According to David Howard-Pitney, author of *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, three elements underlie African American speeches of protest (or jeremiads): past Promise, current Failure, and eventual Fulfillment. Orators such as Frederick Douglass attacked slavery by making three essential claims. First, they argued that the founders built America on the promise of democracy and justice. Second, they maintained that slavery exemplified the current, gross failure of that promise. Third, they held that the Bible and the Declaration of Independence articulate the promise and guarantee its eventual fulfillment. By appealing to scriptural and patriotic authorities, speakers invoked and reinforced what is often called American civil religion. In the twentieth century, civil rights advocate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other African American leaders used similar means to advance the call of equal rights as promised in the Declaration of Independence. Nation of Islam ( NOI) follower Malcolm X, however, employed a method that challenged Promise/Failure/Fulfillment.

**Frederick Douglass**

Born a slave in Maryland in 1818, Frederick Douglass eventually escaped to the North, where he became a Christian preacher and then a magnetic antislavery orator. He regularly structured his orations according to Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. Interpreting the Declaration as a promise, he often paraphrased or quoted it, especially the passage "all men are created equal," which he used to hammer slavery. According to his argument, whites were hypocritical when they stated that their nation was founded on equality while they practiced slavery. Despite this hypocrisy, Douglass insisted, the Declaration was "a true doctrine," and its promise was genuine. Eventually, he declared, the nation would implement equality. Because slavery violated God's goodness, he further contended, it could not ultimately prevail.

Douglass and others who opposed slavery were engaged in ideological warfare with white slaveowners. At that time most white people strongly believed that people from Africa were unalterably inferior. Many Southern whites said that they believed their slaves were happy. Some whites claimed to have scientific proof of whites' genetic superiority. For example, popular writer Josiah Nott argued that people from Africa were barely superior to apes. As authority for their convictions, white supremacists cited not only science, but also the Bible. Slavery, they claimed,
reflected biblical principles. Southern members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives were also convinced that the U.S. Constitution sanctioned slavery forever. With some initial success, they struggled to prevent Northern members of Congress from even introducing antislavery petitions into congressional debate.

In 1852, delivering “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” his most celebrated speech, Douglass issued a blistering assault on slavery. He contended that bondage was evil, in part, because it conflicted with the principles of God and the nation. The Bible and the Declaration, he argued, contained the promise that slavery would eventually disappear. Quoting a poem by William Lloyd Garrison, he concluded that, once slavery died, all Americans would live in harmony and a lovely utopia would unfold throughout the nation.

Douglass was wrong.

Once the Civil War ended and bondage was abolished, the white majority did not embrace equality. Nor did whites live harmoniously with African Americans. Instead, for the most part, Reconstruction collapsed. Northern whites refused to treat African Americans as equals. In the South, former slaveowners continued white supremacy, in part by stuffing ballot boxes. They also exploited their ex-slaves by forcing them into sharecropping. Some white men formed the Ku Klux Klan, a group that terrorized African Americans. Disdaining jury trials, Klansmen and other lawless, white vigilantes lynched African Americans at will and without legal consequence.

Douglass responded to this grim situation by updating the Promise/Failure/Fulfillment structure of his jeremiads. Instead of denouncing slavery, as he had before, he labeled sharecropping a disguised form of slavery. Emulating Ida B. Wells, a younger woman who crusaded against lynching, he also railed at murder-by-rope and other crimes of Southern white terrorists. He continued to cite the Declaration and its promise of equality and kept reiterating that the promise would eventually be realized. He often gave bittersweet speeches at annual ceremonies held to commemorate the end of slavery.

Reconstruction through the Progressive Era

During and after Reconstruction, other prominent African American leaders—including Wells, Robert Elliott, Francis Grimke, William Crogman, and Archibald Carey—delivered jeremiads similar to those of Douglass. Like Douglass, they based their hopes on the Declaration, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Bible. They further appealed to the Constitution, citing the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which Congress passed in the aftermath of the Civil War.

In 1874, for example, Robert Elliott, an African American member of Congress, eloquently pleaded for Congress to pass a civil rights bill that would outlaw racial segregation in restaurants, hotels, and passenger trains. Elliott hailed the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments as efforts to implement the promise of the Declaration. He also quoted the Bible.

In 1905 Francis Grimke, an eminent minister, employed the Declaration as a plumb line to gauge the stupendous failures of Reconstruction. He mentioned the “right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and the pre-
cept that “all men are born free and equal,” then decried racism in the South as being so horrific that “the life of a Negro isn’t worth as much as that of a dog.” In 1919 he supplied a comparable appeal as he quoted the Declaration while exposing “this horrid record of lynching.”

Condemning lynching in 1893, Ida B. Wells also quoted the Declaration in a jeremiad that employed the structure of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment and ended with an idealistic vision of racial harmony. In 1952 Archibald Carey, one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s friends and models, argued similarly as he cited the Declaration approvingly, assailed racism, and finished with a vision as optimistic as Wells’s.

A relatively small number of African Americans disagreed with the jeremiad and its structure of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. These speakers and writers—notably Martin Delany, Henry McNeal Turner, and Marcus Garvey—wanted listeners to separate from their white oppressors. A bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Turner visited Liberia and urged American blacks to emigrate to Africa. In an attempt to challenge white supremacy and promote racial pride, he once proclaimed, “God is a Negro.” During the 1910s and early 1920s Garvey, who also embraced Christianity, staged popular parades in Harlem for the purpose of instilling racial pride. Like Turner, the charismatic Garvey advocated emigration to Africa and, for a brief period, gained a large following in Harlem.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American to graduate with a Ph.D. from Harvard University, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He proved indefatigable as a sociologist, historian, journalist, literary figure, and agitator for African American rights. Booker T. Washington earned fame and Du Bois’s wrath by currying favor with whites while refusing to seek the right to vote. But Du Bois, the radical, and Washington, the moderate, both sought to assimilate with whites. Douglass, Elliott, Grimke, Wells, Du Bois, and Washington gained many more followers than did Delany, Turner, and Garvey.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1929 Martin Luther King Jr. was born to a middle-class African American family in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, who was active in civic affairs, served as minister of Ebenezer Baptist Church; his mother played the organ for the choir. In 1944, at age fifteen, King won an oratory contest by offering a precise example of an African American jeremiad. In this youthful speech, King cited the Bible and the Declaration as touchstones that condemned racism.

Before finishing his doctorate at Boston University, King assumed the ministry of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. There, in December 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white man. JoAnn Robinson and the Women’s Political Council immediately organized a boycott of all city buses. The eloquent King was soon chosen as leader of the protest, which catapulted him into the national spotlight. After thousands of African Americans in Montgomery shunned buses for one year, the U.S. Supreme Court validated their cause by outlawing racial discrimination on buses.

For the rest of his life, King hopscotched the nation, delivering hundreds, if not thousands,
of speeches and sermons. In virtually all of them, he attacked American segregation. Often invoking the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, he assaulted the intertwining “triple evils” of poverty, racism, and war.

In 1963 King and Fred Shuttlesworth led highly publicized racial protests in Birmingham, Alabama. The fire and police departments of Birmingham used powerful hoses and attack dogs on King’s nonviolent demonstrators, including young children. Soon afterward, King joined A. Philip Randolph and other important leaders in orchestrating the March on Washington. For this event, approximately 200,000 people assembled to hear speakers endorse President John F. Kennedy’s civil rights legislation. King capped the event by delivering “I Have a Dream,” one of the most esteemed American speeches of the twentieth century.

Many of King’s speeches reflect long-established patterns of African American political oratory, specifically a bittersweet expression of protest that began before the Civil War and that continues to this day. Orators normally play to listeners’ long-held convictions, then ask audiences to extend those convictions to an issue in question. During the nineteenth century, for example, antislavery speakers often expressed their faith in the principles of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. Most people in Victorian America accepted those two authorities. Opponents of slavery urged their audiences to reject bondage as a violation of the Bible and the Declaration. Because all men were created equal, abolitionists reasoned, slavery must be wrong. Similarly, they held that, if loving your neighbor is a godly principle, slavery must be evil.

During the 1950s and 1960s King gained fame by offering superlative, traditional African American jeremiads. They included his first address during the Montgomery bus boycott. There he condemned racial exploitation and invoked God and the Supreme Court, which, he insisted, guaranteed the eventual triumph of justice.

Several of King’s mentors traveled to India to speak with Mahatma Gandhi, who led India in its triumphant nonviolent campaign to overthrow British rule. Spurred by his mentors’ interest in Gandhi, King implemented and popularized Gandhi’s political philosophy and tactics. According to Gandhian theory, those who suffer should, if necessary, violate unjust laws openly and publicly. Gandhi and King maintained that volunteering for jail can dramatize injustice and hasten the arrival of justice. The drama can be especially effective if lawbreakers are so numerous that they overflow the jail cells. In that case, they strain the legal system; authorities do not know what to do with them. Such lawbreaking—or civil disobedience—attempts to persuade. But masses of lawbreakers also exert huge political pressure on authorities. Television can evoke sympathy for a protest if viewers witness police brutality against nonviolent, hymn-singing demonstrators. This process occurred often during the civil rights movement, notably during King’s Birmingham campaign of 1963.

A few months after the crucible of Birmingham, King climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to deliver “I Have a Dream.” It is a classic African American jeremiad that follows the structure of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. He began by praising the Emancipation Proclamation. Immediately reversing himself, he explained
that, despite the promise of Lincoln’s edict, African Americans were still not free. He depicted a nightmare of racial injustice. Then he proclaimed, “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.’” This statement repeats Douglass’s frequent appeals to the Declaration and hope for the fulfillment of its promise, despite the failures of the moment.

King began the conclusion of “I Have a Dream” by quoting the lyrics of “America” (“My country ‘tis of thee”). Then, following the pattern of Douglass in 1852, Wells in 1893, and Carey in 1952, King unfolded a utopian vision of the magnificent harmony that would come about once racism disappears. Like Wells and Carey at the conclusion of their speeches, King generated his image of harmony by comparing future Americans with members of a choir smoothly blending their voices. King borrowed this ending directly from Carey.

A sharecropper with little formal education, Fannie Lou Hamer emerged as a commanding figure in the racial struggle in Mississippi, where King did not play a prominent role. In 1964, speaking at the Democratic National Convention, Hamer eloquently demanded equality. Her speech followed the classic structure of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment and incorporated phrases from “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

In 1965 King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee picked Selma, Alabama, as a site to agitate for voting rights. On a day known as Bloody Sunday, horse-riding state troopers used tear gas and nightsticks to assault nonviolent African American protestors led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis, a future member of Congress. Televised images of this barbaric police behavior upon well-dressed, unoffending people galvanized even greater national support for civil rights. Many members of Congress thundered their anger at the state troopers and at George Wallace, the governor of Alabama.

Marshaling supporters from around the nation, King and Lewis led them on a fifty-mile trek from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital. There they demanded the right to vote. Using the hypnotic cadences of the black folk pulpit, King recited a litany of racial horrors. But he sounded even more optimistic than he did during the Montgomery bus boycott or in “I Have a Dream.” He concluded his emotional address by quoting idealistic lyrics from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Through this anthem, both patriotic and religious, he appealed once more to American civil religion. His argument of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment again animated his listeners.

In the hands of popular African American orators, Promise/Failure/Fulfillment offered an Argument by Trajectory. Frederick Douglass implied that the nation glimpsed the principle of equality in 1776, that it moved toward equality when slavery ended, and that it would grant full equality to all its citizens eventually. Imbued with a similar faith, a host of subsequent orators argued similarly. At the Montgomery bus boycott, in “I Have a Dream,” and at the end of the march from Selma to Montgomery, King supplied a parallel argument. From 1955 through 1965 he reiterated the view that the nation would continue moving from a slaveholding society to an egalitarian one.

African American agitators depicted promise and fulfillment in part to motivate listeners.
Merely railing at horrors would likely not prompt anyone to overthrow slavery or any other huge injustice. Only people with prodigious hope will hurl themselves at gargantuan evils. If speakers only sketch terrifying visions, their listeners could lapse into despair and helplessness. They could simply withdraw to their homes and nurture their families. But, by envisioning that social movements could usher in utopia, orators could inspire listeners to initiate profound moral crusades.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X viewed interracial utopia as impossible. As James Cone, the founder of black theology, explains, Malcolm X’s differences with King stemmed largely from their contrasting boyhoods.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925, Malcolm Little grew up near Lansing, Michigan, where he suffered greatly from racism and from the poverty of the Great Depression. At times he and his siblings had almost nothing to eat. Unlike King’s successful, nurturing parents, Earl Little, a follower of Marcus Garvey, died suddenly, while his children were still young. Little’s widow, Louise Little, struggled to raise her children alone while trying to cope with meddlesome welfare workers. She was institutionalized in a mental hospital. After growing up in foster homes, Malcolm Little migrated to Boston and New York. There he reveled in a youthful counterculture of zoot suits, acrobatic jazz dancing, draft dodging, marijuana peddling, and gangsterism.

Imprisoned for theft, Malcolm Little began to reassess his identity. He corresponded with Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam (NOI), an unorthodox form of the Muslim religion. As Malcolm Little enthusiastically converted to the NOI, he changed his name to Malcolm X. The “X” substituted for the African name that his ancestors lost when whites forced them into slavery.

Instead of appealing to his listeners’ Christian faith, Malcolm X urged his audiences to abandon it. Through dozens of speeches in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, he persuaded thousands to join the NOI. Like his mentor Elijah Muhammad, he rejected racial integration and preached Black Nationalism. The NOI not only advocated racial separatism, but it also implemented its doctrine. Its members operated their own temples, stores, restaurants, bakeries, schools, and a newspaper with a sizable readership.

When most whites learned about the NOI, they were shocked by Malcolm X’s calls for separation and his refusal to endorse nonviolence. Many had difficulty believing that a sane person could reject white America. But Malcolm X drew vigorous applause when debating leading exponents of nonviolence, including Bayard Rustin and James Farmer. Malcolm X disparaged King and the entire nonviolent effort in the South. His indictment of white America proved so eloquent that white hosts of television and radio shows clamored to put him on the air. He also spoke at numerous, largely white universities.

Malcolm X repeatedly alluded to the African American jeremiad. Like many before him, he sometimes discussed the promise of the Declaration and of Christianity as he constantly castigated the failure of racism. But he exploded the hope for fulfillment. He encapsu-
lated his logic in highly original, provocative aphorisms.
You didn't come here on the Mayflower.
You came here on a slave ship.
We didn't land on Plymouth Rock . .
Plymouth Rock landed on us!
I'm not a Democrat,
I'm not a Republican,
And I don't even consider myself an American.
You're nothing but Africans.
Nothing but Africans.

He repeatedly characterized himself and his listeners as “ex-slaves” and contended that, for them, the United States constituted a “prison.”

This entire appeal challenged Promise/Failure/Fulfillment by exploiting a huge, obvious problem. Fully one hundred years after emancipation, equality was nowhere in sight. Instead, white supremacy still ruled. During the 1950s and 1960s racial discrimination clouded African American lives. Most Southern blacks were consistently denied the right to vote, the right to a good education, the right to use public libraries, the right to eat in restaurants, and many other rights and opportunities. In the South, whites could still murder African Americans without fear of being convicted by an all-white jury. Southern white men who raped African American women would rarely be indicted. In the North, Midwest, and West, as well as the South, huge numbers of African Americans suffered from poverty and deprivation.

Despite their severe mistreatment of African Americans, whites routinely boasted that America was a Christian nation and the leader of the “free world.” On every Fourth of July, whites celebrated the American Revolution and expressed their reverence for America.

They regarded their nation as the apotheosis of freedom and justice.

Responding to the anthem of the civil rights movement, “We Shall Overcome,” 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’?” By raising this question, Malcolm X claimed that, for almost two hundred years, the phrase “all men are created equal” meant nothing. The real principle of America, he insisted, was white supremacy.

Instead of identifying himself with American civil religion, Malcolm X assaulted such identification. Instead of telling blacks to celebrate Thanksgiving, he urged them to disdain the Pilgrims. As he sharply criticized King, he was rejecting the work—and even the goal—of the dominant African American leadership over many generations. He implied that Douglass and a long cavalcade of African American notables had built their main argument on an unjustified faith in whites.

Unlike King, Malcolm X considered racial equality to be a foreign concept for whites. He failed to discern the principle of racial equality lurking within the Declaration—or within the Emancipation Proclamation or the Constitution. For him, the core American principle of white supremacy was never seriously challenged during the American Revolution, the Civil War, or Reconstruction. He implied that African Americans were projecting the concept of equality onto slaveholders, such as Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration, owned slaves throughout his entire adult life.

In short, Malcolm X charged that eminent black leaders were trying to sell a new, alien
tenet of equality by mislabeling it as a great American tradition. These leaders, he maintained, were trying to beautify an extremely ugly situation. They refused, he insisted, to recognize the emptiness of whites’ promise. And they refused, he contended, to recognize the impossibility of a color-blind, utopian America, which they kept saying was imminent.

Malcolm X implied that, for prominent African American orators, the argument from Promise/Failure/Fulfillment had become merely a habit. He implied that, instead of examining their main argument, speakers had routinized it by appealing to a set of identifications that they uncritically accepted.

In Malcolm X’s argument, not only were the slaves of 1776 exempt from the clause “all men are created equal,” but all other Americans were as well. For Malcolm X, the rattling of the slaves’ chains spoke much louder than the pretty words written by Jefferson and other slaveowners. For him, while the Declaration appeared to institute equality, the slaves’ loss of freedom nullified Jefferson’s famous phrase. In this argument, even the white landowners who signed the Declaration were not free.

Malcolm X further challenged the jeremiad when he claimed that the Declaration had nothing to do with nonviolence. Instead, he insisted, the Declaration was a Declaration of War. Through it, Jefferson and the other patriots of 1776 announced their desire to overthrow British rule. Refusing to tolerate “taxation without representation,” they took up arms to defeat the British army. African Americans, Malcolm X noted, paid taxes in 1964, but huge numbers could not vote and were not represented in Congress. Why, he asked, should they tolerate taxation without representation?

He held that they needed independence just as the whites of 1776 needed it. And why, he inquired, did whites think violence was justified in 1776 but not in 1964? Slavery and segregation, he maintained, were far more terrifying than anything experienced by wealthy white landowners in 1776.

Here Malcolm X replaced the Argument by Trajectory with a very different interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. To him, the Declaration did not offer a promise that would gradually be realized. Instead it provided a model for violent upheaval by colonized people against their colonizers. And, he insisted, whites in 1964 were still colonizing African Americans.

One can view all or parts of the Declaration as statements of timeless truths. But Malcolm X interpreted the Declaration in its situatedness. For him, it was an act of defiance and rebellion—an act of war; an act spawning violence, which was sanitized by celebrants on the Fourth of July; an act that legitimized violence in 1776 and that was subsequently alleged to legitimize nonviolence; an act that should be viewed as a precedent for armed struggle.

Comparing King and Malcolm X

Many people have viewed King and Malcolm X as opposites. King was a Christian minister. Malcolm X evangelized for Elijah Muhammad’s NOI. King preached and practiced nonviolence. Malcolm X doubted that approach would prove fruitful for African Americans. King accepted money from white donors, consulted white advisers, and conferred with Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. For most of his career, Malcolm X disdained white
allies. He agitated on the margins of established American politics.

In one respect, King and Malcolm X shared common ground. To them both, the Declaration raised the issue of racial equality, not gender equality. Their position was in sharp contrast to that of Frederick Douglass, for example, who had advocated women’s right to vote and the principle of women’s equality.

Scholars have noted that the rivalry between Malcolm X and King enabled them to work synergistically. Malcolm X made King seem much more moderate than King would otherwise have appeared. When President Kennedy asked nonviolent leaders to stop organizing the March on Washington, A. Philip Randolph mollified the president. Randolph claimed that blacks needed a disciplined outlet for their anger. He implied that peaceful demonstrations were not the only means of pursuing civil rights. This comment referred to the powerful leadership of Malcolm X. By posing an alternative to mainline civil rights organizations, Malcolm X and the NOI made those groups appear much less threatening. Even though they sought significant social change, many undecided whites learned to sympathize with their nonviolent appeals.

King also aided Malcolm X. The enormous scope of the civil rights movement in the South affirmed the unity of African Americans. The Southern struggle prodded them to reassess their racial identity and to affirm their solidarity. Northern blacks welcomed Malcolm X’s call for racial pride in part because they were heartened to see a stiff challenge to white supremacy in Alabama and Mississippi.

Further, as James Cone explains, in some important ways, late in their lives, King and Malcolm X were moving closer together. After completing a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Muslim holy city, Malcolm X publicly broke with Elijah Muhammad and embraced a more orthodox version of Islam. He stopped labeling all white people "devils," affirming instead that Islam welcomed people of every color. Establishing ties with important leaders in the Middle East and Africa, he reemphasized the need for a worldwide struggle against colonialism. In his autobiography, he combined these themes and urged blacks to form their own businesses and to control the money in their own communities.

Not long after Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, King became more radical. He championed the cause of impoverished Americans of every color. Mobilizing a Poor People’s Campaign designed to converge on Washington, D.C., he was preparing to lead activists to occupy government offices and demand an end to poverty. Interrupting that effort, he ventured to Memphis, Tennessee, in April 1968 to assist striking garbage workers. In his speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” he instructed them and their supporters to pool their money and run their own banks and businesses. He also reemphasized African American ties to worldwide movements against colonial rule.

In his 1967 book Where Do We Go from Here?, King acknowledged a big problem with his own argument of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment. While he had offered "radiant promises of progress" in his earlier speeches, those promises, he observed, had not been realized. Instead, he explained, his disappointed listeners witnessed an unresponsive government, destructive riots, and an unjustified war in Vietnam. His "dream," he noted, had become "a frustrating nightmare."
Recent scholars emphasize that, late in his life, King invoked American civil religion less and less. He adopted the stance of a biblical prophet whose authority stemmed from God, not a political document. For example, in “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” he referred to the Bill of Rights and briefly recalled Abraham Lincoln. But he repeatedly invoked scripture. Like Moses at the end of his life, King declared, he hiked a mountain and gazed at the Promised Land, which God would not allow him to enter. But King promised that, despite his own inability to reach the Promised Land, “we as a people” would eventually arrive at that sacred place.

King was assassinated the day after he delivered “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

One can view King’s shift from American civil religion to biblical prophecy as an outgrowth of his own reflections. One can also view his shift as a thoughtful response to the ultimate weakness of the Argument by Trajectory, a weakness that Malcolm X noticed long before King did.

For many younger African Americans—and King—appeals of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment eventually seemed more and more like casuistic stretching. And for them, the stretching had finally overextended itself. While antislavery crusaders never sneered at Douglass’s Argument by Trajectory, demoralized young people booed King in 1967. Their reaction may have prodded him to turn more to the Bible.

While most of Malcolm X’s discussions of violence were somewhat indirect and politic, King criticized Malcolm X for refusing to endorse nonviolence. This refusal continued through Malcolm X’s entire public career, even after he returned from Mecca and broke with Elijah Muhammad and the NOI. King made the obvious point that whites badly outnumbered African Americans. An armed black insurgency, he insisted, would inevitably culminate in a bloodbath. Blacks, he argued, would die by the thousands and their uprising would fail. Cone observed that the King-Malcolm X disagreement about nonviolence was unresolvable.

One can believe Malcolm X’s statements, including his refusal to embrace nonviolence. Malcolm X appeared to insist that he always meant exactly what he said. He captivated many listeners in part because he seemed unusually direct and honest. He seemed never to varnish his words.

But Malcolm X’s life evidenced ambiguity. King observed that African American leaders who discussed armed rebellion chose not to lead a revolt themselves. After Malcolm X stepped out of prison into the NOI, he apparently never committed violence. He lambasted King and others for not retaliating when police dogs attacked children. But Malcolm X never attacked police dogs himself. In 1962, when Los Angeles police murdered an NOI member outside an NOI temple, he flew immediately to the scene. But neither he nor anyone else in the NOI exacted revenge against the Los Angeles Police Department. After this incident, he confided to a close friend: “We spout our militant revolutionary rhetoric and we preach Armageddon . . . but when our own brothers are brutalized or killed, we do nothing.” This statement revealed his recognition of his own inconsistency. Despite his blazing language, he practiced nonviolence.

Perhaps Malcolm X’s most important goal was, in his words, to “awaken” African Ameri-
cans whom he regarded as "brainwashed" or "dead." He explained the problem as follows.

[We] hated our African characteristics.
We hated our heads,
We hated the shape of our nose . . .
We hated the color of our skin,
Hated the blood of Africa that was in our veins . . .
And we hated ourselves.
By saying
You didn't come here on the Mayflower.
You came here on a slave ship
We didn't land on Plymouth Rock . . .
Plymouth Rock landed on us!

He proposed what Kenneth Burke calls a "perspective by incongruity," which, in Burke's words, shatters "the sense of what properly goes with what." White Americans associated the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock with freedom and the beginning of a great, new nation. For African Americans, identifying with the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock meant sharing whites' reverence for all things European. But, for Malcolm X, the entire European arrival spelled terrifying crimes and pitiless exploitation. For that reason, he developed a perspective by incongruity that would attack blacks' identification with white patriotic symbols, such as the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock.

Perspective by incongruity may have been Malcolm X's chief means of reviving those whom he considered "brainwashed." Some, he held, were not only sick, but also "dead" from overidentification with Plymouth Rock, the Declaration, and Euro-American culture. To Malcolm X, this overidentification produced self-hatred among many, who wished for lighter skin.

Malcolm X prodded ordinary people to nurture self-respect by refusing to imitate whites on Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July. His rhetoric helped inspire young activists to begin the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party. His orations also encouraged young poets and dramatists to rewrite American literature as they proclaimed their racial pride on street corners throughout Harlem and in other cities. New presses in Detroit and Chicago issued their vibrant works. By generating the Black Arts Movement, these authors helped develop audiences for such later, world-renowned authors as August Wilson, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison—all of whom write almost exclusively about African American life. The self-respect of young people who responded to Malcolm X did not spring from the Argument by Trajectory and its promise of utopia. Their self-respect sprang from their own racial and cultural pride.

King and Malcolm X confronted frozen white sensibilities and whites' repeated and consistent failure to implement the promise of the Declaration. And they both faced masses of African Americans tempted to despair because racial equality seemed forever distant.

King, Hamer, and their cohorts translated Gandhi's Hindu precepts into a Judeo-Christian idiom that Americans could understand. Civil rights agitators were the first grassroots activists to manipulate television for political ends. Their productions were gut-wrenching. In them, Southern sheriffs routinely emerged as villains, and African Americans emerged as peaceable, freedom-loving hymn singers. The well-choreographed melodramas pressured whites to confront the principles of the Declaration, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

Malcolm X undertook a different, equally difficult task. He sought to alter a body of
identifications that exceedingly gifted orators had cemented for over a hundred years. He shattered patriotic piety developed through long-standing identification with white America. Exalting the NOI, he challenged a highly churned African American community to reassess its habitual loyalties. He did so again when, after returning from the Middle East, he evangelized for a more orthodox Islam. Defamiliarizing the Mayflower, Plymouth Rock, and the Declaration, he rejected the old, essentially unaltered Argument by Trajectory. Further, he challenged King’s claim that the Declaration authorized Gandhian nonviolence, insisting instead that it authorized a violent revolution against England.

In “I Have a Dream,” King deemed the Declaration “a promissory note” that had come back “marked insufficient funds.” Following the form of Promise/Failure/Fulfillment, he heralded America’s great “vaults of opportunity,” vaults that would eventually redeem the promissory note. He and Hamer urged Americans to integrate and thereby fulfill the old American promise. Like Douglass and their other predecessors, he and Hamer taught African Americans that they need not despair or remain docile. Nor would they always remain subordinate to whites.

Conclusion

Through the Argument by Trajectory, Douglass and other abolitionists prodded America to dismantle slavery. The Argument by Trajectory also yielded major political victories during the 1950s and 1960s, most notably the demise of legalized racism. Despite these triumphs, by the end of his life, King appeared, like Malcolm X, to recognize the eventual weakness of the African American jeremiad. Like Malcolm X, he seemed to view it as a form of casuistic stretching that was badly overextended. Unlike Douglass and unlike his own mentors, King maneuvered through and around the Declaration, eventually curtailing his appeals to American civil religion and shifting toward biblical prophecy.

Malcolm X’s perspective by incongruity disturbed familiar identifications in African American life, especially a long-established, widespread attachment to American civil religion. His refusal to revere Christian America prodded blacks to achieve a decidedly greater measure of self-definition.

By re-imagining the Pilgrims and the Declaration, Malcolm X did not seek to integrate outcasts into the American mainstream. Instead, he helped create a people.

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