
Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Vanishing Point of Two Black Streams of Consciousness

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, known to many as Minister Malcolm X, were two prominent African American leaders during the second phase of the twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Today, they are remembered less for their varying principled stands and more for their mass media depictions. Their legacies have been transmitted through caricatures and soundbites, and people often pick and choose quotable statements, manipulating the context of their speeches to create a desired narrative. Over time, the interpretations of the media, scholars, and other civil rights leaders have diluted the messages of both King and el-Shabazz. The way we remember these figures does not portray a complete understanding of either leader. King and el-Shabazz were selfless leaders dedicated to securing rights for blacks in America and willing to die for speaking the truth. Both emerged as leaders selected by the people. It is not by accident, nor should it be a surprise, that many African Americans were drawn to both leaders because of their transparency and authenticity.

Contemporary understandings of King and el-Shabazz have situated the two as polar opposites. King's legacy is constructed around his battle against segregation, but more often this constructed legacy fails to include his critiques of American poverty, militarism, racism, and materialism.

Furthermore, King has been celebrated with a national holiday, and his “I Have a Dream” speech, given in August 1963 in Washington, D.C., is famously used to support colorblindness. The commercial co-optation of King’s life and image has turned him into a tolerant, domesticated icon that both political parties have embraced. Because his radicalism has been overlooked, he is seen as “an idealistic dreamer.”¹

Conversely, el-Shabazz is seen only as a violent militant, despite never using violence to achieve any of his goals. The only federal recognition of el-Shabazz’s image has been preserved on a US postage stamp. Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Spike Lee’s 1992 film *Malcolm X*, and other interpretations paint his legacy as the polar opposite of King. Moreover, these popular media outlets have been the most widely consumed portrayals of his image. Current public opinion draws more on available discourse today than from el-Shabazz and King as the main sources.

The discourse overemphasizes their differences, creating a cycle that has divided black communities rather than unified them. Clayborne Carson has identified that tendency in his article, “Unfinished Business.” Carson addressed popular discourse and argued that “rather than recognizing the points of convergence in the ideas of King and Malcolm X, most black leaders of the era, after King’s death in 1968, saw them as irreconcilable alternatives. Black people were advised to choose between King and Malcolm X, rather than affirming that each offered a partial answer to the problems of the race.”²

Extensive autobiographies³ and biographies have circulated in the media, influencing public discourse and historical scholarship. However, scholars and biographers have not yet adequately compared the political messages and insights that were present in the speeches and published articles of the two men during their respective final years. Some of these

final messages were about unity among African Americans, with the direction of the black struggle extending to a global cause for human rights, economic justice, and the importance of taking pride in African American heritage. The objective of this research is to contribute to an emerging critical body of scholarship that has challenged popular understandings and the perceived differences of King and el-Shabazz by focusing on the political discourses that each leader mobilized in his final years. A comparative analysis of King and el-Shabazz's political positions in their final years reveals that they had congruent beliefs. Currently, there has been little comparison between their transformations, and there is little emphasis on the parallels in their final years. The parallelism in the final messages of King and el-Shabazz reveals the similar beliefs of the two figures. The vanishing point represents the perspective in which King and el-Shabazz's separate streams of consciousness converge.

Extensive literature regarding el-Shabazz and King, at very specific periods of their leadership, has either chosen one or the other as the focus of Civil Rights leadership in the last 50 years. As a result, widely held comprehension of King and el-Shabazz have situated the two as polar opposites. The foundation of King's legacy is his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington in 1963, a speech that ranks among the top ten speeches of all time according to *Time* magazine.⁴ The commercial co-optation of King's life and image creates a palatable icon that both political parties have embraced. In contrast, el-Shabazz's legacy centers around his rhetoric on violence.

During the Black Power Movement in the 1970s, black power supporters focused on el-Shabazz and "dismissed King's nonviolent strategy."⁵ Following the death of el-Shabazz in 1965, Alex Haley published *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.⁶ Instantly, it became an important text, selling over six million copies by 1977.⁷ Following the release of

Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*, sales of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* increased by 300%.⁸ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* depicts el-Shabazz's life from his birth in 1925 until his assassination in February 1965. The text follows the narrative of el-Shabazz going from street hustler and con artist, to black nationalist, and toward the end of his life, to a human rights activist. However, literary critics such as Michael Eric Dyson found the text flawed, saying that it "missed the mark" because it served both "Malcom's need to shape his personal history" and Alex Haley's "political biases and ideological purposes."⁹ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* compresses el-Shabazz's final years into two chapters, which overlook his two newly formed organizations, and does not discuss his trip to Selma nor include attempts to visit King in prison.

Dyson's *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* examines the rebirth of el-Shabazz's legacy in the 1990s. Dyson argued that the rebirth of el-Shabazz's legacy was filled with different contradicting interpretations from scholars, filmmakers, the hip-hop generation, nationalists, and young black men. Dyson argued these interpretations cloud el-Shabazz's greatest accomplishments.¹⁰ Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* challenged how el-Shabazz and Alex Haley shaped a particular image of el-Shabazz.¹¹ Marable filled gaps with his in-depth research, allowing for an examination of el-Shabazz's life from several angles. Marable spent a considerable amount of time describing el-Shabazz's final year, including his break away from the Nation of Islam (NOI), and his trip to Mecca in 1964. In their recent biography *Malcolm X: A Biography*, scholars A.B. Assensoh and Yvette Alex-Assensoh analyze the historical and political context of the life and leadership of el-Shabazz. The book devotes a whole chapter to discuss el-Shabazz's final trip to Africa in 1964 and his attempts to create strong relationships with important figures in the African continent.¹²

During the rise of the liberal multi-culturalism in the 1980s, King's image was resurrected. After his death in 1968 and the release of his manuscripts at both Boston University and the King Center, there was an emergence of new major studies that became relevant in the 1980s.¹³ At the same time that scholars were producing work on King, a campaign to celebrate King's birthday as a national holiday emerged.¹⁴ He became increasingly recognized as a symbolic figure of the 20th century's social justice struggle. According to Clayborne Carson, scholarship on King has "paradoxically become more thematically ambitious and yet often more narrowly specialized."¹⁵ King himself had published three major books: *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*; *Why We Can't Wait*; and *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*¹⁶ Often, scholars use these texts as starting points because they reveal insights into King's intellectual and political evolution.

Out of this wave of scholarship in the 1980s, David Garrow and Taylor Branch¹⁷ are two of the most prominent King scholars. Garrow's *Bearing the Cross* contributes in-depth factual description containing interviews from King's closest associates, newspapers, articles, and writings and copies of FBI wiretaps that made known King's shortfalls and weaknesses. Garrow's insight into King's final year revealed a stressed and deeply troubled man. Taylor Branch contributes to King scholarship with his three-volume biography—*Parting The Waters*, *Pillar of Fire*, and *At Canaan's Edge*—that covers King's life from 1954-1968. Each author focused neither on King nor the civil rights movement as the main subject, but rather on the intersection between King and civil rights. Although King was the central figure in the books, Branch made sure to include other important figures during the movement such as the Kennedys and J. Edgar Hoover.

While the works of Garrow and Branch remain a starting point for King scholarship, recent literature on King has challenged these repre-

sentations. For example, in *Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Year*, Travis Smiley brought attention to the little-known life King led in his final year. Smiley's text chronologically examined the last twelve months that led up to King's assassination drawing from interviews and biographies by Taylor Branch and Clayborne Carson. The book fleshes out the man behind the idealized image. Instead of focusing on King as an "idealistic dreamer," Smiley concludes that "the final leg of King's journey was far rougher" than he had imagined.¹⁸ Smiley's work revealed that King's positions became more radical in his last year, but the move toward radicalization began years before, as scholar Cornell West has revealed. West, in *The Radical King*, focused on King's political radicalism that began to shift toward the end of the 1960s, presenting a little known radical side of King. In the introduction, West suggested that the more radical King is not as popular "because such courage defies our market-driven world."¹⁹ This text not only revealed King's thoughts during his final year, but also removed the veil that has had the effect of silencing the radical King.

James H. Cone's comparative assessment of King and el-Shabazz, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, is a prominent biographical work today. Cone's comparative study of both leaders not only challenges the separate narratives that many scholars have produced previously but also the cultural objects that they are today. His balanced comparison revealed how both leaders influenced one another, and how their intellectual paths overlapped. For example, in his chapter "Two Roads to Freedom," he described King and el-Shabazz as moving "away from the extremes of their original positions" toward embracing "aspects of each other's viewpoints."²⁰ Despite Cone's work, el-Shabazz and King's legacies continue to create division rather than unify and sustain unity among the oppressed. Often the division comes down to their differing views concerning the tactics of

non-violent action. Popular discourse, remembrance and interpretations of el-Shabazz and King tend to glorify each man individually rather than what they both stood for.

Vanishing Point

The views of el-Shabazz and King are usually perceived as widely separate. However, recent scholarship uncovers a merging consciousness in their respective final years. This is not to suggest that suddenly their views were parallel, nor that they had not been similar prior to their final year, but it is plausible to envision the vanishing point toward the end of their lives. March 26, 1964, is the only known encounter between King and el-Shabazz. As King left a press conference at the US Capitol Hill, the two crossed paths, and photographers, who gathered around as the two men shook hands, captured that moment. Clayborne Carson notes the “passing encounter did not bridge the gulf between the two men.” In fact, it was an unplanned encounter. The two never had a known direct dialogue, but with a close examination of their final years, they represent a vanishing point of two black streams of consciousness. The movement and the shaping of their ideas happened naturally over time and increased the more they engaged in the struggle for black freedom. The life of el-Shabazz was cut short as he began to move toward King. Similarly, King’s life was cut short as his radical side became more apparent to the public, and he shifted toward el-Shabazz. The untimely deaths of both men left them and their messages at the vanishing point of black consciousness. Although their positions in some ways seem like dramatic shifts, they had in fact been evolving. Both el-Shabazz and King were highly critical of American hypocrisy, white backlash, and integration. Despite the superficial portrayal of differences, a critical engagement of key passages reveal that they both were approaching converging stances on human rights, eco-

nomic justice, and pride in African American heritage.

El-Shabazz had begun his departure from the Nation of Islam in early 1964, and coincidentally, March 26, 1964 (the day of the handshake shared between el-Shabazz and King) symbolized an evolution for el-Shabazz. His consciousness was evolving toward a rhetoric that dealt with the “improvement of the black condition through changing the American system.”²¹ Just a few days later, after meeting King, el-Shabazz gave the “Ballot or Bullet Speech” in which he stressed the need for blacks to register to vote. He also called attention to the need for unity. “Unity is the right religion,” he asserted. “Black people must forget their differences and discuss the points on which they can agree.”²² His break with the Nation also allowed him to practice what he called true Islam. In the spring of 1964, el-Shabazz returned from his life-altering trip to Mecca. Upon his return, he immediately began to envision the possibility of brotherhood. According to Manning Marable, “toward the end of his life he could imagine the destruction of racism itself, and the possibility of creating a humane social order devoid of racial injustice.”²³ El-Shabazz began moving away from black separatism toward a politics of global justice, which he referred to as human rights. He also established two organizations, the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU) modeled after the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI), which served as a religious organization.

In addition to the organizations that he established, el-Shabazz also made it a priority to reach out to other civil rights organizations. In February of 1965, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) invited el-Shabazz to speak in Selma, Alabama. During his trip, he attempted to visit King who was in prison at the time. However, owing to the resistance of local law enforcement officials, el-Shabazz was unable to visit. Nonetheless, he did speak with Coretta Scott King. In their brief

conversation, he amicably offered his viewpoints on the future of the non-violent movement and expressed his interest in working with King. If their status as leaders and climate of society would not allow them to work with one another, el-Shabazz believed that he would balance and augment King by offering himself as an alternative to white America. He told Mrs. King that "he didn't come to make [King's] job more difficult."²⁴ There was much resistance to el-Shabazz during that period of his evolution, and he was under consistent threat from some members of NOI as well as some government agencies. On February 14, 1965, seven days before his assassination, el-Shabazz and his family faced a direct attack when his house was bombed. His last year was extremely taxing and was ended tragically on February 21, 1965.

Until April 4, 1967, King had yet to speak on the war that continued to escalate in Vietnam. Sticking with his views against violence, King openly began to criticize US involvement in the war, calling it "an enemy of the poor" and noting that he would "attack it as such."²⁵ King strongly believed that social change was best achieved through non-violent action. However, with the war escalating, the younger, less patient activists saw potential contradiction in his argument. "They asked, and rightly so, 'What about Vietnam?' They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted."²⁶ For King, this question was crucial, and he took it seriously. He stated, "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without first having spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government."²⁷ In King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, he argued that "we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values... we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society." He insisted that "when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered

more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”²⁸ King challenged Americans to choose between “nonviolent coexistence or violent annihilation.”²⁹ King believed this choice “may well be mankind’s last chance to choose between chaos and community.”³⁰ As King’s ideas evolved in his final year, he was able to see the African American civil rights struggle as linked to an even bigger issue. King felt that “communism is a judgment on our failure to make democracy real.”³¹ He believed that once the US underwent this true revolution of values, it would cause Americans “to question the fairness and justice” of “past and present policies.”³² King was also aware of the challenge given “the Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn.”³³ As a cautionary note, he asserted that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”³⁴ King also put more emphasis on reducing poverty as the nation moved forward.

Some civil rights leaders saw King speaking out on the war as “betraying the cause,” a phrase used as a chapter title in Tavis Smiley’s *Death of a King*. As Smiley noted, many media outlets spoke out in opposition to King’s assessment. For example, the *Washington Post* claimed King “has done a grave injury to those who are his natural allies...and...an even graver injury to himself. Many who have listened to him with respect will never again accord him the same confidence. He has diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country, and to his people.”³⁵ The criticism was not limited to the media or other external personnel. For instance, his mentor of many years, Bayard Rustin, asserted that “King has alienated many of the Negro’s friends and armed the Negro’s foes, in both parties, by creating the impression that the Negro is disloyal.”³⁶

After the backlash he received, King was viewed more as a contro-

versial civil rights activist. Moreover, as the year went on, his militancy became more visible. In response to his critics, he asserted that, “there’s something strangely inconsistent about a nation and a press that will praise you when you say, ‘Be non-violent toward Jim Clark,’ but will curse and damn you when you say, ‘Be non-violent toward little brown Vietnamese children.’ There’s something wrong with that press!” Many didn’t see the connection he saw between civil rights movement in American and the war abroad. The evolutionary period of King’s ideas continued throughout the year from his critiques of Vietnam, militarism, poverty, and materialism to his belief in America’s need to revolutionize its ideals from a “thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.”³⁷ He called for a “true revolution of values.” Unfortunately, the same people who praise him today have often ignored much of his evolving ideas.

During his last few months, King stated in a conversation with Harry Belafonte, “I’m afraid that America may be losing what moral vision she may have had...And I’m afraid that even as we integrate, we are walking into a place that does not understand that this nation needs to be deeply concerned with the plight of the poor and disenfranchised.”³⁸ King, fearing that he may have worked to integrate into a failing system, added, “I’ve come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house.”³⁹ Instead, the popular image and imagination of King today shows him as an easy-going domesticated icon.

King had once been concerned about his popularity and how it would be interpreted. In an August 1967 address that he delivered at the annual convention of the National Association of Radio Announcers, King expressed his concern about his acceptance as a reasonable leader. King stated: “I always get a little worried when I’m referred to as a responsible leader because so often when some people call you a responsible leader they are really telling you that you are a leader who will not tell the truth

on behalf of your people.”⁴⁰ He continued to argue that when one is coined and accepted as a responsible leader, what that really means is “you are a leader more concerned about your budget than you are the freedom of your people. So often they really mean you are a leader willing to say to the white power structure what they want to hear rather than what they ought to hear.”⁴¹ Unfortunately, because of co-optation and romantic depiction of his radicalism, he has become known as the “leader willing to say to the white power structure what they want to hear rather than what they ought to hear.”⁴² As a result, this label became easily digestible for mass society. This label has also birthed the modern day rhetoric that king is an idealistic dreamer. Despondently, before his evolving critique was actualized, King’s life was cut short.

Parallel Messages

Pride in African American heritage was a point in which el-Shabazz and King converged. For el-Shabazz, the lack of pride was a serious issue. He once stated that “what divided us” in the black freedom movement was “our lack of pride. Our lack of racial identity. Our lack of racial pride. Our lack of cultural roots.”⁴³ He encouraged African Americans to have self-dignity and pride in where they came from. He argued that, because of white supremacy, African American’s were conditioned to think less of themselves. When they thought less of themselves, they expected less. To combat this internal inferiority complex, el-Shabazz believed that it was critical to study one’s history and that “the thing that has made the so-called Negro in America fail, more than anything, is your, my lack of knowledge concerning history.”⁴⁴ Therefore, he strongly believed that investing time to understand history would liberate African Americans and successfully combat self-hate and internal racism. This knowledge of self, for el-Shabazz, extended far beyond the history and experiences of the

enslaved Africans and their impact on African history prior to European civilizations. He felt it was important for African Americans to know the truth that they were not brought over on slave ships because they were perceived as inferior but because of their abilities.

Similar to el-Shabazz, in King's final year, he too took a stance on the importance of black pride. Toward the end of King's life he began to expand his teachings regarding pride. In particular, King's teachings expanded and focused on the need for African Americans to have pride in who they are. In a little known speech given in Cleveland, Ohio, in April 1967, King proclaimed African Americans needed to "sign" their own "emancipation proclamation."⁴⁵ Emphasizing self-help for the black community meant moving beyond reliance on governmental initiatives: "Nobody else can do this for us. No document can do this for us. No Lincolnian emancipation proclamation can do this for us. No Tennessonian or Johnsonian civil rights bill can do this for us."⁴⁶ Although the physical form of slavery was past, the posttraumatic damage caused by slavery remained. In essence, African Americans are physically free. Nevertheless, the residue of slavery is still present in the mental composition of African Americans. Freeing one's mind from mental enslavement was a significant piece, and King asserted that "as long as the mind is enslaved the body can never be free. Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery."⁴⁷ Overall, it was of significant importance for both el-Shabazz and King to speak on black pride and express it to their followers.

While abroad in 1964, el-Shabazz told the *Egyptian Gazette* that he believed African Americans could "never get civil rights" until their "human rights are first restored."⁴⁸ In other words, he charged that the United States of America failed to recognize African Americans as full humans deserving human rights. After shifting his rhetoric to human rights, el-

Shabazz believed that other nations could effectively add pressure to the US. He highlighted the African American struggle and depicted the black freedom movement as a critical component of a growing world problem. He believed that African Americans “will never be recognized as citizens” in America “until we are first recognized as humans... [because] the American ‘system’ (political, economic and social) was produced from the enslavement of the black man, and this present ‘system’ is capable only of perpetuating that enslavement.”⁴⁹

Similarly, in 1967 King began to express his views on human rights. According to King, the Civil Rights Movement must move from an “era of civil rights to the era of human rights.”⁵⁰ King went on to suggest “we in the civil rights movement must come all out now and make it clear that America is a hypocritical nation and that America must set her own house in order.”⁵¹ Because of their premature deaths, it is difficult to judge the exact degree to which el-Shabazz and King foresaw the African American struggle extending to human rights. Nevertheless, they both strongly believed that limiting the African American plight to a civil rights struggle neglected African-American historical experiences.

El-Shabazz and King thoroughly understood and shared a devotion to black consciousness. This evolving black consciousness was the foundational pathway that ultimately led them to the belief that African Americans must become more independent to achieve economic justice. El-Shabazz believed that African Americans should invest in themselves and in their communities by supporting black owned businesses. On April 12, 1964, in his “Ballot or Bullet” speech, he stated that “we should own, operate, and control the economy of our community... we have to become involved in a program of re-education to educate our people into the importance of knowing that when you spend your dollar out of the community in which you live, the community in which you spend your money becomes richer

and richer.”⁵² He understood that other communities, such as the Jewish community, were successful because they invested in themselves. The lack of investment in the community had slowed African American progress. By continuing to spend outside of the community, African Americans lost value in their community. According to el-Shabazz, this lack of economic cohesion contributed to the oppression African Americans faced. Speaking about the importance of a unified community, el-Shabazz asserted that “the only way our problem can be solved is that, instead of sitting around waiting for the white man to solve it, the black people have to come together. We have to forget our differences, our economic differences, our social differences.”⁵³ In the final year of King’s life, he too had come to realize the importance of self-help in the movement. By urging black self-reliance, King’s last speech asserted a stream of consciousness similar to that of el-Shabazz. According to King, “we’ve got to strengthen black institutions,” and by doing so “we begin the process of building a greater economic base.” He also suggested economic withdrawal to put “pressure where it really hurts.”⁵⁴ He reminded the audience that they should unify themselves economically by noting that “individually we are poor when you compare us with white society in America. We are poor. Never stop and forget that collectively, that means all of us together, collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world.”⁵⁵ Both el-Shabazz and King had expressed similar feelings toward the economic injustice that African Americans faced and shared similar solutions to the problem.

Another subject of convergence between el-Shabazz and King is their views on integration. Like many in the NOI, el-Shabazz was against integration, and even after departing from the Nation, he continued to have this belief. He did not believe true integration was achievable, and instead, believed that all of the effort toward integration was tokenism. He asserted that “the 22 million Afro-Americans do not seek either separation or inte-

gration. They seek recognition and respect as human beings... We declare our rights on this earth... to be human beings.”⁵⁶ King’s views on integration were not far from those of el-Shabazz. However, King was a bit more hopeful that integration was possible. Nevertheless, King fully recognized that token integration would not suffice. Most importantly, he emphasized that his views on integration were, in fact, about shared power not the minimal ability to sit at the same counter. For King, integration was “more than something to be dealt with in aesthetic or romantic terms.”⁵⁷ He added, “I think in the past all too often we did it that way... and it ended up as merely adding color to a still predominantly white power structure. What is necessary now is to see integration in political terms where there is sharing of power.”⁵⁸ Definitions of integration varied throughout the Civil Rights Movement, but certainly King and el-Shabazz were not satisfied that only a select few African Americans received their rights.

Throughout most of the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement, members of the Ku Klux Klan and the stereotypical confederate-loving southerner remained the most antagonistic opponents of African Americans. However, both el-Shabazz and King came to see that their biggest opposition was from the white liberals. For el-Shabazz, this was of no surprise. Throughout his leadership, he had voiced his feelings toward white liberalism and saw evidence for his beliefs in America’s political system: “Politically the American Negro is nothing but a football and the white liberals control this mentally dead ball through tricks of tokenism: false promises of integration and civil rights.”⁵⁹ He described the system as being a “profitable game of deceiving and exploiting the political politician of the American Negro.”⁶⁰ He credited the process to white liberals and the cooperation of some civil rights leaders. “These ‘leaders,’” he asserted, “sell out our people for just a few crumbs of token recognition and token gains.”⁶¹ After what King saw as slow progress, he also came to share

similar feelings toward liberal whites. He stated, "over the last few years many Negroes have felt that their most troublesome adversary was not the obvious bigot of the Ku Klux Klan or the John Birch Society, but the white liberal who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice, who prefers tranquility to equality."⁶² As King expanded his civil rights work farther north, he encountered different opposition from northern whites. Toward the end of his life, he came to believe that it was not so much his enemies who were slowing the process for full rights to African Americans but his closet liberal friends who were not willing to fully involve themselves in the plight for African American rights.

Throughout el-Shabazz's public speaking, he consistently exposed American hypocrisy. He argued that the "forefathers committed a crime by bringing our people here to this country...This was a crime and all of those crimes that were committed during 310 years against the black people in this country are the crimes that have come home to roost today on this present generation of whites."⁶³ He boldly challenged America to admit its past atrocity committed against African Americans. King, in his evolving final year, publicly called attention to the hypocrisy in US history. While speaking about the country's most notable figures, King noted that "George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, John Quincy Adams, John Calhoun, and Abraham Lincoln were great men, but, that 'but' underscores the fact that not one of these men had a strong, unequivocal belief in the equality of the black man."⁶⁴ In fact, each of those men had either some involvement in the perpetuation of slavery or held the belief that blacks were inferior. King reminded America that "a society is always eager to cover misdeeds with a cloak of forgetfulness, but no society can fully repress an ugly past when the ravages persist into the present."⁶⁵ Both el-Shabazz and King used their platforms to unapologetically speak about the hypocrisy of America.

In early February 1965, el-Shabazz visited Selma, Alabama. During his visit he addressed NBC news reporters and was asked to speak on non-violence as a form of protest. He stated “I believe that it is right to be non-violent with people that are non-violent. But when you’re dealing with an enemy who doesn’t know what non-violence is, as far as I’m concerned, you’re wasting your time.”⁶⁶ In other words, he felt that America was incapable of being non-violent. That incapability was demonstrated several weeks later on March 7, 1965, now remembered as “Bloody Sunday,” when law enforcement officials used brutal force to destabilize a peaceful protest. While el-Shabazz is most remembered for his revolutionary call to freedom “By Any Means Necessary” and his critiques of nonviolence, his militancy never led him actually to use violence personally in the pursuit of his goals. Most of his critics deem him violent despite this fact. Most interpretations of el-Shabazz fail to acknowledge his explanation for disagreeing with non-violent direct action. In one of his final speeches he clarified that “if Martin Luther King was teaching white people to turn the other cheek, then I would say he was justified in teaching black people to turn the other cheek. That’s all I’m against.”⁶⁷ This statement foreshadowed King’s public critique of the war in Vietnam that occurred two years later.

As the Vietnam War continued, and many young black men were being drafted to fight for a country that did little for them, King addressed the War and some of the questions that were being asked of him. In his speech “Beyond Vietnam” on April 4, 1967, he was forced to address the nation for its violence. In this address, he clearly explained, “I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.”⁶⁸ With those words, King addressed el-Shabazz’s belief that King should urge African American and

white Americans to be mutually non-violent. Moreover, King's view added more creditably to el-Shabazz's statement that African Americans are "dealing with an enemy who doesn't know what non-violence is."⁶⁹

In a perspective drawing, the vanishing point is an imaginary point where two parallel lines meet. King and el-Shabazz represent different streams of black consciousness. When scholarship focuses on their final years, the vanishing point of these two streams of consciousness can be envisioned. At this vanishing point, it becomes clear that they came to similar worldviews and understandings of the struggle for black freedom. It is important to remember both King and el-Shabazz as leaders who were highly involved in a positive outcome of the black freedom movement and not as self-serving individuals detached from the movement of which they were a part. From this understanding, both el-Shabazz and King would advise their followers that the differences between them were not as important as their communal sense of commitment to the struggle for African American advancement and achievement of brotherhood for all. Re-imagining how we interpret their legacies by focusing on their final years can bridge the apparent division. Where these two black streams of consciousness converge will then allow for a more nuanced conversation from which contemporary movements are born.

More than fifty years ago el-Shabazz was assassinated, and today black Americans are still fighting to be recognized as human beings. The "Black Lives Matter" movement has been the latest to emerge in the continuous black freedom struggle. At this time there are many, inside and outside the African American community, who have been scrambling in search of the next leader to emerge and take up the torch that el-Shabazz and King left behind. As we search for those leaders, it is important that we look for leadership that is well informed about the history. "Black Lives Matter" activists and young leaders must understand the importance of taking back

the history of King and el-Shabazz. It should not be the case that King is made into a domesticated icon, while el-Shabazz is completely disregarded rather than recognized as an important figure of that time. We need not re-invent the wheel; we can simply pick up where the black freedom struggle left off. We must not repeat history because of our lack of historical understanding. Not only should we hold everyone accountable for getting the narrative right, but we should also be well informed ourselves. It is clear that something is at stake when a narrative is intentionally created and, by design, leaves out the fact that both leaders evolved to reach a similar point in their political thought. The convergence of King and el-Shabazz teaches us that, as black people, we must work to unify body and thought, recognizing our financial and political power and influence just as our leaders before us have done.

Notes

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