Engaging Parrhesia in a Democracy: Malcolm X as a Truth-teller

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To engage in parrhesia is to function as a truth-teller. While Foucault (2001) outlined different types of parrhesia identified by the Greeks, the five elements of parrhesia remain constant yet context-specific: frankness, danger, criticism, duty, and truth. Foucault (2001) argued that “real parrhesia, in its positive, critical sense does not exist where democracy exists” (p. 83). I claim that parrhesia can exist in democratic institutions and, in fact, is a process that members of the public should demand from public actors. To illustrate this claim, I analyze three Malcolm X speeches, “Black Man’s History,” “The Ballot or the Bullet,” and “After the Bombing” and argue that while he did not start out as a parrhesiastes, he ended his life as one who spoke the truth in a democratic society.

We knew what happened to people who stick their necks out and say them. And if all the lies we tell ourselves by way of extenuation were put into print, it would constitute one of the greatest chapters in the history of man’s justifiable cowardice in the face of other men. But Malcolm kept snatching our lies away. He kept shouting the painful truth we whites and blacks did not want to hear from all the house-tops. And he wouldn’t stop for love nor money.

—Ossie Davis (1964)

Malcolm X was one of the most influential American public figures of the 1960s. During this time of heated racial tension, Malcolm’s rhetoric assumed a unique flavor that left many, mostly white, Americans disturbed. But Malcolm’s voice was fresh, distinct, and credible (West, 1999). Depending on one’s political, social, and economic position (or privilege), Malcolm X was seen as unifying or divisive, extreme or realistic, an agitator or simply passionate. Malcolm’s legacy remains alive in many
historical documents, including his coauthored autobiography, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X & Haley, 1964). Additionally, books, collections of speeches, Web sites (e.g., www.malcolm-x.org, www.cmww.com/historic/malcolm, and www.brothermalcolm.net,) and movies (e.g. Spike Lee’s 1992, “X”) sustain Malcolm’s important legacy in the present day.¹

Rhetoricians continue to (re)articulate Malcolm’s legacy with several recent articles (Terrill, 2000, 2001; Youman, 2001; Winn, 2001). However, while “Malcolm pervades the present,” Houck (1993) argued, this omnipresence “has come at a high cost: understanding” (p. 285). Illo (1971) and Houck (1993) argued that scholars have sentimentalized Malcolm X, have emptied scholarship on X of meaning and have embraced X without critical understanding. The result of this sentimentalization is that literature on Malcolm X “has often missed the mark, offering praise where critical judgment is called for” (Dyson, 1992, p. 29). In this essay, I engage in a critique of the “transcendent status” that Malcolm X has achieved (Dyson, 1992). Dyson argued that while cautiously embracing the myth of Malcolm X, we need to “continue to probe the wellsprings of his appeal, and in so doing, understand our need to romanticize or revile him” (p. 33). Although Malcolm remains an American cultural icon, the 35 years since his murder have complicated meanings about his life, philosophy and have “added layers of meaning to the symbolic legacy of Malcolm X” (Youman, 2001, p. 2). The history of Malcolm X is a complex one that is often misunderstood by scholars and popular writers (Houck, 1993). In this essay, I respond to Dyson’s call for active critique, within the realm of parrhesia, and in doing so, I educe layers of meaning concerning truth-telling.

The writings of Foucault offer a useful lens through which to analyze the project of Malcolm X. Parrhesia, which means “free speech,” is engaged by a parrhesiastes, or “one who speaks the truth” (Foucault, 2001, p. 11). Foucault characterized parrhesia as “a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to the truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (p. 19). Flynn (1987) noted that Foucault held parrhesia as a “moral virtue” where “you admitted the truth even if it cost you your self image” (p. 102). Parrhesia occurs at the intersection of five components: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. While the elements of parrhesia, as Foucault delineated them, remain constant, they are fluid and malleable in the sense that each is context-specific given the particular political, social, and economic conditions of the moment. Currently, parrhesia is a theoretical tool that has been ignored by communication scholars despite the use of Foucault’s other theoretical frameworks in communication scholarship. Understanding Malcolm X’s relationship to parrhesia can help inform our knowledge of this underutilized rhetorical tool.

Although some critics fail to appreciate the entirety of his career and sometimes misunderstand the rhetoric of Malcolm X, he remains an influential voice in the quest for racial equality. “Malcolm’s voice reverberates through contemporary American culture because many African-Americans may find themselves in a position similar to that which he occupied and see his rhetoric as a viable model for confronting that situation” (Terrill, 2000, p. 79). As tensions remain central to contemporary
enactments of race relations in America (Steeh, Bobo, Krysan, & Schuman, 1998; West, 1993); analyzing and critiquing the rhetoric of Malcolm X as parrhesiastic (or not) can help to continue to shed light on the life and philosophy of Malcolm and “approach the black man’s struggle against the white man’s racism as a human problem. Both races, as human beings, have the obligation, the responsibility, of helping to correct America’s human problem” (X & Haley, 1964, p. 375). Foucault (1980) argued, “The essential political problem…is that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousnesses—or what’s in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” (p. 133). I believe that Malcolm X embraced similar goals throughout his career. He struggled to reveal alternate “truths” about African-Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. He argued that African-Americans should be politically involved rather than isolated, economically viable and self-sustaining rather than burdensome, and that they were institutionally oppressed by white power structures and not a race of people incapable of taking care of themselves.

Foucault (2001) argued that true parrhesia, in its critical sense, cannot exist in a democratic society. I call into question Foucault’s argument and show that Malcolm X did function as a parrhesiastes within a democracy. Three important outcomes emerge as I unpack the processual nature of truth-telling as evidenced by Malcolm X. First, my analysis suggests that parrhesia can be expected of public figures; that is, truth-telling is a practice that we should demand from those who desire to (re)create public discourse. Secondly, this nuanced portrayal of parrhesia allows us to better differentiate those who are truth-tellers from those who are not. Lastly, Malcolm’s successes and failures as a truth-teller provide all of us with a vision of how to incorporate truth-telling behaviors into our own individual speech and into our lives.

The remainder of this essay contains three main sections. First, I review Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia and outline the elements that will serve as the framework for my analysis. Secondly, I provide rhetorical analyses of three of Malcolm X’s speeches that are each previewed by a brief biographical sketch designed to provide context for each individual speech. Lastly, I conclude that using the intricacies of parrhesia to (de)construct and (re)envision Malcolm X’s role as a truth-teller shows that it is possible to engage in truth-telling within the constraints of a democracy. In order to adequately analyze the parrhesiastic behaviors of Malcolm X’s life, I analyze speeches from three different rhetorical moments of his career.\(^2\) The time in which Malcolm was a member of the Nation of Islam/Black Muslims (henceforth, NOI) is represented by “Black Man’s History.” “The Ballot or the Bullet” comes from the time after Malcolm had split from the NOI in March of 1964. “After the Bombing” serves as the exemplar for the late part of Malcolm’s life, roughly representing the time after he returned from Africa\(^3\) until his assassination on February 21, 1965.

Foucauldian Philosophy and the Process of Parrhesia

Pinning down an overall philosophy of Michel Foucault is no easy task and is something that he would have likely resisted (Prado, 2000). However, the failure, as of yet,
for communication scholars to recognize the utility of parrhesia to illuminate previously hidden rhetorical features requires me to situate parrhesia in relation to Foucault’s overall project. Across the body of his work, Foucault called into question historical views of seemingly stable disciplines. Among those disciplines that Foucault questioned are truth, knowledge, sexuality, imprisonment, madness, and medicine. And if Foucault had an overall purpose to his writings it was to question dominant, widely accepted systems of “Truth.” He also strove to elucidate other “truths” that were rendered invisible by those dominant “Truths.” For Foucault, truth is fluid, shifting, and unfinalizable. “Truths,” in Foucauldian sense, operate as static entities that quash other “truths” that might exist. Additionally, for Foucault, knowledge and power are contextual. Parrhesia allows us to identify and define the critical agent, one who is questioning a dominant regime of truth, within the unique episteme in which the agents find themselves. Parrhesia allows us to ask “who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power” (Foucault, 2001, p. 170).

In 1983, Foucault gave a series of lectures at the University of California at Berkeley as part of a seminar entitled “Discourse and Truth” (Pearson, 2001). From 1983 until 2001, these lectures circulated among interested parties as notes taken from the lectures until they were published in book form. According to Pearson (2001), the “book” Fearless Speech consists of the content of the lectures and received no final edit from Foucault himself. However, Flynn (2002) held that while these lectures cannot be construed as Foucault’s definitive thoughts on parrhesia, the authenticity of Foucault’s ideas is in no way compromised because, as editor Joseph Pearson noted, the text is predominantly a verbatim transcription of the lectures.

Parrhesia is a verbal activity that occurs at the intersection of five elements, the first of which is frankness, which refers to the parrhesiastes’ openness of speech. When engaging in frankness, the speaker’s heart and mind are completely open to those engaged in discourse (Foucault, 2001). Secondly, parrhesia occurs, for Foucault, where belief and truth correspond. That is, “a parrhesiastes says what is true because he knows that it is true; and he knows that it is true because it really is true” (p. 14, emphasis in original). Foucault (2001) argued that this correspondence of belief and truth cannot exist in “our modern epistemological framework” (p. 14). In the Greek sense, parrhesia was a verbal activity and not a Cartesian mental activity based on evidence. Therefore, Greek parrhesia requires no qualification of how a truth is acquired, it requires the courage to “say something dangerous—different from what the majority believes” (p. 15). To the Greeks, something was truthful if the speaker believed it to be so and it opposed the majority.

Additionally, parrhesia requires an element of danger. A person can only be a parrhesiastes if there is a risk or danger in telling the truth. Parrhesia requires “courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger” (Foucault, 2001, p. 16). The next element of parrhesia is criticism, which can take two forms. The critique can be of an interlocutor by someone who has the power to punish the speaker or criticism can be self-critique engaged by the speaker. The last feature of parrhesia is that of truth-telling as a duty. An orator
fearful of punishment is free to remain silent; however, a parrhesiastic orator speaks the truth regardless of consequences because the speaker feels it is a duty to do so.

Foucault (2001) argued that honest orators are courageous enough to oppose the demos, the people that make up a democracy. Honest orators strive to transform the will of the people only when those changes will serve the best interests of the city. However, Foucault also argued that in a constitutional democracy, where all people are equal before the law, the demos are more accepting of speakers who say what the people desire to hear. Foucault argued that Isocrates' critique of Athenian democracy was that it was not possible to be heard by the demos if one did not "parrot" the will of the people (p. 82). Likewise, those speakers that did not reflect the will of the people were relegated to positions of "comic poets" and "reckless orators;" in other words, they were dismissed (p. 82). Because the will of the people is the most important element of a democracy, and the people only desire to hear those that argue for points they already agree with, Foucault asserted that "real parrhesia, parrhesia in its positive, critical sense, does not exist where democracy exists" (p. 83). Parrhesia can also exist on an interpersonal or group level, as Foucault highlighted examples of parrhesia between friends, between a king and his court and between a teacher and his/her students. Opposition of a majority is not necessary for parrhesia, but Foucault noted that opposition of a majority is "a strong indication" that a speaker is a parrhesiastes (p. 15).

"Foucault (2001) was concerned with the questions: "What is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as how to recognize them" (p. 170)?" Foucault was interested in "recognizing who is capable of speaking the truth within the limits of an institutional system where everyone is equally entitled to give his [or her] own opinion" (p. 73). Foucault (2001) and Peters (2003) pointed to parrhesia as the roots of the critical tradition in Western philosophical attitude. Foucault problematized parrhesia as not simply logical fact/value statements, but he identified "individual autonomy, creativity, and the aesthetic modality of existence as the marks of the parrhesiastes" (Flynn, 1989, p. 196). Foucault (2001) attempted to show the reader a framework for answering questions such as: "How can we recognize someone as a parrhesiastes? What is the importance of having a parrhesiastes for the city? And, what is the training of a good parrhesiastes" (p. 172)?

I have briefly outlined some of the basic principles of parrhesia and the elements it takes to function as a parrhesiastes. I will show, in the context of his speeches, how Malcolm X engaged in parrhesia (or, failed to do so). As stated earlier, Malcolm X is an extremely complex social figure, and his rhetoric cannot be understood outside of the context of his life. Therefore, the analyses below are interspersed with brief explanations of Malcolm's life. I trace some of the significant events of his childhood but focus primarily on the development of the "public" Malcolm X, which occurred during his stay in prison.

The Early Development of Malcolm X

Malcolm Little, born in Omaha, Nebraska, in May of 1925, lived what many Americans would consider a tough and perhaps unfortunate childhood. In 1931,
Malcolm's father Earl, a Baptist minister, was murdered by members of the Klu Klux Klan. Earl Little's skull was crushed in a beating, and then he was thrown on rail tracks to be nearly severed by a streetcar. After her husband's death, Malcolm's mother and Earl's wife, Louise, was denied the payment on the insurance policy that Earl Little had purchased. The death was ruled a suicide. Louise Little was deemed incapable of raising her children by the state of Michigan because she had to care for seven children with virtually no income. She was later committed to a state mental hospital. She was released 26 years later to the care of Malcolm's brother, Philbert. Malcolm ended up at a school from which he was soon expelled. He later landed in another school, behaved himself, received good grades and even was elected class president.

After living with his sister in Boston for a while, Malcolm moved to New York and began engaging in criminal activities, drugs, and violence with gangster West Indian Archie. He also became involved with a white girlfriend, Sophia, while in New York. Lee (1992) depicted Malcolm running "numbers," an illegal lottery-type gambling game, which ultimately led to his split from West Indian Archie because of a misunderstanding and conflict over a prize of $600. Malcolm later tried his hand at burglary, but after a few successful heists, the police arrested him and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. According to Malcolm, his greatest crime was not repeated burglaries, but something far greater. "All they could see was that we had taken the white man's women" (X & Haley, 1964, p. 150).

Malcolm was nicknamed "Satan" by his cellblock mates due to his frequent cursing and proselytizing against religion and God. The encouragement of one inmate, Bimbi, along with a convincing letter from Malcolm's brother, Philbert, describing the "natural religion for the black man" encouraged him to quit smoking, stop eating pork, and begin studying (X & Haley, 1964, p. 156). The letter brought Malcolm the hope of getting out of prison. One of Malcolm's other brothers, Reginald, visited him in prison and proposed that there was one true God, Allah, and his representative on earth was Elijah Muhammad. Reginald's visit, reiterating Muhammad's teaching that "The white man, without exception, was the devil," planted the seed of the NOI (X & Haley, 1964, p. 159). With the encouragement of his siblings, Malcolm penned a letter to NOI leader Elijah Muhammad. Muhammad's response to Malcolm would prove to be important in his conversion to the Black Muslims. All the while, Malcolm continued to read everything he could get his hands on in prison, building knowledge of his race's history and manipulations of it, but he also focused on philosophy, religion, and language.

Upon leaving prison in 1952, Malcolm moved to Detroit and joined the NOI. By the summer of 1953, he was named Detroit Temple Number One's Assistant Minister (X & Haley, 1964, p. 201). Continuously observing the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm became a fluent and powerful speaker and minister. By April of 1954, Malcolm was in charge of the strategically important New York temple. Malcolm was known virtually across the nation by 1959 and was speaking publicly more frequently, representing the NOI and Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm continued preaching the doctrine of the NOI across the country speaking largely in temples,
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universities, and other public forums. Emerging from these years of Malcolm’s life is the first text for analysis: Black Man’s History, delivered in December of 1962 in New York.

Black Man’s History

Malcolm X’s speech, “Black Man’s History,” is considered to be one of the more popular and influential speeches given during Malcolm’s NOI tenure and has been the subject of previous analyses. Terrill (2001), for example, argued that in “Black Man’s History” Malcolm failed to allow for the audience’s critical judgment or independent decisions. He called for a strict adherence to NOI doctrine, hindering his audience’s ability to produce effective social action on its own terms. I position this speech in the context of parrhesia: truth-telling. In analyzing Malcolm X’s “Black Man’s History,” I argue that Malcolm failed to exhibit any of Foucault’s criteria required for parrhesia and thus did not function as a truth-teller.4

The first concept that Foucault (2001) cited as central to parrhesia was frankness. Frankness, in the Foucauldian sense, means that the orator has complete openness of heart and mind. Foucault stated that in parrhesia there is a direct relationship between the speaker and what he says. Foucault (2001) wrote “in parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion” (p. 12, emphasis in original). As was discussed earlier, Malcolm was still a member of the NOI when this speech was given. However, this fact alone does not subsume Malcolm’s thoughts to someone else’s just because he was a member of an organization. But Malcolm went to great lengths in his speech to attribute his material to another, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. In the first two sentences of the speech, X thanked Allah for Muhammad and thanked the previous speaker for “giving us a good preliminary basic understanding of the means and the objectives of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad” (X, 1971, p. 23). In the first few minutes of the speech, Malcolm again stated, “as we are taught by The Honorable Elijah Muhammad” and “the one who is actually the author of this new thinking is The Honorable Elijah Muhammad” (X, 1971, p. 24). This pattern repeated itself throughout the speech as Malcolm stated, “as we are taught by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, (p. 28)” “the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us (p. 31),” “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad knows... he told it to us and we’re going to tell it to you” (p. 36) and “the Honorable Elijah Muhammad says that” (p. 39). I am not arguing that Malcolm was not responsible for what he is stating. Malcolm did speak these words, but the key is that he did not have a direct relationship with them. He was functioning simply as a distributor of Muhammad’s message. Foucault (2001) argued that a “parrhesiastes use the most direct words and forms of expression he can find” (p. 12). Thus, Malcolm’s lack of a direct relationship with his language, as evidenced by his attribution of his positions to Muhammad, means that a critical element of parrhesia, frankness, was not present. Malcolm recognized this retrospectively in his autobiography. He wrote, “I always made it crystal clear that I was Mr. Muhammad’s representative. Anyone who ever heard me make a public speech during this time
knows that at least once a minute I said, ‘The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches...’” (X & Haley, 1964, p. 291). Foucault (2001) stated that, to engage in parrhesia, the speaker and his speech must have a direct connection. This was simply not the case in “Black Man’s History.” Malcolm X was the speaker, but the words were Elijah Muhammad’s.

Another characteristic of parrhesia for Foucault is risk or danger. To function as a parrhesiastes, danger or risk must be potential consequences of telling the truth. For example, Foucault (2001) claimed that a teacher of children, while certainly teaching truth to students, usually does not engage in parrhesia because of an absence of danger. In contrast, a person critiquing a tyrant could be a parrhesiastes because of potential recourse from the tyrant. In the context of “Black Man’s History,” there was no element of risk or danger regarding Malcolm X; thus he could not be functioning as a parrhesiastes.

Malcolm X was a member and minister of the NOI when he delivered “Black Man’s History.” He was protected by the NOI in both a literal sense (e.g. security detail, bodyguards, etc), and a figurative sense as well. Preaching within NOI doctrine safeguarded Malcolm X. He was doing little more than speaking to those who already believed what he was saying, or those who likely had a desire to believe what he was saying. In the first minutes of his speech, Malcolm noted that “here at Muhammad’s Mosque, when you hear us use the term ‘black’ we mean everybody who is here. If you’re here at the Mosque, you’re black, because the only ticket you need to get into Muhammad’s Mosque is to be black” (X, 1971, p. 24). Malcolm also noted his comfort with the audience by stating, “when you get this many of our people together” (p. 23, emphasis added). There was a certain degree of safety in Malcolm’s relation to the audience. Malcolm, in essence, knew who he was speaking to and any opposition to him could be quelled simply based on who was allowed into the rally.

It could be argued that Malcolm’s speech was anything but safe as it stands against everything that was being taught to black people at that time in history. I agree that Malcolm’s “Black Man’s History” represents a counternarrative to the mainstream ideas of the time. However, the controlled nature of the speaking situation and the rhetorical positions offered by Malcolm are important considerations. The admittance only of people who agree with his view or might be swayed by his view (i.e., people sympathetic to or interested in the NOI) outweighs any potential engagement of the speech by white America. While Malcolm was critiquing the mainstream, nobody present for “Black Man’s History” would criticize his views. Most present at the speech already agreed with his position, or were present at the NOI rally because they were at least minimally interested in the political, religious, and moral philosophy of the NOI. Malcolm was not critiquing the positions of Elijah Muhammad, but espousing them. Had Malcolm delivered this speech at a public event, to a more racially diverse population, where the content of the speech would be open to critique, he would have been more fully engaged in the crucial element of parrhesia.

Duty also serves as one measure of truth-telling. Foucault (2001) argued that a speaker given a choice to tell the truth or remain silent has exactly that: a choice. To engage duty in a speech, potential repercussions must exist. For example, Foucault
stated that potential “punishment” or “exile” creates a choice for the speaker to speak or not (p. 19). However, when someone is compelled to tell the truth due to stress or torture from a person of power, parrhesia is not possible. As I have argued, Malcolm largely espoused Muhammad’s doctrine in this speech to people who were already likely to be believers of that doctrine. Malcolm X did not have potential repercussions in the context of this speech. Therefore, he could not be serving as a parrhesiastes. Malcolm could not have seen it as his duty here, in the Foucauldian sense, because no potential repercussions existed from reiterating Muhammad’s doctrine. Only if Malcolm were to disagree with NOI philosophy, could duty exist in this rhetorical moment.

Malcolm did not embody any of the previously discussed principles of parrhesia, and the fifth element did not exist either. There was no correspondence between belief and truth. Foucault (2001) stated “The parrhesiastes is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true” (p. 14, emphasis in original). While Malcolm, at the time, may have thought the content of “Black Man’s History” to be true, he arguably did not know it. In this context, he was not opposing a majority, but rather he was disseminating the majority’s opinion, the majority of the NOI within the NOI. Foucault argued that “the fact that a speaker says something dangerous—different from what the majority believes—is a strong indication that he [sic] is a parrhesiastes” (p. 15). Opposing the majority does not necessitate parrhesia, but it is a strong indicator of when a speaker might be engaging parrhesia. In arguing the positions of the NOI within this speech, Malcolm did not rely on “courage” to “say something dangerous,” but instead he restated the positions of the majority, the NOI (p. 15). Another indicator of his lack of parrhesia was his reliance on Cartesian evidential mental activities to substantiate the coincidence of belief and truth, which cannot occur in parrhesia, according to Foucault. A large portion of the speech involved tracing the history of Yacub, who was the scientist that engineered the “pale-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde-haired thing that you call a man…the Bible calls him the devil” (X, 1971, p. 35). This evidence was based largely on textual information from the Bible. Malcolm stated that Elijah Muhammad, “gets this from the Bible where it says…” (p. 53). Malcolm also relied on “that which is written to last 25,000 years…the Holy Koran” (X, 1971, p 50).

Recall that parrhesia is a verbal activity and not a mental activity based on evidence, regardless of the source from which that evidence comes. Rather than engaging in the verbal activity of parrhesia and opposing the majority, Malcolm used Cartesian mental evidential arguments, based on the Bible and the Koran, to accommodate the positions of Mr. Muhammad and the NOI. According to Foucault, this would not be a direct coincidence of belief and truth. For Foucault, a correspondence between belief and truth cannot exist in “our modern epistemological framework” (p. 14). Because Malcolm X, relied, in this instance, on mental evidential arguments, he engaged what Foucault considered “our modern epistemological framework,” arguments based purely on evidence without consideration of other argumentative resources such as emotion, core beliefs, and self-disclosure. For parrhesia to occur,
the speaker must engage in a verbal activity, not solely a logic-based mental activity; thus, Malcolm was not functioning as a parhesisiates at this juncture.

Foucault (2001) posited a special relationship between certain qualities that can be invoked during speech and truth. While scholars have critiqued X more holistically (Dyson, 1992) and specifically (Terrill, 2001) based on this reading of “Black Man’s History,” I argue that Malcolm’s speech, at this particular rhetorical moment, lacked the elements of frankness, danger, criticism, duty, and truth. Dyson (1992) argued that Malcolm X should be critiqued as well as lauded. “Black Man’s History” is an instance worthy of critique. We should look to other points in Malcolm’s political life for instances of truth-telling.

Malcolm Breaks from the NOI

By late 1962, the rumors of Muhammad’s infidelity had spread beyond the NOI elite. Regular NOI members, non-Muslim blacks, and the popular press all began to realize that Elijah Muhammad faced paternity charges from two NOI secretaries who claimed he had fathered four children (X & Haley, 1964). The constant rumors of Elijah Muhammad’s infidelity served as the catalyst for Malcolm’s split from the NOI. These allegations, combined with a great deal of internal jealousy on the part of other NOI ministers and brothers, forced Malcolm towards the fringes of the NOI. While still serving as the NOI’s National Minister, he found himself garnering less and less publicity inside the NOI, receiving anonymous threats of violence and experiencing increased pressure from the public to answer questions about Elijah Muhammad’s moral violations.

A year later, in November 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Malcolm X, who had been preparing a speech entitled, “God’s Judgment of White America,” which included the theme of “as you sow, so shall you reap,” commented that the president’s assassination was a case of “chickens coming home to roost” (X & Haley, 1964, p. 301). For this statement, Malcolm was “silenced” by the NOI for 90 days. As Malcolm repeatedly found himself marginalized by NOI political shifts and continually experienced death threats, the betrayal of Muhammad and the NOI grew clearer to him. The annual Black Muslim convention was to take place on February 26, 1964, in Chicago and Malcolm’s stat is within the NOI still was uncertain (Breitman, 1967). After Muhammad failed to clarify Malcolm’s status, Malcolm formally withdrew from the Nation of Islam and formed a new organization, Muslim Mosque Inc., on March 8, 1964.

The significance of this break from Muhammad and the NOI cannot be understated. Malcolm, in attempting to come to grips with the fundamental betrayal exercised against him by Muhammad and the NOI, wrote, “After 12 years of never thinking as much as five minutes about myself, I became able finally to muster the nerve, and the strength, to start facing facts, to think for myself” (X & Haley, 1964, p. 306). Breitman (1970) collected essays and interviews from Malcolm’s last year of life when he admitted several times that only later in his life did he begin speaking and thinking for himself. This transition period, this time where Malcolm began “to
think for himself,” served as the context of the second speech text, Malcolm X’s famous “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech, delivered April 3, 1964, in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Ballot or the Bullet

Malcolm X started “The Ballot or the Bullet,” delivered at Cory Methodist Church and sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E) by stating, “Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters, friends and enemies: I just can’t believe that everyone in here is a friend, and I don’t want to leave anybody out” (X, 1965a, pp. 23–24). Here was a stark difference from the opening of “Black Man’s History.” Then, Malcolm celebrated the homogeneity of his audience, but here Malcolm recognized his diverse audience of friends and enemies. The very element of danger that was lacking from “Black Man’s History” was noted in the first sentence of this speech. Malcolm took a risk from the start of his speech, an essential element of parrhesia for Foucault (2001): “Parrhesia, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger” (p. 16).

Recall that in “Black Man’s History” Malcolm qualified many of his phrases with “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that…” Due in part to Malcolm’s break from the NOI less than four weeks prior to this speech, no mention of Elijah Muhammad appeared in it. Malcolm took additional steps toward frankness in this speech; he clearly stated his position early: “I would like to clarify something concerning myself. I’m still a Muslim; my religion is still Islam. That is my personal belief” (X, 1965a, p. 24). Here Malcolm was much more forthcoming with his audience with his background when entering this speaking situation.

Malcolm X (1965b) continued, “I’m not here tonight to discuss my religion. I’m not here to try and change your religion. I’m not here to argue or discuss anything we differ about because…we have the same problem, a common problem, a problem that will make you catch hell whether you’re a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist” (p. 24). Foucault (2001) argued that frankness occurs when it is obvious that the speaker holds his own beliefs. Foucault stated, “The specific ‘speech activity’ of the parrhesiatic enunciation thus takes the form: ‘I am the one who thinks this and that’” (p. 13). In this section of “The Ballot or the Bullet,” rather than attributing his beliefs to someone else, Malcolm owned his statements and engaged in openhearted discourse with the audience.

Although Malcolm’s rhetorical relationship with frankness changed from “Black Man’s History” to “The Ballot or the Bullet,” we should be cautious in attributing frankness unquestioningly in this instance. While this rhetorical evolution becomes more apparent when compared with the third speech, “After the Bombing,” Malcolm, in this moment, appeared reluctant to engage the white members of his audience. While Malcolm often critiqued “the white man,” in his speech, he was often referencing white power structures, but Terrill (2001) noted that this speech was given to “a predominantly black audience” (p. 35). So, in comparison to where Malcolm would go in “After the Bombing,” he had moved towards engaging
frankness, but seemed reluctant to fully engage white people in dialogue. For example, Malcolm stated:

All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man. Now, in speaking like this, it doesn’t mean that we’re anti-white, but it does mean we’re anti-exploitation, we’re anti-degradation, we’re anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn’t want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. (pp. 24–25)

One interpretation of this statement is that Malcolm’s “heart and mind” were not completely opened to the white people that may have been in his audience. Malcolm’s move towards the acceptance of the white members of his audience becomes clearer when analyzing the later “After the Bombing.” The openness of the speaking session was key, and sheltered nature of the earlier “Black Man’s History” limited the parrhesiastic nature of the speech. The openness of “The Ballot or the Bullet” partially liberated parrhesia, but I argue that it was not yet completely enacted in this speech.

What Malcolm X might have lacked regarding frankness in “The Ballot or the Bullet” was present in terms of criticism. He was free of the NOI and the limits the organization placed on political and social activism. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm openly criticized the Democratic leadership of the U.S. Congress, the current status of the civil rights movement, white and Christian preachers, and the international influence of “Uncle Sam.” He felt free to critique those whom he viewed as oppressors. Previously, Malcolm’s topics were constrained by NOI teachings, moral philosophy, and their lack of involvement in social or political action (Terrill, 2001). By moving out on his own, Malcolm used his public platform to engage in critique. Malcolm X was fully engaged in the critical element of parrhesia at this instance. Foucault (2001) argued, “the parrhesiastes risks his privilege to speak freely when he discloses a truth which threatens the majority” (p. 18).

Almost no entity was exempt from Malcolm’s criticisms in “The Ballot or the Bullet,” but government was particularly targeted. For example, Malcolm argued:

In this present administration, they have in the House of Representatives, 257 Democrats to only 177 Republicans. They control two-thirds of the House vote. Why can’t they pass something that will help you and me? In the Senate, there are 67 senators who are of the Democratic Party. Only 33 of them are Republicans. Why, the Democrats have got the government sewed up, and you’re the one who sewed it up for them. And what have they given you for it? Four years in office, and just now getting around to some civil-rights legislation. (X, 1965a, p. 27)

Malcolm also critiqued the gradualism that permeated any legislative action by Congress:

Brothers and sisters, always remember, if it doesn’t take senators and congressmen and presidential proclamations to give freedom to the white man, it is not necessary for legislation or proclamation or Supreme Court decisions to give freedom to the black man. You let that white man know, if this is a country of freedom, let it be a country of freedom; and if it’s not a country of freedom, change it. (pp. 41–42)
Malcolm X had abandoned his unwillingness to get involved with social and political campaigns before his split with the NOI. In this speech, Malcolm “discloses truth which threatens the majority” (Foucault, 2001, p. 18). Malcolm critiqued many of the central elements of dominant populations, as the government, political parties, mainstream civil rights leaders, and other religious leaders were all subjected to criticism. This type of parrhesia, of the Ionic sort, Foucault (2001) characterized as “so valuable to democracy since he is courageous enough to explain either to the demos or to the king just what the shortcomings of their life are” (p. 51). Malcolm did recognize the negative, violent outcomes that may result, but he dealt with that choice only momentarily. X (1965a) stated, “If you never see me another time in your life, if I die in the morning, I’ll die saying one thing: the ballot or the bullet, the ballot or the bullet” (p. 44). Malcolm noted his own death in this speech but, in comparison to the later “After the Bombing,” this reference to dire consequences of his speech seemed almost trivial.

The relationship between truth and belief in this speech was more intimate than in “Black Man’s History.” Progressive steps were clear as Malcolm offered more of himself and his own views in “The Ballot or the Bullet,” rather than simply espousing NOI doctrine. This speech also possessed a strong element of criticism lacking in the previous speech. However, I argue that we should exercise caution in attributing duty and frankness to Malcolm in this speech. While his rhetoric developed over the two years since “Black Man’s History,” my analysis of “After the Bombing” will show that Malcolm had room to engage parrhesia more completely than he did at this juncture. I posit that Malcolm was more fully engaged in the process of parrhesia in “The Ballot or the Bullet” than he was in “Black Man’s History.” After Malcolm’s split from the NOI, his speech emanated more from feeling and self-disclosure and less from Cartesian mental activities. By engaging in parrhesiatic behaviors such as criticism, danger, and to a certain extent, duty, Malcolm was more fully engaged in truth-telling as well as his newly forming political and social philosophies. The development of Malcolm as a speaker, activist, and person, which multiple authors have noted (Breitman, 1967; Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Dyson, 1992), was embodied in the rhetoric of “The Ballot or the Bullet.” In relation to parrhesia, Malcolm was still fighting to define himself as an orator and activist. Shortly after this speech, Malcolm’s life would change radically again, and this shift would open the door for a full engagement in the process of parrhesia.

Transformation and the End of Malcolm’s Life

Less than two weeks after his April 3, 1964, presentation of “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech, Malcolm departed for his Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and other sites in many African countries (X & Haley, 1964). It was on this trip that Malcolm’s views of white people began to change. In a letter home to his wife, Betty, Malcolm (now called El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) wrote:

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by
the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors. We were truly all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the ‘white’ from their minds, the ‘white’ from their behavior, and the ‘white’ from their attitude. (X & Haley, 1964, p. 340, emphasis in original)

As with the beginning of Malcolm’s transition period out of the NOI, there was no distinct beginning to this “third phase” of Malcolm’s life. However, he began to recognize that all white people were not “the devil.” The speech illustrating this phase of Malcolm’s life is “After the Bombing,” delivered February 14, 1965, the night following the firebombing of his home in New York. Tired from a troubling evening and slightly groggy from the calming effects of drugs prescribed to him, Malcolm delivered this speech in Detroit only one week before his assassination in New York’s Audubon Ballroom.

**After the Bombing**

The role of duty in parrhesia has been minimal thus far in my analysis. However, in “After the Bombing,” duty became more central. Consider the context: 24 hours earlier, Malcolm’s home had been firebombed, his belongings destroyed, and his family threatened, yet he still traveled to Detroit to speak. Malcolm (X, 1965b) stated:

I was in a house last night that was bombed, my own. It isn’t something that made me lose confidence in what I am doing, because my wife understands and I have children…[who] understand. I think they would rather have a father or brother or whatever the situation may be who will take a stand in the face of any kind of reaction from narrow-minded people rather than to compromise and later on have to grow up in shame and in disgrace. (pp. 157–158)

I can think of no stronger argument to attest to Malcolm’s sense of duty at this stage than his presence in another city less than one day after his family’s home was firebombed. And in the face of that amazing amount of stress, violence, and hatred, Malcolm still spoke of “taking a stand” and “not losing confidence.” When faced with a choice to speak or not, Malcolm spoke. His duty to speak out at this point fulfilled one of the five elements of parrhesia.

In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm had begun to engage in full frankness with his audience, explaining his position as a speaker with an open heart and open mind. However, Malcolm had not fully embraced white people as part of his audience. Here, in “After the Bombing,” Malcolm more fully embraced all of his audience. Malcolm stated, “I have to straighten out my own position, which is clear. I am not a racist in any form whatsoever. I don’t believe in any form of racism. I don’t believe in any form of discrimination or segregation. I believe in Islam” (X, 1965b, p. 162). He continued, “When you just judge a man because of the color of his skin, then you’re committing a crime, because that is the worst kind of judgment” (X, 1965c). Malcolm concluded his speech:

I say again that I’m not a racist. I don’t believe in any form of segregation or anything like that. I’m for the brotherhood of everybody, but I don’t believe in forcing
brotherhood upon people who don’t want it. As long as we practice brotherhood among ourselves, and then others who want to practice brotherhood with us, we will practice it with them also. We’re for that. (X, 1965b, p. 177)

Throughout this speech, Malcolm progressively attempted to include a greater portion of his audience than in the two prior.

Of the three speeches analyzed here, in this one Malcolm was the most frank with his audience. In his early rhetoric, Malcolm restated NOI doctrine and operated as a mouthpiece for Elijah Muhammad, but not as a parrhesiastes. Also, recall Terrill’s (2001) critique that Malcolm’s speech limited audience ability for action and for independent decision. In “After the Bombing,” Malcolm elevated the audience to an equal level and empowered them to make decisions, commending them for being open minded:

I am very pleased to see so many who have come out to see for yourself, where you can hear for yourself and think for yourself. Then you’ll be in a better position to make an intelligent judgment for yourself. But if you form the habit of listening to what others say about something or someone or reading what someone else has written about someone, somebody can confuse and misuse you. (X, 1965c)

Throughout this speech, Malcolm was more forthright with his audience than ever before. He displayed a new trust and confidence in his audience to make decisions for themselves and more clearly articulated his positions, especially newly adopted ones. Malcolm also fully engaged frankness in “After the Bombing,” the second element of parrhesia.

Danger was an element of parrhesia in “The Ballot or the Bullet” but was absent from “Black Man’s History.” The situation surrounding this speech could serve as evidence enough of the very real danger to Malcolm X at this time in his life. He recognized this danger and engaged it in the speech. In reference to his new work with the non-Muslim community and his previous intention to ignore the existence of the NOI, X (1965b) stated,

So they (the ‘Black Muslim’ movement) had to start doing a take-off on me. Plus, they had to try and silence me because of what they know I know. I should think they should know me well enough to know that they certainly can’t frighten me. (p. 176)

Courage in the face of danger is a defining element of parrhesia for Foucault (2001), and Malcolm, just one week away from his assassination and 24 hours removed from his house being bombed, recognized and challenged the danger he faced and acted as a parrhesiastes by referencing the “Black Muslim” movement and declaring himself unafraid of them. Thus, danger was ever-present in “After the Bombing.”

In the analysis of “The Ballot or the Bullet,” I argued that Malcolm had engaged in criticism of existing power structures (The NOI, Elijah Muhammad, the government) and as Malcolm further developed as a speaker and advocate for social intervention, it should come as no surprise that a continuation of his social critique is present in “After the Bombing” as well. Malcolm offered open and honest critiques of colonial powers (USA, France, and Great Britain), the press, Elijah Muhammad, the KKK, the federal government, other civil rights leaders, and John F. Kennedy.
Foucault (2001) argued that criticism has the capability of hurting or angering the interlocutor. Certainly Malcolm’s criticisms here pointed towards people and institutions that could be damaged. In reference to President Kennedy “psychoing [sic] the American Negro,” Malcolm argues, “Now, a lot of you all don’t like my saying that, but I wouldn’t ever take a stand on that if I didn’t know what I was talking about” (p. 173). Additionally, Malcolm made a case for his audience that his critiques were frightening to those who oppose him. He argued, “When you begin to start thinking for yourself, you frighten them, and they try and block your getting to the public, for fear that if the public listens to you, then the public won’t listen to them anymore” (p. 168). As in “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm offered open and caustic critiques of many operating power structures. Malcolm, in “After the Bombing,” engaged the fourth element of parrhesia, criticism.

Malcolm engaged each of the features of parrhesia in “After the Bombing,” and his relationship with truth was also direct. In this speech, he functioned as a truth-teller in a Foucauldian sense. Foucault (2001) stated that to engage in truth-telling a speaker “says what he knows to be true” (p. 14) and that “if there is a kind of ‘proof’ for the sincerity of the parrhesiastes, it is his [sic] courage” (p. 15, emphasis in original). Following Foucault’s criteria for proving the truthfulness of a speaker, one may or may not look to isolated aspects of the speech as proof. In this case, Malcolm’s courage is evidenced by his willingness to speak his message just hours after an attempt on his life. Because of his willingness to speak in the face of danger, Malcolm X met Foucault’s measures of truth-telling in “After the Bombing,” and fully engaged parrhesia.

Many commentaries ranging from film (Lee, 1992) to the written word (Breitman, 1967; DeCaro, 1996; Dyson, 1995; Goldman, 1979) have argued for recognition of the reconfiguration of Malcolm X’s core beliefs over his life course. Applying the principles of parrhesia to Malcolm confirmed this development from a new theoretical perspective. Additionally, using the framework of parrhesia offered a theoretical grounding for the relation of later-era Malcolm X rhetoric to the truth. My analysis of the rhetorical progression of Malcolm X from “Black Man’s History” to “The Ballot or the Bullet” to “After the Bombing” verified development in his rhetoric when considering truth-telling behaviors.

Conclusions and Implications

Foucault (2001) posited “parrhesia in its positive, critical sense does not exist where democracy exists” because “it is not possible to be heard if one does not parrot the demos’ will” (p. 83). Malcolm’s rhetoric, if it accomplished anything at all, served to critique the demos’ will and practices. His rhetoric has been widely studied and characterized many different ways: as protest (Terrill, 2001), revolutionary (Condit & Lucaites, 1993), emancipatory (Terrill, 2000), militant (Harper, 1971), and confrontational (Branham, 1995). In this essay, I characterize Malcolm X’s rhetoric as parrhesiastic and offer a new vision of Malcolm X that avoids the sentimentalization
and the hasty dismissal of X that Illo (1971) and Houck (1993) noted while engaging
X and his rhetoric, in its various forms, critically.

The rhetoric of Malcolm X illustrates that acting as a critical parrhesiastic agent is
possible in a democracy if a speaker engages the five elements of the parrhesiastic
process. Thus, parrhesia is not just a concept of truth-telling that is lost to the ages,
but a living, contextual standard by which we can judge those who enter into public
dialogue. Parrhesia ought to be a standard for democratic discourses. Parrhesia is
speech that is honest and fearless, but open to reconsideration and critical analysis.
Through an understanding of parrhesia’s elements, we are better able to identify
rhetors who engage in the parrhesiastic process. If we are able to identify duty,
criticism, danger, truth and frankness in rhetoric, we can identify speakers that function
as a parrhesiastes and those who are not. If we understand the individual elements of
parrhesia, we can practice it personally. Parrhesia begins with the courageous task of
self-reflection and self-criticism and lives in people’s ability to speak their minds in
the faces of those who disagree with what they know to be true. But while parrhesia
is fearless speech, it can also be dangerous speech. Malcolm, unfortunately, served as
an example of what can happen when speaking against a majority. But by understand-
ing the conditions of parrhesia, we can learn to function as critical agents
and engage in truth-telling behaviors when appropriate.

Parrhesia can exist in a democratic society and the relentless criticism, admirable
sense of duty, and courageoussness of Malcolm X serve as evidence that parrhesia
should be a quality emulated by current speakers and demanded by those who listen.
“Black Man’s History” -era Malcolm showed us a relatively protected person, reluc-
tant to engage in criticism of the powers that constrained him. Malcolm circa “The
Ballot or the Bullet” began to engage in social critique and moved away from the con-
straints of the NOI, but still evidenced reluctance in his speech to fully engage por-
tions of his audience. In “After the Bombing,” Malcolm, who has seen the
possibilities of brotherhood in humanity, made a stronger case for his criticism, by
speaking from the heart. In the last sentences of his autobiography, Malcolm wrote,
“Yes, I have cherished my ‘demagogue’ role. I know that societies often have killed
the people who have helped to change those societies” (X & Haley, 1964, p. 382).
Malcolm accomplished what seems to elude many individuals in contemporary
society. In a democracy, where the will of the people determines who and what will
be heard, Malcolm offered reflection, criticism, hope, and truth. He did not start
there however. In a process of constant development, parrhesia emerged over time
in Malcolm’s speech, and he can serve, even in this day and age, as a model for those
of us who strive to change this world.

Notes

of Malcolm X in the early 1990s was largely fueled by three events: the 25th anniversary of his
death, the increased media coverage due to this anniversary, and the 1992 riots in Los Angeles.

[2] I have selected “Black Man’s History,” “The Ballot or the Bullet,” and “After the Bombing”
as representative of Malcolm X’s career for two reasons. First, while recognizing the criticism
of a stage model view of X’s life (Dyson, 1992; Houck, 1993), these speeches are appropriate representatives of the social, political, and philosophical progression in X’s thought identified by many scholars (Breitman, 1967; Breitman, 1970; DeCaro, 1996; Dyson, 1992; Goldman, 1979). Secondly, each of these speeches has been utilized by other scholars (Lucaites & Condit, 1990; Terrill, 2001) to analyze X’s rhetoric and thus are recognized as speeches that can serve as useful texts for rhetorical criticism.

Following his split from the NOI, Malcolm made a pilgrimage to Africa. This trip is seen by many Malcolm X scholars to have profoundly impacted his life (Breitman, 1967; Clasby, 1974; DeCaro, 1996; Dyson, 1992, 1995; Goldman, 1979; Harper, 1971; Houck, 1993).

It is necessary to note that I am not criticizing the content of the speech itself as it is, and Malcolm’s position on the oppression of African-Americans, at this juncture of his career, stands autonomously and each individual reader can judge the speech on its own merit. I am simply arguing that the speech is devoid of the characteristics of parhesia.

The book that is cited on the reference page, X. M. (1965b), in G. Breitman (Ed.) “omits sections that were repeated or paraphrased in other speeches” (p. viii). Thus, some of the passages I use to support my arguments occurred during the speech but were not reprinted in the text I have cited. I have found the passages cited in another reproduction of the speech available at (www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_021465.htm). I have cited Breitman, except when using passages he omitted. In those cases, I have cited the online version.

References


