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Plymouth Rock Landed on Us: Malcolm X's Whiteness Theory as a Basis for Alternative Literacy

Using Burkean theory, I claim that Malcolm X brilliantly exposed the rhetoric and epistemology of whiteness as he rejected the African American jeremiad—a dominant form of African American oratory for more than 150 years. Whiteness theory served as the basis for Malcolm X's alternative literacy, which raises important questions that literacy theorists have yet to consider.

From the early 1990s to the present, Ruth Frankenberg, David Roediger, coauthors Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek, and other academics have focused on race by uncovering, interrogating, and theorizing whiteness as a largely unacknowledged but vastly important rhetorical and epistemological system. Nakayama and Krizek consider whiteness "relatively unchartered territory" that "has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain" (291). Whiteness, they claim, "wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position" (291). Further, they argue, "whiteness has assumed the position of an uninterrogated space" (293). Many whites, they argue, refuse to acknowledge their ethnicity, claiming simply to be human, thereby erasing from whiteness "its history and its social

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status" and rendering it "invisible" (298). Those same whites, Nakayama and Krizek continue, paradoxically treat their own "experiences and communication patterns" as "the norm from which others are marked" (293). Yet, Nakayama and Krizek contend, to reveal "how whites have constructed their own social locations of whiteness" means to "displace its centrality and reveal its [previously] invisible position" (292). Frankenberg agrees, maintaining that whiteness is, in her words, a largely "unmarked" source of "dominance" and "normativity" in American life, for many whites prefer to ignore their own racial identity while viewing race as "an apparently distant and abstract concept" (5). Roediger adds, "To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it" (6).

I contend that whiteness is "relatively unchartered territory" for these theorists and others only because they ignore Malcolm X. For over a decade, in hundreds of speeches to masses of people who generally lacked much formal education, he repeatedly and thoroughly exposed, interrogated, theorized, critiqued, and debunked whiteness as an epistemology and a rhetoric. He did so through a project that amounted to nothing less than dismantling and reconstructing African American identity.

Malcolm X theorized whiteness through his radical response to an extremely popular form of oratory—the African American jeremiad. I use Burkean theory to argue that the extreme pervasiveness and longevity of this jeremiad—from the late-18th century through the mid-1960s—rendered it vulnerable to Malcolm X's harsh critique.[1]

Malcolm X became an important figure precisely because he eloquently attacked a set of identifications that, beginning in the 18th century, entire generations of orators had with little alteration brandished and fostered for more than 150 years.

Although Malcolm X's radicalism was evident in his regular denunciations of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, and other contemporaneous, nonviolent leaders, Malcolm X rarely mentioned noteworthy historical figures of African American dissent—such as Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, or W.E.B. Du Bois—or even hinted at the exceedingly long tradition of African American agitation against slavery and racism.[2] Like Malcolm X himself, scholars and the public have interpreted him almost exclusively in the context of the racial protests of the 1950s and 1960s.[3]

Yet Malcolm X became an important figure precisely because he eloquently attacked a set of identifications that, beginning in the 18th century, entire generations of orators had with little alteration brandished and fostered for more than 150 years. Malcolm X maintained that, instead of upholding

universal values, this body of identifications masked America's pervasive culture of whiteness. Malcolm X's exposure of the rhetoric of whiteness enabled him to enact what Bruce Horner calls "counter-hegemonic literacy training" when he founded and edited a Black Nationalist newspaper and when, at Temple Number Seven in Harlem, he taught a class in Western civilization. In this editorship and in his class, his rhetoric empowered him to teach his students, in Horner's words, "to withhold recognition . . . of the cultural capital of the literacy of dominant groups" (753).

Below I explain the structure and history of the African American jeremiad and note the identifications that it spawned. I sketch King's early and mid-career embrace of it and analyze Malcolm X's interpretation of it as a manifestation of what Kenneth Burke terms "casuistic stretching" and "bureaucratized imagination." I further argue that Malcolm X's disdain for the jeremiad provides what Burke calls a "perspective by incongruity" that interrogates whiteness. Next I explain Malcolm X as a theorist and practitioner of alternative literacy. Finally, I explore implications of Malcolm X as a whiteness theorist and a source for alternative literacy.

As David Howard-Pitney explains, African American jeremiads feature three basic elements: past Promise, current Failure, and eventual Fulfillment. Before the Civil War, speakers attacked slavery by offering three claims: first, founders built America on the promise of democracy; second, slavery grossly violated the promise; and third, the Declaration of Independence and the Bible articulate the promise and warrant its eventual fulfillment. By appealing to scriptural and patriotic authorities, orators invoked and reinforced American civil religion, which fuses allegiance to God and allegiance to the United States.

These jeremiads began at least by the late 1780s and 1790s, when John Marrant and Prince Hall appealed to principles of Christianity as reasons to outlaw slavery.

In 1808 Peter Williams quoted lines from the Declaration of Independence—including, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal"—and claimed that the sentiment should apply not only to whites but also to African Americans. In 1830 Williams again lambasted white hypocrisy, proclaiming that blacks "are deprived of their unalienable rights by the very men who so loudly rejoice in the declaration that 'all men are born free and equal'" (115). Two years later Peter Osborne yoked the Bible and the Declaration and held that they both condemned slavery. Two other prominent figures, John Mercer Langston and Henry Highland Garnet, reiterated Osborne's appeal in 1855 and 1864, respectively. In 1857 Frances Ellen Watkins invoked

the Bible and the American Revolution as touchstones for judging the monstrosity of slavery ("Liberty").

Regularly organizing his orations according to Promise/Failure/Fulfillment, Douglass chose the same religious and patriotic benchmarks favored by these previous orators.[4] Treating the Declaration as a promise, Douglass often paraphrased or quoted it, especially the passage "all men are created equal." After doing so in an 1839 speech, he used lines from a poem by William Cowper to explain that the Declaration articulated racial equality:

> Fleecy locks and black complexions
> Do not alter nature's claim.
> Skin may differ, but affections
> Dwell in black and white the same.
> (qtd. in Douglass, "Slavery and Limits" 277, 280)[5]

One of Douglass's routine platform strategies was to measure the horrors of slavery against the ideals of the Declaration. For example, in 1846 he asserted:

> [Americans'] declaration put forth that all men were born free, and were equally entitled to certain inalienable rights—to life and liberty in the pursuit of happiness . . . and yet . . . under the very eaves-droppings of their political institutions, under the very eaves-droppings of their chapels, were heard the clank of the fetters and the rattling of the chains which bound their miserable slaves together to be driven by the lash of their driver . . . to be sold in the market like brutes. ("Slavery as It" 347)

But Douglass argued that the brutality of fetters and chains did not corrode the noble sentiments inscribed on July 4, 1776. In another speech from 1846, this spellbinding figure announced, "I love the Declaration of Independence, I believe it contains a true doctrine—'that all men are born equal.' It is, however, because [Americans] do not carry out this principle that I am here to speak" ("British Influence" 221). He consistently maintained that the promise of the Declaration was valid and its eventual realization certain. During the same speech, he declared that, no matter how egregious slavery was, it could never prevail:

> So sure a truth is, stronger than error, so sure as right is better than wrong, so sure as religion is better than infidelity, so sure must slavery of every form in every land become extinct. Anti-slavery must triumph. God has decreed its triumph. All nature has proclaimed its triumph . . . by the force of truth. ("British Influence" 219)

In his most celebrated speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" from 1852, Douglass bitterly decried bondage. The Bible and the Declaration, he claimed, held the promise that slavery would eventually disappear. Quoting a poem by William Lloyd Garrison, he concluded that, once slavery would vanish, utopian splendor would unfold throughout the nation.

But Douglass's conclusion was wrong. Instead of utopia, the end of slavery—and the period of Reconstruction—brought one hideous calamity after another. Refusing to admit his mistake, the postbellum Douglass simply updated his earlier message of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. Rather than assault slavery, as he did before the war, he denounced sharecropping, calling it a disguised form of bondage. Emulating Ida B. Wells, he railed at lynching and other crimes of Southern white barbarians. He kept citing the Declaration and its promise of equality and kept maintaining that the promise would one day be realized. In 1886 he equated the Biblical Exodus with the signing of the Declaration and upbraided officials who denied the ballot to African Americans and mobs who lynched them. Despite these grotesque violations, he asked listeners to keep embracing the promise. In the same address, he instructed African Americans to conduct decorous demonstrations that would register "a favorable impression" on "our fellow-citizens" and hasten the advent of racial equality ("Strong" 217). He delivered many similar speeches.

Joining Douglass, other postbellum speakers reiterated the familiar argument of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. While continuing to appeal to the Declaration and the Bible, they added new touchstones—most notably the Emancipation Proclamation and the Constitution, specifically the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments, which passed in the aftermath of the Civil War.

In 1874 Robert Elliott, a member of Congress, vigorously protested segregation and urged a ban on racial discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and trains. He interpreted the Emancipation Proclamation and the new constitutional amendments as efforts to implement the promise of the Declaration. Like Douglass in 1852 and afterward, Elliott ended optimistically, in his case, by quoting a touching passage of scripture.

In 1905 Francis Grimke, a well-known minister, discussed the "right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and the precept that "all men are born free and equal," then deplored conditions in the South, where ". . . the life of a Negro isn't worth as much as that of a dog" ("Negro" 400, 403). In 1919 he again cited the Declaration while decrying lynching ("Race Problem" 605, 621).[6]

Grimke shared poetry with his audiences, including these lines from abolitionist James Russell Lowell:

> Truth forever on the scaffold,
> Wrong forever on the throne,
> Yet that scaffold sways the future.
> (qtd. in Grimke, "Centennial" 86)

and this one from abolitionist William Cullen Bryant:

> Truth crushed to earth will rise again.
> (qtd. in Grimke, "Remedy" 331–32)

Lowell's and Bryant's verses helped explain the dynamic paradox of Failure/Fulfillment: evil may reign, frustrating the design of the universe, but only temporarily. Bryant's sentence seems to extrapolate the meaning of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection: just as Jesus was entombed in the earth before He ascended, so here "truth" is "crushed to earth" before it can "rise again."

In 1893 William Crogman assaulted segregation, mentioned the Bible, and reiterated the lines from Cowper that Douglass had recited ("Fleecy locks and dark complexions/Do not alter nature's claim.") ("Negro's Claims" 173).

During the same year Wells varied the jeremiad by analyzing gender issues that male orators generally ignored while retaining what had become stylized appeals to predictable benchmarks. She explained the brutal racial and gender dynamics that prompted tragic and widespread lynching. Like many predecessors on the platform, she quoted the Bible and the Declaration; she also incorporated lyrics from "America" ("My country 'tis of thee . . . /Land of the Pilgrims' pride") as she replayed Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. She used her conclusion to predict that utopia would materialize when murder-by-rope and racism cease.

By embracing part of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment, one could imply the rest. In 1903 Du Bois did that when, concluding the most famous chapter of his most famous book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he brandished the Declaration as a warrant against racism (35).

Even a singer could argue Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) prevented Marian Anderson, a stellar African American contralto, from performing at Constitution Hall. On Easter Sunday, Anderson protested the racism of the DAR by singing at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, before 75,000 people. Many more listened on national radio as she sang European classics, African American spirituals, and

"America" ("My country 'tis of thee . . . /Land of the Pilgrims' pride"). Re-enacting the familiar appeal to Promise/Failure/Fulfillment, she implied that the promise of Christ's Resurrection, Lincoln's emancipation, and the Pilgrims' landing would eventually destroy prejudice (Sandage; Miller and Lewis).

Many orators—both celebrated and quotidian—brought jeremiads to annual ceremonies honoring emancipation in the West Indies (Bowers) and, later, at similar festivities honoring the Emancipation Proclamation (Wiggins; Vander Lei and Miller). In 1895, on the anniversary of Lincoln's edict, Crogman explained the popularity of such commemorative addresses:

> And so, while I am here to-day endeavoring to address you, Negro orators are discussing the same subject elsewhere, not now in the large [Southern] cities only, but also in the more remote towns and villages of the rural districts. ("Thirty-Second" 315)

Disdaining Promise/Failure/Fulfillment, three prominent orators—Martin Delany, Henry McNeal Turner, and Marcus Garvey—urged separation from white oppressors. Turner, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, instilled racial pride by declaring, "God is a Negro." During the 1910s and early 1920s, Garvey, a popular figure in Harlem, quoted the Bible and staged popular parades in Harlem. All three leaders urged listeners to emigrate to Africa.

Other superlative antebellum and postbellum orators—most notably Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper—complicated the jeremiad by explaining racial and gender exploitation as inseparably intertwined. For example, in 1832 Stewart decried gender oppression while portraying Jeremiah, George Washington, and the Pilgrims as heroes—figures whose examples could inspire antislavery agitation. In 1866 Harper firmly declared, "You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs" ("We" 459). In the same speech she tied racism to sexism and linked the American Revolution to the cause of racial equality. For her part, Truth often interpreted the Bible while protesting bondage and championing women's rights.

These women's incisive analyses, however, exerted little influence on their male counterparts. Separatist male orators—Delany, Turner, Garvey, and Malcolm X—and integrationist male rhetors—Elliott, Grimke, Crogman, Du Bois, and King—all thundered against racism while ignoring gender inequities.[7]

With the help of television and radio, King poured the argument of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment into tens of millions of white ears. He often hailed the Declaration as an affirmation of racial equality, sometimes reciting the same lines from Cowper that Douglass and Crogman had favored:

> Fleecy locks and black complexions
> Do not alter nature's claim.
> Skin may differ, but affections
> Dwell in black and white the same.
> ("Facing" 77; "Realistic" 170–71)

Like Grimke, King repeated Bryant's words,

> Truth crushed to earth will rise again.

and Lowell's passage,

> Truth forever on the scaffold,
> Wrong forever on the throne,
> Yet that scaffold sways the future.
> ("Give" 215; "Facing" 82)[8]

Grimke and King cited Bryant's and Lowell's verses to affirm the eventual realization of equality despite brutal racism. For the same reason, King often recalled the Biblical Exodus, a favorite topic of African American spirituals and of folk sermons that began during slavery. Black Christians prized the narrative of Exodus because it celebrated unarmed slaves' triumph over the Pharaoh's seemingly invincible army (Glaude). Through their exegesis of Exodus, entire generations of preachers, including King, articulated Promise/Failure/Fulfillment: despite the evils of Egyptian bondage, they argued, God would eventually realize His promise by rescuing the enslaved Hebrews/African Americans.

Delivered at the Lincoln Memorial (where Anderson had sung in 1939), King's "I Have a Dream" is a classic jeremiad.[9] After hailing the Emancipation Proclamation, King sketched a nightmare of racial injustice that blocked the American promise. Then he announced, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal'" (2532). This assertion replayed Douglass's and many others' appeals to the Jeffersonian touchstone and their hopes for the fulfillment of its promise. After quoting familiar Biblical passages, King concluded by sketching a vision of the utopian harmony that would ensue once racism ends. Like Wells, he introduced this vision by incorporating the lyrics of "America" ("My country 'tis of thee . . ./Land of the Pilgrims' pride"), thereby adding the Pilgrims to the Bible, the Declaration, and the Emancipation Proclamation as warrants for the fulfillment of the American promise (Klumpp; Branham; Vander Lei and Miller).[10]

The jeremiad speakers basically contended that the U.S. is moving in a trajectory toward equality. They argued as follows: although the pledge of equality was announced in the Declaration, it was, at first, dimly understood; then Lincoln moved the U.S. toward equality by freeing the slaves; current agitation was pushing the nation further toward equal rights; and the U.S. would inexorably achieve full democracy at some future moment. Much like Douglass, King, in "I Have a Dream" and hundreds of other speeches, consistently outlined the arc of this trajectory, claiming that the nation would extricate itself from the "quicksand" of racial injustice and keep moving until it reached freedom.

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For scintillating orators, the Argument by Trajectory proved hugely advantageous. Despite Jefferson's slaves and Lincoln's racism (Zarefsky), the argument enabled speakers to hail Jefferson, Lincoln, and their pivotal documents as symbols of equity and proof of a grand, national movement toward complete civil rights. The Argument by Trajectory empowered orators to define themselves as stakeholders in a principle—equality—that remained pristine despite the weed-choked centuries of the Middle Passage, slavery, murder, rape, castration, torture, civil war, poverty, sharecropping, disfranchisement, and segregation. The precept of Equality by Trajectory seemed grounded in redemptive, patriotic moments in 1776 and 1863 that were later ratified by conclusive military victories—first at Yorktown, then at Appomattox.

Further, the Argument by Trajectory inspired many to enlist in grand moral crusades. If speakers only dramatize barbarism, audiences will simply retreat to their homes and nurture their families. Merely cataloguing nightmares would never prompt listeners to hurl themselves at slavery or segregation. Only people with prodigious hope will wrestle gargantuan evils. A panoply of orators instilled hope by claiming that mass agitation could inaugurate utopia.

Malcolm X repeatedly referred to the Argument by Trajectory, constantly evoked the promise of American civil religion, and deplored the folly of racism.

But he exploded the hope for fulfillment.

Instead of appealing to listeners' Christianity, as even previous separatist leaders—such as Turner and Garvey—had done, Malcolm X urged blacks to

abandon their faith and follow Elijah Muhammad into the Nation of Islam (NOI). Through hundreds of coruscating speeches in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Hartford, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, he recruited thousands—many of whom were criminals, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, alcoholics, and other outcasts—into the NOI.

Malcolm X's commanding presence on the platform and the airwaves captivated multitudes. On hundreds of occasions he assailed the entire body of identifications that the Argument by Trajectory had fostered. Rather than celebrate the Pilgrims, he denounced them as the precursors of slaveholders:

> We didn't land on Plymouth Rock . . . Plymouth Rock landed on *us*! (Malcolm X and Haley, *Autobiography* 201; Malcolm X, "Twenty Million" 40)

> You didn't come here on the *Mayflower.* You came here on a slave ship. In chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. ("Message" 4–5)

He exposed the dominant political parties and America itself as masks for whiteness:

> I'm not a Democrat, I'm not a Republican, And I don't even consider myself an American. ("Ballot" 25; "Leverett" 134)

> A cat can have kittens in an oven but that doesn't make them biscuits. I was born in Omaha; that doesn't make me an American. (qtd. in Crawford 98)

He added:

> You're nothing but Africans. Nothing but Africans. ("Ballot" 26, "Second" 87–88)

> We're just as much African today as we were in Africa four hundred years ago. ("Harvard Law" 182)

He defined himself and his listeners as "ex-slaves" and contended that, for them, the U.S. constituted, not freedom, but a "prison" ("Message" 8; "Twenty Million"). An analogy clarified African Americans' disaffiliation from the American Promise:

> I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner. . . . Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born in America doesn't make you an American. ("The Ballot" 26)

Malcolm X implied that, while hardly affecting whites for well over two centuries, the Argument by Trajectory had had the ironic effect of cementing black listeners' loyalty to American civil religion. Not only did such appeals fail to advance African American aspirations, Malcolm X contended, they placed blacks in a conceptual prison of misplaced identification, a prison he sought to open. Although African Americans had fought and died in every American war, their bravery was rewarded with severe mistreatment. Instead of extolling these soldiers for saving democracy, he defined their allegiance as devotion to whiteness:

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> As long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled. He sent you to Germany, you bled. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled. You bleed for white people. But when it comes to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls being murdered, you haven't got any blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed. You bite when the white man says bite. And you bark when the white man says bark. ("Message" 7, "At a Meeting" 125)

Referring to "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X asked simply, "How in the world can a Negro talk about the Declaration of Independence when he is still singing 'We Shall Overcome'?" ("Speech" 12).

Through all these statements, and hundreds of others, Malcolm X rejected the identifications, the work, and even the goal, not only—as he stated—of King and the Southern freedom struggle, but also—as he failed to state—of the dominant African American leadership from 1788 through 1965.

This entire appeal challenged Promise/Failure/Fulfillment by exploiting a huge, obvious problem: despite more than 150 years of protest, white supremacy still ruled.

In part, Malcolm X's strategy amounted to supplying what Burke calls a "perspective by incongruity." As Burke explains, "a word belongs by custom to a certain category." One introduces a perspective by incongruity when one manages to "wrench" the word "loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (*Attitudes* 308). Burke notes that such a perspective undermines a "piety" or "*the sense of what properly goes with what*" and can be so strong

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that it is capable of "shattering piety" through "atom-cracking" (*Permanence* 74; *Attitudes* 308). Interpreting Burke, Thomas Rosteck and Michael Leff note that a perspective by incongruity "pries apart existing linkages" of ideology and custom, overturning "normal patterns of association" (329). These scholars add, "At the intertextual level . . . the piety of a discourse functions competitively as it seeks to undermine the integrity of rival perspectives" (332). By assailing the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower* as harbingers of slavery and racism—instead of as sacrosanct symbols of freedom—Malcolm X supplied a perspective by incongruity that subverted an extremely well-established, rival piety.

Malcolm X dismissed Argument by Trajectory as an example of Burke's "casuistic stretching," an attempt to smuggle a new concept into public acceptance by pretending that the public already embraces it (*Attitudes* 229–32). Unlike Douglass, King, and many others, Malcolm X defined racial equality as a concept foreign to whites. He failed to discern any principle of equality lurking within the Declaration, the Constitution, or the Emancipation Proclamation. Instead, for him, the core tenet of white supremacy underwrote an unending litany of horrors and was never seriously challenged during the American Revolution, the Civil War, Reconstruction, or later. In effect, he argued that, in attempting to legitimize the principle of equality, a long cavalcade of African American notables had projected onto Jefferson and Lincoln a view that they never held or acted upon.

In effect, Malcolm X charged that African Americans had created a new, alien tenet of equality and mislabeled it a white tradition. When orators provided the Argument by Trajectory, he contended, they were trying to beautify a woebegone past and refusing to accept the nonexistent prospect of a racial utopia that they kept insisting was imminent.

Malcolm X also implied that Promise/Failure/Fulfillment manifested, in Burke's phrase, "bureaucratized imagination" (*Attitudes* 225–29). As Burke remarks, a procedure can become a "cow-path" followed "in pious obedience to its secret grounding in the authority of custom" (*Attitudes* 228). Speakers had cited the Bible and the Declaration of Independence as the basis for Promise/Failure/Fulfillment so often that they had turned their argument into a cow-path at least by the time Douglass was refining and perfecting it during 1850s. Apart from the new signposts that Douglass and others added and quickly

codified after the Civil War, the Argument by Trajectory changed very little during a period of more than 150 years.

Malcolm X's rhetorical strategy consisted, in part, of what Burke calls "socializing losses" (*Attitudes* 312–14). In this perspective, not only were the slaves of 1776 exempt from the clause "all men are created equal," so were all the whites. While the Declaration appeared to institute equality, the Black Nationalist insisted, the slaves' loss of liberty nullified Jefferson's famous clause; for even the white landowners who signed the Declaration were not free. The clanking of the slaves' chains spoke much more loudly than the pretty words of Jefferson and his fellow slave owners.

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Further challenging the Douglass/King jeremiad as a species of casuistic stretching and bureaucratized imagination, Malcolm X contended that the Declaration had nothing to do with nonviolence—a claim that Douglass and King (in "I Have a Dream") strongly implied. Instead, Malcolm X insisted, the Declaration proclaimed the signers' desire to fire muskets at British soldiers:

> When George Washington and the [other founders] got ready to declare or come up with the Declaration of Independence . . . they were fed up with taxation without representation. And you've got 22 million Black people in this country today, 1964, who are fed up with taxation without representation and . . . are ready, willing, and justified to do the same thing today to bring about independence for our people that your [white] forefathers did to bring about independence for your people. ("Speech" 11–12)

If the patriots of 1776 hated taxation without representation, Malcolm X asked, why should African Americans tolerate it? Why, he inquired, did whites fancy that violence was justified in 1776 but not in the early 1960s, when Southern blacks paid taxes but were denied the ballot? The dust-caked institutions of slavery and Jim Crow, he maintained, were far more oppressive than anything experienced by wealthy white landowners before the American Revolution.

Here Malcolm X replaced the Argument by Trajectory with a radically different interpretation of the Declaration: rather than providing a promise that would eventually be realized, the Declaration supplied a model for violent upheaval by colonized people against their colonizers.

Whereas Douglass, Wells, King, and many others treated a portion of the Declaration as a revelation of timeless truths, Malcolm X interpreted the entire Declaration in its *situatedness*. For him, it was, in Burkean terms, a symbolic act—an act of rebellion and war whose violence was sanitized by celebrants on the Fourth of July, an act that legitimized violence in 1776 and that—somehow—Douglass and a host of other speakers, including King, later alleged to legitimize nonviolence.

Burke explicates the initial strength and eventual weakness of casuistic stretching. Over time, he explains, a "frame of acceptance" can "be extended to meet the new necessities by casuistic stretching." That is, speakers can, for awhile, gain public support for a new concept by claiming that it is a sacred tradition. But eventually, he warns, casuistic stretching overextends itself, the frame of acceptance breaks, and people become demoralized (*Attitudes* 132–34).

By 1965, the year of Malcolm X's assassination, many leaders in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the most important civil rights organization in the South (and one not led by King), abandoned their Christian nonviolent appeals in favor of a militant Black Nationalism strikingly similar to that of Malcolm X (Carson; Forman; Lewis). To these young agitators, traditional jeremiadic appeals now exemplified bureaucratized imagination and casuistic stretching that had finally overextended itself. By 1966 or 1967 King himself became more radical, invoking American civil religion less and less and adopting the stance of a Biblical prophet whose authority stemmed from God, not from political documents (Cone, *Martin*; Garrow; Lischer). Further, King openly acknowledged the eventual inadequacy of his own Argument by Trajectory, explaining that, once inspired by his "radiant promises," his young followers were now booing him (*Where* 45). Like Malcolm X before him, King eventually discovered that the casuistic stretching of the jeremiad had finally overextended itself.

Burke claims that identification is customarily fostered by what he calls "dull daily reinforcement" (*Rhetoric* 25–26). In addition to oratory and religious services, Malcolm X and the NOI advanced their counter-identification in four important ways:

First, within large Northern cities, the NOI achieved a measure of social and economic separatism and self-sufficiency: not only did its members gather frequently at their temples, they also managed their own stores, bakeries, cafes, and farms. Their partial success in creating an alternative economy reinforced a separatist identity.

Second, the NOI adopted conversational signifiers that designated its members as belonging to a specifically African American, counter-hegemonic, extended family. NOI members affirmed their organization as a family by customarily calling each other "Brother" and "Sister" and by sharing the signifier "X" as their last name. "X" was chosen to replace the unknown, original names of slaves, names that were lost when Africans, dragooned across the Atlantic Ocean, were handed the surnames of their slaveholders. Adopting "X" meant rejecting an identity assigned by those who severed their captives from family and tribal identities. Further, adopting "X" meant refusing any attempt to ascend a social ladder by distinguishing one's self from slaves and from many of their oppressed descendents who, denied the opportunity for formal education, often affixed the letter "X" to documents requiring their signatures. Adopting "X" meant affirming solidarity with millions of people—including the dead, the living, and the unborn—by claiming them as brothers, sisters, ancestors, and descendents on the same family tree. Granting no whites the name "X" meant excluding whites from the family circle.

Rejecting surnames derived from slave owners meant rejecting what Nakayama and Krizek call "the everydayness of whiteness" (296) and stigmatizing other blacks as those who, by virtue of their Euroamerican surnames, were trying but failing to become white. The widespread use of "X" served as a powerful rhetorical means of rendering visible African Americans' pervasive but previously invisible identification with whiteness.

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Third, Malcolm X founded and edited a weekly newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, which was widely distributed within the NOI. Written from a decidedly separatist perspective, every article and opinion piece in *Muhammad Speaks* framed and countered the rhetoric of whiteness articulated constantly by white newspapers and integrationist African American publications.

Fourth, Malcolm X taught alternative literacy. Observing an informal "class" at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, *Village Voice* reporter Marlene Nadle explains that, Malcolm X "assumes the role of teacher." She observes him screening films that he took in Africa, noting that he explains to his lis-

teners, "'They told us there was nothing but jungle over there. Why, the only jungle I ever saw was right here in New York City.'" She adds that he "attacks" *U.S. News and World Report* for "being anti-black" but "tells his pupils to read it" (302).

At Temple Number Seven in New York City, Malcolm X taught a formal course in Western history and culture, a class whose students consisted of his fledgling ministers. As his Assistant Minister Benjamin Karim explains, the instruction was rigorous:

> At the first meeting of the class Malcolm [X] listed some requirements: a notebook, a dictionary, a thesaurus, . . . an etymology text, a library card, and an open, willing mind. He expected us to study, and we studied. I mean, we really studied. (98)
>
> Malcolm demanded a lot of us. We had syllabuses, assignments, reports, book lists. We read the ancient history of peoples like the Chaldeans, Hittites, Egyptians, and Dravidians. We studied current events. Along with the daily *New York Times* and weekly news magazines like *Newsweek* and *Time* we read the London *Times* and, whenever possible, the *Peking Review*, and sometimes a newspaper from Indonesia, too. (97)
>
> I probably did more reading for Malcolm's public speaking class than most students do in four years of college; all of us did. I went out and bought an *Encyclopedia Britannica* . . . . (99)

Through relatively conventional instructional materials, Malcolm X sought to dismantle American nationalism, exposing it as a manifestation of the rhetoric and epistemology of whiteness.

Karim further reports that, while his class "studied the Bible extensively," Malcolm X interpreted scripture quite differently than did most other Americans:

> "Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together," Malcolm would quote from a passage he had underlined in his time-worn Bible, its pages dog-eared and the binding cracked. Black people are this carcass, Malcolm would say. . . . and with unremitting white authority the American eagle will continue cruelly and unjustly to govern the downtrodden so-called negroes until they are awakened. (101)[11]

Here—like Douglass, King, and others—Malcolm X united patriotism and Christianity, in his case by interpreting a Biblical image—the eagle—as a symbol for the United States. But, failing to claim that the American eagle instantiates God's promise, as others had done, Malcolm X contended that the

eagle—America—destroys black lives. Like Malcolm X the orator, Malcolm X the classroom teacher interpreted the ideals of American nationalism as a disguise for whiteness.

All these rhetorical and pedagogical practices subverted African Americans' denials and erasures of distinctive elements of their cultural identity. Malcolm X's interrogations of whiteness countered many people's reliance on hair straighteners and skin lighteners (which were often advertised in African American periodicals)—strategies reflecting futile attempts to climb a ladder of whiteness.

Although Malcolm X did not explicitly theorize literacy in his public speeches or in his problematic *Autobiography*, he embedded in his classroom praxis an interpretation of literacy that presaged the theories of many recent and contemporary scholars. Anticipating Brian Street in 1993, Malcolm X recognized that, in Street's words, "literacy practices" play a role "in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination" and that such practices, in Street's words, "are saturated with ideology" (434, 435).

One can readily infer that Malcolm X developed counter-hegemonic literacy because he understood that the theory and praxis of assimilationist literacy had failed. Noted literacy historian Harvey Graff remarked that many decades of amazing progress in overcoming illiteracy after the Civil War "did not lead to occupational or economic gains" for large numbers of African Americans (226–27)—an observation that propelled Malcolm X's pedagogy many years before Graff's scholarship appeared.

Malcolm X developed counter-hegemonic literacy because he understood that the theory and praxis of assimilationist literacy had failed.

Not only did Malcolm X interrogate, theorize, and undermine the rhetoric of whiteness long before academics noticed such a rhetoric, he also raised powerful questions that subsequent whiteness theorists have yet to ask. One such question is the following: Can Christianity be separated from whiteness? Answering, "No," is Malcolm X, a follower of Islam. Answering, "Yes," is James Cone, the leading exponent of Black Theology, who built on Malcolm X's thought in crucial ways and celebrated African American identity while embracing Christianity. Cone once stated that his move toward blackness and his turn toward Christianity amounted to "the same turn" (Speech). Inasmuch as academic whiteness theorists have yet to ask whether Christianity can be distinguished from whiteness, they have only begun to interrogate whiteness.

Malcolm X poses other critical questions: How can a nation founded in slavery and wallowing in bigotry serve as a "sweet land of liberty," a "shining city on a hill," or "the last best hope on earth"? What do American civil religion and American nationalism have to do with egalitarianism? How can anyone conflate the two? Isn't equality an all-encompassing, global principle demanding an allegiance greater than loyalty to a specific, flawed nation? What does American nationalism have to do with religious ideals? How can a nation of slavery and, later, atomic weaponry and neocolonial war making, exemplify God's unique and righteous intervention in human events? Why does the Bible never mention the United States?

Malcolm X was able to problematize and reconstruct African American identity not only because he grasped the contingent nature of cultural formation but also because he comprehended the importance of what Keith Gilyard terms "primary identities," which, as Gilyard notes, "operate powerfully." Malcolm X did not attempt to dissolve such identities. Instead, he sought to displace the rhetoric of whiteness and thereby begin the process of reconstituting African American self-definition.

Malcolm X was able to problematize and reconstruct African American identity not only because he grasped the contingent nature of cultural formation but also because he comprehended the importance of what Keith Gilyard terms "primary identities," which, as Gilyard notes, "operate powerfully" (270). Malcolm X did not attempt to dissolve such identities. Instead, he sought to displace the rhetoric of whiteness and thereby begin the process of reconstituting African American self-definition. His partial success in that effort served as a prelude to the literary and cultural formations later enacted by such sterling authors as August Wilson, John Edgar Wideman, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison (among others), who create largely African American fictional universes whose characters often resist the desire to identify with whiteness and who sometimes—most notably in the novels of Walker and Morrison—also resist the desire to identify with the patriarchy.

The efforts of Malcolm X, Cone, Wilson, Wideman, Walker, Morrison, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, and others to investigate and remake African American identity are moves toward achieving what Gilyard yearns for: a "radical, transcultural democracy" (262) based on a rhetoric of cultural integrity rather than one of whiteness.

As theorist and practitioner of counter-hegemonic literacy, Malcolm X recognized issues that leftist literacy theorists have yet to engage, especially the need to link literacy theory and instruction to a broader cultural critique that operates not only in cloistered classrooms but also in the public sphere.

From observing Malcolm X, one concludes that alternative literacies and alternative public rhetorics thrive on each other—no, *demand* each other—and that, without powerful public rhetorics to accompany them, alternative literacies will falter.

The most original and most important theorist of whiteness, Malcolm X continues to argue eloquently and prophetically for counter-hegemonic African American cultural formation and literacy. His voice deserves attention because his achievement was large: by thoroughly exposing and debunking whiteness, he helped refashion and radicalize African American identity. In other words, he helped create a people.[12]

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Notes

1. Celeste Condit and James Chesebro question whether Kenneth Burke's system is too Eurocentric to be valuable in the study of non-European rhetorics. Their question is too all-encompassing. I merely claim that Burkean theory can *at times* be valuable to such study. Of course, many other rhetorical theories should also be used in conjunction with African American and other nonwhite rhetorics.

2. Malcolm X's scattered references to Marcus Garvey are the only exception to this generalization.

3. For assessments of Malcolm X in relation to his mentor Elijah Muhammad, see, for example, Claude Clegg, Reginald Collins, Karl Evanzz, Peter Goldman, Benjamin Karim, Bruce Perry, Robert Terrill, and the contributors to Joe Wood's collection. For assessments of Malcolm X in relation to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern freedom struggle, see, for example, Taylor Branch, James Cone, and John Lucaites and Celeste Condit. There are no extensive accounts of the relation-

ship between Malcolm X's leadership and rhetoric and that of Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida B. Wells, or W.E.B. Du Bois. And, despite their obvious similarities, there is not even an extensive account of the relationship between Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey.

4. For appeals to Christianity in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, see Keith D. Miller and Ruth Ellen Kocher.

5. See also Frederick Douglass, "Slavery, the Free Church, and British Agitation against Bondage," 324.

6. See also Francis Grimke, "Remedy."

7. Frederick Douglass strongly and overtly supported women's suffrage and the principle of women's equality. But his jeremiads typically did not underscore gender oppression but rather emphasized the suffering that African Americans shared under the yoke of white supremacy.

8. See Keith D. Miller, *Voice,* 142–58.

9. Several scholars have spotlighted and/or criticized Martin Luther King's advocacy of American civil religion. See Scott Sandage, Martha Solomon, Robert Hariman, and James Klumpp. Several of these writers extend an interpretation that August Meier espoused in a classic essay.

10. "I Have a Dream" is a very traditional African American speech in other ways as well. Martin Luther King structured "I Have a Dream" through a network of metaphors that are part of a large metaphorical system underlying the lyrics of slave spirituals and African American gospel songs. See Keith Miller, "Beacon Light."

11. Benjamin Karim's *Remembering Malcolm* is far more reliable than the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* because it lacks the confusing gaps and internal inconsistencies that mar the *Autobiography* (Malcolm X and Haley). Unlike the *Autobiography*, Karim's book is consistent with other primary sources.

12. I vehemently dispute Malcolm X's (frequently breezy) dismissal of nonviolence. I concur with Cornel West's astute overall assessment of Malcolm X, which faults him and Elijah Muhammad for their homophobia and their thorough sexism.

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