

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

**"I AIN'T NO STRANGER, I BEEN HERE BEFORE":
MALCOLM'S BULLETS AND ELLISON'S CONFETTI**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN CANDIDACY
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AMERICAN STUDIES

BY

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And everywhere, through the immortal dark, something moving in the night, and something stirring in the hearts of men, and something crying in their wild unuttered tongues of its huge prophecies--so soon the morning, soon the morning: O America.

Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock*

France was a land, England a people, but America, having about it still that quality of an idea, was harder to utter--.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

If this weird, upside-down caricature of a county called America, if this land of refugees and former indentured servants, religious heretics and half-breeds, whoresons and fugitives--this cauldron of mongrels from all points on the compass--was all I could rightly call *home*, than aye: I was of it. There, as I lay weakened from bleeding, was where I wanted to be. Do I sound like a patriot? Brother, I put it to you: What Negro, in his heart (if he's not a hypocrite), is not?

Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*

If you see me coming, better open up your door,
If you see me coming, better open up your door,
I ain't no stranger, I been here before.

Traditional Blues

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
1. RALPH ELLISON, MALCOLM X, AND AMERICAN CULTURE	5
2. RALPH ELLISON AND "AMERICANNESSE"	15
3. MALCOLM AND SEPARATION	39
CONCLUSION	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY	69

INTRODUCTION

The primary project of American studies as a discipline is probing American culture. Two figures who stand side by side at the core of that culture--at once explicitly critiquing it while also constituting two of its most dynamic and complex embodiments--are writer Ralph Waldo Ellison and religio-political leader El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (more popularly known as Malcolm X). While Ralph Ellison and Malcolm X have traditionally been regarded as immensely dissimilar figures, the contributions of these two men are in fact quite similar. Indeed, there have been few individuals throughout American cultural history who have better articulated and engaged their own sense of American identity than these two African-American men. For the respective visions of Ellison and Malcolm--regardless of how different their vantage points or conclusions--constitute both a subversive scrutiny of, and trenchant commentary upon, American culture. While both men arrive at entirely different verdicts on the nature of American civilization, their differing conceptions are provocative counterpoints to one another: Malcolm bases his rejection of America on its white supremacist underpinnings while Ellison embraces an America that is, in practice, ineluctably syncretic and multiethnic to the core. In the final analysis, while Malcolm enunciates the most devastating of race-based critiques of American civilization, Ellison provides that same culture's most compelling and celebratory--and ultimately accurate--apologia.

Contemporary cultural debates demand a close reading of Ellison's essays and Malcolm's oratory. For both within and without the academy issues of nationalism, identity, and "multiculturalism" are at the fore of discussion. While it is certainly true, as literary critic Kwame Appiah has observed, that "[in] the 1990s . . . 'race,' 'class,' and

of such concerns from the (post)modern mind appears highly unlikely.¹ As literary and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written: "Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender."² British-born scholar Os Guinness has examined this phenomenon in the American context and alarmingly describes what he calls the contemporary American "crisis of national identity":

The mounting crisis of American identity has been evident to foreign observers for several decades, though it has taken extreme multiculturalism for it to dawn on the minds of most Americans and become one of the key issues of the nineties. But there is a simple reason why a crisis of national identity affects Americans especially deeply. An individual's sense of identity is like a modern nation's self-image and beliefs about itself. And this is true of no modern nation more than the United States. America is not America because of a single culture and a common language. America is characteristically a nation by intention and by ideas, so it depends crucially on an ongoing commitment of heart and mind.³

Not only are Ellison and Malcolm two contemporary thinkers who speak directly to such questions of identity, but also both are keenly aware of the nature and implications of these controversies: what is at issue is nothing less than the nature of American reality.

The analyses that Ellison and Malcolm offer on the constitution of that reality--indeed, the very meaning(s) of America itself--stand in direct opposition to one another. For while Malcolm's hyperbolic orations provide perhaps the most incisive rejection of America and American identity articulated this century, Ellison exuberantly celebrated the constant process of ethnic fusion and democratic leveling he saw as

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Identities* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1.

² Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv.

³ Os Guinness, *The American Hour* (New York and London: Free Press, 1993), 38.

constituting the essence of American culture, a culture to which he lent his unqualified support. This study explores these two strains of cultural thought through an examination of the respective discourses--the writings, speeches, and interviews--of Ralph Ellison and Malcolm X. More specifically, this thesis identifies both the implicit and explicit arguments that emerge from these corpuses as they function to interrogate what Ellison calls "Americanness," or American identity. All other concerns are secondary. Keeping in mind Emerson's observation that "Culture, with [Americans], ends in headache," this study is not an attempt to ascertain how identities are formed, nor is it a discussion of theories or discourses of identity per se.⁴ Likewise, the concept of race is only significant insofar as it relates to this central question of American identity.⁵ Finally, I do not attempt to chart the "politics" or political activism of either Malcolm or Ellison.⁶ Ultimately, this thesis analyses and compares the cultural criticism (specifically the thought on American identity) of two of the most important figures in American cultural history, both of whom emerge from a most powerful strain of American letters, the African-American literary tradition. By examining this criticism, Ellison's notions about the American "melting pot" and "Americanness," and the role this plays in integrating society, will be contrasted to the separatist notions of Malcolm.

⁴ Quoted in Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, ed. Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 28.

⁵ As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has written: "'Race' as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of the 'white race' or the 'black race,' the 'Jewish race' or the 'Aryan race,' we speak in misnomers, biologically, and metaphors, more generally." Gates, *Loose Canons*, 48. Likewise, critic Kwame Anthony Appiah has written that "a discussion of some of the literary ramifications of the idea of race can proceed while accepting the essential unreality of races and the falsehood of most of what is believed about them." Kwame Appiah Anthony, "Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed., eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 277.

⁶ Politically-oriented approaches to Malcolm constitute a sub-genre of contemporary African-American writing. For a balanced treatment of Ellison's political life, see Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Chapter One introduces Ralph Ellison and Malcolm X and briefly roots their ideas in the context of African-American intellectual and cultural history. Chapter Two provides a close reading of Ellison's corpus of criticism, focusing on his notion of the melting pot and what he calls "Americanness." In Chapter Three I examine the thought of Malcolm X--squarely in the the African-American vernacular tradition--by closely reading selected speeches and public statements. In the conclusion I evaluate Malcolm and his legacy in light of Ellison's theories on American culture and suggest that by analyzing both stances we may discover what Ellison calls "the beautiful and confounding complexities of Afro-American experience."⁷

⁷ Ralph Ellison, "Study and Experience: An Interview with Ralph Ellison," interview by Robert B. Stepto and Michael S. Harper, *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977), 427.

RALPH ELLISON, MALCOLM X, AND AMERICAN CULTURE

The importance of Ralph Ellison to American cultural life can hardly be overstated. Novelist Charles Johnson--who devoted his 1990 National Book Award acceptance speech to praising Ellison and his influence--writes that "when the global list of the most valuable authors of the twentieth century is finally composed, [Ellison] will be among those at the pinnacle."¹ As regards the breadth and depth of that influence, one scholar has written that consummate man of letters Ellison views "all American culture as a legitimate domain for his voracious intellectual curiosity."² Ellison understands his role as an African-American artist specifically in terms of fulfilling his "responsibility" to the broader American culture, reiterating that "[t]here is a moral obligation for the critic to recognize what is rich and viable in criticism and then apply it and play it back through his own experience, through his sense of what is important not simply about criticism, but about life. I look at criticism as a corrective, a moral act."³ Beside his works of the fictive imagination--his National Book Award-winning novel *Invisible Man* and a handful of short stories--Ellison's contribution is in the form of a large number of essays dealing with issues ranging from race and identity to the political implications of literature. His two nonfiction collections--*Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986)--deal precisely with such

¹ Charles Johnson, "The Singular Vision of Ralph Ellison," *The Washington Post*, 18 April 1994, C4. Poet Michael Harper, critics Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Stanley Crouch, Shelby Steele, Albert Murray, Houston A. Baker, Jr., and novelist Leon Forrest all indicate the influence of Ralph Ellison on their work.

² Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, "Introduction," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), vii.

³ Ralph Ellison, "Interview with Ralph Ellison," by John O'Brien, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 223.

themes. And one of his paramount concerns is the nature of America and American identity, particularly as they relate to the African-American experience.

Certainly Ellison's foremost interest is art rather than activism. He has said: "I wasn't, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art."⁴ This being the case, however, he registers a keen awareness of the link between what he considers to be the "responsibility of the artist" and political action. To those who believe that Ellison's mediation between art and social engagement "sounds like an argument for the artist's withdrawal from social struggles," Ellison has responded with a quote from W. H. Auden: "In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act."⁵ In fact, the Nation of Islam newspaper that Malcolm X himself founded, *Muhammad Speaks*, has said that "[Ellison] is one of the most river-deep militant race men."⁶ As Ellison himself indicated to one interviewer: "You be your kind of militant and I'll be my kind of militant."⁷ Such a statement aptly describes Ellison's literary project. As writer and scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has said: "For Ellison, the revolutionary political act [i]s not separation; it [i]s the staking of a claim for the Negro in the construction of an honestly public American culture."⁸ During his lifetime, Ralph Ellison refused to adopt what he saw as the limiting, restricting "racialist" role often assigned to African-American artists. He insisted upon fulfilling his incumbent "responsibility" to the broader American society by celebrating the syncretic nature of American culture and

⁴ Ralph Ellison, "Indivisible Man," interview by James Alan McPherson, *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1970, 47.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1995), 508.

⁶ Leon Forrest, "A Conversation with Ralph Ellison," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 220.

⁷ Ralph Ellison, "Ellison: Exploring the Life of a Not So Visible Man," interview by Hollie I. West, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 235.

⁸ Quoted in David Remnick, "Visible man," *New Yorker*, 14 March 1994, 36.

identity and emphasizing that "imagination is [itself] integrative. That is how you make the new--by putting something else with what you've got."⁹ Ellison explicitly saw himself as, perhaps more so than anything else, a commentator on American cultural life.

The body of writing and speeches produced by religious and political activist Malcolm X likewise functions to interrogate American society in ways that are both surprisingly similar to, and explicitly very different from, Ellison's engagement with American culture. Just as Ellison is a masterful artist of the written word, so too is Malcolm of the spoken. Working within the African-American vernacular form of the sermon, Malcolm wielded words and moved listeners in ways unparalleled in contemporary American oratory.¹⁰ In terms of Malcolm's role as cultural critic, one historian has defined Malcolm as "a self-made social critic debating the intentions and public policies of white America."¹¹ "Malcolm," he continues, "was never so much a politician as a moral commentator on politics."¹² Having spent the first seventeen years of his eighteen-year public career as a minister and apologist for Elijah Muhammad's Lost-Found Nation of Islam, Malcolm rooted his critique of America in specifically racial terms. In fact, race is so fundamental to the Nation of Islam's doctrine that some consider Malcolm's legacy as little more than an enunciation of black nationalism and opposition to white racism. Yet while the concept of racial

⁹ Quoted in Graham and Singh, "Introduction," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, vii.

¹⁰ The editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* have written that "[I]n the black tradition, no forms are more quick or overflowing with black power and black meaning" than those in the vernacular. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McHay, eds., "The Vernacular Tradition," in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 5.

¹¹ Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, 2nd ed., Blacks in the New World, August Meier, series editor, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 236.

essentialism and attendant notions of racial difference are certainly fundamental to Malcolm's thinking and thus inform his viewpoint, they do not constitute his sole concern. An analysis of Malcolm's speeches and interviews reveals a much more nuanced critical stance. In fact, although Malcolm lived less than fifty weeks after his break with the Nation of Islam, "[a] careful reading of [Malcolm's speeches]," one literary critic has written, "suggests that Malcolm was moving, however erratically, in a direction that in some cases transcended or bypassed, or indeed rejected, some of the statements he had uttered at one time or another."¹³ And as Malcolm himself said of his complex and dynamic perspective shortly before being assassinated: "I [am] still hard-pressed to give a specific definition of the over-all philosophy which I think is necessary for the liberation of the black people in this country."¹⁴ This evolving perspective creates a situation, as historian Michael Dyson has written, whereby "Malcolm's complexity resists neat categories of analysis and rigid conclusions about his meaning."¹⁵ Ultimately, and like Ellison, Malcolm "left his heirs little that was tangible--no visible organization, no systematic program, no one tidy body of thought; but he bequeathed them a legacy of words."¹⁶

In one intriguing sense, the contributions of Ellison and Malcolm are identical. Their enduring reputations rest primarily on the publication of a single text. Ellison's sole published novel is the fictional autobiography of an unnamed African-American man. As Ellison has described this work: "*Invisible Man* is a memoir of a man who has

¹³ Edward Margolies, *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Black American Authors* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1968), 152.

¹⁴ Malcolm X, "Last Answers and Interviews," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1989), 212.

¹⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: the Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 14.

¹⁶ Goldman, *Death and Life*, 112.

gone through [the American] experience and now comes back and brings his message to the world . . . his memoir is an attempt to describe reality as it really is."¹⁷ Such a statement can very well apply to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. For Malcolm, his *Autobiography*--written entirely by Alex Haley, published posthumously, and more fictional than factual--is the quasi-mythic narrative of his origins and upbringing, spiritual conversion, and public career. In this way the texts are quite similar: they represent one man's view of the relationship between America and the identity of the protagonist. Interestingly, Ellison himself observed a similar connection when he said that "people are reading [*Invisible Man*] and they think I invented Malcolm X."¹⁸

In his study *The Invention of America*, Edmund O'Gorman suggests that nearly all contemporary cultural debate stems from fundamentally different conceptions of America. Indeed, O'Gorman asserts, the tendency to reify the notion "America" has been an ever-present given in American intellectual history and is as old as the nation itself:

The fault that lies at the root of the entire history of the idea of the discovery of America consists in assuming that the lump of cosmic matter which we now know as the American continent has always been that, when actually it only became that when such a meaning was given to it, and will cease to be that when, by virtue of some change in the the current world concept, the meaning will no longer be assigned to it.¹⁹

This is similar to Ellison's understanding of America as being "still an undiscovered

¹⁷ Ralph Ellison, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," by Allen Geller, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85. It is interesting that Ellison has said that it was when he was "speculating on the nature of Negro leadership in the United States [that he] wrote the first paragraph of *Invisible Man*." Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in *Collected Essays*, 218.

¹⁹ Quoted in Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 64.

country.”²⁰ Ellison firmly believes that controversies over the meaning of America and American identity are far from being resolved; rather, the ongoing debates are themselves part and parcel of the American tradition. Interestingly, Ellison himself has written of the difficulty inherent in attempts to represent--in terms of distilling and describing--American identity:

We are reminded of how greatly the “Americanness” of American culture has been a matter of Adamic wordplay--of trying, in the interest of a futuristic dream, to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude. In this effort we are often less interested in what we are than in projecting what we will ourselves to be.²¹

Ellison fully recognized the prophetic and semantic nature of his project. As he writes elsewhere: “That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been, or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds, our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists.”²²

As Malcolm “s[ees] his life as combat, and words as his weapons,” so too does Ellison consider the conflict to define America--and American identity--as linguistic and analytical in nature.²³ Rather than locate this battlefield in the realm of politics or sociology, Ellison explicitly establishes the site of conflict as semantic and intellectual, one of images and ideas. As he writes: “The rock, the terrain upon which we struggle, is itself abstract, a terrain of ideas that, although man-made, exerts the compelling

²⁰ Ralph Ellison, “Television Makes Us See One Another,” interview by Roderick Townley, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 389.

²¹ Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” in *Collected Essays*, 508.

²² Ralph Ellison, “The Golden Age, Time Past,” in *Collected Essays*, 237.

²³ Goldman, *The Death and Life*, 42.

force of the ideal, of the sublime."²⁴ While a number of cultural critics see competing images of America in terms of simple polar oppositions of an either idyllic or nightmarish American experience--no less a cultural giant than novelist and critic Toni Morrison seems to give currency to such a dichotomy in her discussions of "blackness" versus "whiteness"--a close reading of the works of Malcolm and Ellison reveals a great deal more complexity in terms of approach.²⁵

The experience of being African-American is the starting point for both Ellison and Malcolm as they approach American culture. The theme of duality--the condition of the hyphen--is a fundamental one to these figures (as well as the greater African-American tradition). In his essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), African-American historian, sociologist, and activist W.E.B. DuBois writes that:

One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message to the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be

²⁴ Ellison, "Little Man," in *Collected Essays*, 501.

²⁵ Morrison has written that: "I have begun to wonder whether the major, much celebrated themes of American literature--individualism, masculinity, the conflict between social engagement and historical isolation, an acute and ambiguous moral problematic, the juxtaposition of innocence with figures representing death and hell--are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanistic presence." Toni Morrison, "Black Matter(s)," in *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views of Reading Literature*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston and NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 256. See also Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Historian Paul Johnson has written of the American impulse to construct an "American dream"--if not to dichotomize--that "[m]any, perhaps most, Americans [have] thought of their country, almost wistfully, as the last Arcadia, an innocent quasi-Utopian refuge from the cumulative follies and wickedness of the corrupt world beyond her ocean-girded shores." Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, rev. ed. (New York and London: HarperCollins, 1992), 203.

both a Negro and an American.²⁶

This essay constitutes, as one critic has written, "an instituting text for twentieth century black literature written in English."²⁷ In this essay DuBois posits the metaphor of the Veil (signifying the problem of the color line) and the reality of double-consciousness (the notion that each African-American is at all times forced to reconcile his or her divided self). In the process of highlighting these concerns, DuBois constructs an "ontology of blackness upon which is grounded the Black American literary tradition."²⁸ While Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston A. Baker, Jr., and other African-American literary theorists reject the paradigmatic value of DuBois's text, this trope of dualism--both as a rhetorical construct and as an authentic way of viewing reality--figures prominently in and prevails throughout much African-American discourse. Indeed, in many ways the basic contention between Ellison and Malcolm over the nature of American identity stems from differing approaches to the problem of the color line, or duality, the dilemma of attempting to be both black and American.

Closely related to this theme of duality is the concept of black nationalism. As historian August Meier chronicles in his study *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915* (1963), black nationalism was (along with integrationism) one of the primary responses among African-Americans to their status in the United States. DuBois argued that "common suffering" was the basis of such a shared identity among African-Americans:

The so-called American Negro group . . . while it is in no sense absolutely set

²⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1989), 5.

²⁷ Sandra Adell. *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth Century Black Literature*. (Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

off physically from its fellow Americans, has nevertheless a strong, hereditary cultural unity born of slavery, of common suffering, prolonged proscription, and curtailment of political and civil rights . . . [p]rolonged policies of segregation and discrimination have involuntarily welded the mass almost into a nation within a nation.²⁹

As the sociologist C. Eric Lincoln has written, African-American group consciousness comes about because "[u]nder the circumstances confronting them African Americans are [often] required to be black before--and sometimes to the exclusion of--anything else this attitude has come to be known as black nationalism."³⁰ Scholar and theologian James H. Cone explains:

The central claim of all black nationalists, past and present, is that black people are primarily Africans and not Americans. Unlike integrationists, nationalists do not define their significance and purpose as a people by appealing to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, or even the white man's religion of Christianity. On the contrary, nationalists define their identity by their resistance to America and their determination to create a society based on their own African history and culture. The posture of rejecting America and accepting Africa is sometimes symbolized with such words as "African," "black," and "blackness."³¹

Black nationalism is one response offered to the dilemma of duality. While Ellison rejects such a stance outright (he explicitly sees himself as an integrationist) Malcolm is--at least for the greater part of his public career--among separatism's most articulate contemporary proponents.

The late 1950s and 1960s saw these issues explode onto the national scene

²⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, "Three Centuries of Discrimination," in *The Crisis* 54 (December 1947): 362-363.

³⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, 3rd ed., *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Trenton, New Jersey: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 41. When Lincoln's study first came out in 1961, Malcolm was very critical: "Lincoln is incorrect himself. Lincoln is just a Christian preacher from Atlanta, Georgia, who wanted to make some money, so he wrote a book." Quoted in *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrick Clarke (New York and Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1969), 173.

³¹ James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 9-10.

with the emergent civil rights movement. During this time, one strain of black activism--that of black nationalism--acquired a commanding voice. The proponents of this ideology (in contrast to Ellison, who believed that America would one day fulfill its promises of freedom and equality) asserted that black Americans should work for a separate and sovereign state, based on the premise that "blackness" constitutes grounds for nationhood.³² These activists argued, with anger, passion, and conviction, that America was no suitable home for blacks. The political front of such thinking was exemplified by the Black Panther Party and such figures as Malcolm X. As regards aesthetic and artistic production, and exemplified by Amiri Baraka's founding of the Harlem Black Arts Repertory Theater/School, the Black Arts Movement sought to produce and legitimate black art according to black standards and ideals. The group was led by Baraka and Larry Neal. According to Neal, "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America."³³ These Black Nationalists were infuriated by Ellison's essays. By arguing for a common American culture, he seemed to be appropriating supposedly unique and definitional aspects of black life to an American cultural norm. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinnings of his conception of "Americanness"--that American culture is a melting pot inevitably integrating its many disparate parts--was anathema to those calling for total separation of the races. It was in the context of these cultural and political movements that Ellison published the majority of his work, and they set the stage for an examination of Ellison's thoroughly integrated critical stance.

³² See Amiri Baraka, "Black is a Country," in *Home, Social Essays* (NY: William Morrow, 1966).

³³ Quoted in Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971), 272.

RALPH ELLISON AND "AMERICANNESSE"

From the time he published *Invisible Man* in 1952 until his death in 1994, Ralph Ellison was one of the foremost apologists, of any race, for an America which he was convinced offered "infinite possibilities."¹ Ellison was the first African-American to receive the National Book Award, and beginning with his acceptance speech in January, 1953, he consistently articulated the most optimistic celebration of American culture and identity voiced this century. In that particular speech, a harbinger of Ellison's later criticism, he highlighted a number of the concerns that would come to define his unique vision of American society. After situating himself as an author who "attempt[s] to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy," Ellison announced that he "s[aw] America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom."² At once asserting that each individual, particularly the artist, had an obligation to work toward a just and democratic society, Ellison praised American culture's variety, possibility, and freedom. While freely admitting that because of persisting racial and ethnic bigotry his "minority status rendered all [commonly held] assumptions questionable," he maintained that "[o]n its profoundest level American experience is of a whole."³ Thus, while taking into consideration that his status as an African-American gave him a profoundly different vantage point from white Americans, and never willing to accept anything less than equal participation in American life for all citizens, Ellison posited that American identity was ultimately anchored in common experience. In fact, Ellison concluded, "Its

¹ Quoted in Harold Isaacs, "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors," *Phylon* (Winter 1960), 336.

² Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," in *Collected Works*, 151-153.

³ *Ibid.*, 154.

truth lies in its diversity and swiftness of change.”⁴ This notion, that a current of constant change characterizes American culture, would become one of Ellison’s critical mantras. With these words, Ellison formally began his forty-year career as a cultural critic, consistently articulating and affirming a vision of America and American identity that has managed to persist despite the most vehement of attacks.

Central to Ellison’s celebration of America is his understanding of the function of culture. Culture to Ellison “results from the exchange of different lifestyles and beliefs.”⁵ Ellison suggested such a definition by his reference to cultural “swiftness and change.” The exchange itself is best represented in the American context by the oft-derided yet persistently popular image of the melting pot. As one dictionary defines this symbol: “[the] *Melting pot* is a term that uses alchemical imagery to describe the process of cultural fusing.”⁶ From a historical perspective, literary and social critic Werner Sollors has charted popular usage of this metaphor and identified evidence of the melting pot emerging on the American continent as a symbol of ethnic and cultural fusion as early as 1702.⁷ In 1782, Jean de Crevecoeur described the United States as a place where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”⁸ In a notebook entry in 1845 Ralph Waldo Emerson optimistically predicted that “the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles & (the) Cossacks, & all the European tribes,--of the Africans, & the Polynesians, will construct a new race, a new religion, a new State, a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in “Introduction,” in *Conversations*, xiii.

⁶ “Melting Pot,” in *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, eds. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 183.

⁷ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity : Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1986), 94.

⁸ Jean de Crevecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782).

new literature.”⁹ The historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of this process: “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race.”¹⁰ Eminent British historian Paul Johnson has traced this symbol and written: “the notion of a fusion of the races in America was as old as [Jean de] Crevecoeur and Thomas Jefferson. It was dramatized with sensational effect in Israel Zangwill’s play ‘The melting pot,’ which was the New York hit of 1908. The new motion picture industry, which was from its inception the epitome of multi-racialism, was obsessed with the idea, as many of the early epics testify.”¹¹ Although, as Ellison once wrote, “no one has yet forged a metaphor rich enough to reduce American diversity to form,” the figure of the melting pot best describes his own notions regarding American pluralism and the dynamic interplay between different ethnic groups in the American milieu.¹² The term is, in fact, one he often employed, notwithstanding his own particular emphasis and qualifications upon it, to describe his complex understanding of American culture. Ellison, because he used this trope, was thus in an important sense a traditionalist defending a popular American myth.

For Ellison, this metaphor entails a great deal more than a simple fusing of bloodlines. His use of the symbol implies that American culture is itself a composite of all cultures with which it has come into contact. Ellison is certainly not the only intellectual to champion such an idea. Early cultural historian Caroline Ware wrote that “Immigrants and the children of immigrants are the American people. Their culture

⁹ Quoted in Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 95.

¹⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 23.

¹¹ Johnson, *Modern Times*, 203.

¹² Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” by Steve Cannon, in *Conversations*, 112.

is American culture, not merely a contributor to American culture.”¹³ Historian Oscar Handlin likewise wrote that “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.”¹⁴ On a popular level, John F. Kennedy’s book *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964) argues a similar thesis. Sollors, like Ellison, explicitly expands this notion to include all ethnic groups that have lived on American soil. He concludes that “it is well worth it to interpret America not narrowly as immigration but more broadly as ethnic diversity and include the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the continent, the kidnapped Africans and their descendants, and the Chicanos of the Southwest.”¹⁵ For Ellison this conception of America, as represented by the figure of the melting pot, signifies nothing less than the cultural fluidity and possibility inherent in American culture. Many critics argue that the image of the melting pot is static and homogeneous, charging that such an idea demands that various races and ethnic groups lose their separate identities in order to assimilate themselves to a mainstream, primarily white, culture. Mary Dearborn, for instance, argues that “rather than an impartial melting of the divergent cultural patterns from all immigrant sources, what has actually taken place has been more of a transforming of the . . . immigrant’s specific cultural contributions into the Anglo-Saxon’s mold.”¹⁶ Yet Ellison’s understanding of culture is quite dissimilar from such a concept of assimilation. Instead, he sees a process of acculturation whereby

¹³ Caroline F. Ware, *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 87

¹⁴ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), 3.

¹⁵ Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 8.

¹⁶ Mary Dearborn, *Pocahontas’s Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86.

American culture is itself radically changed by the presence and contributions of new groups.

Ellison equated this melting pot process with what he called "Americanness," or the very quality of being American:

It is here, on the level of culture, that the diverse elements of our various backgrounds, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together, "melted" and undergone metamorphosis. It is here, if we would but recognize it, that elements of the many available tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values that make up the total culture have been ceaselessly appropriated and made their own--consciously, unselfconsciously, or imperialistically--by groups and individuals to whose backgrounds and traditions they are historically alien. Indeed, it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians *became* Americans.¹⁷

This passage capsulizes Ellison's sense of acculturation--he never employs the word "assimilation" to describe his own views--and cultural interplay. In the first sentence, he explicitly makes reference to the melting pot concept (which he suggests, by placing the word "melting" in quotation marks, is considered potentially problematic in some quarters). In the second sentence Ellison indicates that this continuous process inevitably occurs regardless of individual or collective intention. Furthermore, he suggests that all aspects of culture--from tastes, which imply little more than personal preference, to values, denoting the fundamental beliefs of a society--are fair game for this dynamic, irresistible, intangible cultural force. In the third sentence Ellison signals that this phenomenon, which he describes as "cultural [mis]appropriation," is the singular process whereby various groups become Americanized and, by extension, American culture is itself constituted. America is an interface between cultures.

To Ellison, arbitrary traits such as creed and color do not make one an American. Nor is consent a requirement in the formation of American identity. As

¹⁷ Ellison, "Little Man at Chehaw Station," in *Collected Essays*, 510.

Ellison once commented: "I'm not an American because I arbitrarily decide so."¹⁸ Rather, "the dynamism of American life," the invisible force of cultural appropriation, ineluctably transforms all individuals and groups living in America into Americans regardless of whether or not they desire such an outcome.¹⁹ Ultimately, by extension, this dynamic constitutes the core characteristic of American culture. Factors such as race, ethnicity, and bloodline are--insofar as the cultural life of the nation is concerned--powerless to prevent such merging and mingling between groups and cultural traditions. While on one level consanguinity is therefore complicated, on the much more visible level of popular culture absolute separation becomes an impossibility. It is for this reason Ellison maintains that "here in the United States at least, culture has successfully confounded all concepts of race."²⁰ Cultural dynamism prevails: there is an irrepressible movement toward integration. "The whole tendency in American life, historically, technologically, statistically, and every other way, is to mix up everything."²¹

Regardless of the degree to which a group or individual attempts to resist Americanization, the process is inevitable and irresistible. One of the most compelling aspects of this strain of Ellison's argument is that it self-consciously asserts its own inevitability: no matter what critics of the melting pot say, the process proceeds. This sense of vibrancy and inexorability is, in Ellison's mind, an unanswerable argument. As he has written, "the irrepressible movement of American culture toward the integration of its diverse elements continues, confounding the circumlocutions of its

¹⁸ Ellison, "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," by Allen Geller, in *Conversations*, 82.

¹⁹ Ellison, "Some Questions and Answers," in *Collected Essays*, 299.

²⁰ Ellison, "Study and Experience," in *Massachusetts Review*, 432.

²¹ Ellison, "What's Wrong with the American Novel," in *Conversations*, 353.

staunchest opponents.”²² This rhetorical gesture conveys a sense of the argument’s own energy and vibrancy. Furthermore, he points to all second-generation Americans as irrefutable, living evidence of his contention:

[Few] groups--or at least few of the children of these groups--have been able to resist the movies, television, baseball, jazz, football, drum-majoretting, rock, comic strips, radio commercials, soap operas, book clubs, slang, or any of a thousand other expressions and carriers of our pluralistic and easily available popular culture. It is here precisely that ethnic resistance is least effective. On this level the melting pot did indeed melt, creating such deceptive metamorphoses and blending of identities, values and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it.²³

This describes the active, potent, energetic dynamism that characterizes American life. Here, as elsewhere for Ellison, popular culture militates against separatism: the underlying tendency of American culture is towards an integration of its various disparate parts. And the shared experience of this cultural give-and-take, this popular culture Americans all take part in, define us all as Americans.²⁴ As Ellison once pointed out, “blue jeans are a way of dramatizing our basic unity.”²⁵

Ellison’s criticism is punctuated with anecdotes of such cultural mixing. It is characteristic for his essays to contain numerous examples and illustrations of what he argues are the obvious incongruities and complexities underpinning American cultural life. In a speech at Columbia University, for instance, Ellison related his encounter a

²² Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” in *Collected Essays*, 505.

²³ Ellison, “What American Would Be Like Without Blacks,” 580.

²⁴ As Robert Hughes has written on this phenomenon: “The United States of America is an immigrant society, and has been since the beginnings of European settlement in the late 16th century. English, French, Spanish, Italians, Africans, Chinese, Japanese and everyone else have been carrying parts of their past, their inherited or remembered culture, into America for the past 400 years.” See Robert Hughes, “American Visions,” in *Time*, special issue (Spring 1997), 9.

²⁵ Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” in *Collected Essays*, 598.

few days prior with a young black man walking down the street wearing a Confederate Army cap: "It was as though the most tragic incident in American history had leaped from a New York sidewalk to confound me with a transformation of the color symbolism which had ignited the Civil War."²⁶ Ellison explained that although his sense of reality was initially perplexed by the existence of this modern-day Afro-Confederate, "The young man continued his march and I continued mine, but then I paused, looked back, and there he was, hands on hips, Confederate-capped head thrown back, bubbling with uncontrollable laughter."²⁷ Ellison continued:

"My alter ego whispered, 'Ellison, the Confederates were also *Americans*, and so, God help me, is he! With that I recalled that comedy and gallows humor are traditional ways that hard-pressed Americans have used in dealing with the problems of social hierarchy."²⁸

Ellison goes beyond simply presenting a figure of radical cultural fusion by likewise recognizing the act as a response to real injustice. One way this man reacts to the hardships of American life is through an inversion of the social order. That act, the absurd cultural fusion he effects, in turn defines him as an American. This example exemplifies Ellison's nuanced understanding of the melting pot. As scholar C.W.E. Bigsby has written: "The potency of the [melting pot] image [for Ellison] lay in its acknowledgement of the fact that, in America, cultural traditions were brought into violent contact, that past and future were made to interact, that ideals, and the evidence of the failure of those ideals, were placed in intimate and ironic counterpoint."²⁹ Such an impulse proposes, in Ellison's words, "an idea of human

²⁶ Ellison, "Notes for Class Day Talk at Columbia University," in *Collected Essays*, 839.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 840.

²⁹ C.W.E. Bigsby, "Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form," in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987), 180.

versatility and possibility which [goes] against the barbs or over the palings of almost every fence which those who control social and political power ha[ve] erected to restrict ours roles in the life of the country."³⁰

Nowhere does Ellison more deftly develop and engage this trope of the melting pot than in his essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," written for *The American Scholar* in 1977. In this essay, Ellison gives focus and force to his argument regarding the dynamism of cultural integration by describing one of the more extreme examples of the pluralism and hybridity he locates in the basic constitution of American culture. Ellison recalls a young man whom he saw "on New York's Riverside Drive near 151st Street" that functions to exemplify the melting pot process at work.³¹ As regards the man's ethnicity, he was "a light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian, or a mixed-breed American Indian to a strayed member of certain tribes of Jews."³² Not only his skin-color and facial features but his dress and choice of clothing constituted an "invasion of stylistic boundaries."³³ With this wording, Ellison alludes to the conquering ("invasion") of American Indians by the Europeans as well as the way in which different cultures have, in America, been brought into violent contact. The man wore a "dashy dashiki . . . [and had a] black homburg hat . . . on the crest of his huge Afro-coiffed head."³⁴ The man's clothing represents his own the underlying character: he is, at his heart's deep core, an individual of diversity and multiplicity (like

³⁰ Quoted in *Speaking for You*, 66.

³¹ Ellison, "Little Man," 505.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 506.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 505.

the rest of Americans). Furthermore, the man was “[c]lad in handsome black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches of English tailoring,” itself significant since shoes are the symbols of the traveler (and imply travel in every direction).³⁵ In addition, he carried “a leather riding crop” in his hand.³⁶ This object, emblematic of control and authority, also constitutes a phallic symbol (thus implying procreation and, by extension, creativity--the same creativity he demonstrates is an integral part of American culture). The juxtaposition of articles from both Germany and England (imperialistic empires) and Africa (a continent of colonization) emphasizes the oppositions the man himself mediates. The hybridity that this figure signifies is further highlighted by the very vehicle from which he emerges, “a shiny new Volkswagen Beetle decked out with a gleaming Rolls Royce radiator” that structurally combines, in its very form, two very different automobiles.³⁷ That this figure of pluralism should occupy such a car underscores and multiplies the cultural fusion he represents. In Ellison’s words, “[v]iewed from a rigid ethno-cultural perspective, neither his features nor his car nor his dress was of a whole.”³⁸ Ellison takes full advantage of the interpretive possibilities this personage offers by reading his actions and physical surroundings in a similar way: the man takes a number of photographs of himself (an action connoting vanity, individualism, and thus American identity) using “an expensive Japanese single-lens reflex camera” with a timer, and places himself “against the not-too-distant background of the George Washington Bridge.”³⁹ Thus the

³⁵ Ibid., 506.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 505.

³⁸ Ibid., 507.

³⁹ Ibid., 506.

no-less significant symbols of a Japanese camera and a physical bridge (itself signifying transition, joining, and bringing together) named after America's first President and General (additionally suggestive) are brought into play.

Ellison's gloss of this figure notes that the character's "carefully stylized movements (especially his 'pimp-imp' walk) marked him as a native of the U.S.A., a home-boy bent upon projecting and recording with native verve something of his complex sense of cultural identity."⁴⁰ Ellison's repetition of the word "native" stresses the fundamentally American aspect of this cultural amalgamation. Ellison writes that the man's "essence lay not in the somewhat comic clashing of styles, but in the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition of modes."⁴¹ In a moment of ekphrasis Ellison extracts from this character's existence a comment on the nature of the greater American culture. Ellison, in fact, argues that this man radically exemplifies the fundamental make-up of American civilization:

[He] sounded an integrative, vernacular note, an American compulsion to improvise upon the given. His garments were, literally and figuratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity interwoven of many strands. Whatever his politics, sources of income, hierarchical status and such, he revealed his essential "Americanness" in his freewheeling assault upon traditional forms Whatever the identity he presumed to project, he was exercising an American freedom and was a product of the melting pot.⁴²

A close reading of this passage of criticism reveals the complexity and sophistication of Ellison's view of the melting pot. His word choice discloses a number of his beliefs regarding the underlying nature of this process. In the first sentence, he uses the word "integrate" with its multiple meanings in mind: it denotes a uniting (of multiple parts), a unifying (thus constituting at once a unity and a multiple), and, in popular parlance,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 507.

⁴² Ibid.

racial desegregation. Furthermore, Ellison's linking of the adjectives "integrative" and "vernacular" is important: both words describe an "improvis[ing] upon the given." The word "integration" suggests that the product of improvising (an impromptu series of changes using available materials) is an entity of unity (from many, one). Ellison uses "vernacular" in an equally complex way, at once connoting native language while simultaneously making reference to American popular culture. The word "compulsion," denoting an irresistible impulse to act, suggests the inevitability of this process--the man is doing what Americans, by virtue of being a part of American culture, are compelled to do.

In the second sentence of the passage Ellison likens the man's multiethnic features to his colorful mixture of styles and plainly enunciates the significance of this figure. In the next sentence, Ellison asserts that regardless of such traits as class, political bent, and "hierarchical status," the man is essentially an American (he may be a communist but he nonetheless takes a picture of himself in front of the George Washington Bridge). Indeed, as Ellison firmly believes, the impromptu mixing and matching of "traditional forms" itself constitutes "Americanness." In addition, the word "freewheeling" indicates that this impulse is both natural (in terms of being heedless and carefree) and free of constraints and rules. This sense of being unobstructed and at liberty is reinforced by the word "freedom" in the last sentence; Ellison there declares that the ability to engage in this process is itself "an American freedom" (calling again to mind the George Washington Bridge). Ellison's use of "whatever" suggests that regardless of, indeed, in spite of, conscious intent and non-cultural factors, the figure is fundamentally American. The text emphasizes this fact by repeating the word in both the third and fourth sentences. Ellison employs this rhetorical strategy to root this nuanced sense of cultural freedom in the very condition of Americanness, thus firmly equating the melting pot process itself with American

culture.

Ellison's reference to the vernacular in the preceding passage signals a strain of one of his primary assertions: spoken English in America, like the rest of American culture, is undeniably hybrid. Ellison locates in what the editor and critic H. L. Mencken called "the American language" concrete and indisputable evidence of the melting-pot process at play. As Ellison has written on the role of the American language in national identity formation:

[T]he American nation is in a sense the product of the American language, a colloquial speech that began emerging long before the British colonials and Africans were transformed into Americans. It is a language that evolved from the King's English but, basing itself upon the realities of the American land and colonial institutions--or lack of institutions--began quite early as a vernacular revolt against the signs, symbols, manners and authority of the mother country. It is a language that began by merging the sounds of many tongues, brought together in the struggle of diverse regions.⁴³

Ellison argues not only that the language of Americans demonstrates the pluralism inherent in their culture, but also, conversely, that the melting pot process occurs because (at least in part) it is a function of the language. In this way, as regards the process whereby national identity coalesces from its constituent elements, the linguistic life of the American people is equivalent to their cultural life. Vernacular culture operates as one of the primary determinants of Americanness. Ellison begins his argument in this passage by asserting that the vernacular developed prior to the emergence of a specifically American identity; the language facilitated, and helped determine, that identity. Ellison next postulates--taking into consideration that the language adapts itself to physical and social conditions--that the American language is radically revolutionary in nature. American English, in fact, constitutes a "vernacular

⁴³ Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in *Collected Essays*, 581.

revolt" against the old country.⁴⁴ The richness of the native tongue is therefore a response to, an overt assault upon, the mother tongue. In this way the living, elastic language of the inhabitants of America is at once a reaction to conditions as well as a potent agent of cultural change.

Ellison's last point in this passage ("merging . . . many tongues") is perhaps his most significant. As he writes elsewhere: "our language is such a flexible instrument because it has had so many dissonances thrown into it--from Africa, Mexico, Spain, from, God knows, everywhere."⁴⁵ The point is powerfully clear: spoken English in America reflects the existence of the melting-pot. In one interview, Ellison mentioned "the connections between English as spoken, say, in Wales or Scotland . . . and Afro-American speech."⁴⁶ Ellison described growing up in Oklahoma with two African-American youngsters from North Carolina as neighbors. "One of them, a roughhouser named Buster, was a good fighter who would inexplicably break into Scottish phrases when he got angry; people paid attention!"⁴⁷ As Ellison told one group of students in Iowa: "When the pioneers got to your part of the country, there was no word for 'prairie' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*."⁴⁸ Whether through the inclusion of words to signify things for which no English word existed (including the appropriation of words such as "hombre"), or through the very modulations and tonalities of pronunciation (such as the

⁴⁴ Early American novelist and critic James Fenimore Cooper hints at such a trend when he wrote in 1838 that "While it is true that the great body of the American people use their language more correctly than the mass of any other considerable nation, it is equally true that a smaller proportion than common attain to elegance in this accomplishment, especially in speech." See James Fenimore Cooper, "On Language," in *The American Democrat*, ed. H.L. Mencken, reprint (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1995), 196.

⁴⁵ Ellison, "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy," in *Collected Essays*, 762.

⁴⁶ Ellison; "Television Makes Us See One Another," in *Conversations*, 388.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Quoted in *Speaking for You*, 23.

distinctive Southern drawl), the American language is a living example of the melting pot process, the very essence of American culture, at work. In another moment of humor, Ellison develops this theme by describing the massive African-American contribution to language:

And whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear. So there is a *de'z* and *do'z* of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents, and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it--doubtless introduced there by Old Yale John C. Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy.⁴⁹

Ellison here dramatically points out that a multiplicity of cultures, languages, and peoples can be heard in the very sound of spoken English. This process does, in effect, preclude any notions of race-specific speech. For while regional and race-based dialects may indeed abound, they cannot delimit nor contain their own influence. In this way, each idiom engages the language in a constant exchange. Each time the dust settles, however, both the language and the idiom reemerge transformed.

The vernacular is but one of many regions where Ellison locates the visible and undeniable results of the American dynamic. In "Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ellison recounts numerous other instances of unexpected cultural pluralism. He recollects, for example, the Tuskegee teacher, Hazel Harrison, who had been a successful concert performer, a student of Ferruccio Busoni, and a friend of world-renowned figures in music, such as Sergei Prokofiev, who had given her a signed manuscript. Ellison suggests that "to anyone who possessed a conventional notion of cultural and hierarchical order [this manuscript's] presence in such a setting [as that of Tuskegee] would have been as incongruous as a Gutenberg Bible on the altar of a black

⁴⁹ Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in *Collected Essays*, 581.

sharecropper's church."⁵⁰ Ellison points to an event that occurred while he was working for the Federal Writers' Project as the signal event that alerted him to this widespread pluralist impulse, the democratic leveling effect at the core of American culture. He was startled to encounter coal heavers, in a basement of the formerly predominantly African-American section of New York City called San Juan Hill, who carried on an expert discussion (in the Southern idiomatic vernacular of formally uneducated African-American working men) of operatic technique that they had learned by years of appearances as extras at the Metropolitan Opera. Ellison locates in this experience the key to understanding the porous and democratic nature of American civilization:

I joined them in appreciation of the hilarious American joke that centered on the incongruities of race, economic status and culture. My sense of order restored, my appreciation of the arcane ways of American cultural possibility was vastly expanded. The men were products of both past *and* present; were both coal heavers *and* Met extras; were both working men *and* opera buffs. Seen in the clear, pluralistic, melting-pot light of American cultural possibility, there was no contradiction. The joke, the apparent contradiction, sprang from my attempting to see them by the light of social concepts that cast less illumination than an inert lump of coal.

The first sentence of the passage registers a keen awareness of the complexity of the melting pot process. Ellison suggests that humor is a reasonable response to the contradictions arising from the American milieu. Humor being both an extemporaneous process (sudden and unanticipated) and the ability itself to perceive what is comical, incongruous, or absurd, Ellison's stated reaction mirrors the nature of the thing he beholds: America's dynamism is similarly simultaneously improvisatory and cognizant of its own improvisation-driven absurdity. This tension within a person--and, by extension, culture--of possessing both self-awareness (reasonableness) and an absurd nature (something ridiculously unreasonable) echoes the existentialist

⁵⁰ Ellison, "Little Man," 512.

philosophers as well as points to the contradictions inherent in American life. These contradictions (regarding ethnicity, class, and culture), inevitably given rise to by the nature of American culture, constitute “the” (signifying singularity) “American joke.” In effect, these three traits tell very little about the other. Ellison heightens the rhetorical effect of this idea by explicitly using the word “incongruities.” As Ellison has written of such American contradictions: “What, by the way, is one to make of a white youngster who, with a transistor radio screaming a Stevie Wonder tune glued to his ear, shouts racial epithets at black youngsters[?]”⁵¹

In addition to the subtle reasoning implied by his mention of humor in the first sentence, Ellison in the second sentence constructs a paradigm whereby the “incongruities” of American life themselves constitute an American “sense of order.” This creative tension exists because American society denotes a vibrant cultural network that mediates oppositions. Such a polymorphous paradigm is self-propelling, rich with possibilities, and thus, in its very constitution, hybrid. This nuanced mediation of paradoxes within a paradigm, an over-arching sense of order that contains and necessitates those paradoxes, explains why Ellison states flatly “there [i]s no contradiction.” What Ellison describes as “American cultural possibility” comes about because the melting pot process negotiates manifold individuals, institutions, traditions, groups, interests, and impulses. This matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. As Ellison has said elsewhere, “the whole is always in cacophonous motion.”⁵² It is significant to note that Ellison never assumes to understand this process; he suggests that the most one can do is to appreciate it (he repeats the word “appreciation” in the first two sentences). Likewise, his use of the word “arcane” to describe this

⁵¹ Ibid., 505.

⁵² Quoted Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 1.

phenomenon denotes a deep mystery or secret, an elixir. Why this process works is, perhaps, inexplicable. Yet it is not only the underlying principle of our culture but also the essential quality to "Americanness."

In the third sentence Ellison highlights the way in which the process actually works. A series of pairings are mentioned, with the word "and" italicized for rhetorical effect. Ellison argues that such an inclusive approach is the only way to account for someone who is both a "workingman *and* opera buff." By reducing the entire mystery of the process down to this word, "and," Ellison affirms that such a situation is "clear." Poet Michael Harper, who credits Ralph Ellison with deeply influencing his own views of American culture and identity, has called this approach "'both/and' rather than 'either/or.'"⁵³ Whereas the tendency to simplistically assume that African-American working men cannot possibly listen to opera (a stereotypic "social concept") might be accepted, it is in no way referential to reality. Indeed, says Ellison, these preconceived social concepts are amazingly "less" insightful than a piece of coal (an opaque substance that produces heat, but no light). By using the word "inert" to describe these concepts (scientifically speaking, inert signifies something that cannot react), they are clearly contrasted to the vibrant, constantly moving, porous melting pot process.

Ellison believes that the melting pot concept, the American process of acculturation, has--in spite of what anyone might wish--made individuals of all backgrounds similarly American. Specifically, and key to his entire understanding of America, is the fact that black Americans are equally part of this American mainstream. Quite simply, African-Americans "are a people who are intimately involved in the texture of American experience."⁵⁴ American culture, he argues, "has had [black] input

⁵³ Michael Harper, "Down Don't Worry Me': An Interview with Michael Harper," by Charles H. Rowell, in *Callaloo* 13:4 (1990), 781.

⁵⁴ Ellison, "Some Questions and Answers," in *Collected Works*, 299.

since before nationhood.”⁵⁵ Ellison asserts that even a cursory examination of American civilization reveals the active involvement and influence of African-Americans in almost every walk of life. He has written that “when we examine American music and literature in terms of its themes, symbolism, rhythms, tonalities, idioms and images it is obvious that those rejected ‘Neegroes’ [sic] have been a vital part of the mainstream and were from the beginning.”⁵⁶ When asked why he thought many white Americans were unwilling to acknowledge the collective contribution of blacks, he asserted that “the pervasive operation of the principle of race (or racism) in American society leads many non-Blacks to confuse culture with race . . . and prevents them from recognizing to what extent American culture is Afro-American.”⁵⁷ Ellison has said that “White Americans have put tremendous energy into keeping the black American below the threshold of social mobility but they still had to descend to see what Negroes were making of the new democratic experience, in order to know what to make of their own.”⁵⁸ American identity is as it is precisely because of the presence of African-Americans. While rigidly subordinating and segregating African-Americans, whites have been shaped by what they have tried so hard to exclude. The collective imagination of white America has been penetrated, its sensibilities infiltrated, by those whose experience of adjusting to a strange land and whose necessary cultural improvisations were more intensely moving, more deeply scarring, more profoundly disturbing than its own.

This racially-motivated refusal by whites to admit and acknowledge the

⁵⁵ Ellison, “The Essential Ellison,” in *Conversations*, 353.

⁵⁶ Ellison, “Study and Experience,” *Massachusetts Review*, 425.

⁵⁷ Ellison, “The Essential Ellison,” in *Conversations*, 353.

⁵⁸ Ellison, “Study and Experience,” 425.

influence of African-Americans on both American culture and themselves has generated the controversies over the identity of black Americans. Since America is inherently diverse, disparate, and free-wheeling, the black American is no less an expression of this process as the Irish or Italian-American. Black America therefore constitutes a vital component of the American diorama. As it has contributed to the greater American culture, likewise has it been effected by that same culture's invisible dynamism. "Afro-American culture," Ellison argued, "is itself a product of that [melting pot] process carried on under the most difficult of social and political conditions."⁵⁹ As Ellison expounded on this aspect of African-American identity:

[W]hile Negroes have been undergoing a process of "Americanization" from a time preceding the birth of this nation--including the fusing of their bloodlines with other non-African strains--there has persisted a stubborn confusion as to their American identity. Somehow it was assumed that the Negroes, of all the diverse American peoples, would remain unaffected by the climate, the weather, the political circumstances--from which not even slaves were exempt--the social structures, the national manners, modes of production and the tides of the market, the national ideals, the conflicts of values, the rising and falling of national morale, or the complex give and take of acculturation which was undergone by all others who found their existence within American democracy.⁶⁰

In this passage, Ellison highlights the fact that the same factors which have influenced every other ethnic group in the United States have similarly interacted with Americans of African descent.

Ellison's thought stands in direct opposition to the the arguments of Malcolm X-style separatists. For the Blacks Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Ellison was a primary target of scorn. As one journalist has written of the time: "Amiri Baraka and

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," in *Collected Essays*, 281.

other nationalists denounced Ellison from platform after platform."⁶¹ When Charles Johnson was an undergraduate in 1969 and stopped by his university's black-studies center, he was told there were no copies of *Invisible Man* since "Ralph Ellison is not a black writer."⁶² Popular as a speaker on college campuses, Ellison began avoiding campuses on the west coast (he was booed down at the University of California at Santa Cruz). In the late 1960s the journal *Black World* published an issue devoted to attacking Ellison (on political rather than aesthetic grounds). Ellison never backed down. Stanley Crouch mentions an incident when, at a luncheon, Ellison sat down next to one of his leading Black Arts detractors and told him, "I'm a street boy; I'm mean, and I have a dirty mouth."⁶³ Thus despite the attacks, Ellison maintained his position. As he told one interviewer: "I'm not a separatist . . . I'm unashamedly an American integrationist."⁶⁴

While Malcolm X argues that race is the singularly important essential, Ellison posits that individual identity is inextricably rooted in its cultural context. He locates in culture, rather than ethnicity, the key to personal identity. Ellison sees appeals to "blackness" and "authenticity" as an example of "the continual confusing of . . . racial background with . . . individual culture."⁶⁵ This belief is rooted in Ellison's claim that "I know of no valid demonstration that culture is transmitted through the genes."⁶⁶

Ellison argues that "even if culture were transmitted through the bloodstream we would

⁶¹ David Remnick, "Visible Man," *The New Yorker*, 14 March 1994, 36.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Quoted in Stanley Crouch, "The Oklahoma Kid," *The New Republic*, 9 May 1994, 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ralph Ellison, "The Essential Ellison," 353.

⁶⁶ Quoted in R.W.B. Lewis, "Ellison's Essays," in *Speaking for You*, 46.

encounter quite a problem in explaining just how the genes bearing 'Negro' culture could so overpower those bearing French or English culture."⁶⁷ He maintains that "[i]t is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience."⁶⁸ Ellison explicitly establishes a connection between culture and individual identity when he discusses his own self-definition. "I am a Negro American," he has said, "[t]hat means something cultural, that I am a man who shares a dual culture."

Ellison's view of the relationship between race and culture--and the dynamic interplay between these influences and the individual's self--is as nuanced as his sense of the American melting pot. Ellison occupies a space where being a black American implies being concomitantly black and hybrid. As Ellison once said in response to a college student who asked about "miscegenation [being] a necessary ingredient [for] racial integration":

I don't think that any of us Americans wants to lose his ethnic identity. This is another thing which has been used to manipulate the society in terms of race. Some few people might want to lose their identities; this has happened. But I would think that the very existence of such strong Negro American influences in the society . . . would indicate that there's never been the desire to lose that . . . the thing that black people have been fighting for so long was the opportunity to decide whether they wanted to give it up or not. And the proof is that in this period when there is absolutely more racial freedom than has ever existed before, you have the most militant rejection of integration.⁶⁹

In this passage, Ellison registers a profound awareness of the importance of race; the existence of the melting pot does not deny the integrity of racial identity. Yet by using the phrase "any of us Americans" Ellison emphasizes cultural community while

⁶⁷ Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," in *Collected Essays*, 292.

⁶⁸ Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Collected Essays*, 177.

⁶⁹ James Alan McPherson, "Indivisible man," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1970, 54.

simultaneously commenting on "ethnic identity." Thus in the very first sentence Ellison evokes a sense of diversity within unity. Ellison qualifies his acceptance of race by mentioning how it has been exploited; the word "manipulation" connotes deviousness and subterfuge. The phrase "some few people might want to lose their identities" underscore the importance of race in terms of personal identity (this statement assumes that race constitutes at the very least an aspect of one's identity), but Ellison situates this racial identification in the context of the "dual culture" he mentions elsewhere. By mentioning African-American influences on American society, Ellison connects American culture to "Negro American" culture and thereby links race to national identity. Elsewhere Ellison downplays race as a defining trait. In an exchange with Ishmael Reed, Ellison mentioned artistic contributions "made by people who possessed African genes," and added "if that means a damn thing, which I doubt."⁷⁰

On the subject of Africa, Ellison rejects the notion that some special relationship exists between African-Americans and Africa. Ellison was, in fact, offered a trip to Africa shortly after being awarded the National Book Award, but opted for France instead. When he declined, he said that "I have no interest in it, no special attachment to the place."⁷¹ Ellison connects interest in Africa to a confusion of black contribution to American culture: "The African content of American Negro life is more fanciful than actual. As long as Negroes are confused as to how they relate to American culture, they will be confused about their relationship to places like Africa."⁷² Moreover, Ellison maintains that "I have great difficulty associating myself with Africa, [and] I suppose this is because so many people insist that I [as a Negro American] have a special tie to it

⁷⁰ Ellison, "The Essential Ellison," in *Conversations*, 350.

⁷¹ Ellison, "Five Writers and their African Ancestors," in *Conversations*, 63.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 69.

that I could never discover in some concrete way."⁷³

Ellison rejects out of hand constructions of Africa as a mythic homeland. In *Invisible Man*, he anticipates later developments in the 1960s and 1970s in the form of Ras the Exhorter, a West Indian-born resident of Harlem. During one street fight when Ras--the very personification of Black Nationalism--attempts to disrupt a Communist street meeting, Ras, knife in hand, makes a passionate appeal to an African-American communist:

You *my* brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men *brothers*? Shit, mahn. That's shit! Brothers are the same color! We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! You--*Godahm*, mahn! You got bahd *hair*! You got thick *lips*! They say you *stink*! They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them? Leave that shit, mahn. They sell you out. That shit is old-fashioned. They enslave us--you forget that? How can they mean a black mahn any good? How they going to be your *brother*?⁷⁴

Once, when asked about Amiri Baraka and others in the Black Arts Movement who consistently articulated a Malcolm X-style black separatist message, Ellison that "[t]hey find it easier to issue militant slogans while remaining safely in the strait-jacket of racist ideology--the ideology of what they call 'blackness'--than to deal with the beautiful and confounding complexities of Afro-American experience."⁷⁵ Summing up his central response to Malcolm X and others: "an over-emphasis on our own racial origins in Africa (an origin which is only partial) at the expense of the way in which our cultural expression has transcended race is to ignore much of what is most intriguing and admirable in Afro-American experience."⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (NY and London: Random House, 1952), 370-371.

⁷⁵ Ellison, "Study and Experience," 427.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 428.

MALCOLM AND SEPARATION

The figure of Malcolm X stands in stark opposition to that of Ralph Ellison. For from the moment he converted to the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in 1947 until his assassination in 1965, Malcolm single-mindedly devoted his life to articulating and propagating the most cogent of race-based critiques of American society. While during the last year of his life Malcolm registered a qualified appreciation for what he called "the brotherhood of all men," the preponderance of his public career was spent vocalizing a vision of America firmly rooted in Elijah Muhammad's separatist black nationalist teachings.¹ Wielding wit, invective, and sarcasm, Malcolm masterfully coupled his mantric assertion that "the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches complete separation" with a relentless interrogation of American society.² In the words of critic Robert Penn Warren: "He was the black man who looked the white man in the eye and forgave nothing."³ Rejecting all arguments that suggested America was in any way democratic, inclusive, or just, Malcolm saw American culture as inextricably rooted in notions of white supremacy. Malcolm propounded this conviction in countless sermons, lectures, speeches, interviews, and debates, maintaining that separation was both a noble and necessary response to such a reality. The issue of American identity is a leitmotif of Malcolm's rhetoric: he rejected American identity in toto and his every assertion was a reason for this rejection. One of the few critics who assumes his

¹ Malcolm X, "The Harvard Law School Forum of December 16, 1964," in *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard* (NY: Paragon House, 1991), 164.

² Quoted in David Gallen, ed. *Malcolm A to X: The Man and His Ideas* (NY: Carroll and Graf Pub., 1992), 99.

³ Robert Penn Warren, "Malcolm X: Mission and Meaning," in *The Yale Review* (December 1966), 169.

propositions rather than claims them, leaving his assumptions implicit, Malcolm employed this simple rhetorical gesture with devastatingly effective results.⁴ Through an examination of selected speeches and public statements, Malcolm's rigorous challenge to optimistic, Ellisonian appraisals of American culture and identity will be explored.

Malcolm's philosophical rejection of "whiteness" and attendant sociopolitical rejection of America was anchored in his understanding of the historic racism of white America, the treatment by and experiences with whites he claimed to have had, and the continuing anti-black bigotry perpetrated by individual whites and institutionalized in the form of black disenfranchisement by State governments. Faced with this evidence, Malcolm privileged the notion that anti-black racism was endemic to the white race: it was somehow in their nature to be hateful. In fact, Malcolm locates in the Nation of Islam doctrine that whites are inherently evil (an intriguing variation on the Christian doctrine of original sin) the impetus for his initial desire to become a Black Muslim. As Malcolm told one interviewer: "Nothing had made me see the white man as he is until one word from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad opened my eyes overnight . . . The first time I heard [his] statement, 'The white man is the devil,' it just clicked."⁵ Malcolm's wholesale acceptance of this maxim entailed assent to attendant notions of racial difference and purity. Malcolm predicated his fundamental assumption that race constitutes identity on a belief in racial essentialism. As a close reading of Malcolm's rhetoric makes abundantly clear, Malcolm viewed all questions of identity--whether religious, political, or cultural--in terms of a simple schematic of racial and ethnic dualism. This opposition defines Malcolm's world view and informs

⁴ In my own mind, the conservative African-American writer George Schuyler was the only person consistently to succeed in holding his own against Malcolm in verbal exchange.

⁵ Malcolm X, "Playboy Interview: Malcolm X: a candid conversation with the militant major-domo of the black muslims," in *Playboy* (May 1963), 60.

his rejection of America and American culture as solely “white” and thus evil. Malcolm elevated his “blackness” to the exclusion of all else. This defining trait functioned as the lens through which he viewed the world. Malcolm explained: “I’m black first, my sympathies are black, my allegiance is black, my whole objectives are black.”⁶

Malcolm’s ideology related black authenticity to skin color as “the only thing [nonwhites] have in common outside of oppression, exploitation, and just plain catching hell.”⁷

Ralph Ellison affirmed the complexity of his own ethnic and cultural background (he was black and American Indian) and celebrated the hybridity, richness, and diversity of American culture and the American people with great enthusiasm. In 1973 he told a primarily white audience at Harvard: “All of us are part white, and all of y’all are part colored.”⁸ Malcolm, on the other hand, attempted to divorce himself from the “American nightmare.”⁹ He once told his listeners: “I would drain every drop of white blood in my body if I could.”¹⁰ On another occasion, when asked how he differentiated an extremely light-skinned African-American from a white person, Malcolm replied: “I don’t worry about these technicalities. But I know that white society has always considered that one drop of black blood makes you black.”¹¹ Such questions are irrelevant, Malcolm stressed, since the collective is more important than an individual exception to the rule. Malcolm acknowledged the collectivist nature of his analysis:

⁶ Quoted in Goldman, *Death and Life*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸ Quoted in “Introduction,” *Conversations*, xiii.

⁹ Quoted in Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 89.

¹⁰ Malcolm X, *Message from Malcolm X*, original tape-recording, 10 November 1963, cassette.

¹¹ Malcolm X, “Playboy Interview,” 58.

"When you begin to think in terms of an individual basis, you lose sight of the whole question. It's collective."¹² Malcolm even used his own mixed background to condemn whites:

You see, well, in the streets they called me Detroit Red, yes! Yes, that raping, red-headed devil was my grandfather! That close, yes! My mother's father! If I could drain every drop of blood that pollutes my body and pollutes my complexion, I'd do it! Because I hate every drop of the rapist's blood that's in me! Think of it, turn around and look at each other, brothers and sisters, and think of this. You and me, polluted all these colors.¹³

While Malcolm is therefore fully aware of the truth of Ellison's assertion regarding interracial mixing, he believed that the white strains of his own background could be isolated and minimized. Rather than accept his own ethnic complexity, Malcolm embraced his blackness and used his ancestry as evidence for his claim that whites are incorrigibly evil: his grandmother had been raped by a white man.¹⁴

An analysis of Malcolm's language is the best entree into understanding his thought. Indeed, his conception of American society was often concealed in vituperative rhetoric, hovering in the background of his word choice and imagery. In terms of Ellison's assertion that being African-American relates in part to "that special sense of predicament and fate which gives direction and resonance to the Freedom Movement," Malcolm eloquently communicated that predicament with astounding

¹² Quoted in Goldman, *Death and Life*, 71.

¹³ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaking*, original tape-recording, 12 December 1963, cassette.

¹⁴ From a biographical standpoint, Bruce Perry has disputed this claim and written that: "Perhaps because his black self-image was so fragile, Malcolm did not disclose that his blue-eyed, blonde-haired paternal grandmother had been part-white. He tried to explain away the white blood on his mother's side of the family by claiming that his maternal grandmother, who had borne three children out of wedlock, had been raped by his mother's Scottish father. No evidence has been found to support this contention, which Louise Little [Malcolm's sister] disputes. Nor do any of her Grenadian relatives seem to give the claim credence. Malcolm asserted that his Scottish grandfather had been a redhead [like himself]. He also claimed that the man's name was Malcolm, even though no one else in the family (including Malcolm's mother, who never laid eyes on him) seems to know what his first name was." Bruce Perry, *Malcolm*, 202.

rhetorical effect.¹⁵ A close reading of an address Malcolm delivered in June of 1963 at the Abyssinian Baptist Church reveals a number of his central ideas and images. That powerful speech, given in response to an invitation by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, lasted an hour and was said by one of his assistants to be Malcolm's oratory at its best.¹⁶ Asked to speak on the topic of "the black revolution," Malcolm began his talk by asking a series of loaded rhetorical questions:

Since the black masses here in America are now in open revolt against the American system of segregation, will these same black masses turn toward integration or will they turn toward complete separation? Will these awakened black masses demand integration into the white society that enslaved them or will they demand complete separation from that cruel white society that has enslaved them? Will the exploited and oppressed black masses seek integration with their white exploiters and white oppressors or will these awakened black masses truly revolt and separate themselves completely from this wicked white race that has enslaved us?¹⁷

Malcolm delimits the parameters of the discussion at the beginning of the very first sentence. By employing the phrase "black masses" to describe the African-American participants in the civil rights movement, Malcolm subtly establishes a distinction between the mass of black people on the one hand and the movement's leaders on the other. Following this narrative tactic, by specifying "here in America" to describe the group, Malcolm avoids linking blacks with an American identity by limiting the implication of the word to one of geography. Additionally, by referring to the "American system of segregation," Malcolm connects, indeed, equates, Jim-Crowism with the nation itself. Malcolm then finishes the sentence by setting up the competing alternatives of "integration" and "complete separation."

In the second sentence, Malcolm refers twice to a specifically white society. By

¹⁵ Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Collected Essays*, 177.

¹⁶ See Imam Benjamin Karim, "Introduction," in *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X* (NY: Arcade Pub., 1971), 16.

¹⁷ Malcolm X, "The Black Revolution," *End of White World Supremacy*, 67-68.

assuming that American society is white, the possibility of black contribution to or connection with that culture is automatically disallowed. Moreover, by adding the modifier "that enslaved them" to the phrase "white society," Malcolm identifies American culture not simply as white but, by extension, historically racist and anti-black (his phrase "has enslaved" at the end of the sentence implies that the enslavement continues to the present day). In the second half of the sentence he repeats this wording but adds that the society is "cruel" as well. By using the pronoun "that" (in the phrase "separation from that cruel white society") Malcolm further implies distance and separation between whites and the black masses. With such careful wording he therefore constructs a dichotomy between separation and integration that makes it counter-intuitive for his listeners to support the latter. The third question sets whites and blacks directly against each other: blacks are described as "exploited and oppressed" and whites as "exploiters" and "oppressors." Significantly, the issue is not one of integration into society (albeit a "white" one) but rather integration "with . . . white exploiters." By the end of the third question, Malcolm declares that the white race, because of its actions, is "wicked" (inherently evil). Thus, Malcolm shifts the question of integration from one of full and equal participation in American life to commingling with an evil race that is guilty of an historical injustice.

Malcolm thus lays out a number of his fundamental assertions, his primary organizing impulses, in the questions that he asks his audience at the beginning of this speech. First, prominent civil rights activists and other African-American community leaders are not in tune with the people they are leading. This implicitly suggests that while this same elite pushes for integration, the masses of black men and women are sympathetic to separation. Second, integration is not about equal participation in a common American culture but rather denotes blacks partaking of an alien, white culture from which they have been totally excluded (one of Malcolm's oft-

repeated phrases was "this white man's society").¹⁸ Third, and Malcolm's only (in this text) incontestable fact, white society is guilty of enslaving African-Americans. Fourth, the white race is inherently and incorrigibly evil. Lastly, American culture is nothing more than (indeed, equivalent to) a white society which is in turn equated with white supremacy. While Malcolm's process of reasoning is not logical in the strict sense, this type of internal logic emerges from Malcolm's rhetoric.¹⁹ The remainder of Malcolm's Abyssinian speech consists of little more than a hyperbolic elaboration of this implicit argument, a polemic he subtly embeds in the first three sentences of his talk.

After setting forth these seemingly innocuous queries, Malcolm asks two additional, explicitly charged, rhetorical questions:

How can the so-called Negroes who call themselves enlightened leaders expect the poor black sheep to integrate into a society of bloodthirsty wolves, white wolves who have already been sucking on our blood for over four hundred years in America? Or will these black sheep also revolt against the "false shepherd," the handpicked Uncle Tom Negro leader, and seek complete separation so that we can escape from the den of wolves rather than be integrated with wolves in this wolves' den?²⁰

Malcolm begins by explicitly identifying a distinction he hinted at earlier. In his mind, a tension exists between the black masses and their leaders (here referred to as "so-called Negroes"). Malcolm takes this leader-follower dichotomy further, however, by using it to introduce the metaphor of the sheep. Malcolm, incidentally, by using the phrase "black sheep," puns the meaning of that phrase while also playing with two senses of the word "poor" (blacks are both unfortunate, in terms of their predicament,

¹⁸ Quoted in Clarke, *Malcolm X*, 174.

¹⁹ Robert Penn Warren has written that "For behind all [Malcolm X's] expert illogic there is a frightful, and frightfully compelling, clarity of feeling--one is tempted to say logic. Certainly a logic of history." Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

and destitute, lacking resources).²¹ On one level, the sheep metaphor functions to straightforwardly describe the relationship between the group and its leaders. The black leadership favoring integration is thus identified as a "false shepherd," selected by the white powers-that-be (an allusion to Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and others of like mind and method). On another level, however, the metaphor conveys a complex set of meanings and associations. Malcolm goes beyond making a simple Biblical allusion (taking into consideration that he is speaking in a church to a Christian audience) to actually drawing a parallel, as many African-Americans have done, between blacks in America and the Jewish people in Egypt. In the Judeo-Christian context, the sheep or lamb symbolizes the Children of Israel who belong to God's flock and are led by their shepherds (political leaders).²² Just as the Jews were enslaved and lost in the wilderness, so too are blacks--as Malcolm says elsewhere--lost in "this wilderness of North America," having been led astray.²³ Later on in the speech, Malcolm makes this implication clear: "so-called American Negroes are God's long-lost people who are symbolically described in the Bible as the Lost Sheep or the Lost Tribe of Israel."²⁴ Moreover, the allusion is not confined to the Old

²¹ The meteoric rise of Malcolm in the 1960s is explained in part by the fact that he articulated the sentiments of many Northern, urban blacks who felt bypassed by the civil rights movement. By contrast with Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm eloquently communicated the bitterness of many blacks who stood to gain little from desegregation. See James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991).

²² The early philosopher of history Eric Voeglin wrote that in the West basic political myths and symbols tend to be variants of the original symbolization of the Judeo-Christian tradition. That is, a founder (Moses) leads the people out of a place of oppression (Egypt) into the desert (a place of possibility) toward a Promised Land (greater freedom). This analysis is in accord with a great deal of the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. See Eric Voeglin, *Order and History*, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1957); and Eric Voeglin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

²³ Malcolm, "Playboy Interview," 62.

²⁴ Malcolm X, "Black Revolution," 72.

Testament: Christ often refers to his followers as sheep. In an additional gesture, Malcolm identifies Elijah Muhammad as the "godsent shepherd" that will fulfill the role of Messiah (a further implication of the metaphor).²⁵

What Malcolm implies about whites is equally significant. The figure of the wolf is a multi-tiered metaphor more complex than it may at first appear. In keeping with Malcolm's use of Biblical symbols, the trope alludes to Christ's words to his followers that "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."²⁶ Beyond denoting that whites are predatory, rapacious, and fierce, the metaphor suggests--when coupled with the repetition of the word "blood"--that the white race is diabolically evil. On one level, the image denotes drawing the life out of something slowly. The blood imagery further signifies violence and pain, and the phrase "sucking on our blood" evokes a sense of whites as vampiric monsters (thus bringing to mind the werewolf), and also hints at some sort of occultic activity (suggesting lycanthropy); in the Middle Ages witches and warlocks were often depicted changing into wolves.²⁷ Moreover, in the orthodox Islamic tradition, the figure of the hell-wolf is understood to be one of the obstacles along the path of the Muslim pilgrim to Mecca.²⁸ This entire complex of meanings Malcolm connects with American culture, "a society of bloodthirsty wolves," which he says has been in existence for more than four-hundred years. As an aside, this wolf imagery used to describe whites was frequently employed by Malcolm; in one speech, for example, he said that "there has never in history been a more vicious and blood-

²⁵ Ibid., 68.

²⁶ Matt. 10:16 NIV (New International Version).

²⁷ See "Lycanthropy," in *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, ed. Rosemary Guiley (NY: Facts on File, 1989), 208.

²⁸ See "Hajj," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (London: E. J. Brill, 1960), 214.

thirsty wolf than the American white man.”²⁹ In many ways, the metaphor of white American as wolf was but one complex variation of Malcolm’s oft-repeated claim that “white people are born devils by nature.”³⁰

Malcolm’s reference elsewhere in this speech to “this wicked race of devils” is immensely important. Malcolm in fact converted the collective white race into a metaphor for all of the injustice, bigotry, and hardship that African-Americans had faced.³¹ Rhetorically, he did to white Americans what white Americans had done to him: he dehumanized them. For Malcolm, white America thus became no less than evil incarnate. As Malcolm discursively expounded on this idea to another audience of primarily black listeners:

We call them what they are. White, that’s their color, but devil, that’s what they are. These aren’t white people. You’re not using the right language when you say the white man. You call it the devil. When you call him devil you’re calling him by his name, and he’s got another name--Satan; another name--serpent; another name--snake; another name--beast. All these names are in the Bible for the white man . . . all those are just names for the devil.³²

In this portion of text, Malcolm implicitly responds to the charge that he is racist by inverting the terms of the debate. He argues that skin color is not nearly as important as inherent nature. On an obvious level, Malcolm plays with imagery of darkness and light by the very act of situating whites as devils (and thus in darkness). More important, Malcolm asserts that the term “white people” is a misnomer: these are not people at all. Refusing even to call whites devils, however, Malcolm pigeonholes all whites and then refers to the race collectively (“it”) as “devil.” With this synecdochic

²⁹ Malcolm X, “Black Man’s History,” in *End of White World Supremacy*, 58.

³⁰ Malcolm X, “Playboy Interview,” 58.

³¹ Malcolm X, “Black Revolution,” 70.

³² Malcolm X, “Black Man’s History,” 57.

gesture Malcolm constructs a linguistic category with metaphorical implications (he acknowledges this by his self-conscious comment regarding "using the right language"). Beyond defining this Other as the ultimate signifier of everything Malcolm (and black people) are not, Malcolm invests this figure with a number of potent associations.³³

After constructing the figure and investing it with the name devil, Malcolm shifts to cataloging his other names. The first and primary one is "Satan," the profoundly evil enemy of God and humanity (by antonomasia signifying an adversary and accuser, first used in the Hebrew book of Job). With this gesture, Malcolm associates whites with the most negative myth and symbol in the Western tradition (carrying with it enormous emotional import). Satan functions--in the Western mind--as nothing less than the personification of pure evil (willfully committed to an eternal conspiracy against God and man). Malcolm therefore reverses conventional analyses of sociocultural and moral authority by casting whites in the role of the outsider (whose sin is pride and rebellion). The term "serpent," another synonym for the devil in the Judeo-Christian context, denotes that whites are sly, subtle, and treacherous. As the devil, in the form of the serpent, tricked humanity in the first book of Genesis, so too does the white race continually employ treachery (and, like the Biblical serpent, false promises) to trick blacks. In the Old Testament account, the serpent made Eve (and Adam) believe that the tree of death was actually the tree of life. The promises of contemporary serpents (white liberals and others) are no less destructive for mankind (blacks) than those of this archetypal serpent. In one speech, Malcolm said: "I call [the

³³ For more on this process, see Jaques Lacan, "The Subject and the Other: Alienation," in *Four Fundamental Concepts*, James Stachey, trans. and ed. (London: Hogarth P, 1953).

white man] a liar every time he opens his lips.”³⁴ This imagery illustrates this sentiment and extends Malcolm’s insistence on blacks’ controlling their own institutions and destiny. Whites, as the enemy of African-Americans, are not to be trusted. His usage of the serpent imagery likewise calls to mind the apocalyptic scripture in Revelation that reads “The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.”³⁵ When Malcolm uses the word “snake,” he simply repeats the same idea and connotations. The apocalypse subtext is carried further by Malcolm’s epithet “beast,” alluding to the figure in Revelation that plays a prominent role in Christian eschatology. This theme, that white America is doomed, is given pride of place later in the Abyssinian speech. Elsewhere, whites are referred to as “blue-eyed devils,” “two-legged snakes,” “white apes and beasts,” and “pale old thing[s].”³⁶ It is significant that early on in the Abyssinian speech Malcolm calls America “this wolves’ den,” thus charging American culture with this entire set of negative meanings and implications. The willingness to be integrated into such a milieu thus constitutes--by the internal logic of Malcolm’s argument--a suicidal death wish for blacks living in America.

In his Abyssinian speech, Malcolm announces that racial separation is the sole sensible reaction to such a reality, “the only intelligent and lasting solution to the present race problem.”³⁷ As Malcolm describes this disposition: “The black masses don’t want segregation nor do we want integration. What we want is complete separation. In short, we don’t want to be segregated by the white man, we want to be

³⁴ Quoted in Marcus H. Boulware, “Minister Malcolm, Orator Profundo,” *Negro History Bulletin* (November 1967): 14.

³⁵ Rev. 12:9 NIV.

³⁶ Quoted in Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 96.

³⁷ Malcolm X, “Black Revolution,” 69.

separated from the white man."³⁸ While Malcolm's wording assumes that the average black person wants separation, it is important to note that Malcolm consistently identifies the "black masses" with the Black Muslims (not only is there a homonymic connection, but in Malcolm's parlance the one expression functions as a code word for the other). Furthermore, he associates himself with this group ("we"). Thematically, the most significant aspect of Malcolm's rhetoric in this textual moment is his differentiation between segregation and separation: while segregation is imposed from without "by" whites, separation is a self-imposed autonomous act. This distinction, for Malcolm, makes all of the difference in the world. As he says during the question and answer period following his speech, "When you are segregated that is done to you by someone else; when you are separated you do that to yourself."³⁹ While disassociation from whites is desirable, it must--in both theory and practice--be an act of self-will. Otherwise, the act of separation is simply one more example of the white supremacist system at work.⁴⁰

In the next section of his speech, Malcolm imbues his message with the nimbus of divine law. Malcolm (while speaking to a Christian audience in a church) equates Islam with truth (in the Platonic sense of absolute and ideal truth):

Islam is the religion of naked truth, naked truth, undressed truth, truth that is not dressed up and [Elijah Muhammad] says that truth is the only thing that will truly set our people free. Truth will open our eyes and enable us to see the white

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁰ Ironically, however, Malcolm and the Nation of Islam were willing to coordinate their activities with the Ku Klux Klan. At a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia in January of 1961, a tacit agreement was reached between the two groups based on mutual support for racial separation. As Malcolm once said of the agreement after his defection from the NOI: "From that day onward the Klan never interfered with the Black Muslim movement in the South." Quoted in *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 123. See also "FBI Report 100-3999321," in *Malcolm X: The FBI File*, ed. David Gallen (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1991), 203; and Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Boston: Station Hill, 1991), 358.

wolf as he really is. Truth will stand us on our own feet. Truth will make us walk for ourselves instead of leaning on others who mean our people no good. Truth not only shows us who our real enemy is, truth also gives us the strength and the know-how to separate ourselves from that enemy. Only a blind man will walk into the open embrace of his enemy, and only a blind people, a people who are blind to the truth about their enemies, will seek to embrace or integrate with that enemy.⁴¹

In a general sense, Malcolm lays claim to the moral high ground for himself by his appeals to, and claim to represent, the truth. Not only is he a nuncio for Elijah Muhammad, but, by extension, a spokesman for Allah himself (in another speech, he compares his relationship with the head of the Nation of Islam to that of a ventriloquist and dummy, and says "This is the way it is with [Elijah Muhammad] and me").⁴² In this passage he mentions the word "truth" no less than twelve times. From a purely rhetorical perspective, this repetition highlights in the minds of his listeners the fact that he is speaking the plain truth as he believes it. In addition to this abstract appeal to the transcendent authority of truth, Malcolm uses this entreaty in a number of ways. In the first sentence, he emphasizes the purity of truth: it is naked (he mentions this four times) in the sense of being plain, without addition or embellishment. While asserting that the Nation of Islam is "the" religion of this truth (the word "the" implies only), his rhetoric echoes both Christ's words that "the truth shall set you free" as well as Moses's exhortation to the Pharaoh of "Let my people go" ("set our people free"). In the first sentence Malcolm makes reference to the Islamic tradition while alluding to the Christian and Jewish ones as well (and, by extension, the African-American praxis of employing similar myths and symbols). Malcolm admitted that such appeals were, at times, for primarily rhetorical effect; he told one interviewer "I might copy a trick I had

⁴¹ Malcolm, "Black Revolution," 70.

⁴² Quoted in Perry, *Malcolm*, 229.

seen lawyers use, both in life and on television. It was a way that lawyers would slip in before a jury something otherwise inadmissible."⁴³

Malcolm emphasized the "truth" of his message in nearly every speech he gave. In this passage, Malcolm says that the truth functions to "open . . . eyes" and provides intellectual perception as to the reality of the white man's nature. Additionally, truth means self-empowerment: blacks "stand" both in the sense of rising (figuratively) and maintaining their position (that of strength and equal footing) vis-a-vis white people. In the fourth sentence, truth is said to compel self-generated progress ("walk for ourselves") rather than reliance and dependency on a race (an explicit group of "others") that intends to do harm to blacks. As an aside, in another speech Malcolm implies that the "truth" had an opposite effect on whites: "The white man's afraid of truth . . . Truth takes [away] . . . all his breath. Truth makes him lose all his strength. Just tell him a little truth--his face gets all red."⁴⁴ In the fifth sentence of this passage, however, Malcolm says that the most important aspect of truth is that it imparts the power ("strength") and knowledge ("know-how") to effect separation from white society and therefore American culture. He concludes this explication of his--and, by extension, Elijah Muhammad's--conception of truth with a warning to his audience. Only a "blind people"--blindness signifying ignorance of the real state of things, a denial of the obvious and hence madness, stupidity, and irresponsibility--would desire integration, since such an act constitutes "embrac[ing] . . . [the] enemy."

At this point Malcolm's argument shifts to a more explicit consideration of the inadvisability of integration as he focuses on two underlying themes: one, whites have always oppressed blacks and will continue to do so regardless of their rhetoric; and two, America is evil and is going to be destroyed. As to Malcolm's first point, "the tricky

⁴³ Quoted in Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X," in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, February 1974, 3.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Perry, *Malcolm: The Life*, 183.

promises of the hypocritical politicians on civil rights legislation would only be designed to advance [blacks] from ancient slavery to modern slavery.”⁴⁵ This statement exemplifies Malcolm’s analysis of the political intentions of whites in general and white liberals in particular: they are deceitful, pharisaic, and utterly insincere. Malcolm often said whites had mastered the “science called ‘tricknology.’”⁴⁶ The sole goal of whites, both past and present, is to oppress black people and keep them in a state of abject subjugation and dependency. In this speech as in others, Malcolm indicates that such a racist stance was endemic to political “liberals.” As he discussed Abraham Lincoln during a WUST radio interview: “Lincoln was a hypocrite who wasn’t interested in freeing the black people He was interested in perpetuating the power of the white man.”⁴⁷ In another interview, when asked about John F. Kennedy, he said “Kennedy I relate right along with Lincoln.”⁴⁸ When asked about Eleanor Roosevelt, he replied: “The same thing.”⁴⁹ Speaking at the University of California at Berkeley, Malcolm was even more direct in his disavowal of white political liberals and their motivations:

White liberals are nothing but political hypocrites who use [blacks] as political footballs only to get bills passed that will increase their own power Civil-rights legislation will give the present administration dictatorial powers and make America a legal police state but still won’t solve the race problem.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Malcolm X, “Black Revolution,” 70.

⁴⁶ Malcolm X, “Black Man’s History,” 58.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Malcolm: A to X*, 81.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (NY: Random House, 1965), 262.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Quoted in Juan William, “Was Malcolm X a Republican?,” in *Gentleman’s Quarterly* (December 1992), 193.

These comments relate directly to the Abyssinian speech. Malcolm indicates that progress will come about only through the actions of black people themselves. This belief perhaps explains Malcolm's acidic disdain for white liberals: not only is their legacy on racial matters an ambivalent one, but they cannot be trusted to effect true change which must come from within the black community. Political affiliation with such a group on one level, and integration into such a society on another, clearly equate in Malcolm's mind to little more than the illusion of sociopolitical progress. Whites will not, indeed, cannot, help black people.

Malcolm's opposition to integration is rooted in a second idea: he apocalyptically foresees America's inevitable and impending doom. As Malcolm tells the assembled congregation: "The black revolution against the injustices of the white world is all part of God's divine plan. God must destroy the world of slavery and evil in order to establish a world based upon freedom, justice, and equality."⁵¹ Malcolm sees contemporary political developments in an eternal context. Concurrently, he reveals a utopian impulse. As an aside, however, such a deterministic view of historical forces is potentially problematic. If history is part of Allah's "divine plan" then so too is the historical experience of slavery. Regardless of such a contradiction, however, Malcolm maintains that America is doomed.

Malcolm's argument then shifts its focus from the general to the specific. Because whites "kidnapped [blacks] . . . stripped [them] of everything that proved [they] were part of the human family, brought them down to the level of an animal, and then hung [them] from one end of the country to the other," white America faces swift and certain destruction:⁵²

This American House of Bondage is number one on God's list for divine

⁵¹ Malcolm X, "Black Revolution," 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 79-80.

destruction today. . . . The innocent must always be given a chance to separate themselves from the guilty before the guilty are executed. . . . because of America's evil deeds against the so-called Negroes, like Egypt and Babylon before her, America now stands before the bar of justice If America can't atone for the crimes she has committed against the twenty million so-called Negroes, if she can't undo the evils that she has brutally and mercilessly heaped upon our people these past four hundred years, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad says that America has signed her own doom. And you, our people, would be foolish to accept her deceitful offers of integration at this late date into her doomed society.⁵³

This first sentence of this segment of text emphatically declares that America is a prison, and has been thus targeted by no less an authority than God himself for immediate demolition. The phrase "divine destruction" evokes a sense of cataclysmic devastation, a notion developed further in the third sentence with the references to the destruction of Egypt and Babylon as chronicled in the Bible. In addition, Malcolm evokes the sense of a court of law with the phrase "bar of justice." Not only does he personify America ("she"), but he also declares God as the judge and implies that he himself plays the role of the prosecution. Malcolm speaks of the "crimes" that she has committed, and the phrase "signed her own doom" calls to mind the image of a written confession. The collective experience of black people in America is sufficient evidence of white criminality. The penalty for the injustices committed against black Americans is "execut[ion]," to be carried out by God himself. As he did in the previous portion of quoted text, Malcolm concludes this paragraph with a warning. He admonishes his audience that integration equals destruction. His wording reflects his belief that the entire scheme of integration is only a stratagem through which whites hope to save themselves from an inevitable fate. It is senseless, Malcolm suggests, to integrate with a society whose destruction is forthcoming. It is significant that many of Malcolm's white listeners took such rhetoric to heart. During one speech at an Ivy

⁵³ Ibid., 72-73.

League university, for example, a Caucasian student--perhaps unwilling to forestall such imminent doom--screamed and jumped out of the auditorium's balcony while Malcolm was mid-sentence.⁵⁴

In the transition to the conclusion of his speech, Malcolm highlights the truly radical separation he believes is necessary: he wants blacks to become "an independent people and an independent nation in our own land."⁵⁵ Thus:

A desegregated theater, a desegregated lunch counter won't solve our problems. Better jobs won't solve our problem. An integrated cup of coffee isn't sufficient pay for four hundred years of slave labor [A] better job, a better job in the white man's factory, or a better job in the white man's business, or a better job in the white man's industry or economy is, at best, only a temporary solution . . . the only lasting and permanent solution is complete separation on some land that we can call our own.⁵⁶

Malcolm demands nothing less than total independence from white society. In this passage, Malcolm blatantly attacks the goals of the civil rights movement. In the first sentence, Malcolm uses the word "desegregated" instead of "integrated" to emphasize how similar the words "segregated" and "desegregated" (and, by subtle implication, statuses) are. By using the examples of the theater and restaurant, Malcolm denigrates the entire project of the nonviolent mass movement. Malcolm's caustic reference to "[a]n integrated cup of coffee" makes the point painfully obvious.⁵⁷ Malcolm saw such token gestures of integration as further evidence of white refusal to grant blacks power; as he told one interviewer: "Everything is hypocrisy."⁵⁸ Beside

⁵⁴ Perry, *Malcolm: The Life*, 183.

⁵⁵ Malcolm, "Black Revolution," 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵⁷ One of Malcolm's stock lines when giving an interview over coffee was "Coffee is the only thing I like integrated." Quoted in Goldman, *Death and Life*, 6.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Clarke, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, 173.

this aspect of the push for integration, Malcolm derides the economic demands of the civil rights movement as well. As long as blacks work for whites, they are dependent on the whites that employ them. As Lincoln has written of this belief: "[The Black Muslims's] basic premise is that the whites' economic dominance gives them the power of life and death over blacks."⁵⁹ While Malcolm accepts that such measures are "temporary solution[s]" (for the problem of black poverty, which he introduced at the beginning of his speech with the phrase "poor black sheep") they do nothing to address the fact that America is doomed and that black people require self-empowerment. The only viable, desirable solution is that of total separation from white America.

Malcolm concludes his speech with a restatement of his primary themes, the same argument implicit in his first four sentences. Malcolm in fact signals this by introducing his peroration with the phrase "And in my conclusion I repeat:"⁶⁰

We want no part of integration with this wicked white race that enslaved us. We want complete separation from this wicked race of devils. But [the honorable Elijah Muhammad] also says we should not be expected to leave America empty-handed. After four-hundred years of slave labor, we have some back pay coming. A bill that is owed to us and must be collected. If the government of America truly repents of its sins against our people and atones by giving us our true share of the land and the wealth, then America can save herself. But if America waits for God to step in and force her to make a settlement, God will take this entire continent away from the white man. And the Bible says God can then give the kingdom to whomsoever he pleases.

Malcolm, by using the words "we," "us," and "our," assumes that his listeners agree with him. Such a mode of address contributes to a sense of intimacy (and thus agreement of purpose) between Malcolm and his audience. Likewise, the beginning two sentences--the first stating the proposition negatively, and the second doing so

⁵⁹ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 85.

⁶⁰ Malcolm, "Black Revolution," 74.

positively--declare Malcolm's central contention that total and "complete separation" is the solution. In the second sentence, Malcolm enunciates an additional demand: separation from America is contingent upon being given resources enough to sustain a black nation. By mentioning the years of slave labor for which no restitution has been made, Malcolm demands reparations. Malcolm expresses that he wants both property and money. And on one level, this is indeed a political goal. But more important, Malcolm demands official acknowledgement that blacks are not part of America: hence the desire for land (and implied recognized nationhood). Malcolm's fundamental assertion is that blacks are not Americans. As Malcolm said in another speech, "I'm not interested in being American because America is not interested in me."⁶¹

Malcolm rejected Ellison's understanding of identity. As his rhetoric makes clear, he asserts that blacks in America should refuse to see themselves as Americans. Malcolm argues that African-Americans should reject their identity as Americans and instead see themselves solely as black, or as Africans living in America against their will. Malcolm bases this rejection on his analysis of American culture as inherently white supremacist, and rejects out of hand the notion that the races are somehow inextricably tied together in the United States. In his opinion, Ellisonian integration--whether cultural or otherwise--is a myth. As he repeats over and over: "I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism I'm speaking as a victim of this American system."⁶² Malcolm believed that since blackness entailed rejection by white America (in his rhetoric, America), blacks were not American. He told one interviewer: "If you're born

⁶¹ Goldman, *Death and Life*, 6.

⁶² Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 1.

in America with a black skin, you're born in prison."⁶³ In Malcolm's mind: why would one want to identify him or herself with an oppressive society? In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, Malcolm said that "the main problem that Afro-Americans have is a lack of cultural identity, [thus] it is necessary to teach him that he had some type of identity, culture, civilization before he was brought here."⁶⁴ This statement highlights Malcolm's conviction that blacks are not a part of American culture. Since American culture is inherently white (and thus exclusionary) the most that blacks can do is partake of standard white culture. Whereas Ellison argued that a true racial revolution could be brought about within the framework of American constitutionalism, Malcolm asserted that only separation--based on a common identity among blacks wholly apart from America--constituted a viable solution. Ultimately, this proposition is the essence of Malcolm's critique.

⁶³ Clarke, *Malcolm X*, 174.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 252.

CONCLUSION

Malcolm's abjuring of American identity poses a formidable challenge to Ellison's vision of America. While Malcolm registered a keen awareness of the role of African-Americans in constituting the nation--he reiterated that blacks had "built up this country"--he nonetheless rejected America because of the white supremacy he saw at its core.¹ The initial point of divergence between the two strains of thought consists of Malcolm's assertion that all white people are inherently anti-black. This collectivist gesture offended Ellison's individualist bent: he saw anti-white prejudice as fundamentally parallel to the Negrophobia demonstrated by many whites. Furthermore, an Ellisonian conception of American culture answers Malcolm's calls for a separate black nation with the words of a traditional Blues lyric: "If you see me coming, better open up your door, / I ain't no stranger, I been here before."² In Ellison's view, blacks had invested far too much in American civilization to reject it, or an attendant American identity, as Malcolm advised. While Ellison was fully cognizant of the injustice and bigotry that persisted in American society, he qualified this recognition with the belief that progress could, and would, be made. Hence when he told Robert Penn Warren that "the nation has been rotting at its moral core," he added the caveat that "and [African-Americans] are determined to bring America's conduct into line with its ideals."³ Ellison's optimistic, celebratory impulse emerges during his most somber moment of reflection on the state of America's soul: American ideals persist and blacks are committed to having them translated into reality.

¹ Quoted in "The Harvard Law School Forum of March 24, 1961," in *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*, ed. Archie Epps (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 128.

² Quoted in Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, xii.

³ Quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 339.

This optimistic impulse is rooted in Ellison's conception of "Americanness," the ineluctable melting pot phenomenon of cultural appropriation whereby individuals of all ethnic groups are acculturated. This process militates against Malcolm-style separatism: the perpetual transformative energy that underpins American culture has made black and white Americans of a piece. While from a historical perspective blacks have contributed immensely to America (without African-Americans there is no America), they also continue to be a "major tributary" of the American mainstream.⁴ The flip-side of this relationship between American culture and blacks is that America has influenced blacks (an idea connected to DuBois's notion of duality).⁵ As this relates to Ellison's ideas on integration: "the real goal . . . is to achieve on the political level something of the same pluralism which exists on the level of culture."⁶ While Malcolm, on the other hand, might have admitted the contributions of blacks to American cultural life, his words indicate that he saw American society in toto as white.

Although Malcolm's rhetoric challenges Ellison's vision of America, the legacy of Malcolm does not. Rather it affirms the existence of the melting-pot process Ellison identified as underpinning American culture. The Ellisonian melting pot paradigm anticipates, accounts for, and explains--indeed, supersedes and ultimately subsumes--Malcolm and his legacy. On a general level, Ellison had a keen awareness that the impulse to navigate issues of identity--and a concomitant continual uncertainty over the nature of that identity--was a function of the "Americanness" he so extolled. When once asked by the *Paris Review* if he thought that the "search for identity [is] an

⁴ Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in *Collected Essays*, 580.

⁵ Ellison, however, modifies DuBois: "It's a little bit more complicated than Dr. DuBois thought it. That is, there's no way for me not to be influenced by American values, and they're coming at me through the newspapers, through the books, through the products I buy, through all the various media--through the language . . . The idea that the Negro psyche is split is not as viable as it seems--although it might have been true of [him] personally." Quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks*, 327.

⁶ *Ibid.*

American theme," he answered--after making the gesture of an uppercut to the interviewer's chin--that "[i]t is *the* American theme."⁷ The dynamic process of acculturation demands a constant self-analysis both collectively and individually. Ellison maintained that "the whole movement of the society is toward discovering who we are."⁸ On the most fundamental level, Ellison accounts for Malcolm: "It's a tradition for Americans to put down things American; it's part of our idealism and our uncertainty regarding our identity."⁹ Moreover, Ellison was intimately familiar with this impulse as it manifests itself in the black community (where it is inextricably tied to race). Ellison was thoroughly versed in Black Nationalist sentiments and his masterfully drawn character Ras in *Invisible Man* exemplifies this Malcolm-style mode of thinking.

Specifically regarding Malcolm, the Ellisonian paradigm understands him to be as American as apple pie. His speeches and interviews nearly always contain a reference to a trinity of ideals: freedom, justice, and equality. Regardless of whether that mantra was used for purely rhetorical effect, Malcolm roots his condemnation of whites on the basis of these three principles. However, tension appears to exist between Malcolm's anti-Western rhetoric and his professed ideals: Malcolm is appealing to the same American values he supposedly rejects. Malcolm's reference to "freedom, justice, and equality" is nothing if not American; political scientists Willmoore Kendall and George Carey have in fact called these same three ideals "the basic symbols of the American political tradition."¹⁰ Hence, Malcolm actually agrees

⁷ Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: *An Interview*," in *Collected Essays*, 219.

⁸ Quoted in Roderick Townley, "Television Makes Us See One Another," in *Conversations*, 388.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Willmoore Kendall and George Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 147.

with America's professed ideals: what he disagrees with is its failure to practice them (like Ellison, he wants the professed and the actual to be one and the same).

Beyond the content of Malcolm's critique--clearly Ellison was likewise concerned with issues of injustice, race, and identity--Malcolm the man was himself fully American. Practically speaking, Malcolm drove an American-made car, drank coffee every morning, and wore a suit and tie daily without exception.¹¹ Malcolm stands wearing a Sax-Fifth Avenue suit and brand-new Italian patent-leather shoes, using a watch from Japan and glasses made in Ohio, speaking American English, his rhetoric and imagery firmly in the tradition of the vernacular, claiming he is not an American. To Ellison this act made Malcolm an American by definition.¹²

Malcolm was situated squarely in the center of a number of American traditions. As one biographer has written, "Malcolm was always, in surprising ways, deeply American."¹³ Numerous scholars have noted this. Critic Edward Margolies has written that:

Malcolm was nothing so much as the quintessential American. Consider for example, his pragmatism Like an inveterate frontier Calvinist, once he feels he has discovered the truth he plunges heedlessly and enthusiastically ahead There was a booster quality about Malcolm, an enthusiasm and aggressiveness that was at once democratically engaging and embarrassingly naive. Nor did Malcolm fail to partake of the typical American's disdain for pomp and high places Finally, Malcolm's innate distrust of government and outside interference in the affairs of men, and his consequent faith in the capacity of individuals to elevate themselves by virtue of their own powers, is undoubtedly one of the oldest of American traditions (or prejudices) of them all. Was not his own life a rather rags-to-riches myth? . . . He was the best and worst

¹¹ Benjamin Karim, *Remembering Malcolm* (New York: Carroll and Graf Pub., 1992), 168.

¹² Critic Robert Hughes has similarly written that "[t]his polyphony of voices, this constant eddying of claims to identity, is one of the things that makes America America." Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 95.

¹³ Goldman, *Death and Life*, 33.

of Americans.¹⁴

Beyond his pragmatism, Puritan fervor, democratic enthusiasm, distrust of the State, and belief in self-improvement, Malcolm is but one in a long line of home-grown heroes. As Warren wrote:

[Malcolm X] was a latter-day example of an old-fashioned type of American celebrated in grammar school readers, commencement addresses, and speeches at Rotary Club lunches--the man who "makes it," the man who, from humble origins and with meager education, converts, by will, intelligence, and sterling character, his liabilities into assets . . . in Malcolm X the old Horatio Alger story is crossed, as has often been the case, with another typical American story. America has been prodigally fruitful of hot-gospellers and prophets . . . Furthermore, to round out his American story and insure his fame, Malcolm X . . . crowned his mission with martyrdom. Malcolm fulfills, it would seem, all the requirements--success against odds, the role of the prophet, and martyrdom--for inclusion in the American pantheon.¹⁵

The Ellisonian paradigm demands such a reading of Malcolm's life and work. Only by placing Malcolm in his cultural context can one accurately interpret and assess his rhetoric. Such a contextualization, however, takes the teeth out of Malcolm's rejection of American identity. While the problem is that Malcolm rejects America because those in power reject him, Malcolm's rejection is little more than rhetorical. He is nothing, it appears, so much as he is an American.

The most powerful way in which Ellison's vision triumphs over that of Malcolm takes the form of culture. Quite simply, Malcolm and his legacy have entered American culture--as the Ellisonian paradigm would predict--in a number of ways. In terms of his thought, Malcolm occupies a remarkably unique place in American intellectual history. Although viewed in his own day by the majority of blacks and whites as an extremist with limited appeal and influence, Malcolm and his legacy is today claimed by a wide variety of groups and individuals ranging from the Communist

¹⁴ Margolies, *Native Sons*, 170-172.

¹⁵ Warren, "Malcolm X: Mission and Meaning," 161-162.

Party U.S.A. to Republican Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.¹⁶ Likewise on the most basic level of popular culture, Malcolm himself has become a faddish commodity. Beginning with the mass publication of Malcolm's *Autobiography* (and climaxing with the 1993 film directed by Spike Lee) Malcolm has fully entered the mainstream of American cultural life. While numerous individuals have decried "Malcolm's reduction to a logo on a baseball cap," the process that Ellison sees as the essence of American culture continues unbounded.¹⁷ Even middle schools, streets, and public parks have been named after Malcolm.¹⁸ While certainly Malcolm's message becomes muted (if not lost entirely) in Malcolm's posthumous engagement with American culture, this outcome is, perhaps, American culture's self-generated built-in method of neutralizing such dissent into superficiality. Hence, rather than Malcolm's legacy subverting America, American culture has itself subverted Malcolm's legacy. As scholar Michael Dyson has written of this phenomenon: "Malcolm's cultural renaissance . . . brims with irony . . . Malcolm's X is marketed in countless business endeavors and is stylishly branded on baseball hats and T-shirts by every age, race, and gender. So much for the politics of purity."¹⁹

In addition to the way in which American culture has dealt with Malcolm's legacy--very much as Ellison would have predicted--there are other barometers that

¹⁶ Clarence Thomas owns copies of all of Malcolm's recorded speeches and can quote him from memory at great length. For an enumeration of other black conservatives that share a similar enthusiasm for Malcolm X, see Juan Williams, "Was Malcolm X a Republican?" *Gentleman's Quarterly* (December 1992), 190-195.

¹⁷ Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Allure of Malcolm X and the Changing Character of Black Politics," in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, Joe Wood, ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 207.

¹⁸ In Berkeley, California, there is a Malcolm X Middle School, in Chicago, Illinois, a Malcolm X public park, and in New York, Lenox Avenue was renamed Malcolm X Boulevard.

¹⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xiii.

suggest the degree of accuracy of Ellison's critical stance. For near the end of his life, Malcolm registered America's effect on him. He shifted away from the separatist position that highlighted his earlier critique of American society. Malcolm admitted that "[s]eparating a section of America for Afro-Americans is similar to expecting a heaven in the sky after you die."²⁰ While never calling for integration as such, the post-Mecca Malcolm explicitly disavowed his earlier anti-white views and attempted to become involved in the mainstream civil rights movement.²¹ Malcolm asserted that blacks "should stay and fight in the U.S. for what [is] rightfully theirs."²² He did just that: he supported the civil rights bills that were brought before Congress, formulated a plan to start an independent party based on black nationalism, and instructed the leadership of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (which he had founded) to organize a mass voter registration drive (to register individuals as independents).²³ Intriguingly, Malcolm stated on numerous occasions that he and the integrationists differed only on tactics and strategy, not on the the final outcome.²⁴ In one speech, he even minimized the differences between "the integrationists and the assimilationists and the separationists," implying that one could be a black nationalist without being a

²⁰ Quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks*, 259.

²¹ See "Malcolm Rejects Racist Doctrine," *New York Times*, 4 October 1964, 59.

²² "Malcolm X Back From Africa--Urges Black United Front," *New York Militant*, 1 June 1964, 1.

²³ See "Malcolm X to Organize Mass Voter Registration," *New York Militant*, 6 April 1964, 1; and "3,000 Cheer Malcolm X at Opening Rally in Harlem," *New York Militant*, 30 April 1964, 3.

²⁴ See Malcolm X, "The Black Revolution," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1989), 51-74; and Malcolm X, "The Founding Rally of the OAAU," in *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X*, ed. George Breitman (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1970), 33-67.

separatist.²⁵ Additionally important, Malcolm began using the term "Afro-American" as a synonym for "black." Malcolm was therefore never as American as he was during the the months preceding his assassination. All of these changes suggest, however inconclusively, that Malcolm was beginning to see the relationship of blacks to America in a new light. While the legacy of this phase of Malcolm's career is ambiguous at best, the fact that Malcolm registered such a change at all is itself certainly significant. This movement suggests the accuracy of Ellison's understanding of American civilization.

In the last analysis, both Ellison and Malcolm emerge as two of the most trenchant commentators on American society the nation has yet produced. In terms of Gates's description of "American culture as a conversation among different voices," those of Ellison and Malcolm are among the most eloquent and compelling.²⁶ These two men devoted their lives to rigorously interrogating an America that had historically denied them access to the fulfillment of the promise it embodied. Through their engagement with that ideal each figure produced a corpus of criticism that stands as a monument to his own character as well as the complexity and diversity of the American people as a whole. By grappling with issues at the core of American culture both men formulated conceptions of American identity that are as applicable to each individual American as they were to Ellison and Malcolm. Ultimately, one can hear echoes of each of their voices in the words of the protagonist of *Invisible Man*: "Who knows but

²⁵ Quoted in George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X: The Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York and London: Pathfinder, 1967), 63. Breitman argues that Malcolm became, however qualified, an integrationist. James H. Cone, in *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, argues in a similar vein that near the end of their lives the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X was moving toward convergence.

²⁶ Gates, *Loose Canons*, 175.

that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"²⁷

Ellison, *White Man's Burden*, 197. New York: Knopf, 1967.

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²⁷ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.

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