Review

The Radical Gone Respectable: American Dreams and Puritan Influences in the Autobiography of Malcolm X

Bennett Kravitz
Senior Lecturer, University of Haifa, Department of English Language and Literature
*Corresponding Email Address: bkravitz@univ.haifa.ac.il; Tel +973 544897813

Abstract

Although Malcolm X in his autobiography does his utmost to present his story outside the range of American experiences, this paper has taken the opposite track. That is, the paper has explored the ways in which Malcolm X’s story is quintessentially American. Specifically, we have found and traced the Puritan influences and American dreams that form the foundation of his self-narrative.

Keywords: Black Muslims, Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, Allah, Negroes, Racism, White Devils.

Although Malcolm X often noted in his speeches to African American audiences that “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock,” but rather that “Plymouth Rock landed on us” (The Autobiography of Malcolm X 205), Malcolm X’s belief system has much more in common with American Dreams and Puritan origins than might seem possible.

The Back to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey was particularly attractive to Malcolm’s father and wasn’t far removed from Malcolm’s own initially segregationist perspective. (Tyner and Kruse 2004, argue that “The theoretical contribution of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) to the later geopolitical discourses of Malcolm cannot be understated” (“The Geopolitics of Malcolm X, 29). Earl Little, Malcolm’s father, was an organizer for the UNIA, Garvey’s association). Malcolm X believed that it was perfectly natural and highly desirable for all concerned to live only among their own people. Although applied for very different purposes, this was the very same ideology of the mainstream Puritan settlers, who felt they could only live among their own kind. So from the very beginning Puritan Americans sought an isolationist position, one that could be regenerated through violence.

Both the Puritans’ and Elijah Muhammad’s religious movement relied, although hardly original in this respect, on the use of the devil as a central tenet of their faiths. The Americans employed the devil as a test of faith for the devout, which in their case took the shape of the Native American. The latter was merely a devil who was to serve as the scourge of the white man, as is made clear in many of the sources. One need go no farther than Rowlandson’s 1682, “Narrative of Captivity” to understand the role the Indian played in regenerating her faith. That is, once she was captured and forced to flee from place to place with her captors, she relied on the idea that god was merely testing her faith and that she could survive and return home to her community if she behaved devoutly and in accordance with god’s will. (Concluding her narrative, Rowlandson thanks god for her tribulations among the Indians: “And I hope I can say in some measure, as David did, ‘it is good for me that I have been afflicted.’ The lord has shown me the vanity of these outward things” (“Narrative of Captivity” 34). The horrific “savages” that held her in captivity are creatures of the devil created only to test the faith of the righteous and punish the wicked).

Malcolm X was initially a separatist (As the interpreter of Elijah Muhammad’s often obscure rhetoric, Malcolm “warns of the need to separate from the doomed white race, for ‘this American House of Bondage is number one on God’s list for divine destruction today.’ Elijah Muhammad…warns us to remember Noah never taught integration, he taught separation; Moses never taught integration, he taught separation” (“Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X” 6).) and, along with the Black Muslim faith, accepted the idea that the white man was merely a devil created by the mad scientist, Dr Yacub. It is true that the insane doctor didn’t create the white man to test the black man’s faith, but over time the Black
Muslims related to that creation event as if its overriding purpose were to allow African Americans to find redemption. Since the white devil was created by genetic manipulation of black people, in some ways the white devil that black people faced came about as the result of inbred evil. Thus the devil, albeit with an external manifestation, is something that comes from within. Only by acknowledging that the white man was a devil created to test the courage and convictions of black people could the latter hope to achieve their rightful place in the world and before Allah. It makes as much sense to visualize the redemptive power of the evil other in the Puritan mind as it does to see that same power to redeem in the Black Muslim determination that all white men are devils and that black men must recognize this and maintain their faith in order to be redeemed. In this light, integration, or the acceptance of the other, is heresy. So the Puritans and Malcolm X both believed in the oppositional role of a devil designed to test the believer’s true faith. (Maria Soldana-Portillo argues that in Malcolm’s view, “White America is the territory of the devil,” as Malcolm, because of the KKK’s burning of his parents’ house, “has been baptized by fire into the savage landscape of white Christianity and into his messianic destiny” (“Prophesy and Performative Masculinity” 291).

The more idea systems are similar yet present with oppositional objectives the more they must engage in conflict. Thus, Malcolm X is “devoutly” anti-Christian. Despite feeling comfortable with their members, he is particularly dismissive of his first adoptive family, the Gohannases.

It was better, in a lot of ways, at the Gohannases. ‘Big Boy and I shared his room together, and we hit it off nicely...The Gohannases were very religious people. Big Boy and I attended church with them. They were sanctified Holy Rollers now. The preachers and congregations jumped even higher and shouted even louder than the Baptists I had known. They sang at the top of their lungs, and swayed back and forth and cried and moaned and beat on tambourines and chanted. It was spooky, with ghosts and spirituals and ‘ha’nts’ seeming to be in the very atmosphere when finally we all came out of the church, going back home. (Autobiography 20).

Malcolm ridicules what he witnessed and takes to task a number of different groups. First, he describes the church goers as absurd, because of their frenetic movements in the service of religious belief. Second, he indirectly dismisses his own previous church-going experiences by pointing out that his current congregation is even more enthusiastic than the Baptists to whom he is accustomed. Finally, by invoking the terms spooky and ha’ant he reduces Christian religious belief to an enslaving mechanism, for whites and blacks. The “ha’ant” was a central theme of slavery used to increase the slaves’ dependence upon and fear of their masters. The masters, by suggesting that they had supernatural powers were better able to control their slaves. While it was, on occasion, the slaves who claimed to have such powers, they were most often oppressed rather than liberated by the use of ghosts and other supernatural artifacts, (See, for example, Gorn’s, 1984 “The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves.” Gorn 1984, opens his article with the oft-quoted former slave Tom Windham recalling, “I’ve seen him since he been dead too. I got a gun old Father Abraham give me right out of his own hand at Vicksberg...Yes ma’m, I know they is spirits” (549). See also Bennett Kravitz, “Reinventing the World and Reinventing the Self in Huck Finn,” (Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations). Fry 1975, in Night Riders in Black Folk History, discusses the connection between ghost lore and oppression. Chireau 1997 argues for a fluidity between African American church behavior and African American occultism, resulting in powerful practitioners of “Black” magic. Moreover, she notes the intrinsic relationship between conjure and Christianity (Conjure and Christianity 226). Rucker 2001, discusses the powers of conjurers who were behind slave resistance movements (Conjure, Magic and Power 84-100). It follows, then, that black people who continue to seek solace in Christianity are still enslaved. Indeed, Malcolm finds it easy to critique religion that relies on magical powers, never realizing in his retrospective analysis that Islam inherited many of the same superstitions and views that were part of Christianity and Judaism. Merely by the acceptance of Moses and Jesus, Islam incorporates their mystical aspects. And Malcolm’s Black Muslim faith relies on ideas no less extraordinary than anything to be found in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. The fantastic creation of white men as devils by an evil scientist should suffice as a prime example. Malcolm’s belief system has far more in common with the ideology of the Christian founders than he would care to acknowledge.

Many of Malcolm’s perceptions are simple reversals of white’s prejudicial views of blacks, which might help explain why, in his view, white men smelled different (27). Since whites are viewed as different and inherently racist, integration is both impossible and foolish. He recalls living with a white family that openly discusses “niggers,” the family members behaving as if Malcolm couldn’t understand to whom they were referring or that he might find such language offensive. It never occurs to them that they are using derogatory speech that Malcolm would find objectionable. For this reason, among many others, Malcolm believes that people should stick to their own kind, just as America’s first settlers believed. In regard to “integration-hungry Negroes, and their supposedly “liberal white friends,” he declares: “I don’t care how nice one (white person) is to you; the thing you must always remember is almost
never does he really see you as he sees himself, as he sees his own kind. He may stand with you through thin, but not thick; when the chips are down, you'll find that as fixed in him as his bone structure is his sometimes subconscious conviction that he's better than anybody black" (28).

Closely related to staying within one's own kind is also the separation that Malcolm envisions for men and women. Indeed, he relates to women as inferior, both when he was a street punk and a Black Muslim minister. While he was learning the ropes as a hustler, he found the insights of "Sammy the Pimp" to be highly relevant to understanding the psyches of women. Sammy had an "infallible clue for determining the 'unconscious, true personality' of women. Considering all the women he had picked out of crowds and turned into prostitutes, Sammy qualified as an expert...he swore that if a woman, any woman, gets really carried away while dancing, what she truly is – at least potentially – will surface and show on her face" (67). (How far away are these speculations about women who dance freely from the Puritan edict as expressed by Mather 1684, against "profane and promiscuous dancing?" While men dancing with men and women with women were tolerated by the Puritans, "Gynecandrical (mixed) Dancing" was not: "Now we affirm this to be utterly unlawful, and that it cannot be toll-rated in such a place as New-England, without great Sin" ("Arrow Against Profane & Promiscuous Dancing" 1). Malcolm goes on to theorize that had he been equipped with Sammy's psychological skills he might have been able to predict the tragic outcome of Laura: his first, initially respectable, black girlfriend. Not only does she become an alcoholic, drug addict, and prostitute, but she falls into what Malcolm implies is the ultimate evil: lesbianism (72). He blames himself for her demise, having abandoned her for a white woman. To say that he has given himself too much credit for Laura's downfall is an understatement. From his perspective, women seem to be completely subsumed by the actions of men, as if the former had lost or never had had free will. Moreover, to imagine that women reveal their inner licentiousness while dancing reduces them to immoral beasts. In this light, then, they are clearly inferior creatures.

Malcolm had other demeaning speculations about women that subjugate their intellectual abilities and societal roles. Thus even in retrospect, he cannot suppress the admiration he has for Sammy the Pimp, a man who uses and abuses women, whose women kept him in style (101). Indeed, the women to whom he gives the most credit for comprehending men are prostitutes. They have an understanding of the male psyche that ordinary women seem to lack. While living in a rooming house in Harlem he got to know these women well:

It was in this house that I learned more about women than I ever did in any other single place. It was these working prostitutes who schooled me to things that every wife and every husband should know. Later on, it was chiefly the women who weren't prostitutes who taught me to be very distrustful of most women; there seemed to be a higher code of sisterliness among those prostitutes than among numerous ladies of the church who have more men for kicks than the prostitutes have for pay. (94)

Before Malcolm reveals the valued knowledge he has received from prostitutes, he distances them from self-proclaimed righteous women who are supposedly more morally lacking than any prostitute. Not only does he elevate the romantic stereotype of the wise prostitute with the big heart, but he also brands an entire class of "respectable" women as unreliable. In this passage he reveals his fundamental distrust and perhaps dislike of all women who do not immediately label themselves as outside the moral code. His portrayal of these women is demeaning to both groups, women of society and women of the streets. Nevertheless, he credits the prostitutes for understanding the psychology of men.

The prostitutes had to make it their business to be students of men. They said that after most men passed their virile twenties, they went to bed mainly to satisfy their egos, and because a lot of women don't understand that way, they damage and wreck a man's ego. No matter how little virility a man has to offer, prostitutes make him feel for a time that he is the greatest man in the world. That's why these prostitutes had that morning rush of business. More wives could keep their husbands if they realized their greatest urge is to be men. (95)

Women's inability to understand men causes them to wreck men's egos. It seems that the solution to marital problems is for women to behave like prostitutes and massage their husband's egos, which is apparently the key to marital bliss. Thus, all would be well with married couples if the man's ego were sufficiently stroked. To view the world from this perspective is to reduce women to the role of ego caretakers in a man's world. The Puritans, the Nation of Islam, and conventional Islam have all – to various degrees – contributed to the subjugation of women in a man's world.

Once Malcolm becomes a Muslim, he reformulates his position on women, but the net result is to maintain a difference between the sexes. Women were to be protected and respected by men, but the sexes were certainly not equal. "Now, Islam has very strict laws and teachings about women, the core of them being that the true nature of a man is to be strong, and a woman's true nature is to be weak, and while a man must at all times respect his woman, at the same time he needs to understand that he must control her if he expects to get her respect" (230). Malcolm is indeed cold and controlling when it comes to women, not only in theory but in practice as well. Even when he decides to marry Sister Betty X, he is particularly concerned about her
height, appreciative that she is tall enough to marry a tall man like himself. To marry a short woman would, according to Elijah Muhammad and apparently accepted by Malcolm, “look odd” (233) (What was eventually to “look odd” to Malcolm was Elijah Muhammad’s sexual abuse of some of his secretaries and other women close to him. Indeed, he fathered eight children outside wedlock with teenage girls. In an ironic turn of events, twenty-eight years after Malcolm’s death, Louis Farrakhan would elevate those former secretaries “to the status of polygamous wives” (Taylor 1998, 178). And his proposal of marriage came about before he had exchanged one personal word with her (235). The best he can do, in retrospect, after having four children with her, is to own up to a grudging affection and respect: “I guess by now I will say I love Betty. She’s the only woman I ever even thought about loving. And she’s one of the very few — four women — whom I have ever trusted” (237).

Perhaps the most intricate connection to American Dreams and the Puritan work ethic is the ways in which Malcolm and his fellow hustlers relate to work. When Malcolm is searching for employment just out of school, he is tutored by “Shorty” on the best way to find a “slave” (46). A slave denotes any kind of work, which seemingly suggests an anathema to labor, but such is not the case. Malcolm works exceedingly hard at everything he does, even when it involves illegal activities. The energy he expends on and the dedication he shows to his various scams is clearly in line with the Puritan work ethic, as delineated by Franklin 1784 in his guise of poor Richard. (Saldana-Portillo 1997, believes that Malcolm “borrows precisely from this naturalized trope of American subjectivity in his construction of oppositional black subjectivity” (“Prophecy and Performative Masculinity” 290). In effect, he turns a white American’s story into a black American’s narrative. See “Poor Richard’s Almanac” for the ways in which Malcolm is influenced by the core of American values). Thus, Malcolm sells reebers as if he were an entrepreneur, just as he turned his shoe shine business into an entrepreneurial venture (106). He followed the old American adage, to rise from rags to riches. Perhaps his most inventive entrepreneurial hustle is the one he first undertook himself and then arranged for his brother, Reginald to continue:

The hustle I got Reginald into was really very simple. It utilized the psychology of the ghetto jungle. Downtown, he paid two dollars, or whatever it was, for a regular city peddler’s license. Then I took him to a manufacturers’ outlet, where we bought a supply of cheap, imperfect ‘seconds’—shirts, underwear, cheap rings, all kinds of quick-sale items.

Watching me work this hustle back in Harlem, Reginald quickly caught on to how to go into barber shops, beauty parlors and bars, acting very nervous as he let the customers peek into his small valise of ‘loot.’ With so many thieves anxious to get rid of stolen good-quality merchandise cheaply, many Harlemites, purely because of this conditioning, jumped to pay hot prices for inferior goods whose sale was perfectly legitimate. It never took long to get rid of a valiseful for at least twice what it had cost. And if any cop stopped Reginald, he had in his pocket both the peddler’s license and the manufacturers’ outlet bills of sale. Reginald only had to be certain that none of his customers ever saw that he was legitimate. (115).

This passage is both loaded with American mythologies and their deconstruction. Perhaps the most ironic idea is that Reginald’s customers could not be allowed to discover that he was “legitimate.” At the surface level we understand that the problem with legitimacy is Reginald’s inflated prices. Yet the more important issue is legitimacy itself. When Malcolm refers to utilizing the “psychology of the ghetto,” he suggests that Harlemites were used to thieves, selling off illegal merchandise at cut-rate prices. But it is also the very idea of legitimacy that is undermined. Just as the “slave” must either be illegitimate or lacking a moral foundation, so too must the process of purchasing be outside the strict confines of the law. Illegal merchandise, or at least merchandise assumed to be illegal, has more of an appeal because it is outside the boundaries of the white man’s economy. A specific black commodity is provided by a black hustler. Despite the marginality of this economic activity it is very much in line with mainstream American thinking. Malcolm and his brother seek social mobility through hard work, yet the latter cannot coincide with the opportunities afforded to whites. Though this is mostly true because of a segregated, biased society, there is also the appeal of an independent black economy, removed from the restrictions of the dominating ideology and its class system. Ideology, as Althusser 1971, reminds us, is defined as the way we imagine the relationships we maintain with others in the world, as well as the way we believe we fit into society. (Althusser 1971, argues in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that ideology is a system of beliefs and assumptions which are unconscious, invincible and "represent the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of their existence" (http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm). Malcolm and his brother are able to follow and upend the American myth of mobility simultaneously. To work hard at a scam is perfectly acceptable behavior. Yet as Malcolm made clear early on in his biography, he has no patience for those “integration mad negroes,” as were those he encountered in the "ritzy neighborhoods such as Roxbury in Boston, who feel entitled to declare themselves "in banking", or in securities," for example, when they are nothing more than glorified messenger
boys or janitors (42). What is worse is that these self-proclaimed upper class Negroes looked down upon those blacks that came from the south and were deemed unsophisticated. This is the type of “legitimacy” Malcolm has no stomach for; he would much prefer, as long as he is on the margins of society, to live the economic life of an outsider. And even when Malcolm finds himself engaged in a “slave” that serves the white world, the essential aspect of the work is to perpetrate a scam on his white clientele. Thus, as a sandwich and coffee man in the aisles of the Yankee Clipper between Boston and New York, he manipulates his customers on the train as much as he manipulated his black customers in the ghetto.

I sold sandwiches, coffee, candy, cake, and ice cream as fast as the railroad’s commissary department could supply them. It didn’t take me a week to learn that all you had to do was give white people a show and they’d buy anything you offered them. It was like popping your shoeshine rag. The dining car waiters and Pullman porters knew it too, and they faked their Uncle Tomming to get bigger tips. We were in that world of Negroes who are both servants and psychologists, aware that white people are so obsessed with their own importance that they will pay liberally, even dearly, for the impression of being catered to and entertained. (78)

Malcolm as entrepreneurial psychologist and modern interpreter of WEB Dubois’s “double consciousness” (The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (The Souls of Black Folk http://www.bartleby.com/114/1.html) understands the mechanisms that motivate consumer spending among both blacks and whites. What is striking is that he can only follow the Puritan work ethic if he feels he is manipulative, somehow outside the frame of normative economic behavior. At that point in his life he might have been surprised to learn the extent to which every business activity has its elements of so-called scam and that he was subscribing to American Dreams, albeit with his own original and marginal economic twist.

When he joins the Nation of Islam Malcolm will continue to project American Dreams, crediting Allah with Franklin’s 1784 adage the latter presented via his Poor Richard persona. Pursuing new recruits for Elijah Muhammad and his movement, Malcolm decides on an active approach, to seek converts in the street, believing that “Allah would be more inclined to help those that helped themselves” (200).

Another way that Malcolm’s Nation of Islam perspective coincides with early American vision is his disgust for the vanity of appearance. He seems to object to vanity both because of his religious convictions and also because black vanity, as is the case with conking the hair, is often connected to a visual makeover in white. Discussing an issue closely related to appearance, Malcolm is outspoken about the degrading credit scam that encouraged blacks to buy things that they couldn’t afford. When he naively informs Shorty that he is saving up to buy his first zoot suit, the latter responds incredulously: “‘Homeboy, you never heard of credit?’” (54). Malcolm goes into debt to project what he retrospectively realizes is an absurd and degrading persona: he posed the way “hipsters” would, in a zoot suit with “hat dangled, knees drawn close together, feet wide apart, both index fingers jabbed toward the floor. The long coat and swinging chain and the Punjab pants were much more dramatic if you stood that way” (54). To add to that outrageous appearance, Malcolm needed to undergo his first “conk,” which would straighten his hair and exemplify the white man’s vision of beauty. The process, often quoted and quite horrendous is, in Malcolm’s view, the essence of self-degradation and mutilation:

I took the little list of ingredients he had printed out for me, and went to a grocery store, where I got a can of Red Devil lye, two eggs, and two medium sized white potatoes. Then at a drug store near the poolroom, I asked for a large jar of Vaseline, a large bar of soap, a large-toothed comb and a fine-toothed comb, one of those rubber hoses with a metal spray-head, a rubber apron and a pair of gloves...the congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire.

I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off...The mirror reflected Shorty behind me. We both were grinned and sweating. And on top of my head was this thick, smooth sheen of shining red hair – real red – as straight as any white man’s.

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there in admiration of my hair now looking ‘white,’ reflected in the mirror in Shorty’s room. I vowed that I’d never again be without a conk, and I never was for many years.

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the
black people ‘inferior’ – and white people ‘superior’ – that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards. (56-57)

Malcolm makes good use of the Foucaultian idea that society brands the individual and the body to impose social values. (Finally, there is a fourth characteristic of power - a power that, in a sense, traverses and drives those other powers. I'm thinking of an epistemological power-that is, a power to extract a knowledge from individuals and to extract a knowledge about those individuals -who are subjected to observation and already controlled by those different powers. This occurs, then, in two different ways. In an institution like the factory, for example, the worker's labor and the worker's knowledge about his own labor, the technical improvements - the little inventions and discoveries, the micro adaptations he's able to implement in the course of his labor - are immediately recorded, thus extracted from his practice, accumulated by the power exercised over him through supervision. In this way, the worker's labor is gradually absorbed into a certain technical knowledge of production which will enable a strengthening of control. So we see how there forms a knowledge that's extracted from the individuals themselves and derived from their own behavior" (Foucault 2000 “Truth and Juridical Forms” 83-4).

See also, De Certeau 1984, The Practice of Everyday Life (148). As long as Negroes are busy imitating whites and viewing them as “superior,” there is little opportunity for black pride and black power to develop. In terms of American beliefs, however, Malcolm is also decrying the vanity of a false sense of beauty that prevents one from reaching self-enlightenment. In that sense his values and that of the Puritans coincide.

When Malcolm discusses his conversion to Islam, he tells a typical Christian tale of being on the bottom but rising to the top. It's also an American myth: in Malcolm's case, to rise from spiritual rags to riches. For Malcolm, redemption can only come after he experiences the utmost despair in prison (153). Indeed, the reason he writes this autobiography (as told to Haley 1964), is not to “titillate” his readers, but to explain the person he eventually became. “The full story is the best way that I know to have it seen, and understood, that 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 and it completely transformed my life" (153).

Not only did he find the Nation of Islam, but he also began to develop a vision of black history in North America as the Puritans did their own: as an errand into the wilderness, or, as Elijah Muhammad delivered the message W.D. Fard had received from Allah: black people were “the Lost-Found Nation of Islam here in this wilderness of North America” (164). Aside from taking on the “wilderness” ideology from American founders, the Nation also indirectly borrows the oft-used idea of a chosen people (249). The Nation's founders have been chosen to lead the black people out of their metaphorical, if not physical wilderness in the United States.

Another way that Malcolm participates in American Dreams is the way he reinvents himself in prison. He begins to bend his will to Allah, learning to accept a higher authority. “For the next years, I was the nearest thing to a hermit in the Norfolk Prison Colony. I never have been more busy (sic) in my life. I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life’s thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person” (173). No less a self-made man than Franklin 1784 or Andrew Carnegie, Malcolm gives himself the education in prison he had never been able to obtain in normative society. In a remarkable investment in self-fashioning, Malcolm begins with the basics, teaching himself words from a dictionary and then practicing his penmanship:

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn’t know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page; down to the punctuation marks.

I believe it took me a day...I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words – immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. (175)

Malcolm’s intensity and dedication leads him eventually to copy out the entire dictionary and learn thousands of new words. From a near-dysfunctional illiterate, Malcolm transforms himself into one of the most eloquent speakers America has ever known, thereby living the American Dream of reinvention. And once he re-fashions himself as a leader of African Americans, he relates to the notion of time in a manner that Franklin 1784 would no doubt approve of: “You won't find anyone more time-conscious than I am. I live by my watch, keeping appointments. Even when I’m using my car, I drive by my watch, not by my speedometer. Time is more important to me than distance” (196). (Carol Ohmann views Malcolm’s autobiography in many ways to be “a traditionally American work...Both Franklin 1784 and Malcolm X testify to certain strengths and certain weaknesses in our national ethos, strengths and weaknesses that have characterized us very nearly from, if not from, the beginning” (“The Autobiography of Macolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition”132).

Much as it was for Puritans, the behavior of the Nation of Islam that Malcolm demands for his followers
includes both private and public morality. Alcohol is forbidden, no smoking is allowed, and public morality is a supreme value. It is not enough to be privately virtuous; as it was for the Puritans; public virtue is a prerequisite for the faithful. (Ohmann 1970 also discusses the role of “moral perfectibility in the Black Muslim rhetoric, which, Puritan-like in its ideal, could have come from Franklin’s famous list of virtues: “cleanliness, temperance, chastity, frugality, industry, resolution. Moral discipline was to bring its rewards in no distant heaven but here, now” ("The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition” 138). When he discusses how people must behave to join the Muslim fold, Malcolm notes that “We were not nearly as easy to enter as a Christian church. One did not merely declare himself a follower of Mr. Muhammad, and then continue leading the same old, sinful, immoral life. The Muslim had to change his physical and moral self to meet our strict rules. To remain a Muslim he had to maintain those rules” (263). Moreover, in reinventing Black Americans, Malcolm relies on the old Puritan work ethic. He preaches that as it is for white Americans, the business of black America is business. Rather than operate on the margins of society, black businesses must take their rightful place in mainstream economic activity.

The American black man should be focusing his every effort toward building his own businesses, and decent homes for himself. As other ethnic groups have done, let the black people, wherever possible, however possible, patronize their own kind, hire their own kind, and start in those ways to build up the black race’s ability to do for itself. That’s the only way the American black man is ever going to get respect. One thing the white man never can give the black man is self-respect! The black man never can become independent and recognized as a human being who is truly equal with other human beings until he has what they have, and until he is doing for himself what others are doing for themselves. (281)

Malcolm envisions the road of black self-respect through the prism of economic strength, relying on self-owned businesses. His way to wealth, aside from economically sticking to one’s own kind, has its origins in much older American thinking.

Malcolm X devoted his life to the betterment of his race and, eventually to the improvement of his country. When he delivered one of his Black Jeremiads, he was warning America, as Jonathan Edwards and many others did before him, that “as you sow, so shall you reap. (“While a minister in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm crafted from the rambling revelations of Elijah Muhammad a hermetically sealed prophetic rhetoric – it called upon its audience to realign their values and behaviors with a foundational set of truths presented in and through that very discourse” (“Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X” 40). Such was his reaction to the Kennedy assassination in 1963. Certainly not Malcolm's most politically thought out response, he was making the point that hatred and violence toward one race eventually lead to hatred and violence toward all.

To combat that hatred and violence, Malcolm X reinvented himself yet again and started his own organization that would include blacks of all faiths. While donations from whites were welcome, membership was restricted to blacks. Nevertheless, Malcolm came to understand through his faith that white people could be decent and that whiteness was more a problem of actions and attitude than of color (340). For the rest of his brief life, he would foster a belief system founded on peace and justice rather than on violence and hatred. In terms of his American influences, despite his oft-expressed disdain for Christianity, Malcolm undergoes a rebirth at the end of his life and sees the possibility of saving America from its “racist cancer” as a dedicated servant of Allah.

What is fascinating in regard to Malcolm’s behavior and intellectual development is the extent to which he relies on American ideologies and dreams to fulfill his goals. No one can totally remove himself from his cultural origins, yet Malcolm X finds a way to invigorate those beliefs and make them relevant for his new-found faith and lifetime goals. Malcolm concludes his autobiography by noting that all of the credit for his life’s work is “due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine” (389). Yet I think it is important to acknowledge the role played by his American heritage in formulating Malcolm X’s unique ideological perspective and activist position in the world.

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