THE IDENTITIES OF MALCOLM X

JOHN BARRESI

Erik Erikson often used outstanding individuals to illustrate his theories—people such as Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Mohandas Gandhi (Erikson, 1969), whose personal development crucially interacted with the social history of the culture in which they lived. In cases like these, the individual’s formation and transformation of identity not only affected the individual, but through the individual affected the culture. Whereas most people acquire and transform their identity by forging and modifying it out of resources readily available within the culture, such outstanding individuals create new resources and provide new models for forging identities.

In this chapter I have chosen to examine the life of Malcolm X. The story of Malcolm X cannot be understood simply as the development in an individual of an idiosyncratic identity, which then became generalized to others. His story and impact on others is not that simple. To see his identity formation and transformation in an Eriksonian way would miss the many

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identities that Malcolm had and has—identities that he himself generated, as well as those imposed on him by others. Furthermore, his impact should not be understood as one of a straightforward model for others. Malcolm was, and remains, a controversial figure. Indeed, the same could be said of Luther and Gandhi, which a simple Eriksonian analysis might miss.

Goodheart (1990) has already provided an Eriksonian analysis of Malcolm X. In this chapter I show what remains to be said about Malcolm X that cannot be captured in such a linear theory of identity development. I use the life history of Malcolm X, with a particular focus on his autobiography (Malcolm X, 1965), to illustrate how narrative theory can inform our understanding of the social and personal identities of an individual. Unlike a strictly historical approach to a life, which focuses mainly on causes affecting the development of an individual, a narrative approach focuses on the stories out of which an individual constructs his or her personal and social identities. In the case of Malcolm X, I believe that one cannot fully appreciate his significance as an individual without considering the variety of narratives that constituted his many identities. Some of these narratives are personal and familial; some are narratives of race and culture; some are national and some international. All are situated in historical time. Through time, these narratives and their relationships to each other were transformed. Some of these narratives of identity were unique to Malcolm, but many of them were shared by other Black Americans of his time. Malcolm was the source of some of the more important of these identity narratives, and from Malcolm’s clear expression of these narratives, they spread to others. Just as in the cases of Luther and Gandhi, it is Malcolm X’s long-lasting influence on others that makes his personal quest for an affirmative self-identity important to consider.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Before describing Malcolm’s life and changing identities, I want to make clear the theoretical viewpoint of identity that I take in this chapter. It is important to distinguish two basic types of identity: social and personal. Social identity is a characteristic way of ascribing sameness to an individual by virtue of his or her relationships with others, whereas personal identity is the way in which an individual characterizes sameness of self. Typically, social identity involves being a recognizable member of a group, whether ascribed or achieved, or having some stable character, or performing some role, recognizable by others. Although social identity often involves self-ascription, and the individual can play an active role in developing his or her social identity, it is the categorization and ascription by others that is
central to one's social identity. In this sense it contrasts with personal identity, which occurs when one perceives stability in self regardless of how one is perceived by others. Because social identity depends more on others than self, from a developmental perspective social identity is something one can have without being personally aware of it. Personal identity, on the other hand, is something one constructs for oneself and requires a certain level of maturity, typically associated with adolescence in the Eriksonian paradigm.

Developmental psychologists from Baldwin (1897) and Vygotsky (1978) to present times (see, e.g., Barresi, 2004; Barresi & Moore, 1996), as well as social identity theorists such as Tajfel (1982) and his followers, have made the case that personal identity is always constituted out of, or differentiated within, social identity. We think of our selves, first, within a social interactive context, as members of some social group, before coming to think of ourselves as unique individuals within those groups. Although such self-identification with a group is not initially in narrative form, it does eventually become a narrative as we learn more about our family or social group history. Hence, when we do finally form a personal narrative of identity, it is always in relation to the historical narratives of these groups. Furthermore, our social identities do not end with those groups within which we identify ourselves but can include identities given to us by other groups within and beyond our culture who take notice of us and provide narratives of how we relate to them, and fitting these identities within their own historical narrative perspective. Although social identities often involve stable narratives, dialogue between individuals and groups with different narrative viewpoints is an important means by which initially diverse and mobile narratives eventually transform into a more generally shared and stable narrative, sometimes constructing new or revised social identities in the process.

With respect to an individual's life history the perspective that I take assumes that an important supplement to narrative theory is script theory (Barresi & Juckes, 1997; Carlson, 1988; Tomkins, 1979). Well before children think in narrative terms about their lives, they have laid down in memory various dramatic situations and activities that they have experienced and that seem to recur in their lives. These situations or scenes and scripts, which often instantiate forms of social identity, have a cast of characters and roles. Individuals can, and often do, shift characters and roles within them. For instance, an individual as a child can learn adult roles through scripts that they experience, and these roles may be adopted as an adult. Their own role in a situation or scene is often a central one from the point of view of script formation, because it is their affective response to the situation and the events in it that gives meaning to the situation. The more
intense the emotions that one experiences in a situation, the more likely that one will remember the "scene," and it is primarily through connecting together different scenes that elicit similar emotions that scripts are formed. Thus, in trying to understand an individual's life history and identity development, it is not only the stories heard by the individual that affect the stories he or she ultimately generates for him- or herself but the "dramatic" situations and their apparent recurrences that are experienced that provide the fuel for personal and social narrative.

My view of personal identity formation and transformation has been influenced by McAdams's (1990) narrative reinterpretation of Erikson's theory of the life cycle. I treat adult transformations not as separate developments beyond identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood but as continuations of identity formation, but in new forms. Furthermore, like McAdams, I believe that the individual is continually revising his or her inner story of self, and that this evolving story is, at any specific moment, a window into the individual's ongoing efforts to achieve a coherence and stability in his or her personal identity.

However, achieving a unified and continuous self is no easy task, especially in a context such as Malcolm's, where one is faced with conflicting social identities out of which one must weave one's personal identity. Hence, I am sympathetic to the dialogical approach, particularly of Hubert Hermans and his colleagues (e.g., Hermans & Kempen, 1993; see also Bakhtin, 1981; Gillespie, 2005; Tappan, 2005), which assumes that each of us carries within us numerous points of view, some of which represent past and future selves; some the views of ourselves by intimate family and friends; and some ideal individuals, cultural stereotypes, and other individual, group, or ideological perspectives. These various points of view appear at different times in our lives, within our personal narrative reflections, and interact at times with each other in those reflections. They also appear in our relations with others, who instantiate, or expect us to instantiate, these alternative perspectives. Thus our lives are composed not of one linear story but of multiple narrative viewpoints that displace and interact with each other over and over again (Barresi, 2002). Although we clearly do transform in identity through time, the past and future is forever with us, and sometimes, as we shall see, a past self, script, or narrative perspective can leap over succeeding changes in perspective to reappear if an appropriate situation arises.

Thus, the perspective I take on identity is one that views the construction of a personal identity as a life-long task beginning in adolescence. The materials out of which an individual forms a personal identity are the social identities that he or she has experienced in the past and will continue to experience throughout life. However, on a more concrete level we create a personal identity out of memories of events in our own life and the lives
of those around us. These events, as experienced, are dramatic scenes. The way we organize these scenes is by scripts, and ultimately narrative, which find common themes in diverse events. But the task of making sense of our lives by unifying these experiences, scripts, and social identities and projecting them into the future is not easy. Thus, typically, constructing a personal identity through self-narrative involves the working through of dialogical relationships between different perspectives or voices within us, and in others, which are always in dynamic equilibrium with each other throughout our lives. Achieving a uniquely individual personal voice and narrative requires becoming masters of our lives, becoming increasingly aware of who we are and how we came to be, then striking a balance between emotions and motivations laid down early in our lives and setting goals for the future commensurate with the way we and the world around us are developing.

BORN INTO WHITE HATE AND BLACK PRIDE

To be born is to be born into a social identity, often into more than one such identity. At the very least one has an identity by being born into a family and into a culture. Usually, these two social identities, hierarchically related, coincide in affirming one's self. But what if one is born into a culture that does not provide a positive affirmation of one's social identity in that culture, but rather is born into a culture of hate for one's mere physical appearance and of oppression of one's social group? Does one have a birthright in such a circumstance? If one is fortunate to have a family in which some personal pride remains, despite cultural oppression, then one has a birthright to a positive social identity from familial sources. Malcolm Little was born Black in a White racist culture, but his parents nevertheless cultivated a pride in their Black identity in this adverse cultural system.

The dual character of the space of social identities into which Malcolm later placed the context of his birth is shown in the way that he begins the first chapter, "Nightmare," of his autobiography.

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. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children, and that my father was away, preaching in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her 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 Garvey.
(Malcolm X, 1965, p. 1)

It is not clear whether this event actually occurred as Malcolm described it (cf. his contradictory description in Clark, 1963, p. 19). According to Perry (1991, pp. 4, 385) his elderly mother would not substantiate the story. Still, it is possible that the event did occur, and whether it actually occurred or not is less important than the role that the scene plays in Malcolm’s narrative because it sets out straight away how Malcolm conceived of his personal position—even while being carried in his mother’s womb—as the immediate object of White hate and Black pride. He thus suggested in his narrative that even before birth, he had two social identities intensely opposed to each other, the negative identity provided by a White-dominated society and a positive one associated with Black pride and the “back to Africa” teachings of Garvey. The conflict between these two identities can be understood to represent the focal point of his existential search for personal identity through narrative reconstruction later in life.

The first paragraph of Malcolm’s autobiography fulfills one’s expectations on how primacy in a narrative is of special importance to personographers (Alexander, 1990). In this paragraph, Malcolm provides the origin myth of his own existence as a leader-to-be of Black pride in the context of White hate. Not only do his parents provide the basic script of Black pride through their participation in the Garvey movement, which Malcolm returned to as an adult when he converted to the Nation of Islam, which also taught Black pride, but in addition the pregnancy scene is symbolic of his position at the boundary between Blacks and Whites, dialogically interacting with both groups. He constantly took this position as a Black leader, first as spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, and later, when he spoke for himself.

One cannot overestimate the importance for Malcolm and for his immediate family of this early period during Malcolm’s life when his father was still alive and both of his parents were deeply involved in the Garvey movement. In terms of script theory, it represented for Malcolm’s family a kind of Black paradise that was eventually lost due to the evil influence of White racism, a theme that they would later recognize in the origin myth of the Nation of Islam of an original Black paradise destroyed through the machinations of a Black Mephistopheles and his created White devils. For Malcolm, it was the attempted recovery or reconstitution of this lost Black paradise, but on a much wider scale, which would become the hallmark of his later development and deepest personal goals. For this reason, if for no other, Goodheart’s (1990) Eriksonian analysis misses a significant stage in Malcolm’s development by starting his account with a period after the fall
from this Black paradise, when Malcolm acquired a surrendered identity under the influence of White racism.

**SURRENDERED IDENTITY**

Malcolm’s earliest vivid nightmare memory was of when his family’s house was set on fire while they were in it asleep at night. Malcolm was 4 years old at the time. Two years later, in 1931, his father was likely killed by the same racist group by being placed, unconscious, under a trolley. Malcolm viewed both of these events as examples of White hatred directed at his family. But in his account, he saw his family as a victim of White racism in America that was more general than these overt acts of hatred. For instance, when his father died only one insurance policy on his life paid its premium; the company of the second larger one declared that his father committed suicide. Then, during the Depression years, when his family was in poverty and Malcolm got in trouble for stealing food, the officials from the state social services agency, rather than helping the family hold itself together, broke it up by placing Malcolm and some of the other children in foster homes. A major result was that his mother’s spirit was beaten. Her sense of independence and racial pride was defeated by the system of institutionalized White racism, and she retreated into mental illness. She was placed in a mental institution by the authorities, and the family became disconnected.

After getting into additional trouble at school Malcolm was eventually placed in a detention center run by a White couple, who took a liking to him and whom, in turn, Malcolm tried to please. In the process, Malcolm surrendered his Black identity and tried to “become” White. Although Goodheart (1990) treated all of the early life of Malcolm before he went to live with his older half-sister Ella in Boston as one involving identity, it was only after his family broke up that I think Malcolm actually surrendered his identity. But there is a sense in which Goodheart is right, for the surrendered identity he formed at this time may have been Malcolm’s first provisional attempt to forge a “personal” identity as a young adolescent. In an attempt to forget his traumatic past and living in a congenial White environment, Malcolm attempted to place a White “mask” on his Black skin (Fanon, 1967), trying to fit in White society in whatever way they would accept him, while at the same time half believing that this same society would never think of him as more than an inferior being, a “mascot” or “thing.” By the time that he was elected president of his otherwise all-White seventh-grade class, he had become deluded by his apparent success, both in academics and popularity: “I was proud [of being elected]. I’m not
going to say I wasn't. In fact, by then, I didn't really have much feeling about being a Negro, because I was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be white" (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 31).

But this source of pride in his new "personal identity" did not last long. Within a year, his deluded sense of White success became unmasked by his English teacher. Mr. Ostrowski's response to Malcolm's comment that he would like to become a lawyer shattered forever Malcolm's belief that Black Americans could ever "become" White or successfully integrate with Whites on an equal basis in the United States.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised.... He kind of smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me now. We all have like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands—making things. . . Why don't you plan on carpentry?" (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 36)

With the illusion of becoming White shattered, believing that his own intellectual ability and accomplishments did not matter and that what did matter was that he was Black, Malcolm lost interest in school and wanted to leave the White world he was living in. In his autobiography he described this event as "the first major turning point in my life" (1965, p. 35).

Fortunately, during this same period his half-sister, Ella, a daughter from his father's first marriage, visited Malcolm's family from Boston. He was extremely impressed with her.

I think the major impact of Ella's arrival, at least upon me, was that she was the first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life. She was mainly proud of her very black skin. This was unheard of among Negroes in those days, especially in Lansing. (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 32)

It is interesting to note that it is shortly after mentioning that his family no longer talked about his institutionalized mother, whose Black pride had been broken by White racism, that Ella is described as the "first really proud black woman" he ever saw. In any event, the die was cast, and a turning point reached in Malcolm's first attempt, at 13, to form a personal identity. Although he reported that his remark about becoming a lawyer was not made in any seriousness, his teacher's response put an end to any attempt to find a personal identity in a White cultural context. Then the appearance of Ella on the scene provided him with a possible alternative—to move to Boston and live with her in a wholly Black community, something he may have dreamed of doing, when, as a child, he first saw pictures of Garveyites parading in a wholly Black crowd. In a short while, he was able
to arrange the move to join Ella. This move changed the direction of his life in a radical manner.

Still, we should not sell short what Malcolm learned about White Americans during his time living with them. He got to know how they thought about Negroes. He also learned how to succeed in social contexts with them. Unlike many Blacks raised in central-city ghettos, where Malcolm would later come to live and eventually thrive, he, early in his life, was exposed to the White culture and even seemed to succeed for a while within that context. But he learned the distinction between being White and being Black among Whites. However friendly Whites were to him, there was always an undercurrent of superiority in their interactions with him. He was never really accepted as an equal, so, despite any success he achieved, he could never, once disillusionment set in, really trust White America to overcome its racist attitudes. This early experience conditioned his later skepticism about integration, while also rendering him capable of communicating face to face with White people (see DeCaro, 1998, pp. 91–92).

NEGATIVE IDENTITY

Goodheart (1990) rightfully identified the next phase of Malcolm’s life as involving a negative identity—that of a hustler in the ghettos of Boston and New York. This period began when he moved in with his half-sister in Boston and almost immediately got involved in hustler activities. School no longer had any interest for him, and becoming a member of the Negro middle-class, which he equated to striving to fit into White America, seemed to him a sham. He judged it better to be Black among Blacks and to steep oneself into ghetto life. But in entering that life, he adopted an identity that Erikson called a negative identity (Erikson, 1968). Such an identity glorifies what would otherwise appear negative. The life of a hustle was the negative projection of the White American ideal—at least, so it seems from the point of view of that ideal. But, on the other hand, the ghetto also provided a field of activity in which Malcolm could acquire a personal identity and become a success, where he could receive the respect of at least some of his Black peers. The ghetto also included a positive cultural side for Black Americans, in music and dancing and in creative writing, all of which Malcolm would participate in at one time or another during his life. Moreover, the northern Black ghettos were a hotbed for Black nationalist philosophy, which would become significant for Malcolm’s later development.

As the older and wiser Malcolm looked back on his hustler years, especially at the first “conking” of his hair, and the self-infliction of so much
pain to make his hair look straight like a White man’s, he said that it was his “first really big step toward self-degradation” (Malcolm X, 1965, p. 54). Malcolm’s retrospective attitude about his ghetto existence as a hustler was that he was living at “dead level”—not really being alive, although obviously thinking at the time that he was. He realized that the roles he played as hustler fed the sickness that was White America, where, on the one hand, White people pretended to live honorable lives among other Whites, while, on the other hand, they sought out the excitement of sex, music, drugs, gambling, and so forth in the central city ghettos, where they forced Black people to live and expected them to provide these activities. Some Black people, including hustlers such as Malcolm, fed these desires. Harlem, particularly early on, was a thriving culture, because dance music, liquor, drugs, and sex were all readily available, with few questions asked, and little interference by police, who were happy to be paid off and to allow these activities to occur in Black rather than in their own White neighborhoods.

In Malcolm’s case, he rose eventually from a shoe-shine boy, selling drugs, and so forth, in Boston to become a gun-toting hustler in Harlem, who managed women and steered White men to whatever sexual activities suited their desires. At first, he was careful in his own use of drugs, but eventually became addicted. As a hustler with a gun, he also came into conflict with other hustlers, and came close to a showdown with another New York hustler, before escaping to Boston. In Boston he organized a burglary gang, which included his long-time White mistress Sophia. He was eventually caught when he tried to pick up a stolen watch that he was having repaired. Perry (1991) suggested that Malcolm unconsciously got himself caught at that time because he realized that his hustling career had failed, and he needed a way to escape it. In any event, probably because he was a Black man with a White mistress, he was sentenced to 8 to 10 years in prison for a relatively minor crime. He was 20 years old at the time.

**PRISON: A PSYCHOSOCIAL MORATORIUM**

Malcolm’s 6-year term in prison (he was paroled before his full sentence was served) was, in terms of the development of personal identity, the most important period of his life. It was the time when he recreated himself from a minor hoodlum, with addictions, virtually no education, and a self-defeating attitude toward life, into a self-educated, religious believer, with a self-confident, optimistic, and morally upright attitude toward life. He also acquired, through his new religion, a mission to teach other Black people how to get rid of their own negative identities, as he had his. Part of that lesson was for them to realize that the main cause for their negative lifestyle was the “White devil.” However, Malcolm’s stay in prison involved
much more than a religious conversion to the Nation of Islam. Even before he heard about the Black Muslims from other family members, he was already undergoing transformations in prison. As detailed in his autobiography, it was mainly under the mentorship of a wise older Black prisoner named Bimbi that he awoke to the futility of his self-destructive behavior. Bimbi recognized that Malcolm had misdirected intellectual capacities, and he taught him how to regain their rightful use. Malcolm began a program of self-education that, once combined with his interest in the dogma and mythology of the Nation of Islam, led him in directions of self-reflection about Blacks and Whites in America, which would eventually result in a major transformation not only in Malcolm’s self-narrative but in the self-narratives of many Black Americans.

From the point of view of theory, what is fascinating about Malcolm’s psychosocial moratorium in prison, and his arrival at a new personal identity during that time, is how such a radical transformation could occur. When he entered prison his attitude was self-defeating: He was still on drugs, constantly in solitary for breaking rules, and always swearing against God and religion. Because of this behavior he was called “Satan” by other inmates. Yet, in his transformation, this self-hatred and anger with God eventually reversed itself into a hatred of a different source—the “White devil,” or White race, which in the origin myth of the Nation of Islam were all created as devils. And, instead of anger with God and religion, he converted to the Nation of Islam and loved Allah.

Malcolm’s description of his conversion well illustrates the dialogical nature of self in transformation. In a manner similar to James’s (1902) account of religious conversion, Malcolm was aware of two selves within himself, the “bad” satanic self he had been and the “good” religious self he ultimately became. The dialogical struggle between these two selves was most intense in his attempt to pray.

The hardest test I ever faced in my life was praying. You understand. My comprehending, my believing the teachings of Mr. Muhammad [Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam] had only required my mind’s saying to me, “That’s right!” Or, “I never thought of that.”

But bending my knees to pray—that act—well, that took me a week...

I had to force myself to bend my knees. And waves of shame and embarrassment would force me back up.

For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. It’s easy for me to say that now. But, then, when I was the personification of evil, I was going through it. (pp. 169–170)

Nevertheless, after repeated struggles to kneel and pray, he did succeed, and soon he was into his new character and life.
I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life's thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person. (p. 170)

Malcolm’s rapid character change from satanic atheist to what Goodheart (1990) called “religious fundamentalist” may seem surprising at first, but the roots of this potential transformation were laid down much earlier in Malcolm’s life. The Nation of Islam was for Malcolm and his family a continuation in a different form of the script of Black pride combined with religiosity that they experienced in their home and family activities, before Malcolm’s father was killed and the Garvey movement dissipated. It is important to note that Malcolm was the fifth member of his family to join the Nation of Islam and that it was his brothers and older sister who convinced him to take the teachings of Elijah Muhammad seriously. They had already found sustenance in Nation of Islam teachings that must have reminded them of their own early experiences. Like the Garvey movement and, indeed, influenced by it, the Nation of Islam taught Black pride and Black self-initiative. Followers of the Nation of Islam were taught to avoid all interactions with Whites, and told that Blacks could only succeed to the extent that they worked together for a common goal, which included returning to Africa. They both taught that economic independence was the key and that Black people needed to work together to acquire that independence. In addition, religious moral values were instilled both in the Nation of Islam and in Malcolm’s family’s home. Finally, it should be noted that Elijah Muhammad, who was already communicating with him in prison, would take a particular intimate interest in Malcolm, just as his father did, so that they developed a father-son relationship, one that would prove difficult for both of them as Malcolm outgrew the constraints of the Nation of Islam.

I have compared the Nation of Islam and Malcolm’s initial family situation at the level of scripts so that we have in the conversion of Malcolm, as with his other brothers and sister, a continuation of what might be called, in Tomkins’s (1979; see also Carlson, 1988) terminology, a commitment script, in which early positive socialization leads to the development of commitment to purposes in line with that socialization. But this commitment script is one that combines with a nuclear script, where good things turn bad, as the good original scene and script of Black pride and family affection was brought to an end by the death of Malcolm’s father and the breaking up of their home and his mother’s subsequent mental dissolution. The fact that most of Malcolm’s family joined the Nation of Islam and were committed to its activities, with several brothers besides Malcolm becoming ministers, indicates a recovery of the original affective motivation and socialization
that occurred in the Little family home. However, a key element that makes the Nation of Islam also tie in with the nuclear script is the role that the "White devil" plays in their mythology. For Malcolm, even before he understood anything else about the religion, this element made sense to him, and gave him an ingredient necessary to transform self-hate into another emotion—the hate of the White devil that he came to see as the source of the disintegration of his own family and of the lowly status in America of Black people. Malcolm would eventually overcome his nuclear script and undifferentiated hatred of White people, but it would be a struggle that would involve him in rejecting the Nation of Islam mythology and Black Supremacist ideology and returning to the nonracist Garveyite view of Black nationalism as well as to converting to a nonracist form of Islamic religious ideology.

MINISTER MALCOLM X

As noted earlier, shortly after leaving prison in 1952 Malcolm came under the personal tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, and soon acquired his "X," replacing the "slave owner" name, Little, with an X to indicate that his own family name and identity had been lost when his ancestors were brought to America as slaves.1 Within a year, Malcolm was an assistant minister for the Nation of Islam in Detroit, and shortly thereafter head minister in Boston. In 1954 he was head of a number of temples that he organized on the East coast, and he also became head minister in Harlem, a position he held until December 1963. In 1957, he became the national representative of the Nation of Islam, which he also retained until December 1963. After John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in Texas and Malcolm commented about "chickens coming home to roost," implying that American violence throughout the world had turned against its own leader. Because he had been previously told not to make any comment about Kennedy's death, Malcolm was temporarily suspended from the Nation of Islam by Elijah Muhammad. Although Malcolm did not formally leave the Nation of Islam until several months later, the suspension effectively ended his role in the organization at this time.

During the 10 years of his role as minister in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm was primarily responsible for the rapid expansion of the organization and for giving it a public profile at a national and international level. But, during that time, he also created enemies within the organization, and, even before leaving it, there was a developing conflict between Malcolm

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1A family history by Malcolm's older step-sister Ella's son, Rodnell Collins (1998) supports the claim that Little was the name of the slave owner of Malcolm's ancestors on his father's side.
and Elijah Muhammad over the political involvement of the Nation of Islam in the civil rights movement. Whereas Muhammad wanted the Nation of Islam to stay out of politics and to focus on recruitment of Blacks into the Nation of Islam, Malcolm thought that the organization should participate in political activities that would be for the good of Black Americans both inside and outside of the Nation of Islam. Eventually, Malcolm’s enemies in the organization convinced Muhammad to get rid of Malcolm, despite his personal dedication to Elijah Muhammad. However, Malcolm also began to lose his personal faith in Muhammad when it became obvious to him that he had fathered a number of children with his private secretaries, which was against the moral code of the Nation of Islam. When he talked about this issue with some other ministers and the word got back to Muhammad, it was only a matter of time before Malcolm would be ejected from the organization. The Kennedy comment provided Elijah Muhammad the ostensive justification he needed to initiate that ejection. Malcolm soon realized the suspension was not going to be a temporary one but likely a permanent one. So he voluntarily left the organization in March 1964.

From a theoretical perspective, these 10 years as part of the Nation of Islam were crucial in the development of Malcolm as a unique individual voice for Black Americans in the civil rights movement. The theory of the dialogical self (Bahktin, 1981; Barresi, 2002; Gillespie, 2005; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Tappan, 2005) is most useful for understanding this development. At the beginning of the period, the point of view and dialogical voice most prevalent in Malcolm’s activities was the voice of the aggressive minister of the Nation of Islam, out fishing for new converts to the organization and engaged in pedagogical activities within the organization. This voice was one in which Malcolm represented his own conversion to other Blacks as an illustration of the power of Elijah Muhammad to save Black people from the White devils. This voice was one often directed against the “White man’s religion,” Christianity, which he argued purposely kept Black people in their inferior position. This voice was also the initial ground in his rhetorical attacks on White hypocrisy about racism. This voice in Malcolm became visible at a national level when he appeared in 1959 in Mike Wallace’s television documentary about the Nation of Islam, “The Hate That Hate Produced” (Wallace & Lomax, 1959).

However, by 1959, well before his final separation from the Nation of Islam in 1964, a second voice had developed in Malcolm. This voice represented not the Nation of Islam but Black Americans in general, and most specifically Black Americans in Northern ghettos who were not being represented by the civil rights movement developing in the South. This voice expressed the same kind of anger at the White devils, but rather than being based on a religious myth, it was both personally and politically based.
This voice began to emerge in 1957 when Malcolm confronted the New York police over their brutal beating of an innocent Nation of Islam bystander who was trying to stop them from beating someone else. The police held this person in jail until Malcolm had members of his temple march outside the station. Other Blacks joined in, and Malcolm was thus able to force negotiations. He got to see the man, and arranged to have him sent to a hospital. Only after this happened did he call off his people, and possibly prevented a riot. One police officer’s response to what happened was to say that “No [Black] man should have such power.” Once the word got around Harlem about what Malcolm had accomplished, he came to be viewed not as a religious leader but as a political force within the community.

Malcolm’s second, angry political voice came in conflict with his first, Nation of Islam voice when in 1962 a similar event of police brutality occurred in Los Angeles. In this second case police entered a Nation of Islam temple, where they shot a number of members, killing one of them. Malcolm was outraged by the event and wanted to take action, probably similar to the kind of action he took previously—using his political power to control the event. However, Muhammad, who wished to avoid political involvement at all costs, ordered him not to take any action. The result was that Malcolm had to inhibit this second voice, a voice that at that time was much more his own independent voice than the first voice, which effectively “ventriloquated” (Bakhtin, 1981; Tappan, 2005) Muhammad’s teachings. But this second voice, which had its basis partly in the Garveyite teachings of Malcolm’s family, partly in the anger associated with his family script, and partly in the political climate of the times, could not be held back forever. This dialogical voice kept being elicited in other contexts, particularly by the media and at invitations for Malcolm to speak at university campuses and other forums. Jealousy of Malcolm’s notoriety as a Black leader, independent of his religious affiliation, by other Nation of Islam members, including Muhammad, would eventually lead to his suspension and formal withdrawal from the Nation of Islam.

In any event, as a result of the Wallace television documentary and subsequent media exposure, Malcolm became a public figure in the civil rights movement whose political voice evoked a variety of narrative social identities depending on who observed his performances. From the point of view of the Black populace in the Northern ghettos, he represented a distinct political voice who spoke the truth about racism and of the smoldering anger developing in the ghettos. To other, more moderate Black political leaders, who were trying to achieve integration with Whites by peaceful means, he represented a dark and potentially dangerous side of the Black movement for freedom. From the point of view of the Nation of Islam, he was causing trouble for the organization rather than acquiring new members.
Finally, from the point of view of most White Americans, who saw only brief media glimpses of his gospel of hate, he seemed to be a dangerous fanatic representing Black supremacy.

But this new political voice with its attendant diverse public social identities was not the only new voice developing in Malcolm in the early 1960s. There were others. One other voice of importance was the emerging true Islamic voice. Often Malcolm would speak about Islamic religion in a manner that was more congenial to true Islam than to the Nation of Islam. In these circumstances, he would stress the common tradition of the three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and stress how Islam was the more congenial of these religions for “people of color.” In making these comparisons, he was going against the teachings of Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, although Malcolm tried not to make this apparent. It eventually would become so, when he finally left the Nation of Islam and started his own Islamic organization seeking the approval of Sunni Islam, one of the two main branches, along with Shiism, of Islam.

Malcolm’s remark regarding Kennedy’s assassination occurred as an outburst following a speech he gave as a substitute for Muhammad, who was ill. Because Malcolm was already having trouble holding back his own independent views, he prepared a written speech to ventriloquate Muhammad’s views. However, he allowed White news people to attend the talk and answered their questions afterward. When asked what he thought of Kennedy’s death, he lost control, and against Muhammad’s orders, expressed his own political view that the violence that Kennedy had allowed to occur against Blacks and others had come back to haunt him: “Chickens had come home to roost.”

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When Malcolm realized that he could not regain status in the Nation of Islam, and not only that his suspension would be permanent but that leaders in the Nation of Islam had put out the word that he should be killed, he formally left the organization in March 1964 and formed his own religious organization, the Muslim Mosque, Inc. His hope was to be accepted as a member and minister within true Islam. The status of the Nation of Islam within the international Islamic community was always in doubt, although Malcolm and Muhammad had tried to make connections, and even visited the Middle East in 1959. After that trip, Muhammad became less interested in Islam, whereas Malcolm continued to maintain and even cultivate his interest.

With the monetary assistance of his sister Ella, Malcolm made two long trips to the Middle East and Africa in 1964, during the first of which
Malcolm was accepted into Sunni Islam and was able to make his hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. This was an extremely rewarding personal experience for Malcolm because, in addition to affirming his religious identity as Islamic, it provided him with a new humanitarian vision of society. The fact that Islam included people of many visible races, including Whites, getting along together without racism provided him with a realistic vision and conception of the possibility of a nonracist society.

His visits to Africa in 1964 immediately after his hajj to Mecca had a more political impact on his thinking and his sense of racial identity. When he returned to the United States, he had an expanded sense of his own personal identity and of African American social identity in general. He also had a much less separatist and more humanitarian vision of how to effect improvements in the United States. After this visit to Africa, Malcolm formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) as a secular organization devoted to the improvement of conditions for all African Americans, regardless of their religious orientation. Malcolm was not able to effect much with this organization. The little progress he made in acquiring a new nonracist social and political identity because of his past image as a racist separatist, and the mobility of his rapidly changing ideas, was tragically thwarted when he was killed in February 1965.

From the point of view of narrative theory, Malcolm, during this last period of his life, was trying to develop a voice that he could claim to be fully his own. This voice would have integrated his personal and social narrative viewpoint and combined in a balanced manner his several commitments: his religious commitment to Islam; his political commitment to Black Americans; his cultural commitment to pan-Africanism; and his commitment to individual human rights and justice, regardless of culture, race, gender, or other social category that might inhibit human flourishing. However, because he was seen by others through the lens of his past alliance with the Nation of Islam and the social identities that developed around his public appearances, he was not allowed, as he said, to “turn the corner” and take on a new, more humanitarian role as a leader in the civil rights movement. Instead, he was continually harassed by the Nation of Islam, misrepresented by the media, and unable to form alliances with the other Black political leaders by the time of his untimely death.

THE MEANING AND LEGACY OF MALCOLM X

Unlike Goodheart’s (1990) linear account of Malcolm’s identity development, I believe that Malcolm’s life and its meaning can be best envisioned as a circle that began with the dream of a Black paradise in a White world of hate, and one that ended with that same dream, but in a different context.
In between there was a diversion from the dream. Malcolm was conscious, at least during the last few months of his life, of this connection to his past. In a conversation with Jan Carew (cited in Carew, 1994), when asked if the “new” Malcolm after his hajj was different from the Malcolm who spoke at the Oxford Union 3 months earlier, Malcolm is reported as replying the following.

No. I’m one and the same person, the son of a mother and father who were devoted Garveyites all of their lives. The son of a father who was murdered and a mother who was mentally crucified by racists. I’m carrying on the work they started, just as my children will carry on my work when I’m gone. Before they carted my mother off to a mental hospital and tore our family apart, she kept telling us that without an education we’d be like people blindfolded in a forest pockmarked with quicksand. I strayed from those teachings of hers for years, but I came back, didn’t I? My vision of the struggle has been broadened, that’s true, but my basic commitment is the same. (pp. 89–90)

Malcolm recognized what I have suggested was the commitment script of his Garveyite family, in which he took on the role that his parents played in his childhood, especially his father. But he was diverted from this commitment script because of the nuclear episodes, where good turned bad: with the murder of his father, the harassment of his mother to her mental dissolution, and the breakup of his family. He got sidetracked as a result, first surrendering his Black identity by trying to become White, then, when rejected by Whites, by reversing directions to adopt a negative identity with respect to mainstream American values. Eventually he recovered himself, became self-educated, and joined the Black Muslims, where Muhammad played the role that his father once played in teaching him about Black pride and Black independence. But he could express his own deepest values based on the original family commitment script and develop an independent personal identity only after he left the Black Muslims, when he developed his own views of how to be a Black leader trying to deal with racism in America.

An important part of the teaching that Malcolm shared with his parents was the emphasis on Black cultural pride initially derived from Garvey, which he elaborated in narrative terms. In a speech that he made at the founding rally for the OAAU he described the “cultural aspect” of OAAU’s Black Nationalist philosophy.

"A race of people is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself." [cited from Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, 1964]
Our history and our culture were completely destroyed when we were forcibly brought to America in chains. And now it is important for us to know that our history did not begin with slavery. We came from Africa, a great continent, where live a proud and varied people, a land which is the new world and was the cradle of civilization. Our culture and our history is as old as man himself and yet we know almost nothing about it. (Malcolm X, 1970/1992, pp. 53-54)

In his speech, Malcolm described how White society systematically worked to eliminate all cultural knowledge from Blacks during slavery, bringing them “to the level of animals,” then treating them as such.

We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people. . . . This cultural revolution will be a journey to our rediscovery of ourselves. History is a people’s memory, and without memory man is demoted to the level of lower animals. (Malcolm X, 1970/1992, pp. 55-56)

In the Black Nationalist philosophy of Malcolm we see how he intertwined the issue of personal or individual identity and Black cultural identity, where both are dependent on history or narrative. To be human requires memory—otherwise one is a mere animal. Through memory one can know one’s past, which is necessary to reveal who one is. Once one knows who one is through memory, then one can take pride in this revealed identity. However, that can happen only if the memory allows for a narrative in which one can have pride. A history or memory of the past given to you by those who have oppressed you, and treated you as an inferior being, will not provide an identity of which one can be proud. Hence, one must construct one’s history by shaping a narrative that gives positive meaning and value to one’s identity. Only then can one regain one’s pride.

It is important to note that in Malcolm’s speech he also described how White Americans and European culture did more than play a role in stripping African Americans of their cultural identity. There was more at stake. The erasure of memory was done initially in the service of slavery. But even after slavery was abolished there was continued oppression of Black Americans with lynching, segregation, second-class citizenship, and projected negative identities. The result was that most Black Americans of the time had much more to recover than a cultural heritage. They had to recover economic and political control over their own destinies. In Malcolm’s view, self-knowledge and pride in one’s heritage was thus just a necessary condition and stepping stone on which to obtain Black power. Without a sense of individual and social identity of being a Black person with a shared African heritage, African Americans could not attain a group...
identity. And without a group identity they could have no power as a group to affect their future.

Although Malcolm himself did not introduce the concept of Black power, those Black Americans who did, not long after his death, saw in Malcolm and his OAAU a primary source for their inspiration to organize Black people politically as an independent group in American society with common interests and the potential communal power to achieve those interests. Malcolm was at the time of his death a controversial figure, and the meaning of his legacy has been debated among Blacks and Whites ever since. But there is little doubt that he has provided the inspiration to many Black Americans to take pride in themselves and in their Black heritage and to work together to achieve a meaningful place in American society.

CONCLUSION

Malcolm’s search for a positive identity both for himself and more generally for Black Americans illustrates how personal and social identity are intertwined, how narrative is crucial to both forms of identity, and how society can be transformed by changing personal and social narratives. Right from infancy, Malcolm was caught up in personal and social stories of identity. Malcolm’s position in his family as well as his family’s position in Black activism during the 1920s provided the basis for identities and stories that would later develop in Malcolm’s self-narrative and his attempts to provide social narratives for Black Americans. But the stories and identities that Malcolm adopted as well as those that were imputed to him by others were not mere transformations of a single coherent story. A number of inconsistent stories and identities were developed around Malcolm and by him, in his attempts to make sense of his life and of the lives of other African Americans. The struggle to develop affirming identities that could be accepted by self and would be accepted by others was a struggle in which Malcolm engaged throughout all of his postadolescent life. And, although Malcolm effected more dramatic changes and engaged in a more intense struggle than most of us, Malcolm’s search for a positive identity through narrative as well as through political action, illustrates in an extreme form the struggle for a coherent sense of personal and social identity that occurs for many people in the modern and postmodern era. Stable personal narrative identities fixed by social role are a thing of the past in Western culture. Instead, the predominant theme is the dialogical emergence of identities, sometimes multiple and inconsistent, sometimes combined into a reasonable coherence, all depending on stories we can tell that make sense of our lives to external and internal audiences and that can lead to actions and historical transformations in identity, inconceivable in earlier times.
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