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Religious Heretic, Political Prophet

Malcolm X, Democracy,
and Abolition Ethics

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Abstract

The religious and political thought of Malcolm X underscores a radical politico-ethical tradition that speaks to a fundamental but neglected aspect of American democracy: the idea that democracy cannot flourish without a radical (individual and collective) ethics. Malcolm X's speeches, particularly in his late career, illustrate the degree to which American democracy is unrealizable unless it can give an account of human finitude in a social context of anti-Black racism. I contend that Malcolm X's move toward human rights activism during his mature political development is contingent on a radical ethics at the individual and group level. It is an ethical practice based on reflective intentionality and creative exchange. I call this vision of radical praxis *abolition ethics*.

Keywords: democracy, ethics, civil rights movement, Black nationalism

On April 3, 1964, in the midst of a contentious debate on the desegregation of Cleveland Public Schools, the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality invited Malcolm X, one of the nation's most popular but mythologized activist-intellectuals, to address a public symposium on education alongside Louis E. Lomax, the accomplished journalist and author.¹

Speaking nearly a month following his resignation from the Nation of Islam after he was censured by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad for controversial statements regarding the assassination of U.S. president John F. Kennedy,

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the thirty-eight-year-old Malcolm X stood behind the pulpit of the largest Black congregation in Cleveland, Cory Methodist Church, and articulated the political philosophy of his newly formed organization, the Muslim Mosque, Inc.² This ecumenical organization was designed to promote what the former national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam called a “new” civil rights agenda. “The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation.”³

Malcolm X maintained that giving Blacks the psychic, political, and economic tools for individual and group liberation, as his organization sought to do, was a far more substantive goal than that which could be achieved by the pragmatic, and thin, political agenda of the traditional civil rights movement, which, he insisted, focused primarily on securing voting rights and securing integration.

His criticism of the civil right agenda, interestingly enough, had weakened. In an unusual shift in political perspective, Malcolm X acknowledged in his address the need for constitutionally protected rights for all citizens. However, securing those political rights, he implied, at the expense of acquiring individual and group power was a grave mistake. Referring to legislative roadblocks impeding the passing of federal civil rights legislation, Malcolm X criticized the established Negro leadership for its naive belief in American goodwill.

I’m not anti-Democrat, I’m not anti-Republican. I’m not anti-anything. I’m just questioning their sincerity, and some of the strategy that they’ve been using on our people by promising them promises that they don’t intend to keep. . . . That’s why, in 1964, it’s time now for you and me to become more politically mature and realize what the ballot is for; what we’re supposed to get when we cast a ballot; and that if we don’t cast a ballot, it’s going to end up in a situation where we’re going to have to cast a bullet. It’s either the ballot or the bullet.⁴

In an effort to draw attention to his underlying new political agenda, Malcolm X constructed a hyperbolic distinction between the ballot and the bullet. The distinction, I argue, exposed the absence of a theory of freedom and power within the civil rights movement. Indeed, nearly three decades before Iris Marion Young exposed the failure of distributive justice to account for social and cultural phenomena in shaping political agency in her in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Malcolm X identified white supremacy as the primary source of Black political and economic immobility and reason for American

democracy's inherent "hypocrisy" and imminent demise. To a large extent, Malcolm X emphasized, the right to vote had not translated into significant political and economic milestones for Blacks, especially the poor from urban areas. "All [the Democrats did] when they got to Washington was give a few big Negroes big jobs. . . . That's camouflage, that's trickery, that's treachery, window-dressing."⁵ In his effort to illustrate the dubious reliance on a narrowly construed rights-based agenda, Malcolm X admonished Blacks to seize on their existing power, both social and financial, in order to establish economic, political, and psychological independence without seeking white validation or relying on white benevolence. His call for Black independence was not novel. However, what is noteworthy is the direction of his vision: toward a human rights political agenda. "Civil rights means you're asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you are born with. Human rights are your God-given rights."⁶ Situating anti-Black racism as a violation of human rights was a clever move, as it aligned Black political struggle to movements designed to end imperialism and racial injustice across the globe.

In what would become one of his most popular speeches, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X outlined the general framework for interpreting his political and religious commitments following his 1963 departure from the Nation of Islam. This speech offers one of Malcolm X's more comprehensive accounts of Black nationalism, which emphasized the traditional tenets of Black nationalist rhetoric: economic empowerment, self-help, and individual piety. "The political philosophy of Black nationalism means that the Black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own community; no more. The Black man in the Black community has to be re-educated into the science of politics so he will know what politics is supposed to bring him in return."⁷ The science of politics was designed to complicate the traditional boundaries of American racial political discussions by incorporating human rights and ethics into debates on justice and democracy. Malcolm X's bold articulation and reframing of Black nationalism was a significant move. According to Frederick C. Harris, political science professor and author of *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics*, the speech represented Malcolm X's vision of an "independent Black politics [that] would shape perspectives on Black political life for decades."⁸ Harris astutely links Malcolm X to a broader Black radical tradition within African American political thought, dating back to Martin Delany, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ida B. Wells. But, unlike Harris, I argue Malcolm X is far more invested in reconstituting democracy than in establishing an independent Black political movement circumscribed by American domestic politics.

Malcolm X's religious thought and political imagination, I argue here, underscore a radical politico-ethical tradition that speaks to a fundamental but neglected aspect of American democracy, namely, the idea that democracy cannot flourish without a radical (individual and collective) ethics. The necessity of such an ethics beckons us to consider the limits of moral agency and the degree to which, if at all, political actors can exercise and embody liberty, rights, and freedom within a white supremacist context. For Malcolm X, American democracy is unrealizable unless it can give an account of human finitude or, more specifically, address the extent to which what I call the *moral problem of Blackness* forestalls the nation, at the political and cultural level, from imagining Blacks as "human" and therefore deserving of rights and freedom.⁹ Interested in more than building another male-centered, Black independent movement, Malcolm X yearned, at least implicitly, to establish a political tradition in and through which Black bodies could heal and define themselves outside white supremacist constructions of Blackness. In the absence of political, economic, and military power, securing political rights for African Americans would depend on white benevolence. Malcolm X advocated a shift from moral suasion as a viable political strategy and pleaded with African Americans to define their political movement as a human rights struggle.

The effort to embody and execute freedom among a disenfranchised people raises the question of normative ethics: what ought I to do? Malcolm X's response: the "ought" question should be understood from the perspective of the "victims" of American democracy: African Americans. Through this hermeneutical lens, standing from behind the veil of Blackness, Malcolm X introduced to the world not only the ignored concerns of the Black working class but also generated in his late-career speeches an epistemic template by which a radical vision of ethics as a deliberate reflection and creative exchange, what I call abolition ethics, might be established.¹⁰

Abolition ethics is embedded, for instance, in Malcolm X's effort to rally African leaders to bring before the United Nations human rights violations against the United States for condoning more than "four hundred years" of violence and discrimination against African Americans. This ethical framework emerged in his 1964 address "To Mississippi Youth," where he argued that desegregation had nothing to do with "moral enlightenment or moral awareness" but stemmed from global pressure. "No, the only time that cycle [segregation] was broken even to a degree was when world pressure was brought to bear on the United States government. They didn't look at us as human beings—they just put us into their system and let us advance a little bit farther because it served their interests."¹¹ Moral suasion, as Malcolm X indicated, would not

help end Black oppression, as African Americans were not human, and since they were not human, they were not redeemable. Another form of critical reflection was needed, a discourse or practice that would interrogate racial injustice transnationally. Though Malcolm X did not explicitly name ethics as a discursive site for interrogating Black subjugation, his move toward framing racial injustice in the United States as a matter of human rights depends on the implementation of ethical practices at the individual and group level that foster and sustain critical reflection and creative exchange.

The ethical framework I detect in Malcolm X's writings becomes more apparent if one envisions his departure from the Nation of Islam and subsequent iconic role in etching out the terrain of post-civil rights Black nationalism not as a reinvention but as a reframing of three important epistemic resources he drew on throughout his intellectual and spiritual life: Black women's radicalism, religious ecumenicalism, and a Black working-class ethos. Though not always illuminated by the activist-intellectual in his public speeches and in the scholarship of the mostly male interpreters of Malcolm X's thought, these resources are critical to understanding his deepening pan-African perspective. In fact, it seems doubtful Malcolm X would have discovered the intellectual narratives, spiritual resolve, and courage needed to recast Black nationalism by incorporating human rights as a deliberate extension of political freedom if he had focused strictly on "manhood" and "African nationality" without forging a link to Black feminist thought, religion, and the Black working class.¹² Though I believe Malcolm X's move is novel, some leading historians may not agree with my position. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, in his prolific literary analysis of the jeremiad in African American religious and political traditions, resists identifying Malcolm X's interest in human rights as unique or reflective of a creative development in his political thought. Instead, according to Moses, Malcolm X's motivation for "abandon[ing] civil rights" emerges, in part, from an African American intellectual tradition among writers and activists "who had internationalized their struggle by lecturing abroad on the defects of American democracy."¹³ According to Moses, the "followers of this tradition had hoped to profit from the moral vulnerability of a nation self-conscious of its destiny as a 'City on a Hill.'"¹⁴ I agree with Moses, at least partially. Malcolm X's move did represent a return to a radical Black political tradition that predated the civil rights movement, but I disagree with Moses's suggestion that leftist thinkers like Malcolm X were attempting to exploit the nation's "moral vulnerability" at a time when the world had grown increasingly suspicious of America's international political endeavors. Malcolm X was unabashed in his position on America's moral standing: the country was amoral and could

not muster sufficient evidence to the contrary. As early as 1961 in a speech delivered at the Harvard Law School, Malcolm X called America “wicked” and claimed it was on the verge of experiencing God’s wrath for its treatment of Blacks. “We are living in the Day of Judgment right now. God is the Judge that our American slave master must answer to. God is striking this country with tornadoes, storms, floods, rain, hail, snow; and terrific earthquakes are yet to come.”¹⁵

Had Malcolm X continued to appeal to apocalyptic rhetoric and theological reasons for America’s “decline,” Moses’s argument would be justified. But he did not. A year prior to his censuring, Malcolm X began articulating in his public speeches that African American solidarity with Africans and a coming to terms with African American social and economic power were necessary for achieving freedom, especially for those committed to an integrationist agenda. The move was subtle but nonetheless noteworthy. Malcolm X remained committed to African American independence within the context of the Nation of Islam’s theology of separatism. However, he began giving nontheological reasons to justify the Nation of Islam’s position. Interestingly enough, in his 1963 speech “Twenty Million Black People in Political, Economic, and Mental Prison,” he objects to integration primarily on political and economic grounds, not simply theological grounds. The move offers a glimpse into Malcolm X’s increasing intellectual frustration with the Nation of Islam’s theology, which was focused on separatism and paid no critical attention to international politics and capitalism’s role in fostering economic and racial inequality. Malcolm X’s religious and political positions after his departure from the Nation of Islam had been developing several years prior to his split with his spiritual father and community, and after he started his own organization, he grew even more confident in his new beliefs, which were increasingly guided by his emerging ethical imagination.

Two epistemic narratives from Malcolm X’s biography inform my understanding of the role of abolition ethics within his thought: his parents’ Black nationalist religious and political teachings and his relationship with Black feminists. Malcolm X grew up in a religiously ecumenical home among family members who were deeply committed to Black nationalism. His father, Earl Little, was a Baptist preacher and staunch supporter of Marcus Garvey’s popular Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). His mother, Louise Little, was also active in UNIA and introduced Malcolm X to global culture and politics and influenced his worldview. Fluent in five languages, Louise Little acquainted her children with French and Caribbean literature, emphasizing their Caribbean heritage in their upbringing.¹⁶ In “Black Popular Culture

and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions,” Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews maintain that Malcolm X’s political organizing was undergirded by “grassroots women organizers, who were the very backbone of groups like SNCC [and the] Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party” and who were heavily involved in articulating and executing political positions.¹⁷

From Black feminists, Malcolm X learned a great deal about Western imperialism, African history, and socialism. In “‘If you’re in a country that’s progressive, the woman is progress’: Black Women Radicals and The Making of the Politics and Legacy of Malcolm X,” Erik S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard offer a substantive and nuanced account of Black women’s role in shaping Malcolm X’s intellectual activism. Turning to “biographical accounts of him” by Black women in diaries, public archives, and oral histories in an attempt to counter Manning Marable’s portrayal of Malcolm X’s thought in *Malcolm X: A Reinvention*, they argue that Malcolm X was “committed to a Black radical agenda, and that women of color radicals such as Vicki Garvin, Queen Mother Moore, and others were central to helping him rethink and develop an even more expansive position on Black liberation in the United States and globally.”¹⁸ Along with teaching Malcolm X the importance of understanding Africa in relationship to African American slavery and segregation, Black women like Vicki Garvin, who played a central role in Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr.’s election to the New York City Council and U.S. Congress, were, according to McDuffie and Woodard, resources Malcolm X relied on to expand his political mobilizing in Harlem and abroad.¹⁹ McDuffie and Woodard see the influence of Black women’s thought on Malcolm X’s political imagination in particular during the last two years of his life, when he traveled to Africa for extended periods of time:

If Malcolm’s international travels and exchanges with female revolutionaries of color overseas altered his global vision, they certainly also transformed his gender politics. Underscoring the ways women of color were sometimes ahead of him on political matters, due in part to his encounters with them Malcolm came to reject the Nation of Islam’s patriarchal gender politics and began to adopt a progressive gender outlook that appreciated women’s status as the barometer by which to measure democracy at home and overseas.²⁰

Malcolm X’s public speeches during the last two years of his life seem to pull from the fragments of the ethical narrative developed during his childhood, a narrative that fed his relationship with Black feminists and radicals

during his years in Harlem. Nonetheless, many of Malcolm X's speeches remained deeply steeped in gendered language and reflected deep gender biases. However, as his interest in international affairs expanded, his speeches took on a reflective tone and engaged in political issues that went far beyond the American narrative of the white-Black racial binary. These are signs of his expanded political agenda, of the ethical challenge he was increasingly waging against democracy.

His critical reflection on democracy raises a serious challenge to contemporary political liberal visions of it. A "weak" political liberal assumes that reasoned debates, wherein citizens bandy about sufficient justifications for their decisions based upon pregiven rules, will lead to just ends. But the degree to which racial and gender biases, especially those fueled and justified by religious reasons and moral beliefs, might impede rational discussions is often not taken into account. A "strong" political liberal argues that reasoned debates alongside a political tradition that emphasizes and cultivates trust might create the conditions for building a just society. Both weak and strong liberals seem to suggest that in twentieth-century American democracy, framed largely by political liberalism (which focuses on rights and equality), political actors will act according to just, democratic principles and rules. Malcolm X's late speeches indicate otherwise.

Unlike many of his peers, Malcolm X anticipated the dangers of appropriating the familiar political vocabulary of liberty, rights, and democracy for pragmatic, political goals. Malcolm X was clear: American democracy had emerged from the same seeds that cultivated and sustained American slavery and segregation, which could only mean that it was fundamentally flawed and that any attempt to revive its ideals and fundamental principles without careful attention to racial violence and subjugation would fail. Uncritical assessments of democracy's potential would camouflage structural divides and silence internal and external critics of American empire. Malcolm X exposed the limits of liberalism and attempted to carve out a new political ethos fashioned by the political and social circumstances facing democracy's victims.

Malcolm X attracted an audience from a range of political, economic, and social contexts in part because the charisma and conviction he embodied represented an ethical imagination; that is, Malcolm X was a living example of how to answer the existential question facing Blacks in an anti-Black society: who am I? Malcolm X did not provide specific responses to this question, but his speeches serve as a guide for imagining the relationship between ethics and democracy. I build the case for taking seriously Malcolm X's ethical imagination by first examining his early speeches and identifying contrasting

and overlapping themes that reflect his ethical commitments and the moral fabric of his thinking. I then investigate his understanding of Black nationalism as a political tradition that reaches into human rights. Finally, I explore the two basic components of abolition ethics: reflective action and creative exchange.

Early Speeches: Masculinity, Rhetoric, and Building a Movement

William W. Sales Jr. divides Malcolm X's political thought into three periods: 1952–1962, when he adopted the theology of the Nation of Islam; 1963–1964, when he became involved in African American politics and founded Muslim Mosque, Inc.; and 1964–1965, when he embraced pan-African internationalism and global politics.²¹

The early Malcolm X attempted to extend Elijah Muhammad's empire among the working poor and neglected prison population. He focused on legitimizing the Nation of Islam as the true religion for African American freedom. A central component of the religion's theology is the Yacub creation narrative, the story of an evil Black scientist who, thousands of years ago, created white people—a race of people who are evil by nature. In his speech “The Black Man's History,” Malcolm X elucidates this story:

I just wanted to point out that the white man, a race of devils, was made six thousand years ago. . . . The only reason God didn't remove them [at God's appointed time] was because you and I were here in their clutches and God gave them an extension of time to give the wise men of the East the opportunity to get into this House of Bondage and “awaken” the Lost sheep. Once the American so-called Negroes have been awakened to a knowledge of themselves and of their own God and of the white man, then they're on their own. Then it'll be left up to you and me whether we want to integrate into this wicked race or leave them and separate and go to our own. And if we integrate we'll be destroyed along with them. If we separate then we have a chance for salvation.²²

This theological explanation of white racism reinforced, in a strange way, the insanity of white racism. “The point was not so much Yacub as it was a racial Manichaeism that the story constructed: white is evil, Black is good. This account offered an easy explanation of white racism: white people oppressed nonwhites because of genetic programming.”²³

This narrative is important for three reasons. First, it provides theological support and justification for believing Blacks were the creators of civilization and whites were the devil. Second, the story distinguishes the Nation of Islam from previous iterations of Black nationalism by rooting its ideology of separation on theological grounds. Third, the creation story gave Malcolm X the theological language with which to condemn integration as a barrier to Black liberation and freedom as well as to justify the need for a separate nation for Blacks.

The early speeches had the tone of jeremiads. Malcolm X routinely referred to the pending doom the nation faced and how African Americans could save themselves only by separating from whites. In 1960 at a freedom rally in Harlem he reminded the audience of the looming tragedy awaiting society: "The Western World today faces a great catastrophe. It stands on the brink of disaster. Mr. Muhammad says the only way our people can avoid the fiery destruction that God Himself will soon unleash upon the wicked world is for our people to come together among themselves in unity and practice true brotherhood."²⁴

At his first speech at the Harvard Law School in 1961, Malcolm X continued with the jeremiad motif. This time he suggested that Black oppression was divinely planned. "The miserable plight of the twenty million Black people in America is the fulfillment of divine prophecy."²⁵ Malcolm X reminded the people that God would choose someone from "among the lowly, uneducated, downtrodden, oppressed masses, from among the lowest element of America's twenty million ex-slaves," to redeem God's people.²⁶ Of course, this person was Elijah Muhammad. "Now, today, God has sent Mr. Elijah Muhammad among the downtrodden and oppressed so-called American Negroes to warn that God is again preparing to bring about another great change, only this time it will be a final change."²⁷ The end of times would bring a dramatic change: the restoration of Black peoples to their original and ordained status. White rule would come to an end. God would seal their doom. "God has come to close out the entire old world, the old world where for the past six thousand years most of the earth's population has been deceived, conquered, colonized, ruled, enslaved, oppressed, and exploited by the Caucasian race."²⁸

During the next two years, Malcolm X began speaking on topics otherwise ignored by Elijah Muhammad. For instance, Malcolm X was unusually critical of Black politics and African American leadership in a 1963 speech delivered in Detroit called "A Message to the Grassroots." Here, Malcolm X outlined his critique of the civil rights political strategy in his analogy of the "field Negro" and the "house Negro." The distinction was used to mark the boundaries between

Black nationalism and the civil rights movement. “The house Negroes—they lived in the house with master, they dressed pretty good, they ate good because they ate his food—what he left.”²⁹ The house Negro grew into the traditional leader of the civil rights movement. The field Negro, on the other, was beaten and mistreated by his master. Of course, the field Negro disliked the slave master and was prepared to fight. In the context of simmering political and personal disputes within the Nation of Islam and the growing jealousy among some over Malcolm X’s increasing heroic public status, this address is another indication of the shifts and adjustments in Malcolm X’s politics. Edward Curtis IV makes an apt observation regarding the growing chasm between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad: “While Malcolm continued to defend Elijah Muhammad and his version of Islam throughout 1963, it is clear that his separation from his spiritual father had already begun.”³⁰ According to Curtis, he had begun to have doubts about Muhammad in the late 1950s, when the Nation of Islam faced fierce criticism from a number of Sunni Islamic groups from abroad for its use of Islam to justify racial separation.³¹ Rod Bush is more direct about Malcolm X’s growing skepticism of Muhammad’s teaching: “Malcolm’s efforts to internationalize the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality for Black people was at odds with Elijah Muhammad’s antipathy for foreigners and his focus on the Lost-Found Nation in the wilderness of North America. The effort to make the struggle for civil rights a struggle for human rights to be adjudicated in the World Court got Malcolm in trouble.”³² In fact, after 1962, his speeches are less about justifying Muhammad’s teaching and more about Malcolm X’s criticisms of Black integrationist politics and American foreign and domestic policies. The ethical turn had begun. He was encouraging people to broach questions of what ought to be the case and what might be possible.

The clash between his commitment to the Nation of Islam and his growing interest in international politics created the political and religious conditions that transformed his rhetoric from jeremiads into a radical ethical discourse, both particular and universal in nature. To be sure, Malcolm X was fundamentally a race man, focused primarily on the plight of African Americans, and he remained heavily invested in a separatist agenda until his death. But his interest in the particular plight of African Americans did not negate his interest in human rights and desire to link African American political struggles to the global fight to end imperialism.

Malcolm X’s maturing political view of pan-Africanism and global politics is informed by his intellectual and personal relationships to radical Black feminists and womanist thinkers. This is not to suggest that Malcolm X’s thought is protofeminist per se. However, during the time Malcolm X was shifting away

from the strict political teachings of the Nation of Islam and beginning to consider the economic and class-based sources of racial inequality in the United States and abroad, he was engaged in serious conversations with thinkers such as Shirley Graham Du Bois, Maya Angelou, Vicki Garvin, Alice Windom, and Queen Mother Moore—all of whom were involved in pan-Africanism and women's rights long before Malcolm X expressed a serious interest in exploring racial oppression in relationship to colonialism and imperialism.³³

It does not follow that just because Malcolm X was indebted to the work of these Black women he was a feminist. Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins and Farah J. Griffin question, and rightly so, the usefulness of reclaiming Malcolm X's thought for purposes of dismantling gender barriers and exposing Black women's social injustices. Malcolm X's understanding of gender, which was heavily influenced by the strict and narrow constructions of women's role in the Nation of Islam, was limited throughout much of his life. Malcolm X viewed women in several ways. There were women "who challenged male authority, often by using their sexuality for their own gain," which Collins describes as the Eve archetype.³⁴ There were women who sacrificed for their families at all costs, what Collins calls the Madonna archetype. And, finally, there were women who were the subject of the "protection of promise" discourse within Malcolm X's speeches, as Griffins puts it, that spoke to the need to protect Black women from sexual, physical, and emotional assault. As one can see, Malcolm X's conception of gender was complicated. It reflected an earnest desire to honor and "respect" Black women, but the framework was far too narrow, these Black feminists suggest, to be of any use in Black women's liberation. "Malcolm X's treatment of gender reflected the widespread belief of his time that, like race, men's and women's roles were 'natural' and were rooted in biological difference. Like his essentialist definition of race, Malcolm X held equally essentialist notions about gender."³⁵

Still, Ransby and Matthews have discovered evidence of Malcolm X grappling with his sexist views in a 1965 letter Malcolm X wrote to his cousin-in-law:

I taught brothers not only to deal unintelligently with the devil or the white woman, but I also taught many brothers to spit acid at the sisters. They were kept in their places—you probably didn't notice this in action, but it is a fact. I taught these brothers to spit acid at the sisters. If the sisters decided a thing was wrong, they had to suffer it out. If the sister wanted to have her husband at home with her for the

evening, I taught the brothers that the sisters were standing in their way; in the way of the Messenger, in the way of progress, in the way of God Himself. I did these things brother. I must undo them.³⁶

Malcolm X's religious and political conversion clearly played a significant and sustained role in his intellectual life. This brief excerpt reflects the ongoing questioning and analysis he engaged in and provides a glimpse of his changing gender politics.

What remains at issue is the political framework Malcolm X used to shape his understanding of human rights in general and African politics in particular. Some scholars suggest that even the globalist lens he adopted after leaving the Nation of Islam was male centered. In *Black Empire*, Michelle Ann Stephens considers the epistemic contours of Black internationalism during the 1960s and asks whether the move toward pan-Africanism was just another way to expand Black men's leadership. "The black global imaginary described here was also inherently masculine, created to fit the needs of a new and modern Black male subject entering onto the stage of world politics."³⁷ Malcolm X was indeed limited by the gender biases of his religious training, the gendered language he used to describe freedom, and the overall internationalist framework he employed in his expanded political vision. But we should not ignore the usefulness of his ethical and creative imagination for imagining and developing radical practices on account of this limitation.

Religion, Black Nationalism, and Black Radical Traditions

Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam's version of Black nationalism emerged in opposition to integration. Focused on morality, self-empowerment, and economic mobility, the Nation of Islam eschewed political involvement. According to Dean Robinson, for Muhammad, "the so-called Negroes of the United States were lost—they knew nothing of their original identity, of their true religion, or of what they needed to build a Heaven on Earth. Further, they wasted their time on political struggles. Allah would solve the problem of white racism, with His vengeance."³⁸

What distinguishes Malcolm X's thought from, say, that of Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad is the extent to which he imagined human emancipation as a process of diving into particular historical narratives and normative philosophies in order to loosen the chain that binds us to histories and narratives we did not create. The historical memory of slavery and its

subsequent role in reinforcing and reifying Black subjugation would not be shattered, Malcolm X insisted, as long as Blacks idealized integration and political rights as the route to success. Gaining a seat in a historically segregated workplace, state legislature, or college would not alter the fundamental structural systems that initiated Black subjugation. Integration gave Blacks access without the fundamental power to reconstruct or reimagine the table at which they sat.

The mature Malcolm X drew on Black nationalism as a starting point for criticizing American democracy. "I'm one of the 22 million Black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. . . . And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare."³⁹ The backdrop to this nightmare is segregation, which forced Blacks to work and endure in what he characterized as menial positions. The nightmare ended, albeit temporarily, in the midst of the Cold War. The war allowed Blacks to slowly free themselves from segregated contexts. They landed better jobs, and eventually their educational and social opportunities expanded.

Yet the milestones some African Americans reached did little to improve their overall conditions. Political efforts to sustain liberty and rights were meaningless, according to Malcolm X, without the economic and social power to protect them. In Malcolm X's vision, economic mobility was a form of embodied power. "If we own the stores, if we operate the businesses, if we try and establish some industry in our own community, then we're developing to the position where we are creating employment for our own kind. Once you gain control of the economy of your own community, then you don't have to picket and boycott and beg some cracker downtown for a job in his business."⁴⁰ Initially, he believed separation would allow Blacks to secure economic power and mobility, but over time he modified his position.

As early as 1960, at a freedom rally in Harlem, Malcolm X began exploring the topic of human rights in relation to African American political struggles. "As a collective mass of Black people we have been deprived, not only of civil rights, but even our human rights, the right to human dignity . . . the right to be a human being!"⁴¹ As Malcolm X distanced himself from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, he eventually began to address Martin Luther King Jr. and his political vision in his speeches. James Cone claims Malcolm had "consciously moved toward the politics of Martin King and the civil rights movement."⁴² "While he continued to reject integration and to advocate separation," Cone adds, "Malcolm concluded that the return to Africa or the creation of a separate state in the Western hemisphere was 'still a long range program.'"⁴³ He still

wanted to expand the struggle for liberation by getting African Americans to consider the limitations of a U.S.-based political agenda. “For Malcolm, it was clear that the U.S. stage was a white stage. If one looked at the plight of African Americans as a problem of human rights and not civil rights, then one moved to the world stage, where Blacks were a part of the dark majority of human-kind.”⁴⁴ The shift in African American politics, Malcolm X suggested, would give them the political and ethical resources to develop a broader political project than one based on white political acceptance and economic benevolence. Malcolm X wanted Blacks to change the fundamental conditions and terms by which African Americans imagined freedom and democracy.

Abolition Ethics

Malcolm X desperately yearned to reframe the epistemic narratives through which African Americans imagined themselves and that informed political and racial subtexts. The most striking manifestation of this yearning emerged in the Oxford Union debates in England, where, standing on the world stage, Malcolm X called for a renewed resistance against American racism and imperialism. He called it “extremism, in defense of liberty.”⁴⁵

According to Saladin Ambar, unlike previous iterations of the leader’s call for revolutionary retaliation against anti-Black racism, the address at Oxford represented Malcolm X’s most reflective account of revolution. Extremism is justified, according to Malcolm X, by all human beings who are, or have been, subjugated and oppressed by their government or society.

So my contention is that whenever a people come to the conclusion that the government, which they have supported, proves itself unwilling, or proves itself unable to protect our lives and protect our property, because we have the wrong color skin, we are not human beings unless we ourselves band together and do whatever, however, whenever, is necessary to see that our lives and our property is protected, and I doubt that any person in here would refuse to do the same thing were he in the same position, or should I say were he in the same condition.⁴⁶

Malcolm X refrained from his usually biting jabs against the nation. Instead of making theological references to the “white man’s” evil soul or incarnation as the devil to justify a Black revolution, he drew on the language of rights

and liberty to characterize how the national government failed to “protect” the “lives” and “property” of African Americans. He used the language of political liberalism to raise a critical question: how can one not support a revolution against such political atrocities? As Malcolm X aptly opined, revolutionary behavior is contextual, and one ought to examine the historical and social circumstances of the revolution before determining its merits. Whites would not be justified, he suggested, in calling for political resistance to efforts to implement civil rights legislation because that would not be extremism in defense of liberty.

In his talk, Malcolm X also criticized U.S. involvement in the Congo, which had been reported in the media as humanitarian assistance, labeling it “criminal activity.” The nation illicitly relied on its standing in the world, Malcolm X insisted, to justify its involvement in the Congo’s internal political strife. The death of “Congoese women, Congoese children, Congoese babies [is] extremism, but it is never referred to that as extremism because it is endorsed by the West, it is financed by America, it’s made respectable by America.”⁴⁷ This is the kind of extremism, Malcolm X retorted, manifested in the nation’s bombing of Hiroshima.

Malcolm X’s criticism of the U.S. involvement in the Congo was noteworthy, as it pointed to his growing knowledge of African affairs. It, too, displays, Kevin Gaines maintains, Malcolm X’s increasing political sophistication. “Malcolm noted the double standard by which the State Department and the Western press condoned the slaughter of Congoese under the cover of humanitarianism, yet condemned the rhetorical advocacy of self-defense by Blacks as a means of protest against unredressed white violence in the South.”⁴⁸ Not only did Malcolm X link racial injustice to American imperialism, but he also showed how America manipulated its world power to serve narrow self-interests.

His condemnation, in effect, invoked the question of the ethical, as it implies that individual behavior and group actions are accountable to laws that transcend the nation-state or cultural context. “In this new phase in Malcolm’s political understanding, unrestrained power is the devil within humanity, not the blood that courses through the veins of whites.”⁴⁹ Ambar calls this Malcolm X’s political conversion. “For while Islam had confirmed the universality of the human condition, the Black struggle in America and around the globe validated the specific attention to racial equality. Human beings had rights and those rights could be fought for without respect to race, but they could also be fought for, and indeed had to be fought for on occasion, with respect to race.”⁵⁰ Malcolm X’s Black nationalism informs and contextualizes the struggle for human rights as embodying a set of ethics that should protect

positive and negative freedoms. All nations, America in particular according to Malcolm X, ought to be held accountable for crimes that violate human rights as outlined by the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Malcolm X's criticism illuminates his personal moral struggle to make sense of Black subjugation, and from this moral struggle emerges a framework for imagining abolition ethics in which critical reflection and creative exchange play essential roles.

Abolition ethics assumes political actors are reflective. Malcolm X's distinction between the Uncle Tom and the field Negro is hyperbole but apt for my understanding of the reflective component of abolition ethics. Both the house Negro and the field Negro possess double or triple consciousness, and both are at war with their multiple identities. Through reflection and critical engagement with their social and political contexts, the conditions are created for the emergence of reflective political actors who are interested in engendering ethical practices.

Abolition ethics calls for political agents to engage the lived world, not simply through rational debates on justice but by joining movements and involving themselves in transnational political struggles. Without this engagement, Blacks cannot assume or understand different viewpoints or conceptualize the world from the underside from an *ideal* perspective. During his world travels Malcolm X came to see that poor and working-class African Americans would remain locked in the bottom if they did not find a way to shed their American identity and American-centered racial politics. Finding freedom would be possible, according to Malcolm X, when Blacks joined transnational political movements.

As political actors engage the world through critical reflection and sustained action, the conditions emerge for a creative exchange, what can be characterized as the development of a novel idea or strategy. A case in point was Malcolm X's attempt to mobilize African leaders to bring charges against America for violating the human rights of African Americans, which set the stage for his ethical imagination to materialize. His strategy was to create a distinct link between Africans and African Americans as a way to generate support among leaders for his proposal. The language he used to frame his overall argument accomplished his goals. Indeed, his speech acts created a new political landscape through which to see and hear otherwise left-out voices from the political mainstream. When he referred to Blacks as Afro-American, he engaged in a creative act. "Malcolm and his followers insisted on the legitimacy of Black and African heritage as the basis for the full participation

in American life. This oppositional self-naming of the ‘Afro-American’ was a defiant assertion of the expansiveness of Blackness as the basis for demands for national citizenship, for international affiliation, and ultimately, for a radical democratic politics universal in its applicability.”⁵¹

Conclusion

In the last chapter of his autobiography, Malcolm X shared his intimate feelings about his political work:

I must be honest. Negroes—Afro-Americans—showed no inclination to rush to the United Nations and demand justice for themselves here in America. I really had known in advance that they wouldn’t. The American white man has so thoroughly brainwashed the black man to see himself as only a domestic “civil rights” problem that it will probably take longer than I live before the Negro sees that the struggle of the American black man is international.⁵²

His tone is rather pessimistic here; Black freedom on American soil would not be realized during his lifetime. As he reflected on his political life, he acknowledged a truth he had never articulated: African Americans were Americans, and as long as they remained in America they would never pursue a real political fight against the place they called home.

The black man was scarred, he was cautious, he was apprehensive. I understood it better now than I had before. In the Holy World, away from America’s race problem, was the first time I ever had been able to think clearly about the basic divisions of white people in America, and how their attitudes and their motives related to, and affected Negroes. In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being.⁵³

In America, African Americans were locked in a racial prison. They were Black and their identities were defined in opposition to whites and whiteness. Of course, Blacks could free themselves by changing their names, reframing their identities. To do so, Malcolm X implied, required some kind of radical action, a kind of suspension of judgment that would permit Blacks to see themselves

in tension with the normative white gaze. In a practical sense, this is what happened when Malcolm X traveled to Africa and the Middle East. There, he could “feel like” a human being. But as long as African Americans placed their faith in political rights and narrow visions of American democracy, they would never know what it felt like to be a human being. What it takes to feel like a human involves a practice of intentionality, reflection, and creation. This is the framework for building a new political agenda based on abolition ethics.

Notes

I would like to thank my colleague and mentor, Professor Tracey Hucks, for offering critical feedback on my overall argument as I prepared this article.

1. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1990), 23.
2. Donna Tressler, “Cory United Methodist Church,” Cleveland Historical Society, <http://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/643>.
3. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 31.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. *Ibid.*, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 35.
7. *Ibid.*, 38.
8. Frederick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press), 5.
9. In my book, *Tragic Soul-Life: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Moral Crisis Facing American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), I discuss at length how W. E. B. Du Bois’s understanding of the “Negro problem” emerged from what I call white contempt of Blackness—cultural and religious beliefs among whites in the innate moral and intellectual inferiority of Blacks. The moral problem of Blackness, hence, emerges as a hermeneutic lens that informs how non-Blacks conceptualize the “Black.”
10. I am indebted to Du Bois’s construction of “abolition democracy” as a model for developing my own understanding of abolition democracy. Du Bois used the term in *Black Reconstruction* to denote how race and class inform democracy and democratic traditions.
11. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 141.
12. Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8–9.
13. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993), 231.
14. *Ibid.*, 231–32.

15. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*, ed. Archie Epps (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 128.
16. Erik S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard, "‘If you’re in a country that’s progressive, the woman is progressive’: Black Women Radicals and the Making of the Politics and Legacy of Malcolm X," *Biography* 36, no. 3 (2013): 513.
17. Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews, "Black Popular Culture and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 529.
18. McDuffie and Woodard, "If you’re in a country that’s progressive, the woman is progressive," 511–12.
19. *Ibid.*, 518. For instance, Garvin reinforced three important points that proved beneficial for Malcolm X’s organizing: religious institutions as critical sites for organizing, the working class as a viable political force, and independent media as a necessary tool for disseminating information.
20. *Ibid.*, 527.
21. William W. Sales Jr., *From Civil Rights to Black Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 60–61.
22. See www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_12.
23. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, 38.
24. See <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.ca/2013/05/harlem-freedom-rally-1960.html>.
25. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X*, 116.
26. *Ibid.*, 118.
27. *Ibid.*, 119.
28. *Ibid.*, 120.
29. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 10.
30. Edward E. Curtis IV, "Why Malcolm X Never Developed an Islamic Approach to Civil Rights," *Religion* 32, no. 3 (2002): 229.
31. *Ibid.*, 228.
32. Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 184.
33. McDuffie and Woodard’s "If you’re in a country that’s progressive, the woman is progressive" provides a great deal of primary research in this area.
34. Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning to Think for Ourselves: Malcolm X’s Black Nationalism Reconsidered," in *Malcolm in Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 74.
35. *Ibid.*, 78.
36. Ransby and Matthews, "Black Popular Culture and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions," 530.
37. Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in The United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 40.
38. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, 35.

39. Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, 26.
40. Ibid., 39.
41. See <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.ca/2013/05/harlem-freedom-rally-1960.html>.
42. James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 193.
43. Ibid., 193.
44. Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 187–88.
45. Saladin Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 171.
46. Ibid., 178.
47. Ibid., 172.
48. Kevin Gaines, “Malcolm X in Global Perspective,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 167.
49. Ambar, *Malcolm X at Oxford Union*, 49.
50. Ibid., 84.
51. Gaines, “Malcolm X in Global Perspective,” 168.
52. Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 1992), 419.
53. Ibid., 420.