

LOOKING PAST THE HATE: FROM MALCOLM X TO EL-SHABAZZ

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“When I *am* dead . . . I want you to just watch and see if I’m not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with ‘hate.’ He will make use of me dead, as he made use of me alive, as a convenient symbol of ‘hatred,’” states Malcolm X in the final chapter of his 1964 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (439). Malcolm X would be unsurprised that still today anthologies and textbooks focus either on his education or on his “the white man is the devil” (211) separationist preaching from his NOI days, his “the chickens coming home to roost” (347) remark about the assassination of President Kennedy, or other regrettable comments. The image of this remarkable man as a “racial fanatic” (513) and “fomentor of violence” (421) who preaches “segregation and race hatred” (512) remains intact. As M. S. Handler puts it, “No man in our time aroused fear and hatred in the white man as did Malcolm” (ix). Many Americans still consider Malcolm X a hateful person with narrow beliefs and ideas, especially in racial matters.

But why does such a negative image exist of the historical Malcolm X? Mainly, it is because Malcolm X is still largely associated with The Nation of Islam (NOI), a supposed sect of Islam lead by Elijah Muhammad. Although the NOI shaped Malcolm X’s white-race-hatred ideas when he initially converted, he no longer belonged to it in the final years before his assassination. When Malcolm X converted a second time to Orthodox Islam, his ideas and beliefs, especially about white people, changed dramatically. Malcolm X changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz after his second conversion, revealing that he had become a new person, but he was and still is known as Malcolm X, the name given to him by the NOI. I use this name in my article so that readers will understand who I discuss. I also refer to him as Malcolm Little in passages that discuss his life before converting to the NOI and as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz in passages that discuss his life after converting to Orthodox Islam.

To clear Malcolm X’s image, I will argue that his image is inconsistent with the person he became in the last years of his life. As a framework for this discussion, I will examine his *Autobiography* within the genre of conversion narratives, focusing on rhetorical language and structure. Knowing the public was resistant to the person he became, Malcolm X deliberately used the language and structure of conversion narratives in his *Autobiography* to help convince future generations of his change, a task that succeeds for those who read *Autobiography* carefully. As Thomas Benson puts it, “the autobiographical mode is uniquely suited to explaining and justifying how Malcolm was led from one stage of life to another. . . . Malcolm makes ‘change’ a major theme of his *Autobiography*” (6).

Conversion Narratives

Most authors of autobiographies who experience conversion must face the challenge of creating

“myths of self that account plausibly for the dramatic shifts in attitude and behavior that follow from an authentic conversion experience” (Griffin 152). Since Malcolm X converts not only once, but twice in his lifetime, *Autobiography*’s main purpose is “to establish his credibility” and to make his conversion narratives plausible (Benson 2). In “The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives,” Charles Griffin reveals that in autobiographies, converts “can use the agency of narrative form to construct [their] coherent and plausible myths of self” (160) and in turn convince us of their change, especially since, as he likes to think, “‘truth’ in conversion narratives is closely allied to form” (161). For example, in her autobiography *The Experiences of God’s Gracious Dealing with Mrs. Elizabeth White*, which attempts “to testify to the personal experience of conversion [and change] as precisely and persuasively as possible” (Caldwell 6), Elizabeth White’s main theme of deliverance succeeds because it fits in a rhetorical structure that parallels her spiritual deliverance and rebirth through conversion with her physical experience of childbirth (Caldwell 8). In *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Saint Augustine uses multiple structures, including darkness vs. light, descent vs. ascent, and sin/rebellion vs. redemption to represent his life before and after conversion and to reveal his profound changes (Crosson 80). Similarly, Charles Colson uses a rhetorical structure in his autobiography *Born Again* to convince skeptics that his changes in thought and action after conversion are sincere (Griffin 153). He follows a specific structure of pride before conversion vs. humility after conversion to shape “the development of Colson’s personality both before and after conversion” (154), revealing that he feels emptiness in his “pride-driven” life and contentment in “his efforts to be humble” (158). By following rhetorical structures in their autobiographical conversion narratives, converts persuade their readers of “the logical necessity of the course they have taken through life” and “the appropriateness of those paths of experience” (Griffin 153) and convince the readers that they have indeed changed after conversion.

Conversion Narratives of Malcolm X

In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X uses rhetorical language, including metaphors of imprisonment and “going out,” within an underlying rhetorical structure of imprisonment versus going out, revealing Malcolm X’s change from being limited and hateful before conversion to enlightened and free afterward. As Thomas Benson puts it, “Malcolm’s *Autobiography* is constructed in terms of the contradictions between open and closed, constriction and enlargement, confinement and action” (12). Such a structure works in both conversion narratives within the *Autobiography*: first, Malcolm Little’s conversion from near-atheism to the NOI, and second, Malcolm X’s conversion from the NOI to Orthodox Islam.

The rhetorical metaphors of imprisonment and “getting out” are prevalent throughout Malcolm X’s two conversion narratives and are important for understanding the change in his image, for they “stand as symbols for Malcolm’s discovery of self” (Benson 13). Malcolm X reveals how he changed from the hateful man that he was during his NOI days to the enlightened man that he became after converting to Orthodox Islam. Malcolm X illustrates change through signs of struggle and confusion, through foreshadowing of crisis, and through conveying a figurative imprisonment of mind and spirit that parallels the literal imprisonment of his body during his conversion to the NOI. Malcolm X ultimately frees himself from NOI ideology by physically and mentally moving toward Orthodox Islam.

The Rhetorical Language and Structure of the First Conversion Narrative

Malcolm Little's life in America is a "nightmare" (Haley and X 3). When he is a boy, whites brutally murder his father, an event that leads his family to psychologically deteriorate (17). Little's mother is put into a mental institution, and he is separated from his siblings. In seventh grade, Little's dreams shatter when his white teacher tells him that being a lawyer is "no realistic goal for a nigger" and that he should "plan on carpentry" (43). From then on, Little lives a purposeless life, entangled in drugs and criminal behavior. Soon, Little starts to see how he and his black friends are "imprisoned" in this life, in this American context: "All of us—who might have probed space, or cured cancer, or built industries—were, instead, black victims of the white man's American social system" (104). Things become so bad for Little that he says, "everything was building up, closing in on me. I was *trapped* in so many cross turns" (153, emphasis added). Figurative imprisonment becomes literal when Little is sentenced to ten years in prison.

Little's life before conversion, like that of many converts, was a life of sin, rebellion, and confinement; his soul was filled with trauma, anguish, and restlessness. Little's life through conversion becomes a life of redemption (Van Horne 78-85) and, in his particular case, a life of enlargement: "prison turn[s] out to be [his] salvation" (Frost 65). By learning and eventually accepting the NOI as his ideology, Little turns from a corrupt atheist who only bends his knees to pick a lock to rob someone to a devout believer who now bent his knees in prayer (Haley and X 196). Most importantly, he turns from being "mentally dead" (145) with no respect for himself as a black person to someone "much improved mentally" by discovering "black self-pride" with the help of the Nation (298). Eventually, Little becomes Malcolm X, changing into "another person" (196). Thus, as Malcolm X says, "I had sunk to the very bottom of the white man's society when—soon now, in prison—I found Allah and the religion of Islam [NOI] and it completely transformed my life" (174).

Reading and education were the most influential prison experiences in Malcolm X's enlargement. Reading allowed him to partake vicariously in the outside world. A "new world" (Haley and X 199) opened to Malcolm X through reading, for he says, "I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive" (206).

Ironically, though, Malcolm X's narrative suggests that the NOI is a confining ideology that requires him to have "a second redemption" (Van Horne 88). In other words, what complicates the structure of the first conversion narrative and what complicates the idea of prison and the NOI as beneficial is that Malcolm X has a second conversion that also follows the same imprisonment versus enlargement structure. Thus, what is considered as redemption and "going out" in the first conversion narrative is in fact the "imprisonment" phase of the second conversion narrative.

The Rhetorical Language and Structure of the Second Conversion Narrative

Mental imprisonment metaphors in *Autobiography* parallel Malcolm X's physical imprisonment, and signs of struggles and confusion as well as foreshadowing of crisis express the narrow-mindedness of the NOI. When his brother Reginald sends a letter saying "Malcolm, don't eat any more pork, and don't smoke any more cigarettes. I'll show you how to get out of prison" (Haley and X 180), Malcolm X's "automatic response was to think he had come upon some way I could work a *hype* on

the penal authorities” (180). His language shows he was suspicious of the NOI from the start. But Malcolm X tells us, the words “‘Get out of prison’ . . . hung in the air around me. I wanted out so badly” (180), explaining that his only motivation to accept the NOI was to get “out” of the confines of prison. Willing to try the NOI, Malcolm X listens as his brother explains its beliefs, which include the ideas that “original man was black” (187); that Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the NOI, is the messenger of Allah; and that “the white man is the devil” (184) who was created by a black scientist named Yaqub as revenge against Allah (191). Malcolm X states that “to say I was confused is an understatement” (183), especially since he remembers a white Jew who had been very good to him. “I couldn’t make of it head, or tail, or middle” (184), he says.

Nonetheless, Malcolm X accepts NOI teachings for twelve years, likely attracted by black nationalism; the NOI is “an avowedly ‘black nationalist’ organization” that “defined Islam as the religion of black American militancy” (McAlister 626-27). Whereas in his previous life Malcolm Little “was trying so hard, in every way [he] could, to be white” (Haley and X 37-8), conking his hair and “believing that the black people are ‘inferior’—and white people [are] ‘superior’” (64), the NOI leads Malcolm X to hate the white man based on race. Malcolm X says, in debating, “if there was any way in the world, I would work into my speech the devilishness of the white man” (212). Even when Malcolm X is released from prison in 1952, he is still mentally imprisoned within the Nation and thus his hateful, racist ways of thinking intensify.

Malcolm X soon starts to feel his imprisonment within the NOI, for he indirectly hints that it can only grow to a certain point and therefore cannot take him “out” completely. From the first time he visits a NOI temple, Malcolm X is “outraged” with the “empty seats” and the slow growth of the temples, saying “we should go *out* into the streets and get more Muslims into the fold” (225, emphasis added). Although the NOI enables Malcolm X to speak at colleges and universities (324) and to become a minister of a big temple (247), “going out” with the Nation restricts Malcolm X’s enlargement. For example, even though in 1959 Malcolm X and the NOI move outward by becoming popular and internationalized through the media (273), fame quickly backfires when the newspapers describe the black Muslims as “hate messengers” and “black segregationists” (274) and Malcolm X as a “demagogue” (307).

Gradually, Malcolm X questions his extremist views. Although he is initially disturbed when Middle Eastern students confront him “about the differences between the so-called ‘true’ Islam and the NOI” and tell him “that his belief in white devils [is] un-Islamic” (Curtis IV 229), he ultimately thinks about broadening “his knowledge of religion” (Haley and X 366). When Malcolm X comes across some white people that he sees as “honest and sincere” (346) and “even worthy of respect and affection” (Frost 65), he begins to question “the feasibility of an all-black nation within a white Nation” and starts to sense that “physical separation [is] unrealistic” for black and white Americans (Houck 288). Malcolm X does not question his suspicions because they are “questions that [can] not be answered by the rigid racism of the Nation of Islam” (Frost 65). Even when Malcolm X feels spiritually separated from Elijah Muhammad, he still cannot realize this separation: “I could not yet let myself psychologically face what I knew: that already the Nation of Islam and I were psychologically divorced” (Haley and X 351).

When Elijah Muhammad’s infidelity with NOI secretaries is exposed, “the psychic trauma and

spiritual disorientation of [that] experience forces Malcolm X to reexamine his religious faith, and it is out of this that El-Shabazz is born” (Van Horne 88). Malcolm X decides “to make the pilgrimage to Mecca” (Haley and X 365) to learn about “true Islam” (400). He finally decides to go “out” mentally and physically.

With Malcolm X’s trip, enlargement and redemption, the second phase of Malcolm X’s second conversion, begins. From the moment he lands on foreign soil, everything Malcolm X experiences is pleasant and eye-opening. He was “struck by the cordial hospitality of the people in Frankfurt” (Haley and X 369): “They were of all complexions, the whole atmosphere was of warmth and friendliness. The feeling hit me that there really wasn’t any color problem here. The effect was as though *I had just stepped out of prison*” (369-70, emphasis added).

While at the airport, Malcolm X tries to follow his guide in the proper orthodox prayer rituals. However, this time, even though he *physically* struggles while praying, Malcolm X is not ashamed and relentlessly tries to perform the prayer. Gone is the confusion Malcolm X felt with the NOI, and not just in the prayer rituals: “although I am excited, I feel safe and secure, thousands of miles from the totally different life that I have known” (Haley and X 384).

In that very different life that Malcolm X led in America, the Islam that he knew was restricted to black people only. However, he sees on his trip an equality and unity that erase all the racial problems he had come to believe were inevitable. On the way to Jedda, “packed in the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair—all together, brothers! All honoring the same God Allah, all in turn giving equal honor to each other” (372). Malcolm X begins to change his hateful racial thinking, and he becomes increasingly aware of the race and color problems of the American context. In a letter to his loved ones, Malcolm X explains that “the *color-blindness* of the Muslim world’s religious society and . . . human society . . . had each day been making a greater impact, and an increasing persuasion against my previous way of thinking” (389, emphasis in original). In Africa, after Malcolm X has a conversation about America’s racial problems with a white ambassador, both men come to the conclusion that “it isn’t the American white *man* who is a racist, but it’s the American . . . *atmosphere* that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man” (427, emphasis in original).

Malcolm X’s transformation culminates in Mecca when he finally says, “there is no God but Allah, He has no partner” (388), which is the basic belief that is required for conversion to Orthodox Islam. Although the former Malcolm X couldn’t even shake hands with a white reporter in his NOI days, the new El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, “a true [Orthodox] Muslim” (385), enjoys talking, eating, and drinking with white men (391). El-Shabazz, “the universal Muslim” (Van Horne 89), believes “that the blanket indictment of the entire white race with the charge of criminality is morally wrong. While Malcolm X’s fight was against the white man, El-Shabazz’s fight ‘is against the white *racists*’” (92-93, emphasis in original). These changes shock El-Shabazz, but he realizes that “[his] whole life had been a chronology of—*changes*” (Haley and X 390, emphasis in original). He also knows that the American public, enemies and loved ones alike, “would be astounded . . . and no less astounded would be millions whom I did not know—who gained during my twelve years with Elijah Muhammad a ‘hate’ image of Malcolm X” (390).

Why El-Shabazz's Changes Were Not Accepted

When El-Shabazz's journey ends and he returns to U.S., he realizes that he will return to a place where racism will prevent the majority of the public from acknowledging his new beliefs regarding equality. Back in the U.S., El-Shabazz creates his own organization "to help create a society in which there could exist honest white-black brotherhood," but he has difficulty organizing his group and conveying his ideas (Haley and X 431). Some black people do not accept El-Shabazz's beliefs because they have been "soaked" for good in America's oppression and brainwashed to believe themselves inferior (419). Mainstream black leaders don't accept El-Shabazz because he "simply propagated the 'white devil' doctrine for too long to gain a foothold of legitimacy among [them]" (Houck 289). Also, according to Alex Haley and X, "the American white man's press refused to convey that [Malcolm X] was now attempting to teach Negroes a new direction," for the focus was on the misconception that he was teaching violence (421). Whenever El-Shabazz encourages oppressed African Americans to defend themselves against white *racists*, and whenever he speaks of justice in general, he is "accused of 'stirring up Negroes' . . . or 'inciting violence'" (421). Thus, as hard as he tries to reshape his image, El-Shabazz is largely unsuccessful.

Ultimately, as El-Shabazz's daughter Attallah Shabazz puts it, "in time my father's growth and independence [from the NOI] would be his undoing" (xvi). Many historians believe that El-Shabazz's murder was ordered by Elijah Muhammad, who felt threatened by El-Shabazz's new efforts (Handler xiv). El-Shabazz was murdered before he could convince people he had changed.

In his autobiography, El-Shabazz charges that "the Muslims of the East" who were "infuriated" by Elijah Muhammad's fake Islamic tales "themselves hadn't done enough to make real Islam known in the west" (Haley and X 194). "Their silence," he says, "left a vacuum into which any religious faker could step and mislead" the people (194). Similarly, most modern day Muslims and other El-Shabazz supporters have not done enough to clear his name or to make the real El-Shabazz known in the west, *their* silence in turn allowing the hateful image of the leader to continue. If El-Shabazz were alive today, he would probably say that it was up to those Muslims and supporters to clear his name and image. Thus, as a "Muslim of the East" who finds herself just as infuriated as her brothers and sisters about the misconceptions plaguing Orthodox Islam and the image of El-Shabazz, I have decided to do my part in breaking the silence, lifting the veil of ignorance and revealing the truth about El-Shabazz. Since it is clear that the hateful Malcolm X changed tremendously, the focus thus should not be on Malcolm X, but on El-Shabazz, the man who fought for brotherhood and unity. We also must never forget El-Shabazz's legacy and his challenge to humanity when he says, "Let us learn to live together in justice and love" (qtd. in Shabazz xviii), nor should we fail to strive for his hope that "one day we may all meet together in the light of understanding" (xxiv). As Attallah Shabazz suggests, although some people have said that her father "was ahead of his time" in regards to his brotherhood, unity, and justice ideas, the truth of the matter is that "he was on time and perhaps we were late" (xxiv).

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