate Little from historical obscurity.

In terms of primary sources, Little's personal papers are not available for public review. The probate files of Louise and Earl Little located in the Ingham County Court House in Lansing, Michigan, provide important information into the couple's lives in Michigan, especially her institutionalization in the Kalamazoo mental hospital. However, these records must be read carefully. These files tell us more about the racial, class, gender, and sexual politics of white state officials than they do about Little's life. To fill the gaps in our understanding of her life, this paper draws from oral histories conducted by this author with Little's family in the United States and Grenada, as well as remembrances by her children, content in the *Negro World*, and scholarly accounts of her life (Little 1995). There are many questions that may never be answered about Little's life. What is for sure is that her story is significant not only because she was the mother of Malcolm X; even more, her life reveals the transnational dimensions of black Midwestern history, the gendered contours of Pan-Africanism, and the importance of women in building and sustaining the transnational UNIA at the grassroots level across time, space, and historical generations.

## Early Years

Little's road into the Garvey movement and to the U.S. Midwest was neither predetermined nor inevitable. However, coming of age in Grenada, a British

colony and former slave society deeply stratified by race, gender, and class, as well as growing up in a community with a dynamic culture of opposition, laid the foundations for her community feminism and her life as an organic activist-intellectual in the Garvey movement. She was born Louise Langdon on January 2, 1894, in La Digue, Grenada, a village in St. Andrew Parish on the windward (eastern) side of the island. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the parish was the site of large sugar plantations worked by thousands of enslaved Africans (J. Martin 2007, 215). The violent history and legacy of slavery and colonialism left an indelible mark on Little's body and consciousness. She was born sixty years after the formal end of slavery in Grenada and across the British Caribbean (ibid., 73). Little was the product of rape. Her father, Edward Norton, was a loafer from Scotland, who had a penchant for sexually assaulting African-descended women. Norton raped Little's mother, Edith Langdon, when she was 11 years old, producing her only child, Louise. Norton was significantly older than Langdon. He fled Grenada soon after his assault of Langdon in order to escape the wrath of the Langdon family.<sup>8</sup> In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the black nationalist leader decried his unnamed grandfather: "I was among the millions of Negroes who were insane enough to feel that it was some kind of status symbol to be light-complexioned—that one was actually fortunate to be born thus. But, still later, I learned to hate every drop of that white rapist's blood that is in me" (Malcolm X and Haley, 1965, 2). Little informed Malcolm's distaste for his white grandfather. Detesting the crime committed by her father against her mother, Little was cognizant of the painful history of racialized sexual violence experienced by black women. With her fair complexion and long black hair, she could have easily passed for white. However, growing up in a family fiercely proud of its African ancestry ensured that Little identified with black people and their struggle to be free. She would cultivate this sensibility in her children.

Despite the traumatic circumstances that produced her, Little grew up in a tight-knit extended family. Her maternal grandparents—Jupiter Langdon and Mary Jane Langdon—raised her during her early childhood years. Although the details about his early life are sketchy, Jupiter Langdon was born around 1825 in present-day Nigeria. He was a "liberated African," a term that referred to captives freed by the British Royal Navy from slave ships on the Atlantic Ocean, who were often sent to the Caribbean (Lovejoy 2010). A skilled carpenter, Langdon was determined to be free and independent from whites. He acquired land in La Digue and built a home on the property in which several generations of the Langdon family lived, including Louise Little. Jupiter Langdon's livelihood, together with land ownership and raising



their own food, provided the family with a degree of autonomy from whites that most blacks on the island did not enjoy. For Little, growing up on the Langdon family property imparted the importance of land ownership. She also learned the art of gardening and raising food and utilized this knowledge as an adult. Additionally, Jupiter Langdon provided Little and her family with a direct link to Africa and to the memory of slavery. The family revered their African-born progenitor, who passed away in 1901 at the age of 75.<sup>9</sup>

Little's female relatives played the most important role in raising her. She grew up in a community where women exercised considerable autonomy within the public and private spheres and where children often took the names of their mother's lineage. This was the case of Little. Although Little for unknown reasons sometimes used "Norton" as her surname on official documents until her marriage, she was known within the family and La Digue as "Louise Langdon."<sup>10</sup> Her maternal grandmother, Mary Jane Langdon, raised Little during her childhood years. Mary Jane Langdon was born in Nigeria around 1848. At the time of her passing in 1916 at the age of 68, she worked as a domestic. She had six children with her husband: Edgerton, Edith, Gertrude, Florence, Reginald, and Avey. Like her husband, Mary Jane Langdon was a resourceful person, who passed these traits on to her granddaughter. Little was close to her maternal grandmother, as well as with her extended family.<sup>11</sup>

No family member was more important to Louise Little in her early adult years than Gertrude Langdon, Little's aunt who was a few years old than her mother. Gertrude Langdon was a proud and self-reliant woman who worked as a seamstress. She passed this trade on to her niece. The pride and self-reliance of her female relatives left an indelible mark on Little.<sup>12</sup>

Growing up in La Digue proved instrumental in instilling Little with a sense of independence, cosmopolitanism, history, and justice. She enjoyed a degree of educational opportunity unavailable to most black Grenadians, especially women. Although it is unclear precisely how much formal education she received, Little acquired an excellent education through a nearby school affiliated with the Anglican Church. For a young woman of color living in a colonial society, literacy and formal education were powerful tools for upward mobility and for challenging the status quo. Similar to Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, both of whom attended elite secondary schools for girls in Jamaica, formal education instilled confidence and a sense of independence in Little. She utilized these skills in the UNIA.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to her formal education, the rich oppositional culture of La Digue nurtured Little's intellect and sense of social justice for people of color. The memory of epic resistance of the indigenous Carib people of Grenada to

European genocidal wars of extermination during the seventeenth century, as well as the oppression and defiance of enslaved Africans, loomed large across the island (Martin 2013, 296–307). Culturally, La Digue was a multilingual community. It was here that Little learned to speak fluent English, French, and patois. Her multilingualism bolstered her cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup> By the time she reached early adulthood, Little was a self-assured, globally minded young black woman passionately committed to justice whose knowledge of the world emanated largely from her community.

Even though she lived in a supportive family and enriching community, Little decided to emigrate from Grenada to Canada. She wanted more from life than what colonial Grenada could offer her as a young, single, child-free, well-educated black woman. The limited economic opportunities for the island's black majority—even modestly comfortable land-owning Grenadians like the Langdons—explain why Little's uncle, Edgerton Langdon, emigrated in 1913 to Canada. Following in the footsteps of her uncle and thousands of her compatriots, Little emigrated from Grenada.<sup>15</sup>

Little left Grenada in June 1917 by steamship. It is unknown whether Little planned to remain permanently in Canada. For sure, she never returned to her ancestral home. However, she never forgot from where she came and the lessons she had learned in Grenada. Her commitment to black freedom, kin, and self-reliance remained with Little after she landed in St. John's, New Brunswick, Canada, on June 26, 1917, and for the rest of her life.<sup>16</sup>

## Canada

Although she possessed a strong racial consciousness before she left Grenada, it was in Montreal where Louise Little first became a Garveyite and joined the UNIA. She lived in the city for two years. Little arrived in a country in which African people had resided since at least 1628. By 1921, Canada counted a national population of 18,291 African-descended people or about 2 percent of the country's total population. Despite their small size, black Canadians forged small but robust, globally connected communities. This was true in Montreal, Canada's largest city and industrial center. By the early twentieth century, blacks in Montreal—many of whom hailed from the Caribbean—established thriving community institutions committed to uplifting African-descended people locally and globally. These developments made Montreal fertile ground for the transnational UNIA to take root (Williams 1989, 21–41).

The Montreal UNIA emerged as a stronghold of the worldwide Garvey movement. Marcus Garvey first visited Montreal in the winter of 1917 only

weeks after founding a UNIA division in Harlem. He enthralled the mostly Caribbean migrant audience. Little had not arrived yet in Montreal. However, her uncle Edgerton Langdon, who was already familiar with Garvey, probably attended the meeting. Langdon introduced his niece to Garveyism and the UNIA after she arrived in Canada (Carew 1994, 131). Like elsewhere, the Montreal UNIA was a diasporic space that enabled its largely Caribbean-born members to forge community and to advance black liberation. From the very beginning, women figured prominently in the Montreal UNIA. Ranking UNIA female leaders such as Amy Jacques Garvey and Madame Mamie Turpeau De Mena frequently traveled to Montreal during the inter-war years. Little's exact role in the Montreal UNIA is unclear. What is for certain is that her uncle Edgerton Langdon and his son, Henry J. Langdon, were actively involved in the division's affairs for decades to come (Bertley 1996; 1980, 51–52, 106).

Personally, living in Montreal and joining the UNIA was a transformative experience for Little. She lived with her uncle Edgerton Langdon and worked as a seamstress and domestic laborer in white homes. In 1918, she met Earl Little at a UNIA meeting in Montreal. Born in 1890 in Butler, Georgia, in the state's black belt, to a racially proud family, he worked as a skilled craftsman and lay Baptist minister. He shared Louise Little's passion for Pan-Africanism. The couple married on May 10, 1919.<sup>17</sup> By the following year, the couple moved to Philadelphia to help build the Garvey movement. Louise Little was one of 88,000 people from the Caribbean who migrated to the United States during the early twentieth century (James 1998, 8). She became a naturalized U.S. citizen. In Philadelphia, Little gave birth to her first child: Wilfred. In 1921, the UNIA assigned Louise and Earl Little to Omaha, Nebraska, for the purpose of building the organization in the industrial Midwest city. Little's life changed forever when she moved to the American heartland (Marable 2011, 20–22; Strickland and Greene 1994).

### **Grassroots Garveyism in the Midwest**

While it was in Canada where she enlisted in the UNIA, it was in the U.S. Midwest where Louise Little performed her most important grassroots work on behalf of the Garvey movement. Her work reveals the transnational linkages between the diasporic Midwest and the larger black world, her community feminism, and her success as an organic activist-intellectual in cultivating the principles of Garveyism in the next generation of black people. Omaha was Little's first stop in the American industrial heartland. The city was a

center of meat packing and a railroad hub. Omaha was home to the third-largest African American urban population in the U.S. West (Taylor 1998, 204–5). The city's black population doubled from 5,143 to 13,315 in 1920. The foreign-born black population appears to have been small. (Omaha counted approximately 191,000 whites.) Blacks came to the city in search of better job opportunities in the stockyards, railroad yards, and meat-packing plants, and a life free of Jim Crow. However, the racial realities of Omaha dashed many of their dreams. In September 1919, a violent “race riot” erupted which resulted in the lynching of a black man and a mob of thousands of whites who burned down the county courthouse and threatened to hang Omaha's white mayor. This unrest was one of more than twenty “race riots” in major industrial U.S. cities during the “Red Summer of 1919.” Blacks in Omaha did not passively accept their second-class citizenship; they fought back with guns (Menard 2010).

Racial violence and black resistance in Omaha caught the attention of Marcus Garvey and the Littles. In an editorial about the Omaha riot published in 1919 in the *Negro World*, Garvey argued that racial oppression on a global scale would persist “so long as [African Americans] remained divided ourselves” (Hill 1983, 41). No UNIA division existed in Omaha in 1919. The local may not have been founded until 1925. Black armed self-defense in Omaha impressed the Littles and convinced them to relocate to that city on behalf of the UNIA.<sup>18</sup>

Louise Little and female members of the Omaha UNIA were critical to advancing the branch's grassroots work. The local counted probably fewer than 100 members, many of whom surely worked in low-level jobs in the railroad yards and stockyards and as domestics. The gendered hierarchy of power that existed within the transnational UNIA also operated within the Omaha UNIA. Men held the presidency, while women served as secretary. This was the case of Louise Little and Victoria Miles, both of whom held the position of secretary and wrote reports published in the *Negro World* (Little 1926; Miles 1926). The position of secretary required Little and Miles to be actively involved in the daily life of the Omaha UNIA, to understand the concerns of its members, and to win their trust. The sparse historical records of the Omaha UNIA provide no information into whether the branch organized a contingent of Black Star Nurses, the women's auxiliary that performed work similar to that of the Red Cross, or if women openly challenged patriarchal power within the local. What is clear is that Little and her female colleagues of the Omaha UNIA were visible in leading the struggle for African redemption. Little's grassroots work resembled that of Maymie Turpeau De

Mena, who traveled across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and Central America on behalf of the UNIA, and Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, the ex-Chicago UNIA leader who in 1933 founded the Peace Movement of Ethiopia and organized a mass campaign for African American repatriation to Africa (Taylor 2002, 44).

If she dedicated her life to promoting grassroots Garveyism, then Little was also willing to put her life on the line to fight white supremacy. This was most evident in her confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan outside of the Littles' home in Omaha. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* opens with this story:

When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our house in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children and that my father was away, preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because the "good Christian white people" were not going to stand for my father's "spreading trouble" among the "good" Negroes of Omaha with the "back to Africa" preachings of Marcus Garvey. (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 1)

After klansmen issued these threats, they rode their horses around the Littles' home, shattering the windows of the house with their rifle butts. Neither the klansmen nor Louise Little exchanged fire. The whites then rode off into the night. No one in the house was injured. Soon afterward, Earl Little returned home from out of town. He was enraged. However, he did not retaliate. His wife was expecting their fourth child—Malcolm, who was born on May 19, 1925. Given these circumstances, Earl Little decided it would be best to move away from Omaha. The Littles relocated to Milwaukee soon after Malcolm was born (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 1–2).<sup>19</sup>

Although this powerful account is mediated through Malcolm X and Alex Haley, frames her in maternalist terms, and omits her involvement in the UNIA, Louise Little's encounter with the klan provides important insight into her militancy and community feminism. The white night riders went to the Littles' home to silence Earl Little for his leadership in the local Garvey movement. However, his success in leading the Omaha UNIA would not have been possible without his wife. Louise Little must have been scared when the klansmen approached her home. She could have remained inside the house with her children or have run away. Instead, she opened the door,

confronted this group of gun-carrying white men, and told them that her husband was out of town preaching. Given that racist whites often saw the black church and black ministers as subversive, Little made no apologies for her husband's commitment to racial uplift. Her decision to reveal her pregnant body to the klansmen was a shrewd and risky move. She surely knew that whites had lynched black women, including expectant mothers (Armstrong 2011). Given this reality, Little's decision to show her pregnant body to the klansmen can be read a strategic performance that both affirmed and challenged prevailing discourses of black womanhood, revealing her awareness of the gendered and sexual contours of white supremacy. On the one hand, she portrayed herself as a defenseless unprotected mother. On the other hand, Little used her body to demand respect and protection of black womanhood and motherhood from white men. Her actions defied white supremacist, patriarchal, and heteronormative discourses that framed black women as deviant, unwomanly, and unfit mothers. This was an effective strategy. Staving off the attack, she defended herself and children. Louise Little's decision to share this story with the young Malcolm X suggests that she not only wanted him to know about the racial violence the family had encountered but also to appreciate his mother's militancy.

In addition to her grassroots work for the Garvey movement, Louise Little may have worked closely with and gained the respect of Marcus Garvey. Looking back at his early childhood years, Wilfred Little claimed,

But I can never forget that when Marcus Garvey was on the run from the FBI, my mother hid him in our house and wrote letters and dispatches for him. She was an educated woman who could write clearly and well; and several times, she received letters from the leaders of the movement thanking her for the work she had done and praising her devotion to the cause. (Carew 1994, 118)

This is an intriguing claim. However, Wilfred Little stated neither the time nor place of these alleged encounters. The archival record has yet to confirm them. Still, the possibility of collaborations between Little and Garvey spoke to her commitment to Pan-Africanism and resembled the ways UNIA female leaders such as Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey were crucial to the movement.

While she may have worked with Garvey, we know for sure that Louise Little continued to carry out her grassroots activism on behalf of the UNIA in Lansing, Michigan. Arguably, the most lasting way she advanced grassroots Garveyism and promoted community feminism was through nurturing these values in her children while living in Michigan's state capital. Her time

in the Lansing area marked one of the most rewarding moments of her life. The Littles settled on the outskirts of Lansing because Louise Little wanted to raise her children in a rural area and to live independently on their own land. Lansing was home to several automobile factories. Unlike Omaha, Lansing's black population was small. In 1930, the city counted 1,409 African Americans or 1.8 percent of the city's total population of 78,397. The Lansing area counted only a handful of Caribbean-born people. Most black men worked as unskilled laborers in the service economy, while most African American women toiled as domestics (Meyer 1969). Earl Little worked as a handyman, who earned extra money speaking on behalf of the UNIA and preaching in local black churches. Louise Little sewed clothes for black and white clientele.<sup>20</sup>

Lansing was a hotbed of white supremacy. In 1924, the KKK held a massive rally in the city attended by thousands of whites (Strickland and Greene 1994, 16–17). The Littles experienced the wrath of local white supremacy. In 1929, the Black Legionnaires, a local white supremacist group, burned down the first home in which the Littles lived in Lansing in retaliation against Earl Little for allegedly inciting the local black community (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 3). Still, the Littles soldiered on.

For Louise Little, inculcating the memory of Grenada into her eight children—Wilfred, Hilda, Philbert, Malcolm, Reginald, Yvonne, Wesley, and Robert—was a crucial way to survive racially hostility in the Midwest and to nurture Garveyism in the next generation. She never sent her children to Grenada. However, in a testament to the continuing importance of her Caribbean roots to Little's identity, Wilfred, Hilda, Philbert, Malcolm, and Reginald bore the names of relatives in Grenada. “Langdon” was the middle name of Louise Little's youngest child, Robert, who was born in 1938 and was fathered by a black man who jilted her.<sup>21</sup> Naming her children after relatives in Grenada created ties of real and imagined family solidarity between the diasporic Midwest and the Caribbean.

Nurturing the Garveyite principles of self-determination, pride, and self-reliance in their children was paramount to Louise and Earl Little. According to Wilfred Little, “My father and mother were people who were busy working under the philosophy of Marcus Garvey and that's the kind of household that we grew up in” (Little 1995, 10). Echoing her uncles' remembrances, Ilyasah Shabazz emphasized the importance of Louise and Earl Little to preparing the ground for Malcolm X's political development. She wrote, “It was Grandmother Louise and Reverend Little . . . who sowed the seeds of insight, discipline, educational values, and organizational skills in my father,



not Elijah Muhammad. Mr. Muhammad cleared away the weeds and allowed those seeds to flourish and grow” (Shabazz and McLarin 2002, 53). Louise Little made sure to impart the principles of Garveyism to her children.

Cultivating a black internationalist perspective in her children was also an important medium for Louise Little to instill Garveyism. She had them recite the alphabet in French and impressed upon them the importance of communication as a way for promoting self-improvement (Shabazz and McLarin 2002, 53). Upon her directives, the children read the *Negro World* and *The West Indian*, the newspaper edited by Theophilus A. Marryshow, a Grenadian who later became the leading advocate for the West Indian Federation, a short-lived political union of British colonial territories in the Caribbean from the late 1950s to the early 1960s (J. Martin 2007, 157–58). Knowledge of current affairs enhanced the Little children’s global awareness and pride.

For the Littles, nothing was more foundational to building a proud, self-reliant, tightlyknit family than land ownership. After their first home in the Lansing area burned down, Earl Little built by hand a four-room, one-floor house on a six-acre plot owned by his wife and him on the outskirts of the city. As Louise Little’s youngest daughter Yvonne (Little) Woodward recalled, “The land that we were on was very important to my mother. It was important to us that our father and mother bought it” (quoted in Strickland and Greene 1994, 33; Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 10; Marable 2011, 27). Drawing from lessons she had learned in Grenada, Louise Little taught the children how to grow their own food and the importance of self-reliance. Wilfred Little recalled, “On our land we raised everything we needed to eat, we produced it right there. . . . This kept us more or less in an independent mode” (Strickland and Greene 1994, 22). The Little’s land was critical to the family’s economic survival and to their identity as independent black people (ibid., 14–30).

Meanwhile, Louise Little’s community feminism was apparent in her efforts to maintain her independence within her marriage. The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* portrays her as a passive woman victimized by physical and emotional abuse from Earl Little. Family members tell a different story. They allege that Louise Little loved her husband, but she stood up to him. They quarreled, sometimes bitterly, but he never physically hit her.<sup>22</sup> We probably never will know the exact nature of Louise and Earl Little’s relationship. But, given her upbringing and fortitude, it seems likely she was just as willing to challenge the patriarchal authority of her husband as she was the racism of white Midwesterners.



## Nightmare

If her years in Lansing represented an exciting moment for her, then the 1930s also constituted the worst of times for Louise Little. Earl Little was violently killed under suspicious circumstances on September 28, 1931, in Lansing. The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* refer to the mental breakdown of Louise Little and the break-up of the family by white state officials after the passing of Earl Little as a “nightmare” (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 1–22). In many respects, the memoir is correct. At the same time, the *Autography of Malcolm X* elides Louise Little’s resilience spawned by her Garveyite sensibility, community feminism, and Grenadian heritage.

Now widowed and the sole provider, Little relied on her Garveyite beliefs and lessons she had learned in Grenada to take care of her family in a racially hostile Midwestern environment during the depths of the Depression. She worked as a domestic for whites and sewed clothing for sale. Without family living nearby, she forged a support network among blacks in Lansing, many of whom had been active in the UNIA. Underscoring the continued importance of her Grenadian heritage, Little became especially close to two Afro-Caribbean families: the Lyons and McGuires, who lived in nearby Mason, Michigan. Louise Little held on for eight long years (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 11, 13, 22, 28).

Ultimately, the strains of providing for a large family, a failed courtship, and the birth of her eighth child by the man who jilted her, together with the discrimination she faced as a black, single, working-class woman targeted by the state, overwhelmed Little emotionally. Deeply depressed, she was unable to care for herself and her children. Beginning in 1938, white social workers began calling on her home to investigate the well-being of her children after some of them, most notably Malcolm, engaged in shoplifting. Little openly despised the white social workers who came to her home. She believed they wanted to strip her of her children and independence (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 17). The Ingham County Probate Court intervened in this affair. Doctors evaluated Little on behalf of the probate court. Using racial, class, and gender-coded language, these evaluations cited her alleged hostility toward relief workers, tendency to talk to herself, recent birth of an “illegitimate” child, refusal to give up her children to foster care, and claim she had been “discriminated against” as evidence of Little’s purported insanity and grounds for committing her to the Kalamazoo psychiatric facility.<sup>23</sup> Following these recommendations, probate judge John McClellan deemed her “insane” and

ordered her to the Kalamazoo mental hospital. She arrived at the facility on January 31, 1939. She spent nearly the next 25 years of her life at the hospital. Judge McClellan ordered the placement of the younger Little children into foster care.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways, the institutionalization of Little into a psychiatric hospital should be read as an example of state-sanctioned violence against black women. The work of historian Kali Gross about crime, prosecution, and incarceration of African American women in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Philadelphia provides useful insight into Little's encounter with state violence. Appreciating the justice system as a form of social control that targeted vulnerable black working-class women and framed them as deviant and criminal, "policing and prison practice operated as a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby reformers, criminologists, and prison administrators ultimately invented the very crime class they sought to repress" (Gross 2006, 128). This description fits Little's experience. Viewing her through racist, sexist, and heteronormative lenses, white doctors, social workers, and court officials interpreted Little's mental breakdown, pride, status as a poor unmarried black woman who recently had a child, and defiance as proof of her criminality and deviance. Her location as a Caribbean woman also may help explain why social workers and the courts targeted her. Even though she was a naturalized U.S. citizen, white social workers and court officials nonetheless may have viewed her foreign-born background with contempt and as grounds for her institutionalization in a psychiatric hospital. Indeed, the state through the courts, social workers, and medical professionals punished Little and her family, subjecting them to trauma, dislocation, and hardship.

Unfortunately, Little's thoughts about her institutionalization and encounters with state violence have been mediated through reports and stories told by others. Still, existing evidence suggests she understood her commitment to a psychiatric hospital as a form of state-sanctioned punishment and incarceration for her attempt as a black woman to live free. She apparently made these points to hospital doctors and to family members when they visited her at the mental hospital. Yvonne Woodward claimed, "[S]he would beg us to get her outta there because, she said, 'They're going to take my land.'" For Little, "they" referred to the white power structure. Her nightmare came true. The state ultimately seized her property. Given the importance of land to Little's sense of family, pride, and independence, losing her property was devastating (quoted in Strickland and Greene 1994, 33).

Despite the tremendous hardships she faced, Little, family, and friends waged a protracted and successful struggle to secure her freedom from the

Kalamazoo mental hospital. Her release from the psychiatric hospital in 1963 was one of the most joyful events in the lives of family members. For Little, leaving the institution marked the end of a grueling chapter in her life and an exciting new beginning in her life journey.<sup>25</sup>

## Later Years

Although she spent more than two decades in the Kalamazoo State Hospital, Louise Little survived this traumatic event. Still strong and radiant, she spent her final years recovering from her institutionalization and reconnecting with family in Michigan. Her survival and the legacy of Little's life enriched her family, who took the Garveyite lessons they had learned from her into new forms of black protest and community building across the Midwest and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

From her release to her passing, Louise Little lived a private life. She never again engaged in Pan-African organizing. Nor did she speak publicly about her life, including the assassination of her son, Malcolm, on February 21, 1965, whose death devastated her.<sup>27</sup>

While she never again participated in UNIA organizing, the legacy of Louise Little's Garveyite politics lived on through her children whose work bore the stamp of the Midwest and touched millions of people across the world. This is most apparent in Malcolm X, who is often identified as the progenitor of Black Power. His efforts were critical to building the Nation of Islam (NOI) into the largest U.S. black nationalist formation by the late 1950s. Founded in Detroit and later headquartered in Chicago, the NOI had a stronghold in the Midwest and identified Garvey as one of its forbearers. Many Midwestern-based NOI members toiled in factories, including Malcolm X, who worked in an automobile plant in Detroit after his release from prison in 1952 (Joseph 2006, 7–18, 53–67; Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 204, 211). Wilfred Little, Philbert Little, and Reginald Little ministered in the NOI in Michigan.<sup>28</sup> Later in life, Wilfred Little became a community activist in Detroit and a noted lecturer on Malcolm X and the history of the Little family (Little 1995).<sup>29</sup> The life of Robert Little reflected his mother's concern for nurturing future generations. Earning a graduate degree in social work from Michigan State University, Robert enjoyed a successful career as a well-respected scholar of family caregiving. He worked in the state of Michigan's Department of Human Services and served as the commissioner of New York City's Child Welfare Administration during the early 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Wesley Little maintained close ties to his family.<sup>31</sup>

Grassroots Garveyism and community feminism of Louise Little lived on her daughters: Hilda Little and Yvonne Woodward. While neither woman converted to Islam or engaged in political activism for black freedom or women's rights, they both enjoyed long lives committed to self-improvement, family, and community building. Hilda Little, who never married or had children, moved to Boston in the 1940s where she worked for years in an insurance company before returning to Michigan later in life.<sup>32</sup>

Yvonne Woodward embodied the determination of her mother to build self-sufficient black communities. Like her mother, Woodward cherished landownership, self-help, and black unity. In the 1960s, she and her family moved from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Woodland Park, a small, historical black resort town in central Michigan (Jones 2010). Resembling her mother's decision to live in a rural area outside Lansing, Woodward saw Woodland Park as an exciting opportunity to rear her children away from the city, on their own land, and among an independent community of black people. She purchased several parcels of land, opened a community grocery store, and established a public park in the center of town. Hilda Little and several relatives of Louise Little moved to Woodland Park to maintain their family connections and to build an independent black community. Louise Little spent her final years living with family in Woodland Park. She passed away in 1991. The family held a private memorial service for her in Grand Rapids. She was cremated, and her ashes were scattered in the Woodland Park area.<sup>33</sup>

Louise Little's final years sparked renewed interest in the family's Grenadian roots. Even though she never returned to and rarely spoke about her homeland later in life, Little's family was proudly aware of its Caribbean heritage. Some relatives traveled to Grenada before and after her passing with the intention of gaining a deeper appreciation for Louise Little and their family roots. Today, family, scholars, and Grenadian officials continue to discuss the possibilities of building a memorial in her honor on the island.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

The story of Louise Little is fascinating and complex. She was a remarkable organic activist-intellectual whose commitment to advancing grassroots Garveyism helped build the transnational UNIA in the Midwest and nurtured the principles of black self-determination in her children whose work changed the world. Coming of age in a rich culture of opposition in colonial Grenada stoked her Pan-African consciousness. In search of a better life, she emigrated to Canada. Once there, she joined the Garvey movement and made her way to the American heartland, where she carried out her most important life's

work. Drawing from the strong women she had known in Grenada, Little practiced community feminism. She defied the sexism of her husband and the violence and racism practiced by white klan members and state officials. Yet, she lived a difficult life as evidenced by the violent death of her husband and most famous child, and, above all, her twenty-four-year confinement to a psychiatric hospital. Still, she survived these traumas.

More broadly, tracing Louise Little's story extends the study of the black world by uncovering the history of the diasporic Midwest as a distinct and important site of black protest. Her life illustrates the significance of women in advancing grassroots Garveyism and Pan-Africanism. For scholars of women, gender, and the African Diaspora, Little's life demonstrates the challenges of recovering the histories of black women activist-intellectuals who left few—if any—written records and whose legacies scholars have largely overlooked and denigrated. Still there are many questions that remain unanswered about her life.

Finally, Little's life serves as a powerful model for those of us today committed to creating a more just and democratic world. She understood the importance of grassroots organizing for black liberation, as well as the need to cultivate the next generation of black freedom fighters. She also believed in the dignity of black womanhood. Given that African-descended people remain second-class citizens globally and that the lives of black people seemingly don't matter in the eyes of the police and everyday white people, Louise Little offers a model for championing black liberation for us all.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes

1. Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, personal interview by Erik S. McDuffie (author), Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 9, 2014; Little (1926); Malcolm X and Haley (1965, 2).

2. The hospital, which remains open today, is now named the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital. See Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, "Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital." Retrieved at <http://1.usa.gov/1QuC7aT>, accessed June 7, 2014.

3. Deborah Jones, telephone interview with Erik S. McDuffie (author), February 18 and 19, 2015. There is discrepancy about Louise Little's age. Most accounts claim she was born either in 1897 or 1900. Louise Little's baptismal records from Grenada list January 2, 1894, as her birthday; personal papers of Terance Wilson, Madeys, Grenada (hereafter TW papers). I am grateful to Mr. Wilson, who is the great grandnephew of Louise Little and the third cousin of Malcolm X, for sharing his papers and extraordinary knowledge of Louise Little and the Langdon family with me. I am extremely grateful to Deborah Jones, the daughter of Yvonne Little Jones Woodward and the granddaughter of Louise Little, for sharing information about her family and supporting my research.

4. Coined by Italian Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1971), the term "organic intellectuals" has come to describe thinkers from the working-class or marginalized groups

whose ideas do not originate from the elite and who speak on behalf of the oppressed. My thinking about “freedom dreams,” is taken from historian Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) who emphasizes the significance of hope and the imagination, not racism and oppression, as the catalyst for drawing African-descended people to social movements committed to building a new world radically different from the status quo. My definition of Pan-Africanism is drawn from Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood’s *Pan-African History* (2002, vii).

5. Cultural historian George Lipsitz (1988) coined the term “culture of opposition” to describe the ways blacks drew from a tradition of resistance deeply rooted in the African American experience. Additionally, Lipsitz’s discussion of organic intellectuals shapes my understanding of the concept. He argues that “[o]rganic intellectuals . . . succeed only when their organizing efforts articulate and activate ideas already present in the community, and when they tap existing networks of communication and action” (11).

6. My thinking about grassroots Garveyism is also informed by historian Adam Ewing who “views Garveyism not as an ideology but as a method of organic mass politics” (2014, 6).

7. This article joins a growing body of scholarship that challenges the erasure of women in the study of Garveyism, Pan-Africanism, and black nationalism; see Blain 2015 and forthcoming 2016; Davies 2014; Duncan 2009; J. Martin 2007; Reddock 2014; Taylor 2002.

8. Terance Wilson, personal conversation with author, La Digue, Grenada, March 14, 2015.

9. Terance Wilson, personal conversation with author, La Digue, Grenada, January 13, 2015.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Birth Certificates of Langdon family members, TW Papers; Wilson, conversation with author, January 13, 2015; Terance Wilson, personal conversation with author April 7, 2016.

12. Marriage certificate of Gertrude Langdon, TW Papers.

13. Wilson, conversation with author, January 13, 2015; Gloria Chitterman and Fitzroy Walcott, conversation with Erik S. McDuffie, La Digue, Grenada, January 15, 2015; T. Martin 2007, 17; Taylor 2002, 15–16.

14. Wilson, conversation with author, January 13, 2015; Carew 1994, 125.

15. Wilson, conversation with author, January 13 and March 14, 2015; Putnam 2013, 1, 23–39.

16. Passenger List, Ancestry.com. *Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865–1935* (database online). Original data: *Passenger Lists, 1865–1935*, Microfilm Publications T-479 to T-520, T-4689 to T-4874, T-14700 to T-14939, C-4511 to C-4542, Library and Archives Canada, n.d. RG 76-C, Department of Employment and Immigration fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. I would like to express my gratitude to Jessica Russell for sharing this information with me.

17. Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014; State of Michigan. “Certificate of Death: Earl Little.” Division of Vital Records, Ingham County Courthouse, Lansing, Michigan. File No. 545, Date of Death, September 28, 1931, filed October 30, 1931; Carew 1994, x, 131.

18. Miles 1926; Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2015.

19. The Littles lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and then Indiana Harbor, Indiana, before settling in Lansing. Earl Little headed the small but active UNIA divisions in Milwaukee and Indiana Harbor, an industrial suburb of Chicago. There is no record of Louise Little holding formal positions within these divisions. However, given her ardent Pan-African

politics, it seems hard to imagine that that she was not actively involved in these locals at the grassroots level. See Evanzz 1992; Hill 1989, 561n1; Trotter 2007, 125.

20. Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014.

21. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 19, 2015.

22. Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014.

23. Quoted in Dr. Geo. R. Clinton, Ingham County Probate Court file, January 3, 1939; Dr. E. F. Hoffman, Ingham County Probate Court file, January 3, 1939, both in Louise Little Probate File, B-4398.

24. R. A. Morter to John McClellan, January 31, 1939, Louise Little Probate File; Malcolm X and Haley 1965, 22; Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 18 and 19, 2015; Deborah Jones, personal email correspondence with author, March 11, 2015.

25. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 18 and 19, 2015; Carew 1994, x.

26. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 18 and 19, 2015.

27. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 19, 2015.

28. "Wilfred Little, 78, Brother of Malcom X," *New York Times*, May 21, 1998; Marable 2011, 118.

29. "Wilfred Little, 78, Brother of Malcom X."

30. "Robert Little: Youngest Brother of Malcolm X," *Detroit News*, November 28, 1999; Crumbley and Little 1997, ix.

31. Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014.

32. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 18 and 19, 2015; Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014.

33. Deborah Jones, interview with author, February 18 and 19, 2015; Deborah Jones, email to author, March 11, 2015.

34. Wilson, interview with author, January 13 and March 14, 2015; Steven Jones and Talib El Amin, interview with author, 2014.

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