Rhetoric of Retention: Malcolm X’s “A Message to the Grassroots”

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ABSTRACT

This independent study will investigate how black leaders such as Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka use African American rhetorical features, including distinct racial appeals, ideology critique, and identifiable black urban charisma. I will examine how the narratives that they transmit contribute to the valuing of cultural retention. My research will ask how and to what end these two figures utilized rhetorical styles and ideological content in order to promote a diasporic consciousness that would position distinct points of reference such as West African cultural and intellectual traditions that remain prevalent in the culture and intellectual traditions of African Americans presently. Overall, this project will provide a clearer understanding about how dynamic and charismatic African American speakers have used rhetorical strategies to enable various cultural retentions among African Americans. Readings will include poetry, speeches, history, literary criticism, gender studies, and rhetorical studies.

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With Malcolm X’s “A Message to the Grassroots,” Alexander Sterling mobilizes rhetorical criticism and the scholarship on West African retentions to analyze the reverberations of West African communalism in one of Malcolm X’s well known speeches. Emphasizing that African American social movements often resist Western frameworks of knowledge and politics, Sterling’s analysis offers a lucid analysis of Malcolm X’s radicalism that places the speech in vital conversation with scholarship by Cedric Robinson, Vorris Nunley, and other important theorists of black rhetorics and politics. This is an excellent example of undergraduate research.

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Alexander Sterling is a fourth year English major. Alexander furthered his passion for African American Literature and Rhetoric with the assistance of Professor Erica Edwards during an independent study experience. He investigated the use of African American rhetorical features including distinct racial appeals, dominate white ideology critique, and identifiable black urban charisma. Alexander received the Ross Scholarship and is a member of the Golden Key International Honour Society. His long and unconventional life journey will continue this Fall in the UCR’s PhD program in English. Alexander thanks Professors Erica Edwards and Vorris Nunley for their help and invaluable research in the field, and Dr. Audrey Howard for her endless encouragement and support.
In his 1963 speech, “A Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm X utilizes ideological content and rhetorical strategies to promote a diasporic consciousness that would position distinct points of reference, such as West African cultural retentions—Africanisms—that remain current in the culture and intellectual traditions of African Americans. (This writer suggests that moving beyond the simple anthropological observation of linguistics to include the broader considerations of rhetoric and ontology would inform the discussion of retention.)

This analysis of Malcolm X’s “Message to the Grassroots” is based on the assumptions of neo-Aristotelian methodology. This methodology includes historical context and considers the occasion and issues to which the speech was responding; the connection and receptivity of the original audience to the propositions addressed by the rhetor; and the motivational, logical, and ethical appeals—as defined and or discussed by Cicero and Nunley—made in an attempt to shape content and craft arguments to facilitate idea adaptation and social action.

This paper provides evidence that “Message to the Grassroots” emphasizes the West African cultural retention of privileging the community over the individual—a retention considered by Malcolm X as necessary to give voice to the grassroots long silenced by Western ideologies. In addition, though not specifically articulated, the speech supports black ontology shaped by a West African worldview. Regardless of the intent, this speech also invites an exploration of black ontology—black existence and identity formation and what it means to be black—through the lens of the black radicalism that profoundly influenced it.

Robinson discusses the divergent concept of being, using narratives related to slave revolts in America to address the issue of the scarcity of African and African American slaves’ violence against their white colonial oppressors. He posits that there was violence, but that its motivation and manifestation served to subvert dominant expectations: “This violence was not inspired by an external object; it was not understood as a part of an attack on a system, or an engagement with an abstraction of oppressive structures and relations” (160). Actual being was renounced for historical being in order to preserve the “ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses. . . . Defeat or victory was an internal affair” (161).

Robinson’s conclusion lays the foundation on which this paper’s arguments for retention are constructed. No attempt is made to venerate or elevate Malcolm X as a person. The focus is on the cultural retention he espouses through the use of selected rhetorical devices.

In “Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm X reinforces a view of the formidable power of community, beginning with his depiction of the masses. In contrast to the Western notion of the individual, the following quote elevates the African cultural retention of collectivity:

[T]he grass roots out there in the street . . . scared the white man to death, scared the white power structure in Washington, D. C. to death. . . . When they found out that this black steamroller was going to come down on the capital, they called in . . . these national Negro leaders that you respect and told them, “Call it off.” And Old Tom said, “Boss, I can’t stop it, because I didn’t start it” (Breitman 14-15).

Discussion of “Message to the Grassroots” in context requires a brief overview of black resistance history. Marable and Robinson are informative in this regard. Robinson introduces a late nineteenth century manifestation of two competing ideals concerning revolution that later becomes evident in Malcolm X’s “Message to the Grassroots.” He writes that cooperation and community were prominent features of black existence—an understandable response to blacks’ collective suffering under white oppression. He also provides evidence not only of black Americans’ resistance, but also of their retentions of certain Africanisms, including community:

By the second half of the nineteenth century, two alternative Black political cultures had arisen, each nurtured by a particular Black experience. . . . Free Blacks gravitated toward the privileged political and social identities jealously reserved
for non-Blacks. At the same time, on the plantations and in the slave quarters, slaves tended to form [their own] historical identity... Black mass movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries proved both the existence and vitality of an alternative Black political culture... inventive rather than imitative, communitarian rather than individualistic, democratic rather than republican, Afro-Christian rather than secular (Robinson 97).

Robinson informs understanding of “Message to the Grassroots” against a backdrop of 1960s racial and political realities, as well as personal and social forces that contributed to the politics and development of Malcolm X into a charismatic nationalist leader. A critical link in the life of Malcolm X was Jamaican-born social activist Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. (“Marcus Garvey Biography”), who immigrated to the United States to meet and discuss with George Washington Carver his plans to establish a school in Jamaica modeled after the Tuskegee Institute. However, Carver died four months before Garvey arrived in the United States.

Disappointed but undaunted, Garvey traveled and lectured across the country, garnering among discontented, disillusioned American blacks support for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), a fraternal organization he had founded in Jamaica. His gift for oratory created an exciting gospel of racial pride. He also inspired the global Black Nationalism and Pan Africanism movements that advocated African American resettlement in Africa and unification of all African diaspora in order “to establish a country and absolute government of their own” (“Marcus Garvey Biography”). At its height in 1920, the UNIA boasted 4 million members.

Two young foot soldiers in the Garvey army—Earl Little and Louise Langdon North—met and married in Montreal, Canada, when an informal chapter of the UNIA was established there (Marable 24-25). Working first in Philadelphia and later in Omaha, Nebraska, they labored for the UNIA—even after Garvey’s arrest in 1922 and subsequent conviction and imprisonment for mail fraud. Their fourth child, Malcolm, was born May 19, 1925 (“Malcolm X Biography”).

Malcolm’s childhood was painfully scarred by the racist society that touched all aspects of his life. Harassment, death threats, home destroyed by arson, murder of his father, mental breakdown of his mother, separation of his family, destruction of his dreams by a school teacher, imprisonment, and introduction to the Nation of Islam were all contributing factors in the development of the man who later delivered the fiery “Message to the Grassroots” (“Malcolm X Biography”). Later, in alliance with Nation of Islam leader, Elijah Muhammad, he became a major force in the expansion of the philosophy of black nationalism—with “each recruit a visible rebuke to American conceits” (Marable 146).

In a speech delivered before more than 4,000 Muslims and non-Muslims at the Detroit Temple on August 10, 1957, Malcolm X described the power of rank-and-file black Americans within America’s political system: “[I]f the so-called Negro intelligentsia, intellectuals and educators won’t unite to help alter this nasty and most degrading situation, then the little man in the street will henceforth begin to take matters into his own hands” (Marable 145). His concluding sentence issued a clear warning to black leaders and the black middle class that the marginalized, disadvantaged, desperate, and despairing working-class and poor blacks denied a seat at the table of participatory politics would one day lose their patience and rise up violently. His oft-repeated theme of grassroots agitation subsequently became the basis for what many consider to be his most famous address, “Message to the Grassroots” (Marable 145-146).

Malcolm X delivered “Message to the Grassroots” at the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference on November 1, 1963, at King Solomon’s Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. On the occasion of this speech, King Solomon’s Baptists Church served as a hush harbor space—a place where a marginalized and disenfranchised audience met, absent the disapproving gaze of whiteness, to encourage themselves with the hope and assurance that brighter days lay ahead (Nunley 26). Historically, enslaved
Africans and African Americans were heavily scrutinized by their masters to minimize the danger of “resistance, rebellion, and retention of African culture within hidden transcripts” (Nunley 26). Nineteenth century hush harbors were created as safe spaces for free expression of what went unsaid in the public sphere.

Hush harbor audiences were bound together by their common experiences, the tactics they employed to negotiate those experiences, and their common knowledge and expectations resulting from their experiences. Within the confines of the secure hush harbor space of King Solomon’s Baptist Church, cultural retention was both being preserved and produced. In his role as rhetor/orator, Malcolm X employs tropes, knowledge, terministic screens, and nomenclature “anchored in African American life and culture” to connect with, inform, and persuade his audience (Nunley 30). Drawing from familiar stories, history, and the common frustrations of his listeners, he effectively incorporates humor to keep his audience engaged (Nunley 30).

Nunley’s discussion of the principles of African American hush harbor (AAHHR) rhetoric includes three terms that inform the analysis of “Message to the Grassroots”: nommo [power of the word], parrhesia [speaking truth to power], and phronesis [practical wisdom, intellect, virtue] (44).

Facilitated by nommo or rhetoric/the power of the word, Malcolm X attempts to reshape thinking by addressing West African cultural retentions related to ontology, worldviews, and the value of community over the individual. The material world is understood, constructed, impacted through language; language and rhetoric are not epiphenomenal to reality. Nunley emphasizes the importance of nommo as “fundamental not only to the binding together of community but also to that community’s understanding of reality. . . . Informed discussion of African American rhetoric in its public, literary, or hush harbor forms must take nommo (the power of the word) into account (23, 44).

Using the imagery of a plow, Nunley illustrates how nommo functions in and through the materiality of the world: “[L]ike the plow, which parts the earth in preparation for the planting of seed, the word does work in the world” (Nunley 45). As Malcolm X began to plow with his words the soil of his listeners’ minds, he also dropped the seeds of cultural retention—effectively recalibrating their sense of self. Now while words can operate as tools, they can also operate as weapons. Nunley observes: “Nommo intensifies the understanding of what is at stake in African language use and African American oppression when words are often the only or primary weapon left to a subjugated people advocating not only for their rights but also for recognition as being fully human” (45).

Using his words as weapons to fight against impediments to unity, Malcolm X first wages battle with “differences” among the diverse groups in the audience. He urges his listeners to “forget about our differences” and to understand what really made them victims in society—not religious or political or civic affiliations; and not because they were Americans “‘cause if you was an American, you wouldn’t catch no hell. You catch hell ’cause you’re a black man” (Breitman 4). He warns against public disharmony and the temptation to air their “dirty laundry” in the public eye: “[W]e’re all the same family. And when you have a family squabble, you don’t get out on the sidewalk,” (Breitman 6). He also cautions against weakening the Black Revolution by allowing white people to play an integral part in it.

The narrative presented by Malcolm X contrasted starkly with the dominant narrative of his time. It inserted what Nunley calls “a kind of undomesticated Blackness into the world” (45)—one that rejects white supremacist ideologies and origin stories. Many whites and some mainstream black leaders considered his words dangerous and their inability to control him troubling.

Malcolm X makes a direct connection to Africa by reminding his audience how African Americans came to this country: “You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the ‘Mayflower.’ You came here on a slave ship—in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. . . . brought here by the people who came here on the ‘Mayflower’” (Breitman 4-5). He argues a common origin, stresses unity, and gathers the factions of his audience under one banner.
As he clarifies for his audience the distinctions between what he calls the Negro Revolution and the Black Revolution, he elicits support for the Black Revolution by “citing true examples and historical parallels”—the rhetorical device Cicero called exemplum. Considering history to be the discipline best qualified to provide solutions to current problems (Breitman 8), he cites historical revolution models—the American, French, and European revolutions—and identifies the nature and objectives of these events. Despite some logical inconsistencies, he effectively insulates his subsequent argument for violence as a natural aspect of revolution since the goal of revolution is the acquisition of land, which is the basis of independence; and land acquisition is achieved most often by bloodshed (Breitman 7).

Malcolm X then employs two more classical rhetorical devices. He repeats the word “land” five times—because he wants this word to penetrate the mind of his audience. Cicero called this redundancy—“sometimes repeating an idea, word, or phrase. He also used the rhetorical question—“a query with an obvious or obviously desired response used for effect, emphasis, provocation—[to invigorate] his arguments and [press] home the counter frame”—that the white power structure advocates violence only in white revolutions. This point is not lost on the audience when he establishes through exemplum that violence is historically a winning strategy in the context of revolution.

“Message to the Grassroots” identifies two forms of revolution but ignores a third form that is neither fundamentally violent nor nonviolent—one that is driven by different values, and by ambitions that have nothing to do with land. Enslaved Africans’ and African Americans’ decision to opt completely out of the Western system in order to preserve black ontology and way of being is an example of such a revolution.

In the following passage, Malcolm X infuses questions and statements with pathos in order to persuade his listeners to overt action; to arouse emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, shame); and to point out the absurdity of an argument for nonviolence when the nation responds with violence whenever threatened or provoked:

“You bleed for white people. But when it comes time to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven’t got no blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed. . . . How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your churches are being bombed, and your little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you’re going to be violent with Hitler, and Tojo, and somebody else that you don’t even know? (Breitman 7-8)

Malcolm X characterizes blacks who support nonviolent revolution as traitors and Uncle Toms who impede black progress and aid white selfishness and sense of entitlement. He equates nonviolence with “paging back onto the plantation (Breitman 10). In contrast, he lauds the Mau Mau Revolution in Kenya and the Algerian rejection of France. Their scorched earth policy and destruction of everything in their path, their rejection of integration and insistence on land for themselves, their nationalist aspirations and willingness to engage in bloody battles to gain their desired ends—this is the stuff of which revolutions are made. He then tethers the idea of African revolution to the concept of African American revolution and challenges his audience to unite, embrace their African roots and connection, provide for their self-defense, and opt out of the Western system as citizens empowered and emancipated by the acquisition of land.

Addressing a primarily black audience, Malcolm X refutes the hypocrisy evident in the hegemonic logic that demonizes black nationalism while supporting white nationalism. Speaking truth to power, he refuses to be silenced by the possible consequences of rejecting the ideology that frames revolutions according to different standards. In African American hush harbor rhetoric, this is described as parrhesia. “Parrhesia requires the rhetor to put her/his self at risk in speaking truth to power, to the dominant political rationality, or hegemony that could result in the loss of status, influence, resources, legitimacy, or life” (Nunley 46).

Malcolm X now turns to the main aspects of African cultural retention—African values, epistemologies, and knowledge.
He begins recreating his audience’s terministic screen by addressing the way black people perceive themselves. Nunley writes: “Terministic screen is both a reflection and deflection of reality and... any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others. No stance or view, no claim to reasonableness, lies outside of the contamination of human perspective” (30).

Here, his oversimplified house Negro/field Negro analogy and trope is pressed into service: the house Negro representing Western individualism, and the field Negro representing African communalism. The analogy is used not only to contrast the two views but also to launch a criticism of what he considers to be co-opted black leadership. He speaks in plain style—the rhetorical device described by Cicero as a “direct, staccato style [that] that ensures the understanding and engagement of the audience.” Wit is interjected into this analogy, the rhetorical feature described by Cicero as “sometimes mocking or employing humor.” Making fun of the house Negro diminishes the value of this worldview. The field Negro and his worldview—including the cultural retention of valuing the community over the individual—are elevated.

Again nommo—the power of the word—is used to invigorate the audience’s reception of phronesis, the third of the African American hush harbor rhetoric devices Nunley discusses: “Phronesis, which refers to practical wisdom, intellect, or virtue, embraces high theory but wrenches it down to earth around functionality and usefulness. . . . Phronesis taps into the sensus communitas—the commonplaces—of African American culture and provides the subjective fortification highly valued in African American communities” (47).

Possibly anticipating resistance to the idea of cultural retention and maintaining a perpetual, positive link to Africa, Malcolm X again resorts to humor to proactively present historic truth regarding African ontology: “I mean, this is what you say. ‘I ain’t left nothing in Africa,’ that’s what you say. Why, you left your mind in Africa” (Breitman 11). This use of wit readjusts the focus of his speech to the heart of the matter: lost values, identities, ways of relating to each other, and worldviews.

Herskovits observes: “In West Africa, an important cultural value is cooperative endeavor. Any research relative to “survivals of the African tradition of discipline and control . . . and . . . furtherance of community needs must consider various kinds of cooperative and mutual-aid effort among Negroes of this country. The tradition of cooperation in the field of economic endeavor is outstanding in Negro cultures everywhere” (Herkovits 160-161). Based merely on this anthropological evidence of the importance of community and cooperatives in the African and African American traditions, a more realistic appraisal of African retentions would conclude that African Americans maintained some degree of their cultural heritage while also accommodating themselves to whatever extent was necessary for survival.

Nunley describes the effect of what he called “African American podium-auction block rhetoric,” a rhetoric that takes into account worldviews, knowledge, figures of speech and commonplaces that identify with and can be persuasive in African American contexts. However, when that rhetoric is co-opted, it “privilege(s) more mainstream American (read: White), worldviews, epistemes, and tropes that are hegemonic, and therefore offer a more comforting, domesticated, consumable, and marketable Blackness” (Breitman 6).

Using plain language, Malcolm X continues his discussion of the influence of co-opted Negro Revolution leadership on the black masses. Comparing their effect to Novocain on the body, he concludes that co-opted Negro Revolution leaders numb the pain of the masses without addressing the underlying conditions causing their discomfort. Unable to correctly interpret the messages filtered through the lenses of their leaders, the black masses continue to suffer on all levels the negative effects of a political system intent upon controlling them. This simile “paints a picture so clear that the audience can see with the mind’s eye”—Cicero’s definition of the rhetorical device sub oculos subiectio—as he drives home his points. Reverting to the parrhesia that speaks truth to power, Malcolm X advocates the need for blacks to be respectful but to know when to draw the line—when self or community is threatened and when co-opted black leaders put their personal interests above the community’s (Nunley 16).

Malcolm X’s admonition to resist contemporary enslavement (anesthetization) through some form of resistance reflects Edwards’s observations of Kelly’s ancestral Africans and Robinson’s black radicals who
broke with “liberal epistemologies of order and resistance” (119). Robinson’s claim is important because of what it reveals about the lengths to which African captives went in their resistance to enslavement in the New World. Their attempts to flee, whether across the ocean back to Africa or to maroon communities in the vicinity, cannot be understood as simple reactions to plantation servitude. Rather, they must be understood as complete rejections of their lot. It was simply to “reconstitute the community that ‘black radicals took to the bush, to the mountains, to the interior’” (Robinson 118).

Nunley makes a case for ontology shaped by rhetoric: “To push the racial-spatial, rhetorical trope further, ontology, being writ large, and racial ontology, Black being, in particular as they relate to the body, are inherently rhetorical and spatial in the American context” (17). Ontology is not automatically determined at birth but is constantly in the process of being reframed and recreated throughout life by words and various social factors.

Based on Robinson’s analysis, it becomes clearer how and why an African American Revolution would differ from a White Revolution. Enslaved Africans/African Americans did not have land or property—they were property. The only thing of value they could claim was their being—who they were as black people at the very core of their being. A successful revolution would not involve the acquisition of land; it would involve their retention of an African worldview sustained in the face of Western determination to colonize and assimilate them.

“Message to the Grassroots” adds to understanding of African American rhetoric as a medium for reframing black ontology—that is, what it means to be black in the world and how one uses that understanding to affirm personal dignity, build and enhance community, and integrate the past with the present as a building block for the future. Rather than marginalized masses of powerless victims, the grassroots were recast as a force capable of liberating themselves from the political and social burden of oppression. Malcolm X in a symbolic hush harbor context defied the cultural history of severe censure, strict regulation, and intolerance of the notion of free speech uttered by an authentic black voice and challenged his listeners to action oriented toward the best interests of the community as opposed to the individual.

By focusing on the anti-Western notion of community above individual aspirations, by urging his listeners to renounce former mindsets of adjustment and submission, and by acknowledging the high cost of participating as change agents in the world, Malcolm X challenged his listeners to adjust their thinking to accommodate his proposed insights, which reflect connection with and continuity of a West African worldview.

WORKS CITED


