



HARVARD Kennedy School

MALCOLM WIENER CENTER for Social Policy

Where History and the Humanities Meet Public Policy

Q+A with Khalil Gibran Muhammad

By April Austin

Khalil Gibran Muhammad brings the perspective of a historian and a humanist to the Harvard Kennedy School, where he is professor of history, race and public policy and a faculty affiliate of the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy. He also holds an appointment as the Suzanne Young Murray Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.



Muhammad grew up on Chicago's South Side as part of a large extended family. His father, Ozier Muhammad, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist with The New York Times, and his mother, Kimberly Muhammad, is an educator and administrator. His great-grandfather, Elijah Muhammad, led the Nation of Islam from 1934 until his death in 1975.

Muhammad comes to Harvard from his role as director of the [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#), where he increased visitations, enhanced programming and led fundraising and oversight of a \$22 million renovation. On October 12 and 13, he and Leah Wright Rigueur, associate professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, will co-chair the symposium, "[Race and Justice in the Age of Obama](#)," hosted by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and co-sponsored by the Malcolm Wiener Center, Shorenstein Center for Media and Public Policy, and Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

How will the discussion about race and justice change after President Obama leaves office?

We're going to see a much more critical lens on what America is and should be. The next administration will have to own and embrace that the "greatest country in the world" has also been the greatest purveyor of un-freedom, in terms of its capacity to incarcerate its own population. You can debate the reasons for that, but that is the

challenge of how we talk about America in the post-election. We're continuing to see the gap exposed between the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the reality. This gives us all—particularly at a place like the Kennedy School—the opportunity to redefine what America can be. What makes America exceptional is flexibility, malleability, and a capacity to pivot and change because of the openness of the society.

What do you see as your role at the Harvard Kennedy School?

I bring two assets to the University. They're not unique to me, but I think being a historian in a school of public policy is a good thing, because many social scientists and policy experts don't always leverage the humanities.

As director of the leading archive of global black history [the Schomburg Center], and a place that has a rich tradition of visual and performing art, I recognized that people often come to a more complex appreciation of the world and its possibilities through the humanities and art.

One way to think about it: How do you create a space for applied historical and humanistic analysis? Why not take literature as a starting point for a conversation about complex human behavior, rather than starting with a social scientist's analysis or an anthropological report or a work of psychology? It's not to privilege one approach over the other; it's to diversify the sources. Because when students go into the government agency, the NGO, the nonprofit, or even the private sphere, they're going to have to lead and communicate with people, and they're going to need multiple modes of communication in their toolbox.

Are there other opportunities for the School to lead?

In the history of policy work, there's room for more appreciation of what I would call the black public sphere. Often, blacks are the objects of scrutiny, to be tested, sampled, polled, talked about, analyzed, but they're not actually knowledge producers and contributors to how problems are defined in the first place. And that couldn't be further from the truth. There's a great deal of productive knowledge that exists, that often circulates heavily within the black public sphere that doesn't always translate, or isn't widely accepted, outside of it.

The black public sphere has been neglected and continues to be neglected and it's partly why these moments of crisis recur every 50 years or so, because at some point the consequences of the policy decisions of neglecting that black public sphere come back to haunt us.

There are many more voices, both in the past and in the present, that can come to bear on thinking about how to make America more racially just, more economically fair, and ultimately more reflective and inclusive of the many contributions that have helped make democracy a real and functioning system.

Your great-grandfather was Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. Did this relationship influence your scholarship?

I didn't know him, because he died when I was very young. From my father, I had an early awareness of wanting to engage the world from a perspective that privileged the humanity of black people. I'm proud to continue that tradition, which includes documenting, giving voice, and advocating for the place of African Americans in this country and black people more generally around the world.

Read the Harvard Kennedy School [press release](#) and the [Harvard Gazette](#) article on Muhammad's appointment.