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Martin v. Malcolm: Democracy, Nonviolence, Manhood

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MARTIN V. MALCOLM:
DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, MANHOOD

John M. Kang

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I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this symposium—“Nonviolence and the Road to Democracy”—bids the reader to reflect on the comparative merits of nonviolence versus violence as a means to accomplish a transition to democracy. Recent events have brought attention to this issue in the context of the Middle East and North Africa.¹ There appear to be glimmerings of the yearning for democracy in these popular political movements.²

Yet fundamental questions linger about them: Other than a change in the status quo, what do they want? What does democracy mean to them? Are these movements in fact peaceful, and if so, are these seemingly peaceful means impelled by principled choice or by provisional necessity? At this point, we cannot know the answers to these questions, in large part, because we cannot

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possibly interview most of the participants, let alone all of them. And even if we
could, many of the answers would surely be incomplete, diverse, and mutually
conflicting.\(^3\)

In such circumstances, perhaps the best that can be gleaned are the
words of a charismatic leader who at least can answer these questions for him-
self and explain why he arrived at his answers. While such leaders have not yet
appeared in the Middle East and North Africa, there are two who have come to
personify the movements for democracy in late twentieth-century America—
Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. By sifting through their words, we may
gain a better idea about why someone would choose nonviolence over violence
(or vice versa). Through them, we also may understand better how personal life
experiences, rather than formal study in ethics or philosophy, are responsible for
shaping a person's conception of democracy.

I begin in Part II with King. He envisioned democracy, at its base, as the
legal recognition of full rights for black Americans. But King desired more than
legal rights. As a devout Christian, he sought to live in a “beloved community”
with whites where both groups would regard each other with affection. Natura-
ly, for King, violence had no business in achieving such ends.

Malcolm, however, was famous, perhaps notorious, for his memorable
announcement that blacks should pursue “any means necessary” to acquire
power.\(^4\) I address the substance of this argument in Part III. Unlike King, the
early Malcolm, before his trip to Mecca, opposed integration with whites as a
political sham that would never guarantee rights for blacks.\(^5\) He sought instead a
separation from whites where blacks could form their own independent nation.
And unlike King, Malcolm believed that, given the relentless exploitation of
blacks by whites, violence had to be available as a moral option rooted in self-
defense and political assertion.\(^6\)

Part IV explores the personal origins of the arguments advanced by
Malcolm and King. I suggest that their familial upbringing and economic cir-
cumstances profoundly shaped their worldviews and political proscriptions. My
purpose for venturing into their personal lives is not to indulge a bleak voyeur-
ism but to outline which types of people might be drawn to which kinds of ar-
geuments for democratic change.

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\(^3\) Andrew C. McCarthy, *Do the Protesters Want Democracy?*, NAT’L REV. ONLINE (Feb. 9, 2011, 4:00 AM), http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/259310/do-protestors-want-democracy-andrew-c-mccarthy (arguing that the diversity of groups in Egypt preclude generalizations about what the protesters may want).


II. King’s Passive Resistance

In this Part, I discuss King’s views about nonviolence and democratic change. The substance of both terms, for King, derived from morality and religion.

A. Democracy

Begin with what King thought about democracy. Analytic philosophers will be disappointed, though. For King did not write for scholars. He was a political activist intent on arousing popular support, and he opted for inspiring prose rather than precise and deeply structured definitions. King’s conception of democracy was informed almost entirely by the ethos of the Declaration of Independence: For King, democracy entailed the view that all men, irrespective of their race, were presumptively entitled to equal respect. He accordingly invoked the Declaration in his moral indictment of de jure racism. “Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality on the question of race,” King asserted.7 America “has been torn between selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy.”8 By “antithesis of democracy,” King had in mind racial discrimination, and specifically, segregation. For him, both were “strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.”9

While slavery had been outlawed, King believed that segregation presented its own threat to democracy. The Supreme Court had established in Plessy v. Ferguson the now infamous doctrine that racially segregated public facilities were constitutional as long as they were deemed equal.10 But King objected that from Plessy “a new kind of slavery came into being.”11 Plessy’s doctrine of “separate but equal” soon manifested itself as “strict enforcement of the ‘separate,’ without the slightest intention to abide by the ‘equal.’”12 As a result, “the Plessy doctrine ended up plunging the Negro into the abyss of exploitation where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.”13 True, the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education14 eventually overturned this

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8 Id. (emphasis added).
9 Id.
10 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 544 (1896).
11 KING, Nonviolence and Racial Justice, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 5–6.
12 Id.
13 Id.
doctrine in the context of public elementary schools, but King argued that Plessy’s racist mindset “still remained as the rationale of segregation in other areas,” including public transportation and restaurants.

Racial segregation was condemned most poignantly by King in his personal narratives. None is more evocative than his Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Jailed in Alabama for peaceful civil rights demonstrations, King addressed white clerics who criticized his campaign of civil disobedience. The white clerics urged him to wait until segregationists decided to come around to King’s message. King, however, retorted that “you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” if you have to endure the experience of psychological devastation.

Devastation like this:

[When] you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”

Or this:

[When] you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you . . .

Or this:

[When] your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy,” (however old you are) and your last name

15 Id. at 494–95.
16 KING, Stride Toward Freedom, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 451.
17 KING, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 289.
18 Id.
19 Id.
20 Id. at 293.
21 Id. at 292–93.
22 Id. at 293.
becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”

In short, King concludes, “when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness,’ then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

Segregation, in King’s view, unfairly eats away at the victim’s sense of self-worth.

King had also mentioned discrimination as a separate category from segregation, but the former was also condemned as incompatible with the democracy at the heart of the Declaration of Independence. In Letter from a Birmingham Jail, he also sketches the harms of racism generally. Again, addressing the white clerics, King tells them that he cannot “wait” for change:

[When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize[,] and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society . . . .

Racism is more than an offense to democracy. It is for King a combination of the oppressive, terrifying, and profoundly powerful.

What is to be done, then? King proposes a policy of nonviolent civil disobedience, something I address in the next Part.

B. Nonviolence

King’s proposal for nonviolence is familiar enough. His reasons for advocating it are perhaps less so. He had to convince blacks who had suffered humiliations and physical abuses to eschew retaliation. Especially for young black males, such arguments were hard to swallow. “To the young victim of the slums,” King observed, “this society has so limited the alternatives of his life that the expression of his manhood is reduced to the ability to defend himself physically.”

“No wonder,” he continues, “it appears logical to him to strike

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23 Id.
24 Id.
25 Id. at 301.
26 Id. at 289.
27 Id. at 292.
28 KING, A Gift of Love, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 62.
29 Id.
out, resorting to violence against oppression,” for “[t]hat is the only way he thinks he can get recognition.”

Against this backdrop, King’s arguments for nonviolence had to be resourceful. His arguments organized themselves into two categories: One, utilitarian arguments that explained the political benefits of nonviolence;31 and, two, religious arguments that impelled black Christians to dutifully model their lives after Jesus of Nazareth. I explore these arguments in turn.

A principal and oft-repeated argument by King for nonviolence rests on a utilitarian perspective that violence will only beget violence, a self-destructive cycle that will hamper efforts to achieve democracy. “To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in our world,” he declares.32 He continues:

We have learned through the grim realities of life and history that hate and violence solve nothing. They only serve to push us deeper and deeper into the mire. Violence begets violence; hate begets hate; and toughness begets a greater toughness. It is all a descending spiral, and the end is destruction—for everybody.33

King urged that “[a]long the way of life, someone must have enough sense . . . to cut off the chain of hate . . . .”34 So worried was King about this “chain of hate” that he admonished, “violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves.”35 Again, King urged, “Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear.”36

Violence, at any rate, does nothing to solve the basic problems of the black community, King argued. “Rioting and violence provide no solutions for economic problems.”37 Some black nationalists have claimed that violence against whites “enables Negroes to overcome their fear of the white man.”38 But, King objects, “they are just as afraid of the power structure after a riot as before.”39 After a riot in 1964 in Rochester, New York, “[w]hen we discussed the possibility of going down to talk with the police, the people who had been

30 Id.
31 KING, The Current Crisis in Race Relations, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 86–87.
32 Id. at 85, 87.
33 Id. at 87.
34 Id. at 87–88 (emphasis added).
35 KING, Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 54, 57–58.
36 Id. at 58.
37 KING, A Testament of Hope, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 313, 322.
38 Id.
39 Id.
most aggressive in the violence were afraid to talk” and “[t]hey still had a sense of inferiority . . . .”40

Aside from these purported harms, King marshaled a grand example to show that nonviolence works—the liberation of India from the British Empire.41 “More than 390 million people achieved their freedom, and they achieved it nonviolently,” he announced.42 “Gandhi,” King wrote, “was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his lifetime than any other person in the history of this world.”43 All of this came to pass “with a little love and understanding goodwill and a refusal to cooperate with an evil law . . . .”44

There was another reason, other than utility, to adhere to nonviolence, King counseled. Nonviolence was required by Christian morality. Specifically, King argued that nonviolent resistance to racist laws is not an effort to register hatred against white oppressors.45 Nonviolent resistance “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding.”46 The noncooperation or boycotts waged by civil rights workers should aim toward “redemption and reconciliation.”47 King concluded that “[t]he aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.”48

Blacks, King urged, must love their white oppressors.49 But what did it mean to love one who was degrading you? “In speaking of love at this point, we are not referring to some sentimental emotion,” King qualified.50 For “[i]t would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense.”51 Rather, “‘[l]ove’ in this connection means understanding good will.”52 King had in mind agape love, which in Greek, means a “redeeming good will for all men, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.”53 It is the “love of God working in the lives of men” such that “[w]hen we love on the agape level we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal

40 Id.
42 Id.
43 Id.
44 Id.
45 KING, Nonviolence and Racial Justice, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 8.
46 Id. at 5, 7.
47 Id. at 8.
48 Id.
50 KING, Nonviolence and Racial Justice, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 8.
51 Id.
52 Id.
53 Id.
to us, but because God loves them.” More precisely, agape love means “loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed he does.” Agape love entailed healing the damaged souls of white racists. King explained, “Since the white man’s personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro.” For King, “[t]he Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears.”

At the heart of this agape love is a desire to want to live in a multiracial community and to build relations with white Americans. King announced, “Agape love is not a weak, passive love” but “love in action.” It is “love seeking to preserve and create community.” So devout was King to the ideal of forging positive relations with whites that he stated that agape love “is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community.” At one point, King suggested that, without a beloved community where blacks and whites care about each other, he would fail to exist as a person with a meaningful identity: “If I meet hate with hate, I become depersonalized, because creation is so designed that my personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community.”

With such words, King came to embody the spirit of nonviolence in the civil rights movement. But his message did not resonate with all black dissidents, some of whom sought purchase in violence as a political tool and as a means of self-defense against white racists. The arguments for nonviolent resistance, therefore, appealed only to a certain type of black activist. Worth exploring in this respect is what caused King himself to adopt nonviolence, rather than violence, in the cause of civil rights. I take up this issue in Part IV; in the next Part, I address another prominent leader during the 1960s civil rights movement, Malcolm X.

III. MALCOLM’S ARGUMENTS

If there was ever a figure who appeared to oppose the nonviolent ways of the Reverend King, it was surely Malcolm X. And if there was one maxim that encapsulated Malcolm’s political ethos, it was his threatening pronounce-
This seeming justification for violence, like King’s call for nonviolence, is part of a larger political worldview that deserves to be unpacked.

A. What Malcolm Saw as the Problem

Like King, Malcolm saw the denial of civil rights as morally intolerable. Foremost, for Malcolm, like King, there was an issue of safety. King had spoken of the racist violence inflicted against black Americans by “vicious mobs” and “hate-filled policemen.” 64 Malcolm, too, recounted the violence of racism. In 1964, he addressed African heads of state at the meeting for the Organization for African Unity. 65 He told them:

During the past ten years the entire world has witnessed our men, women[,] and children being attacked and bitten by vicious police dogs, brutally beaten by police clubs, and washed down the sewers by high-pressure water hoses that would rip the clothes from our bodies and the flesh from our limbs. 66

Malcolm also catalogued these crimes:

Two black bodies were found in the Mississippi River this week; last week an unarmed African-American educator was murdered in cold blood in Georgia; a few days before that three civil-rights workers disappeared completely, perhaps murdered also, only because they were teaching our people in Mississippi how to vote and how to secure their political rights. 67

Such atrocities, according to Malcolm, were contemporary heirs to a racism that has existed from America’s beginning. 68

In 1963 Malcolm gave a speech in Detroit where he explained that the relationship between blacks and whites was one of oppressed and oppressor since America’s inception. 69 He stated, “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

63 MALCOLM X, At the Audubon, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 88, 96 (emphasis added).
64 KING, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 292.
65 MALCOLM X, Appeal to African Heads of State, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 72, 73.
66 Id. at 74.
67 Id. at 72, 74.
68 MALCOLM X, Message to the Grass Roots, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 3–5.
69 Id.
chicken.”70 And “you were brought here by the . . . Founding Fathers.”71 While slavery was formally abolished, racism was still alive and well. “The internal moral consciousness of this country is bankrupt,” he stated, and “hasn’t existed since they first brought us over here and made slaves out of us.”72 Whites, Malcolm argued, “make it appear they have our good interests at heart, but when you study it, every time, no matter how many steps they take us forward, it’s like we’re standing on a—what do you call that thing?—a treadmill.”73

These words were delivered after the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education74 had rejected segregation in public schools,75 but Malcolm failed to see any changes. Things were actually worse, in his view. Ten years after the Court’s decision in Brown, he told an audience in Detroit, “[t]here’s more segregation now than there was in 1954.”76 For Malcolm, there was in America “more racial animosity, more racial hatred, more racial violence today in 1964, than there was in 1954.”77 He bewailed, “Where is the progress?”78 The white man, Malcolm reminded, is “in your motherland [Africa] taking control over minerals that have so much value they make the world go around. While you and I are still walking around over here, yes, trying to drink some coffee [in a desegregated restaurant]—with a cracker.”79

This reference to the exploitation of Africa was a theme to which Malcolm repeatedly returned. For he wanted to stress that white racism was not restricted to America, but was a global phenomenon that was organized by profoundly powerful forces whose avarice were insatiable. White racism, Malcolm asserted, expressed itself through an international campaign of colonialism where European countries took over and enslaved nonwhite countries.80 He explained:

I might point out here that colonialism or imperialism, as the slave system of the West is called, is not something that is just confined to England or France or the United States. The inter-

70 Id. 4.
71 Id. at 4–5.
72 MALCOLM X, To Mississippi Youth, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 137, 142.
73 Id.
75 Id. at 494–95.
76 MALCOLM X, The Ballot or the Bullet, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 23, 31.
77 Id.
78 Id.
79 MALCOLM X, At the Audubon, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 115, 124.
80 MALCOLM X, After the Bombing, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 157, 160.
ests in this country are in cahoots with the interests in France and the interests in Britain.81

More:

This international power structure is used to suppress the masses of dark-skinned people all over the world and exploit them of their natural resources, so that the era in which you and I have been living during the past ten years most specifically has witnessed the upsurge on the part of the black man in Africa against the power structure.82

By situting white racism internationally, Malcolm sought to convey that it was not a random aberration in the United States, but an international campaign to enslave nonwhite peoples everywhere. What, then, did Malcolm propose to create more democratic rights for blacks in America? The next Part addresses this question.

B. What Malcolm Saw as the Solution

Malcolm had described the conflict between whites and blacks in morally unbridgeable terms. Whites terrorized and murdered blacks. And racist violence was not restricted to the backwaters of Mississippi or Alabama. Malcolm connected what was happening in those places to a global movement where white people sought to colonize—to enslave—nonwhite peoples.

Malcolm’s early political views thus laid the foundation for his rejection of racial integration, which King had worked so hard to justify. While Malcolm never provided a point-by-point rebuttal of King’s proposal for integration, we can nonetheless juxtapose their respective claims.

Recall King’s argument that integration was necessary not simply for blacks to acquire equality but in order for blacks to help whites to heal their damaged souls.83 King, you remember, had sought to create a beloved community with whites.84 Even as he recognized the injustice inflicted by whites, King wrote in Letter from a Birmingham Jail that he has “longed to hear white ministers say, ‘Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother.’”85 Malcolm, however, had connected the European colonization of Africa as a larger manifestation of white exploitation of blacks in Ameri-

81 Id.
82 Id.
83 KING, An Experiment in Love, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 19.
84 Id. at 20.
85 KING, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, in TESTAMENT OF HOPE, supra note 7, at 299 (emphasis added).
ca.\(^{86}\) Instead of longing, unrealistically in Malcolm’s view, to hear white leaders
tell their followers to embrace blacks as their brothers, he stated that the whites
in America and those in Europe—“They are brothers.”\(^{87}\)

Whereas King had called whites and blacks “brothers” in a moral and
religious sense, Malcolm acerbically referred to whites as the worst of \textit{animals}.
“America is worse than South Africa, because not only is America racist, but
she also is deceitful and hypocritical.”\(^{88}\) “South Africa,” Malcolm stated, “is like
a vicious wolf, openly hostile towards black humanity.”\(^{89}\) America, though, “is
cunning like a fox, friendly and smiling, but even more vicious and deadly than
the wolf.”\(^{90}\) The imagery is quite suggestive; while one can forgive and eventu-
ally welcome back a wayward brother, one cannot trust a murderous fox, let
alone regard him as a \textit{brother}. Instead of urging integration, Malcolm once told
a black audience full of religious and national diversity, “what we have foremost
in common is that enemy—the white man.”\(^{91}\)

The only experience that Malcolm offered for whites and blacks living
in some semblance of peace was the absurdly lopsided relationship between the
slave owner and what Malcolm called the “house negro.”\(^{92}\) The house Negro
“loved the master more than the master loved himself,” remarked Malcolm.\(^{93}\)
He continued:

If the master said, “We got a good house here,” the house Negro
would say, “Yeah, we got a good house here.” Whenever the
master said “we,” he said “we.” That’s how you can tell a house
Negro.\(^{94}\)

Examples were proffered:

If the master’s house caught on fire, the house Negro would
fight harder to put the blaze out than the master would. If the
master got sick, the house Negro would say, “What’s the mat-

\(^{86}\) \textit{MALCOLM X, At the Audubon, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra} note 4, at 115, 125.
\(^{87}\) \textit{Id.} (emphasis added).
\(^{88}\) \textit{MALCOLM X, An Appeal to African Heads of State, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra} note 4, at
72, 75.
\(^{89}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^{90}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^{91}\) \textit{MALCOLM X, Message to the Grass Roots, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra} note 4, at 3, 5.
\(^{92}\) \textit{Id.} at 10.
\(^{93}\) \textit{Id.}
\(^{94}\) \textit{Id.}
ter, boss, we sick?” We sick! He identified himself with his master, more than his master identified with him.95

Even today, house Negroes persist, Malcolm remarked:

“There government”! I even heard one [Negro] say, “our astronauts.” They won’t even let him near the plant—and “our astronauts.” “Our Navy”—that’s a Negro that is out of his mind . . .

White people, Malcolm believed, would always relate as superiors to blacks, never as equals. The purchase price for integration, then, was degradation. For Malcolm, King’s vision of the “beloved community,” along with the more general idea of racial equality therein, was a farce.

Not integration, but revolution was what Malcolm, at least the early Malcolm, wanted.97 He expounded the type of revolution he had in mind by juxtaposing two varieties—an exalted Black revolution and, its inferior alternative, the Negro “revolution.” Begin with Malcolm’s stinging critique of Negro revolution. He announced, “The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution.”98 And Negro revolution was an exercise in futility and embarrassment:

It’s the only revolution in which the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegregated theater, a desegregated park, and a desegregated public toilet; you can sit down next to white folks—on the toilet.99

In this context, do not forget Malcolm’s previously quoted line: The white man is “in your motherland [Africa] taking control over minerals that have so much value they make the world go around” while “you and I are still walking around over here, yes, trying to drink some coffee [in a desegregated restaurant]—with a cracker.”100 Thus conceived, Malcolm saw nothing honorable in integration. In fact, it deceived blacks into thinking that they were making

95 Id.
96 Id. at 12.
97 Id. at 9. After his Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, an older Malcolm adopted much more positive views about both whites and racial integration. Malcolm saw in Mecca white and nonwhite Muslims worshiping together in peace and love. MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 325–48.
98 MALCOLM X, Message to the Grass Roots, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 3, 9.
99 Id.
100 MALCOLM X, At the Audubon, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 115, 124.
progress, even as their motherland was being devoured by whites. This Negro “revolution,” Malcolm fumed, was “no revolution.”

What Malcolm urged was “Black Revolution.” He never quite spelled out what this entailed, but it seemed to involve, at least in one version, a radical, if rather ambiguous, idea where blacks would overthrow the white government and take over America. Malcolm had said, referring to the anti-colonial movements throughout the world: “Revolution is in Asia, revolution is in Africa, and the white man is screaming because he sees revolution in Latin America.” Blacks did not lead the revolutions in Asia and Latin America, but Malcolm called such revolutions “black,” partly because of their anti-white ethos and the fundamental changes which they engendered against white colonialist rule. And while Black revolution was against white supremacy, Malcolm urged blacks to look to the American Revolution—the same one enacted by the Founding Fathers whom Malcolm had condemned as the importers of slaves—as a model for what blacks should do. He summarized the American Revolution in bluntly instrumental terms devoid of any pieties about freedom for mankind:

That revolution was for what? For Land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. . . .
The French Revolution—what was it based on? The landless against the landlord. What was it for? Land. How did they get it? Bloodshed.

In this kind of revolution, there “[w]as no love lost, no compromise, was no negotiation.” True revolution “is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way.”

Malcolm happily took a direct shot at nonviolent resisters:

Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, as Rev. Cleage was pointing out beautifully, singing “We Shall Over-
come[?]” You don’t do that in a revolution. You don’t do any singing, you’re too busy swinging.109

A revolutionary “wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation.”110 Malcolm alluded to Algeria’s war of independence against France. “The Algerians were revolutionists, they wanted land.”111 France had “offered to let them be integrated into France” but the Algerians “told France, to hell with France, they wanted some land, not some France.”112 Accordingly, the Algerians “engaged in a bloody battle.”113

On the other hand, in America, those “Negroes” who seek nonviolent change toward integration “aren’t asking for any nation—they’re trying to crawl back on the plantation.”114 The caustic reference to “plantation” should recall Malcolm’s condemnation of the obsequious house Negro.115 Those black civil rights workers advocating peace were, in Malcolm’s eyes, “Uncle Toms”.116

Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, twentieth-century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, to keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. That’s Tom making you nonviolent.117

Malcolm concluded: “Blood running down your jaw, you suffer—don’t know what’s happening. Because someone has taught you to suffer—peacefully.”118 The injunctions against nonviolence by King and others were thus decried as naïve and ineffective, if not dreadfully emasculating.

Malcolm supplemented his support for violence by arguing vigorously that white America lacks moral authority to denounce violence because its own origins are in violence.119 Remember, Malcolm had stated that any revolution, including the American, “is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its

109 Id.
110 Id.
111 Id.
112 Id.
113 Id.
114 Id. at 10.
115 Id.
116 Id. at 12.
117 Id.
118 Id.
119 Id. at 9.
Writing in 1964, he reminded that America continued to immerse herself in wars, including unconscionable wars against African nations:

In 1964 this government, subsidizing Tshombe, the murderer of Lumumba, and Tshombe’s mercenaries, hired killers from South Africa, along with the former colonial power, Belgium, dropped paratroopers on the people of the Congo, used Cubans, that they had trained, to drop bombs on the people of the Congo with American-made planes . . . .

Worse, he insisted, America exploits young black men to fight in these wars, and thus is undeserving of the right to condemn violence by blacks.

IV. THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

They were so good with words, King and Malcolm. It is tempting, therefore, to rely on the words alone to discern what each man thought about the topics at hand—nonviolence, democracy, and manhood. But the speeches and essays authored by King and Malcolm were more than abstract proposals in the service of grand political designs. Their words represent a worldview and an order of morality which were shaped by, and made sense of, the quite different circumstances in which they had lived.

A. The Origins of King’s Beloved Community

Let us examine the personal roots for why King may have embraced nonviolence and the beloved community which was its end. His speeches and essays focus on the moral and practical benefits of both. Yet, they tend to sidestep the fact that King was able to embrace the beloved community and its non-violent means because he had grown up in a family where he lived a relatively peaceful and comfortable life. In other words, King had been brought up in a family where stability was the norm. Unlike those who have to endure the chaos of economic uncertainty, King was blessed with financial comfort. “I have never experienced the feeling of not having the basic necessities of life,” he recalled. Such things “were always provided by a father who always put his family first.” While not rich, King’s father was “able to provide us with the basic necessities of life with little strain” and King “went right on through school and never had to drop out to work or anything.”

120 Id.
121 MALCOLM X, Prospects for Freedom in 1965, in MALCOLM X SPEAKS, supra note 4, at 147, 149.
122 KING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 41, at 5.
123 Id.
124 Id.
“was a wholesome community, notwithstanding the fact that none of us were ever considered members of the ‘upper-upper class.’”

Outside his home, “[c]rime was at a minimum, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious.”

King concluded, “[t]he first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years” and “[l]ife had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.”

King’s mother, Alberta, also did not know firsthand the travails of poverty. She was the daughter of Adam Daniel Williams, whom King called “a successful minister,” and, like young Martin, she “grew up in comparative comfort.” Alberta “was sent to the best available schools and college and was, in general, protected from the worst blights of discrimination.” She “was provided with all of the conveniences that any high school and college student could expect.”

This is not to imply that life was easy for King’s father as well. Martin senior had grown up as a sharecropper’s son. Yet, he too achieved success; he finished high school and graduated from Atlanta’s Morehouse College, still a prestigious institution.

How did the financial success of King’s family influence his opinion about nonviolence? A couple of plausible inferences can be made. One, since he lived in an economically stable neighborhood where “crime was at a minimum,” King probably regarded peace as the norm while dismissing violence as a terrible moral aberration. Two, by virtue of living in an upper middle-class area, King was more likely to come into contact with whites, and white neighbors who were more likely to give him and his family a measure of respect as economic equals who had achieved success. Therefore, King was less likely to have harbored a violent resentment against his white neighbors, even as he found segregation to be morally intolerable. Three, the young Martin had learned firsthand from his parents that America, even in a segregated and overtly racist Southern town, is a place where blacks can thrive economically by lawful means. Violence was not necessary for his parents to become respectable members of the upper middle-class.

Add to this economically stable home, two loving parents who exemplified a beloved community on a small scale. Violence in such a setting was morally incomprehensible and, as a practical matter, unnecessary. Indeed, King’s
account of his family is one of bliss. “My home situation was very congenial,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{133} He continued:

I have a marvelous mother and father. I can hardly remember a time that they ever argued (my father happens to be the kind who just won’t argue) or had any great falling out.\textsuperscript{134}

The words are telling. King’s mother and father surely had disagreements, like any marital couple, but he says that he can \textit{hardly remember} them arguing. King’s model of manhood is a father who will not let events succumb to a “great falling out” with loved ones. Martin senior thus showed his son that a man should value relationships with others and strive to sustain them in the face of conflict. Similar to his description of Martin senior’s description of his mother is of someone who is “soft-spoken and easy-going”; she is “warm and easily approachable.”\textsuperscript{135} Her upbringing, like King’s, was one of financial stability. She was the daughter of a “successful minister” and “grew up in comparative comfort.”\textsuperscript{136} Alberta was “sent to the best available schools and college and was, in general, protected from the worst blights of discrimination.”\textsuperscript{137}

King commented, “These factors were highly significant in determining my religious attitudes.”\textsuperscript{138} Elaboration followed:

It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances.\textsuperscript{139}

The words are inadvertently barbed. Although King was a religious minister, he attributes his faith, not directly to divine revelation or the Bible’s teaching, but to a sociological factor—the family. “It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love \textit{mainly because} I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present.”\textsuperscript{140} In the next sentence, he is surprisingly candid about the personal circumstances that have given effect to his vision of a nonviolent beloved community: “It is quite easy for me to think of the uni-

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Id.} at 2.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Id.} at 3.
\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Id.} at 2.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Id.} (emphasis added).
\end{flushright}
verse as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances."141

King’s mother showed him that the world can be racist as well but that he should not be daunted. Alberta instilled in King a sense of racial self-worth, something that spurred his sense as an adult to address injustice.142 “She taught me that I should feel a sense of ‘somebodiness’ but that on the other hand I had to go out and face a system that stared me in the face every day saying you are ‘less than,’ you are ‘not equal to,’” King remembered.143 He added, “[T]hen she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: ‘You are as good as anyone.’”144 Notice that Alberta does not attend these words with proscriptions of violence, to hit back when racists hit you.

The elder Martin also showed his son that racism was wrong but, at the same time, that physical retaliation was unnecessary to correct it. The “first time” that King had seen his father extremely angry was when a clerk at a shoe store told King and his father to move to the segregated seats.145 King’s father responded, “We’ll either buy shoes sitting here . . . or we won’t buy shoes at all.”146 With these words, Martin senior and his son walked out.147 The “first time I had seen Dad so furious” wasn’t accompanied by violence. It was attended by an open critique of injustice and, a precursor to King’s famous bus boycott, a refusal to patronize a racist store. Another example that King retells is of a white policeman who pulled over the car driven by King’s father.148 King’s father had accidentally passed a stop sign.149 The policeman accosted him.

Policeman: All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license.

King’s father: Let me make it clear to you that you aren’t talking to a boy. If you persist in referring to me as a boy, I will be forced to act as if I don’t hear a word you are saying.150

More than indignation, the verbal protest worked: “The policeman was so shocked in hearing a Negro talk to him so forthrightly that he didn’t quite know how to respond. He nervously wrote the ticket and left the scene as quickly as
possible." Worth reflecting on is what this incident may have meant to young Martin as a commentary about manhood. Martin senior did not resort to violence. But he insisted that he would not be treated with emasculating disrespect.

The elder Martin also proved to his son that nonviolent but steady leadership by a religious minister can create peace even in a racist city:

As pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, my father wielded great influence in the Negro community and perhaps won the grudging respect of the whites. At any rate, they never attacked him physically, a fact that filled my brother and sister and me with wonder as we grew up in this tension-packed atmosphere.

Take note of the description. As children, King and his siblings were struck with wonder by their father, not because he showed manly force, but because he was able to use his words and his moral authority as a pastor to deflect physical attack. It was an instructive example for young Martin.

Supplementing his stand for equal rights was King’s belief in the beloved community where whites and blacks could live together with affection. This belief was bolstered by his experience as a graduate student where he had been mentored by caring white patrons. King enrolled in Boston University’s School of Theology. The school, he noted, was under the leadership of Dean Walter Muelder and Professor Allan Knight Chambers, both of whom “had a passion for social justice.” King also commented that his professor, Harold DeWolf, was a “very dear friend of mine” who “greatly influenced” him.

King benefited from the friendship and guidance of whites and, thus, was inclined to believe that the beloved community was possible.

Indeed, King’s first memory of being a victim of racism didn’t involve threats by hooded Klansmen or beatings by white cops. It involved the loss of friendship. King explained:

From the age of three I had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around

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151 Id.
152 Id. at 5.
153 Id. at 30.
154 Id.
155 Id.
156 Id. at 31.
every day; his father owned a store across the street from our home.\textsuperscript{157}

Then something changed:

At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools, of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school; this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me.\textsuperscript{158}

This was the “first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem.”\textsuperscript{159} And the young Martin “was determined to hate every white person.”\textsuperscript{160} His parents, however, “would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him.”\textsuperscript{161}

Although Martin may have felt that he “was determined to hate every white person,” the feeling did not last. One of the chief reasons why he embraced integration was because he had enjoyed the pleasures and rewards of living in an integrated community. A deeply formative experience came from King’s trip, as a recent high school graduate, to the racially integrated Northeast.\textsuperscript{162} “Just before going to college I went to Simsbury, Connecticut, and worked for a whole summer on a tobacco farm to earn a little school money to supplement what my parents were doing,” began King.\textsuperscript{163} In Simsbury, he attended a racially integrated church, an unfamiliar experience for him.\textsuperscript{164} “One Sunday, we went to church in Simsbury, and we were the only Negroes there.”\textsuperscript{165} Despite his minority status, King was welcomed by the white parishioners to lead the services for students: “On Sunday mornings I was the religious leader and spoke on any text that I wanted to 107 boys.”\textsuperscript{166} It was not just church. “I had never thought that a person of my race could eat anywhere, but we ate in one of the finest restaurants in Hartford [the capital of Connecticut].”\textsuperscript{167} The experience of integration for King was therefore quite thrilling.
The white church and the fancy restaurant treated him with equal respect, and made him feel like a member of a shared community, and at least in the church, probably a beloved community. Integration, then, was not a political pipedream for King. It was already happening in the Northeast, and hence suggested that it could, and should, be happening in his Atlanta.

A concluding, and telling, commentary was proffered by King. Recalling his thoughts as he was returning to Atlanta from Connecticut, King remarked, “it was a bitter feeling going back to segregation” because “[i]t was hard to understand why I could ride wherever I pleased on the train from New York to Washington and then had to change to a Jim Crow car at the nation’s capital in order to continue the trip to Atlanta.”

On his trip back to Atlanta, he reflected, “The first time that I was seated behind a curtain in a dining car, I felt as if the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood.”

Look again at King’s remark that he sensed a “bitter feeling” about returning to Atlanta’s segregation. It was not despair that prompted the bitterness; it was an overflowing of youthful hope. King had seen in Connecticut the possibilities of a beloved community. He had been treated with respect and warmth and dignity. King’s “bitterness” at returning to Atlanta was in fact a powerful longing for integration. That segregation for the young Martin became “hard to understand” after his experiences in Connecticut did not signify confusion, but moral critique of racism as a preparation for action against it. So he thought on his train ride, “I could never adjust to the separate waiting rooms, separate eating rooms, separate rest rooms, partly because the separate was always unequal, and partly because the very idea of separation did something to my sense of dignity and self-respect.”

King, of course, would spend the rest of his life trying to prevent that assault to his dignity and to the dignity of other black Americans.

B. Malcolm’s Growing Up in Violence

Malcolm’s defense of violence in furtherance of political action was, like King’s creed of nonviolence, explainable in part by looking to personal history. To begin, consider that nonviolence was embraced by King partly because it seemed so natural to him, as someone who had grown up in a safe, stable family.

Now consider the life of Malcolm’s father, Earl Little. Earl “had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching.” Malcolm continued,

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168 Id. at 11–12.
169 Id. at 12.
170 Id.
171 MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 4.
What my father could not know then was that of the remaining three, including himself, only one, my Uncle Jim, would die in bed, of natural causes. Northern white police were later to shoot my Uncle Oscar. And my father was finally himself to die by the white man’s hands.\footnote{Id.}

Malcolm concluded with a chillingly prescient surmise: “It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared.”\footnote{Id.} Whereas the King family regarded peace and stability as norms, Malcolm was heir to a family of violent death.

The violence, moreover, was the product of racism. Malcolm thus grew up believing that when blacks and whites interact, violence, even murder, is entirely possible. The sort of peaceful coexistence lauded by King was, for Malcolm, fragile and deceptive. The first lines in Malcolm’s \textit{Autobiography} foreshadow the violence that would define his life and death:

\begin{quote}
When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out.\footnote{Id.}
\end{quote}

The night ended with destruction. The “Klansmen finally spurred their horses and galloped around the house, shattering every window pane with their gun butts.”\footnote{Id. at 3.} Earl moved his family to East Lansing, Michigan, yet here too racist violence awaited. \footnote{Id. at 5.} “As in Omaha, my mother was pregnant again, this time with my youngest sister,” Malcolm said.\footnote{Id.} He continued:

\begin{quote}
I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us.\footnote{Id.}
\end{quote}

Malcolm recounted what followed:
We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showing sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off.179

The white government officials charged with protecting Malcolm’s family stood idle. “The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground.”180

Earl had survived this attack, but he would not survive the next one. When Malcolm was about six, Earl met his violent end. Here is how Malcolm narrated it:

My mother was taken by the police to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet was over my father in a bed, and she wouldn’t look, she was afraid to look . . . . My father’s skull, on one side, was crushed in, I was told later . . . . Negroes in Lansing have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half.181

The Black Legion, a splinter group from the Klan, was rumored to have been responsible.182

Malcolm surmised that the attacks against Earl were prompted by the latter’s unapologetic and public advocacy for the creed of Marcus Garvey.183 The famous Garvey was head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and, in Malcolm’s words, “[w]ith the help of such disciples as my father, Garvey, from his headquarters in New York City’s Harlem, was raising the banner of black-race purity and exhorting the Negro masses to return to their ancestral African homeland . . . .”184 Malcolm remarked, correctly, that such pronouncements made Garvey “the most controversial black man on earth.”185 By preaching Garvey’s gospel, Earl, in turn, became controversial. When the Klansmen attacked Earl’s family in Omaha, they “shouted threats and warnings at [Malcolm’s] mother that we had better get out of town because ‘the good Christian white people’ were not going to stand for my father’s ‘spreading trouble’ among the ‘good’ Negroes of Omaha with the ‘back to Africa’ preachings of Marcus

179 Id. at 6.
180 Id.
181 Id. at 13.
182 Id.
183 Id. at 3.
184 Id.
185 Id.
Garvey. 186 Notwithstanding these attacks, Earl stubbornly preached that black people must leave America and create a separate cultural life from whites.

In this way, he was similar to King’s father. Both men bravely refused to tolerate racism and publicly challenged it. But they did it differently. While Earl ardently opposed integration, Martin senior told his son that “I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him.” 187 And Martin senior practiced what he preached by showing tenderness toward his family.

Earl, while a target of violence, was himself a violent man. Malcolm’s “memories are of the friction between my father and mother.” 188 He attributed the tension potentially to the fact that Louise, unlike Earl, had a formal education. 189 “Every now and then, when she put those smooth words on him, he would grab her.” 190 And “[m]y father was also belligerent toward all of the children, except me.” 191 Malcolm remembered that “[t]he older ones he would beat almost savagely if they broke any of his rules—and he had so many rules it was hard to know them all.” 192 Contrast this picture of family with King’s account. “My home situation was very congenial,” he stated. 193 “It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present.” 194 Malcolm, on the other hand, remembered a father’s endless rules enforced by savage beatings against his siblings.

As for the beatings reserved for Malcolm, those came chiefly from his mother Louise:

Nearly all my whippings came from my mother. I’ve thought a lot about why. I actually believe that as anti-white as my father was, he was subconsciously so afflicted with the white man’s brainwashing of Negroes that he inclined to favor the light ones, and I was his lightest child. 195

186 Id.
187 KING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 41, at 7.
188 MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 4.
189 Id. at 6–7.
190 Id. at 7.
191 Id.
192 Id.
193 KING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 41, at 2.
194 Id.
195 MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 7.
Not love for Malcolm, but a love of white aesthetics—or less charitably, racial self-hate—is what Malcolm attributes for his father’s generally nonviolent relations with him.196

There are at least two general inferences to take away from Malcolm’s narrative of violence.

One, Malcolm’s moral appraisal of white people, already abysmal, was worsened by his perception that whites are capable of the most sadistic violence. The Klan, after all, had terrorized Louise while she was pregnant with Malcolm. White men had burned down their house, while white firefighters and cops did nothing. And the Black Legion purportedly had viciously murdered Earl. All the while not a single white person, according to Malcolm, did anything to protect or support his family.

Two, Malcolm came to understand that the world, if not always violent, was fundamentally so. For Malcolm, violence was not an abstract idea—it defined his existence. His parents used violence in two respects. It was used to impose a discipline that was arbitrary and ferocious and, also, to vent rage against him and his siblings. In addition, violence was used by racists to terrorize his family and murder his relatives. In either case, young Malcolm learned that violence, in the profoundest sense, changed things. Violence instilled terror, burned down houses, and destroyed families. Putting aside the moral implications of these things, Malcolm learned that, on some level, violence was powerful—that it worked. Contrast this realization with King’s recollection that his neighborhood “was a wholesome community,” where “[c]rime was at a minimum, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious.”197 Whereas the first chapter of Malcolm’s Autobiography was aptly titled “Nightmare,” King had happily reminisced that “[t]he first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years” and “[l]ife had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.”198

Malcolm grew up in violence. As I discuss next, he also grew up very poor. This too would affect his worldview.

C. Economic Class

Economic factors are important for discerning why King had advocated nonviolence while Malcolm had often derided it. King lived in an economically comfortable family that afforded stability and certainty. He “went right on through school and never had to drop out to work or anything.”199 Growing up in an upper middle-class neighborhood, King was blessed with a father who was

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196 For more information on the idea of white aesthetics, see generally John M. Kang, Deconstructing the Ideology of White Aesthetics, 2 MICH. J. RACE & L. 283 (1997).
197 KING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 41, at 2.
198 Id. at 5.
199 Id.
“able to provide us with the basic necessities of life with little strain.” Malcolm’s father Earl lived in a different world. Like King’s father, Earl was a Baptist preacher. But their differences were profound. Martin senior was pastor at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, a prestigious and lucrative position. Earl “never pastured in any regular church of his own; he was always a ‘visiting preacher.'” Never holding a steady job, Earl moved from Nebraska to Milwaukee to East Lansing, Michigan. In East Lansing, Malcolm always recognized that he was near the economic bottom, even among blacks at that time. He recalled:

Back when I was growing up, the “successful” Lansing Negroes were such aswaiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected. The real “elite,” the “big shots,” the “voices of the race,” were the waiters at the Lansing Country Club and the shoeshine boys at the state capitol.

While renowned for its automobile industry, companies did not hire blacks. “No Negroes were hired then by Lansing’s big Oldsmobile plant, or the Reo plant.” Most of the blacks “were either on Welfare, or W. P. A. (Work Progress Administration), or they starved.” Malcolm’s family was not immune to poverty. “The day was to come when our family was so poor that we would eat the hole out of a doughnut; but at the time we were much better off than most town Negroes.” Yet Malcolm’s family was “much better off,” not because economic opportunities availed themselves in Michigan but because “we raised much of our own food out there in the country where we were.” In Malcolm’s impoverished world, crime paid: “The only Negroes who really had any money were the ones in the numbers racket, or who ran the gambling houses, or who in some other way lived parasitically off the poorest ones, who were the masses.”

After his father’s murder, Malcolm’s family faced gripping uncertainty. “My mother was thirty-four years old now, with no husband, no provider or

200 Id.
201 MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 7.
202 KING, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 41, at 5.
203 MALCOLM X, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, supra note 5, at 7.
204 Id. at 4–6.
205 Id. at 8.
206 Id.
207 Id.
208 Id.
209 Id.
210 Id.
211 Id.
protector to take care of her eight children . . . .” 212 By 1934, three years after Earl’s death, “we really began to suffer” and “[t]his was about the worst depression year, and no one we knew had enough to eat or live on.” 213 At this time, “[s]ome kind of psychological deterioration hit our family circle and began to eat away our pride.” 214 Malcolm elaborated:

Perhaps it was the constant tangible evidence that we were destitute. We had known other families who had gone on relief. We had known without anyone in our home ever expressing it that we had felt prouder not to be at the depot where the free food was passed out. And, now, were among them. At school, the “on relief” finger suddenly was pointed at us, too, and sometimes it was said aloud. 215

Glumly, Malcolm remembered, “It seemed that everything to eat in our house was stamped ‘Not To Be Sold’ . . . [a]ll Welfare food bore this stamp to keep the recipients from selling it.” 216

Under such circumstances, stealing was an attractive option to the boy. Remember, too, what sort of moral universe the young Malcolm inhabited. White people excluded Malcolm’s family from meaningful jobs, causing them to live in the country to grow their own food; white people smashed windows in his house in Omaha; white people burned down his house in East Lansing; and, they probably murdered his father. White police officers, emblems of government authority, did nothing. And all of the laws that protected property and prohibited theft were created by white people. In Malcolm’s eyes, whatever legitimacy the law possessed had been discredited.

There were middle-class blacks in East Lansing but these, Malcolm remarked, purchased their status by embracing racial self-hate. Malcolm called them “‘middle-class’ Negroes—the typical status-symbol-oriented, integration-seeking type of Negroes.” 217 A poignant example was detailed:

Just recently, I was standing in a lobby at the United Nations talking with an African ambassador and his wife, when a Negro came up to me and said, “You know me?” I was a little embarrassed because I thought he was someone I should remember. It

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212 *Id.* at 14.
213 *Id.* at 16–17.
214 *Id.* at 17–18.
215 *Id.* at 18.
216 *Id.*
217 *Id.* at 8.
turned out that he was one of those bragging, self-satisfied, “middle-class” Lansing Negroes.\textsuperscript{218}

Malcolm bitterly remembered, “He was the type who would never have been associated with Africa, until the fad of having African friends became a status-symbo\textsuperscript{219}l for ‘middle-class’ Negroes.”

Given the abysmal economic status of most blacks in Lansing, it is not surprising that Malcolm remained cynical of the possibilities and benefits of integration. As a child, after all, Malcolm had learned that white America had no desire to integrate blacks as equal members. This is not to say that in Malcolm’s view whites did not need blacks, but only as waiters, janitors and other menial laborers. A stunning symbol of their exclusion from white America, Malcolm’s family literally had to live in the country, away from civilization, raising their own food to survive. Those blacks who managed, somehow, to move to the middle class had done so, according to Malcolm, by disowning their self-respect and deriding those brethren below them. Integration, therefore, granted a kind of self-esteem, Malcolm observed, but one that was morally barbed and ultimately detrimental and shameful. What Malcolm described was an amazing contrast to King’s life in an upper middle-class family. Unlike Malcolm, King had learned that even in the face of racism, a black family could succeed quite well in Atlanta. That experience probably left him with the impression that America, in spite of its racism, was still a place where blacks could thrive and, one day, achieve equal citizenship in a beloved community.

Second, Malcolm learned that crime did in fact pay, and he was unbothered by its unethical status, for the government of white America hardly played by the rules, anyway. True, King had also violated the law, yet he had done so openly and had been publicly willing to accept the punishment. Malcolm saw crime as a way—indeed, the way—to make money in an economy where blacks were widely excluded; he had quipped, “[t]he only Negroes who really had any money were the ones in the numbers racket, or who ran the gambling houses . . .”\textsuperscript{220}

Crime, therefore, was not a moral wrong to his adolescent eyes. The only sin was getting caught. Malcolm remembered, “[T]he more I began to stay away from home and visit people and steal from the stores, the more aggressive I became in my inclinations.”\textsuperscript{221} The extent to which Malcolm rejected the moral authority of whites to pass judgment against his crimes is suggested by these comments:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{218} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{219} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{220} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{221} Id. at 18–19.
\end{itemize}
White people always associated watermelons with Negroes, and they sometimes called Negroes “coons” among all the other names, and so stealing watermelons became “cooning” them. If white boys were doing it, it implied that they were only acting like Negroes. Whites have always hidden or justified all of the guilt they could by ridiculing or blaming Negroes.222

When Malcolm was caught, the punishment failed to resonate with his moral sensibility. The punishment for Malcolm, indeed, just confirmed his view that whites sought to hurt blacks. “When I began to get caught stealing now and then, the state Welfare people began to focus on me when they came to our house.”223 The welfare workers talked about “taking me away,” Malcolm recalled.224 “What I first remember along that line was my mother raising a storm about being able to bring up her own children.”225 “She would whip me for stealing, and I would try to alarm the neighborhood with my yelling.”226 Over time, Louise “suffered a complete breakdown, and the court orders were finally signed,” sending her to “the State Mental Hospital at Kalamazoo.”227 Afterwards, Malcolm again encountered what he interpreted as a savage act of racism: “A Judge McClellan in Lansing had authority over me and all of my brothers and sisters. We were ‘state children,’ court wards; he had the full say-so over us. A white man in charge of a black man’s children! Nothing but legal modern slavery—however kindly intentioned.”228 Government, and its laws, thus represented for Malcolm a coercive, immoral expression of white supremacy, not something which deserved obedience. In his twenties, Malcolm, unsurprisingly, became a professional criminal. He did stick-ups and robberies and was immersed in a world of illegal guns.229 He became a drug user,230 a drug dealer,231 a pimp,232 and he messed with powerful criminals who could have extinguished him.233

222 *Id.* at 19.
223 *Id.*
224 *Id.*
225 *Id.*
226 *Id.*
227 *Id.* at 25.
228 *Id.*
229 *Id.* at 126.
230 MANNING MARABLE, MALCOLM X 78 (2011).
231 *Id.*
232 *Id.*
V. CONCLUSION

It is hard to generalize why an individual may embrace peaceful means of democratic change while another may embrace violence. At this point, no manifest leader has emerged in the Middle East or North Africa to explain the political and moral content of nonviolence and democracy for his constituents or the general public. However, the lives of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X provide some insights into why leaders may arrive at the definitions that they do for these terms. Those leaders who, like King, have been blessed with a loving and financially comfortable upbringing are probably more likely to embrace nonviolence and an account of democracy that seeks peaceful coexistence with those who were once their oppressors. On the other hand, violence and separatism are likely to appear more attractive to those who have lived Malcolm’s life, a life damaged by violence as well as sustained by its power.