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INTRODUCTION

Beyond Dreams and Nightmares

On Thursday, March 26, 1964, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. descended, separately, on the United States Senate building. Each dressed in a suit and tie, their similar sartorial choices reflecting a shared status as religious ministers and political leaders who paid sharp attention to their physical appearance. That day, the Senate debated the pending civil rights bill, with opponents of racial justice conducting a filibuster designed to prevent its passage. Their unplanned joint appearance recognized the US Senate's deliberations as one of history's hinge points. The Senate debate centered on the fate of the bill, already passed by the House of Representatives, which was designed to end racial discrimination in public life. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 promised to bring the nation closer to multiracial democracy through the end of racial segregation. The proposed law guaranteed that restaurants, movie theaters, swimming pools, libraries, and amusement parks would no longer serve as markers of shame, humiliation, and unequal citizenship for black Americans. President Lyndon Johnson championed passage of the legislation in honor of the martyred John F. Kennedy, who had urged the nation and Congress to embrace civil rights as a "moral issue" in the months before his November 22, 1963, assassination in Dallas, Texas.

Malcolm and Martin attended the filibuster as participant observers in the nation's unfolding civil rights saga. In a sense, they both sought to serve as witnesses to an ongoing historical drama they had actively shaped in their respective roles as national political leaders and mobilizers.

King's presence among the spectator's gallery added a buzz of

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excitement to the proceedings. He arrived in Washington as the single most influential civil rights leader in the nation. His "I Have a Dream" speech during the previous summer's March on Washington catapulted him into the ranks of America's unelected, yet no less official, moral and political leaders. *Time* magazine named him "Man of the Year" for 1963 and, unbeknownst to King at that moment, he stood on the cusp of being announced as a Nobel Prize recipient. King emerged as the most well-known leader of the "Big Six" national civil rights organizations, which included the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Urban League's Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "snick") chairman and future Georgia congressman John Lewis.

King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) served primarily as a national mobilizer of local freedom struggles. The NAACP, the nation's oldest civil rights group, marshaled its resources toward eradicating racism in law through a series of court cases that culminated in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which outlawed racial segregation in public schools, and local efforts to end discrimination in public accommodations and voting rights. Wilkins's measured approach to racial justice reflected his decades of operating in political terrain that waxed and waned between robust political progress and tragic setbacks. CORE's roots in the radical pacifism of the Second World War found new life in the direct-action demonstrations of the early 1960s. The avuncular, baritone-voiced Farmer endured stints in jail alongside young student activists and was confident enough to debate anyone who couched his militant nonviolence as passive or weak. The Urban League defined racial justice as opening the doors of economic opportunity within a system of American capitalism that Young fervently believed held the key to black freedom. A. Philip Randolph served as the dean of the black freedom struggle. Tall, courtly, and intelligent, Randolph began his ascent into black politics as a radical socialist during the First World War, before adopting a militant pragmatism as a labor leader bold enough to threaten a march of ten thousand black men on Washington—a march that was halted only after Franklin

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Delano Roosevelt signed an executive order banning discrimination in the military. SNCC was the wild card within the Big Six. Organized by Ella Baker, a King colleague and ally turned political adversary, SNCC helped to radicalize the entire movement through its courageous activism in the most dangerous parts of the South, exemplified by Chairman John Lewis's willful insistence of putting his body on the line and receiving the battle scars to prove it. In the American political imagination—and to the chagrin of his colleagues—King was the one who personified the struggle for racial justice, civil rights, and black citizenship around the nation.

Malcolm X's presence in the Senate gallery, on the other hand, stoked fear, surprise, and bewilderment among journalists and spectators. From 1957 to 1963, Malcolm served as the "national representative" of the Nation of Islam (NOI), the controversial religious group whose defiant resistance against white supremacy gained them both a large following in the black community and fear and suspicion among white Americans. The NOI forbade its members from actively engaging in political demonstrations, but Malcolm rejected these rules and inserted himself into the black freedom struggle on his own terms. He arrived in Washington on a mission to establish his political independence after a dramatic departure from the NOI.

Malcolm's reputation as perhaps the most vocal critic of white supremacy ever produced by black America preceded him. As NOI spokesperson, he became Harlem's hero in the fight against racial oppression. He debated journalists, civil rights leaders, and politicians on subjects ranging from police brutality to unemployment, crime, and social justice, and in the process cultivated a personal reputation as the most militant racial-justice advocate in America. Malcolm's critics called him dangerous, but his supporters, both in and outside the NOI, embraced him as black America's prosecuting attorney—unafraid to charge America with crimes against black humanity. To them, he had inspired a long-overdue political revolution. "I have always loved verbal battle, and challenge," Malcolm said. He set his political sights on eradicating "the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America," a fight that would take him to the corridors of national power. Even as Malcolm sought to influence the center of American government alongside Martin Luther King Jr., he

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remained a political maverick whose bold truths upset some of the very civil rights forces he now sought an alliance with. Malcolm was a political renegade, unafraid to identify racial injustice in America as a systemic illness that required nothing less than the radical transformation of the political and racial status quo.[1]

Malcolm stalked the corridors of the Senate throughout the day, accompanied by five aides and holding impromptu press conferences in between watching, from the visitors gallery, a debate to decide the fate of millions. He declared that he wanted the bill to pass "exactly as it is, with no changes." But he predicted that, even if the legislation passed, the struggle for black equality would continue: "You can't legislate goodwill," he said. "That comes about only by education." Malcolm informed reporters that he flew in from New York to observe the lay of the land and "see whether we should conduct any demonstrations, and, if so, what form they should take." It was the first time he had ever visited the Senate.[2]

Martin Luther King Jr. exited the visitors gallery in the afternoon to speak to reporters in a conference room, where Malcolm sat like a spectral figure on a rear sofa. Lately, King had been preoccupied with Malcolm. During a recent interview with author Robert Penn Warren, King took umbrage with Malcolm labeling him as "soft." Just eight days later, he now stood for the first time in the same room as a man many considered to be his evil twin. King ignored Malcolm and announced plans for a national "direct action" campaign scheduled to begin in May. "We will not be content at all even if this bill is passed," warned King, in a comment that mirrored Malcolm's skepticism about the possibilities of effectively legislating racial justice.[3]

But in the Senate building, Malcolm offered full-throated support for the pending legislation. The *New York Times* announced, "Malcolm X Backs Rights Bill" in a short article that introduced him as "the 'black nationalist' leader." By 1964, Malcolm X had turned black nationalism—a historic blend of cultural pride, racial unity, and political self-determination—into a bracing declaration of political independence for himself and large swaths of black folk. This shift recognized mainstream democratic institutions, including the right to vote, as crucial weapons in the struggle for black dignity and citizenship. Malcolm X, the racial

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separatist who routinely attacked civil rights demonstrations as wrongheaded, had pivoted into an embrace of politics as the means to produce radical ends. Malcolm wanted to spread word of what he was witnessing in the nation's capital back to Harlem residents who, he explained, "are beginning to feel black"—describing the restive mood among a population that not too long ago insisted on being called Negro.[4]

King, on the other hand, warned of escalating racial tensions if the bill was not passed. His rising stature in the aftermath of the March on Washington afforded him special privileges in the nation's capital, including private meetings with supportive politicians such as Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey. King's access to senators and the president allowed critics, including Malcolm X, to identify him as a political insider captured by reformist impulses. In truth, King's conciliatory image masked the beating heart of a political radical who believed in social democracy, privately railed against economic injustice, and viewed nonviolence as a muscular and coercive tactic with world-changing potential. Vowing to convince the nation with "words" and "deeds" of the importance of the civil rights bill, King threatened to organize civil disobedience in the face of "stubborn" opposition to the goal of black citizenship. He candidly discussed the shadow of racial upheaval that simmered beneath the Senate debate and the wider national conversation about black equality in America. Failure to pass the bill, King suggested, would thrust "our nation" into a "dark night of social disruption." King's warning about violence echoed Malcolm's prediction that civil rights legislation, even if passed, could not prevent a violent and long overdue reckoning on racial justice in America.[5]

Martin and Malcolm both recognized the pivotal role violence played in maintaining America's racial caste system, a system that defined white violence against black bodies as legitimate, legal, and morally just and that regarded black violence—even in defense of black humanity—as criminal, dangerous, and a threat to law and order. Malcolm, who cultivated a well-earned reputation for deploying words of fire, arrived in Washington chastened by his recent and acrimonious departure from the Nation of Islam. He avoided his usually blunt language, even as he characterized the entire debate as a "con game" that threatened to provoke a "race

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war" if the government was not serious about civil rights enforcement. King spoke of violence as an evil that lurked within a Pandora's box that the nation might, if civil rights legislation was passed, still avoid. "I hate to discuss violence, but realism impels me to admit that if this bill is not passed in strength, it will be harder to keep the struggle disciplined," King confessed to reporters. In Washington, Malcolm and Martin found their usual political identities inverted. Malcolm addressed reporters as a budding statesman—an unelected dignitary who identified his moral authority in the thousands of black faces in Harlem, "the black capital of America." King made no such public claims of leadership; instead, he surveyed a tense national racial climate and declared the passage of the civil rights bill to be the only plausible mechanism that might prevent larger racial storms from engulfing the nation.[6]

After watching King's press conference, Malcolm slipped out a side door, where an assistant made certain he would bump into King in full view of the press. Malcolm, six foot three, handsome and smiling, stood eight inches taller than King, who stretched out his hand. For a brief moment, they sized each other up.

"Well, Malcolm, good to see you," King offered.

"Good to see you," Malcolm responded. For the next few minutes, they made history by chatting amiably. Malcolm expressed interest in joining civil rights demonstrations while his assistant snapped photos and United Press International and Associated Press cameras flashed. Both men smiled broadly in the AP photo and were caught in more serious reflection by UPI.[7]

The initial awkwardness of their meeting gave way to a rapport aided by a mutual understanding of black culture, their shared role as political leaders who doubled as preachers, and the rhythms of a common love for black humanity and yearning for black citizenship. Martin and Malcolm would never develop a personal friendship, but their political visions would grow closer together throughout their lives. A mythology surrounds the legacies of Martin and Malcolm. King is most comfortably portrayed as the nonviolent insider, while Malcolm is characterized as a by-any-means-necessary political renegade. But their relationship, even in that short meeting, defies the myths about their politics and activism.

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By March 1964, both men were experiencing remarkable political transitions. Malcolm pivoted into lobbying, protesting, threatening, and cajoling democratic institutions, with the goal of achieving black dignity. His appearance in Washington amplified his quest to wed formal political maneuvers—such as voting rights and policy advocacy—to more maverick and controversial notions of political self-determination—such as gun clubs, self-defense groups, and a black-nationalist political party. Malcolm engaged with American democratic institutions in a manner that allowed him to not only participate in the civil rights struggle but reframe it as global movement for human rights, one that connected civil rights activism in America with movements for political self-determination in Indonesia and Nigeria.[8]

Meanwhile, King's political reputation swelled as the movement he came to personify expanded beyond his full comprehension and control. His long-standing appreciation of the relationship between racial equality and economic justice, what the March on Washington had knowingly called "jobs and freedom," remained thwarted by a nation that refused to contemplate the high price of racial justice—and especially who might pay that cost in privilege, power, standing, wealth, and prestige. King's candid discussion of violence, what he called "realism," would rapidly escalate after his meeting with Malcolm. For King, realism produced the sweet spot between aspirations of racial justice and a contemporary reality scarred by Jim Crow.

Over the course of the next three months, Malcolm and Martin organized in the shadow of a national political debate over civil rights whose momentum grew as spring turned to summer. King responded to this rapidly transforming political landscape by making plans to secure voting rights. Malcolm embarked on a five-week tour of the Middle East, where he took the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and became an orthodox Muslim. The two men would not live to see their shared vision come to fruition.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, announced the legal end of racial discrimination in public accommodations and publicly owned property. The bill also ended the practice of diverting federal funds toward segregated facilities, including schools. Enforcement in certain parts of the nation would take years. Greenwood, Mississippi, a site where King and the

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movement confronted great resistance, drained its public pools rather than integrating them.[9]

The assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, broke the secret hearts of millions of African Americans who had quietly claimed him as their unspoken champion, alongside the tens of thousands who publicly did so. Malcolm inspired blacks to unapologetically love themselves. He set a fearless example in this regard, offering his story of individual triumph against racism and poverty as a chance at collective redemption for the entire black community. Malcolm's death arrived before the public acknowledgment of Black Power—a movement birthed from his activism and which would spur King to greater radicalism, more forceful political rhetoric, and an embrace of radical black dignity.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968, was a global tragedy. His untimely death indelibly altered American history, evoking a national trauma that we have yet to recover from. A troubling shadow haunts King's legacy, blunting his impact on American democracy. Over one hundred million Americans watched King's funeral on television as major cities convulsed in anger, violence, and mourning in the immediate hours and days after his death. Lyndon Johnson's passage of the Fair Housing Act is usually regarded as a final policy tribute to the racial-justice efforts spearheaded by King. Today, more than fifty years after King's death, the struggle for racial justice continues in ways that are both historically recognizable and disconcertingly new.

In many ways, racial segregation in America has worsened since King's death. National progress has been stalled, indeed reversed, by local, state, and federal policies—from gentrification and zoning laws to tax codes—that have made dreams of racial integration as distant as an unseen horizon. Shortly after the passage of fair housing legislation in 1968, Congress passed a national crime bill that planted the seeds for the contemporary crisis of mass incarceration. The Safe Streets Act of 1968 successfully helped to reimagine the nation's domestic priorities over the next half century, diverting tens of billions of dollars from anti-poverty, housing, and educational programs into the world's largest prison system. America's criminal justice system warehouses, exploits, punishes, and executes the same brown and

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black faces King challenged the entire world to embrace in love. It is no accident that Richard Nixon's rhetoric of "law and order" during the 1968 presidential campaign season flourished in the wake of King's assassination: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. had warned against the specter of massive racial uprisings if the nation remained unwilling to commit to guaranteeing black dignity and black citizenship.[10]

King's death roiled national politics generationally. His assassination turned him into much more than a martyr. He became one of the founding fathers of postwar American democracy, a social-movement leader whose memory reinforced both the grandeur and travails of the nation's racial history. Yet, King's posthumous celebration in contemporary American popular culture remains incomplete. He is recognized as perhaps the nation's most famous advocate of nonviolence and celebrated as a prophet whose stirring example unleashed the racial progress that culminated in Barack Obama's presidency. He balanced his critique of America's complicity in promoting materialism, militarism, and racism with a defiant optimism about democracy's enormous potential to achieve a more hopeful and humane world. But the more incendiary of King's politics are still too often ignored, discounted, or unmentioned. The radical King identified racism, poverty, and war as threats against the entire planet, but this aspect of his legacy remains sidelined because of the discomfort his words of fire continue to cause.

In the popular imagination, Malcolm is the political sword of the black radicalism that found its stride during the heroic years of the civil rights era and fully flowered during the Black Power movement. King stands in contrast as the nonviolent guardian of a nation; his shield prevented a blood-soaked era from being more violent. Their respective worldviews antagonized, infuriated, and inspired each other. In many ways, Malcolm might best be considered black America's prosecuting attorney, a political leader who condemned white institutions and citizens for historic and contemporary racial crimes. The sight of Malcolm regaling Harlem audiences, reporters, and television cameras with the era's boldest analysis of institutional racism—always laced with biting humor—remains an indelible image of the period. His sternly handsome face conjures up "a space of myth and mourning." He forged

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personal intimacy with a mass audience by boldly confronting America's brutal history of racial trauma, and his uncanny ability to recognize the revolutionary potential found in the distillation of black pain proved transformative. Over time, he convinced large swaths of the black community that the very source of their oppression—their blackness—held the key to liberation. Malcolm believed in the intrinsic value of black life even when many African Americans did not. In the early days of the civil rights movement, this made him a man ahead of his time. After his death, his unyielding faith in the beauty of black struggle made him an icon.[11]

While Malcolm inspired black folk on urban street corners from Los Angeles to Harlem, King captivated the centers of American power. The image of the thirty-four-year-old Georgia preacher addressing the nation on August 28, 1963, from the National Mall in Washington, DC, transformed him from a protest leader into a statesman respected by American presidents and world leaders. Whereas Malcolm bonded with audiences through confessional admissions of his youthful moral failings and righteous anger over the indignities of Jim Crow, King displayed a passionate empathy for both sides of the nation's racial divide. He raised the philosophy of nonviolence as shield against the humiliation, poverty, and violence of America's Jim Crow system. Martin Luther King Jr., contrasting Malcolm X's prosecutorial zeal, became the nation's chief defense attorney on both sides of the color line. He defended black humanity to whites and convinced African American audiences that embracing the architects of racial oppression could lead to a transformed world, contoured by racial justice.

Malcolm and Martin achieved political maturity in a revolutionary age that fundamentally transformed race relations in the Global North and South. In the 1950s, a time when Jim Crow laws in the United States diminished black citizenship nationally and virtually obliterated it in the South, the two leaders emerged as internationally recognized advocates for racial justice. Their supple intelligence, political courage, and dazzling oratory set them apart as the quintessential activists of not only their generation, but all subsequent ones that followed. They innovated radical political activism as an enduring vocation capable of

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eliciting respect from opponents, gaining devotion from supporters, and inspiring lasting political change globally.

Malcolm's formal political activism outside of prison, which spanned the years 1952 to 1965, overlapped with King's, which occurred from 1955 to 1968. While Malcolm embraced political activism as a vocation three years before King, his time as a national figure arrived in 1959, three years after King's emergence as the public face of the epic Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. The mythology presents King as a hopeful optimist whose soaring "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington is contrasted with Malcolm X's unapologetic declaration that black citizenship would only be achieved through "The Ballot or the Bullet."

Contemporary depictions of both men have left us with indelible icons more than flesh-and-blood human beings. Too often, our complex and messy national civil rights history has been related to the general public like a children's bedtime story, one that requires—indeed, mandates—a happy ending. Civil rights are now largely recognized as a political and moral good, the movement's demands for citizenship and equality retrospectively considered unassailable parts of our democracy. The era's combative militancy, even among advocates of nonviolence, is obscured in this telling or, at times, forgotten. The real Malcolm and Martin offer a more complex portrait of the era. Braiding their political lives together provides a new, difficult, and challenging, but ultimately more satisfying, understanding of these men and the times they shaped.

Malcolm and Martin, in life and death, retained sharp differences. They disagreed on the role of violence in organizing a political revolution. Early on, they diverged on the source of racial oppression, with Malcolm focused on systemic patterns of racial injustice and King attuned to racism's invidious damage on hearts, minds, and souls. Cultivated in the black Christian church, King deployed religious language in political sermons that elevated the struggle for racial justice into the moral issue of the twentieth century. Malcolm found his religious faith in two distinct forms of Islam that gave him the personal strength to match his political convictions. He embraced the language of street speakers—from learned griots and intellectuals to corner-store hustlers—to offer an unvarnished portrait of institutional racism, white supremacy,

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and racial violence.

But a binary understanding of Malcolm and Martin is incomplete. Two-dimensional characterizations of their activism, relationship, and influence obscure how the substantive differences between them were often complimentary. It underestimates the way they influenced each other. And it shortchanges the political radicalism always inherent in each, even when they seemed to be reformist or reactionary. This book examines the political lives of two social-movement leaders who assumed divergent but crucially similar roles. Over time, each persuaded the other to become more like himself. Reexamining Malcolm and Martin alongside each other highlights the debt contemporary racial-justice struggles owe them both.

Malcolm and Martin were considered two of the most dangerous activists of their generation. A wide range of politicians (including presidents), Justice Department officials (most notably FBI director J. Edgar Hoover), and police and intelligence agencies marked them as subversives capable of fomenting civil unrest and racial disorder. FBI agents placed illegal wiretap surveillance on King courtesy of the sitting attorney general, garnering compromising information that threatened to derail him and the movement. Malcolm attracted both federal surveillance and a branch of the New York Police Department, the Bureau of Special Services, which served as the NYPD's version of the secret police and tracked him from the early years of the Cold War until his death.

In what follows, I argue that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. represent two black revolutionaries whose lives, activism, and political and intellectual thinking became blueprints for racial and economic justice advocacy around the world. At the height of their international visibility and political power, they recognized in each other a kindred spirit whose very presence helped them fulfill their respective roles. Their dual strategies, in retrospect, amplified and built each other up. Malcolm's envelope-pushing militancy offered Martin leverage against allegations that he was a communist or worse. Martin's aura of political moderation aided Malcolm's quest to galvanize America's black underdogs: the street-corner hustlers, artists, prisoners, formerly incarcerated, and drug addicted who became his family before his religious

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conversion in prison.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. bestride the postwar global age of decolonization alongside icons such as Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and Franklin Roosevelt. America's domestic racial crisis, with its attendant political impact around the world, shaped their professional and political careers. Organizing struggles for black dignity and radical black citizenship became their métier. Malcolm's quest to connect domestic freedom struggles to international human rights battles amplified and internationalized the radical democracy that Martin envisioned at the March on Washington. Similarly, Martin's anti-war activism and anti-poverty campaigns unleashed a stinging critique against racism, militarism, and materialism that echoed Malcolm's strident anti-colonialism. As young men, Malcolm and Martin pursued their political activism through religious institutions: the Nation of Islam and the African American church. While religious faith steadied them, both held larger, radically secular dreams of black liberation. Malcolm and Martin were the two most ambitious, creative, and courageous activists of the generation that forever changed American race relations. Both men confronted American presidents over issues of racial justice and pointed out the political hypocrisy that allowed racial apartheid to flourish in a democratic nation. Martin assaulted democracy's rear flank in speeches and demonstrations that sought to compel the government, institutions, and political leaders to reconcile, at long last, the sacred words enshrined in the founding documents with actual deeds. Malcolm orchestrated a direct attack by confronting democracy's jagged edges of police brutality, economic injustice, and antiblack racism.

Malcolm and King's births, in 1925 and 1929 respectively, meant they came of political age at the dawn of the Cold War. Racial politics of the moment informed their respective birthrights, offering a bittersweet inheritance that would help catapult them to undreamed-of heights as young men. Alive, the two became permanently bound in the public imagination as the Janus-faced symbol of a black freedom struggle that might decide America's political fate. In death, they became sanctified political martyrs, fallen historical icons, and saints whose followers called them simply Martin and Malcolm.

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They became the two most visible and important leaders of the civil rights movement's heroic period. This period covers the era from the end of legal segregation in 1954 to the civil- and voting-rights victories won a decade later. Marked by the rise of massive civil disobedience, demonstrations, sit-ins, political assassination, and racial violence, this era has become enshrined in our national memory as a searing test that the country passed, to its credit, by ending segregation and guaranteeing black citizenship. King's presence buttresses a narrative of inexorable racial progress, from bus boycotts and sit-ins to the March on Washington and voting legislation. Malcolm's activism disrupts such a linear tale, forcing us to gaze into the hidden bowels of black America that shaped him and his worldview. Malcolm identified antiblack racism as an institutional dilemma that required the kind of public truth telling that many whites, and some blacks, did not want to hear. But he pushed for a reckoning on the issue of black dignity with blunt language that contrasted with King's search for black citizenship capable of allaying white fear and black anger.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s most enduring legacy is the commitment to and introduction of what I call *radical black citizenship*. For King, radical black citizenship encompassed more than just voting rights. Urban violence in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts erupted in August 1965, less than a week after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The result of an encounter between a local resident and police, the conflict escalated into a sprawling, citywide riot that shocked and frightened the nation. After the urban rebellion of Watts, King came to realize that in addition to voting, true citizenship included a good job, living wage, decent housing, quality education, health care, and nourishment. That is to say that citizenship meant, according to King, more than the absence of the negative structures of oppression he spent his life fighting. His legacy of radical black citizenship—one that continues in the work of Moral Mondays, March for Our Lives, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter—encompassed his revolutionary life, fearless love of the poor, and uncompromising stance against war and violence, all of which offers hope for a better future. His life also provides a framework for resistance against rising levels of inhumanity, racism, and injustice that he would find all too familiar today.

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Malcolm X too often remains primarily remembered for what he was not: Martin Luther King Jr. But in reality, Malcolm was a brilliant activist, organizer, and intellectual whose life reminds us of the possibilities of a liberated future in America and beyond. His unapologetic insistency on what I call *radical black dignity* marked him as a prophetic visionary in the eyes of a global black community and as a dangerous subversive to the American government. Malcolm defined black dignity as a collective goal that required bold leadership and the ability to confront America's tragic racial history. The embrace of black identity, history, and beauty served as the first step in organizing a revolutionary movement for political self-determination, empowered by Africa's presence on the world stage and the courage of ordinary black people in insisting that their lives, traditions, culture, and histories mattered in the face of archipelagoes of racial terror that stretched from Brooklyn to Birmingham to Bandung. Malcolm's searing description of the pain, trauma, and violence of America's racial wilderness became the crux of his political debate with King. King fully acknowledged the panoramic nature of racial oppression —in essence the existence of the American racial wilderness—only after Malcolm's death.

America's civil rights struggle in the twentieth century, now remembered as a virtually seamless march toward racial progress, unfolded in violent fits and starts. The signal events of the heroic period—1954's *Brown* Supreme Court decision; the August 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, followed that December by the Montgomery bus boycott; 1957's Little Rock Central High School crisis; the 1960 sit-in demonstrations that spurred the creation of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and the 1961 Freedom Rides; James Meredith's 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi; Birmingham, Alabama's, racial crisis in the spring of 1963, followed by the March on Washington, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the Kennedy assassination; the Freedom Summer and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and Bloody Sunday in Selma and the passage of the Voting Rights Act—continue to frame the popular conception of the era at the expense of a more nuanced and historically complex understanding. This limited vision of the period constrains our ability to appreciate the personal and political

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contradictions that enveloped Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. during this era.

In the years immediately following the First World War, Marcus Garvey's jaw-dropping call for political and racial self-determination transformed black identity, paving the way for the emergence of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. King's political ascent rested on the central role of the black church and interracial groups like CORE and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which created new political spaces where radical democracy briefly thrived during the Great Depression and Second World War. The immediate postwar years featured daring interracial alliances, robust movements for black political self-determination, and potential for black equality that briefly aligned political and ideological radicals, moderates, militants, and conservatives in a struggle for dignity and democracy. Cold War liberalism blunted freedom dreams, turning former allies into informers, decimating a budding labor and civil rights alliance, and smearing advocates of interracial democracy as communists and worse.[12]

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. came of age in an American political landscape that crushed dreams of black dignity and openly rejected the idea of black citizenship. Yet they also inherited a political and historical legacy that offered a revolutionary vision for social and political change. Racial violence scarred black life daily, culminating in well-publicized sexual assaults against black women that, although subsequently airbrushed from history, helped to shape the political activism of vital segments of the African American community.[13]

Conventional narratives of the civil rights era's heroic period also obscure discussion of black people residing on the lower frequencies of American political life. Malcolm X thrived in these spaces, cultivating prisoners, the formerly incarcerated, and the black working class in an effort to reach a mass audience of disenfranchised Negroes.[14]

Malcolm X helped to internationalize black political radicalism. He defined the struggle for black citizenship through global events that made him black America's unofficial prime minister. Black radicals, aware of the racial conflicts that made national headlines, looked toward anti-colonial struggles in the Third World for inspiration in their own domestic racial justice

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struggles. Malcolm toured African nation-states, Middle East capitals, and European cities in an effort to link domestic black politics to the larger world of anti-colonial and Third World liberation movements. He engaged in international affairs from the start of his career and not, as is popularly imagined, during his final year. These events abroad, which paralleled and at times intersected with the mainstream civil rights demonstrations, remain largely hidden from the public. Understanding the ways in which Malcolm and Martin both shaped and were shaped by the local, domestic, and global currents of the civil rights and Black Power movements offers us a better appreciation of the movements and their legacies.

Malcolm X came to embody and amplify the ferment of radical black political self-determination both domestically and around the world. With increasing intellectual and political agility, he traveled beyond cultural and political borders, attracting a coterie of supporters that included civil rights activists, white leftists, African intellectuals, and Third World revolutionaries.

Malcolm's most profound influence on the civil rights era after his death came from a most unexpected place. Martin Luther King Jr.'s political activism following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act directly reflects the influence of Malcolm X and Black Power radicals. During the last three years of his life, King evolved from a national political mobilizer on friendly personal terms with American presidents into a revolutionary. King's travails in America's searing political battlefield during these years is overwhelmingly overlooked; the nation's collective gaze is instead kept on the triumphant passage of civil rights and voting rights legislation. But King's August 1965 visit to Los Angeles in the wake of the rebellion stirred in him the seeds of revolutionary discontent. His April 4, 1967, Riverside Church speech in New York City braided racial injustice, economic inequality, and the Vietnam War into a brilliant critique of American empire, institutional racism, and violence. A year later in Memphis, Tennessee, King found his reputation among white Americans in decline as he recruited a multiracial army of the poor to come to Washington and demand radical legislation that would provide a living wage, guaranteed income, and an end to poverty in the world's richest nation. The revolutionary King, who pushed America to become a

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redistributive social democracy that embraced racial justice and black citizenship, is largely missing from our national understanding of the era.

Politics—ranging from racial segregation in public accommodations in the South to police brutality and unemployment in the North—preoccupied Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s early activism. Martin and Malcolm's claims to national leadership rested on relationships initially cultivated at the neighborhood level, and their sensitivity to racism's local manifestations proved to be foundational to their collective political development. King's rhetorical genius helped turn a local boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, into a national referendum on racial dignity and American citizenship. Against the backdrop of a Cold War that identified civil rights activists as domestic subversives influenced by communists or worse, King identified racial justice as the hidden key to reimagining American democracy. Malcolm turned Harlem into his local political headquarters for a grassroots movement for social justice. He mirrored this success in cities such as Detroit, Boston, and Los Angeles, where black nationalists came to view him as the leader of a movement for black political power that paralleled civil rights struggles.

Malcolm X's national leadership ascended upon a torrent of blunt words that simultaneously punished and inspired. His scathing critique of institutional racism and white supremacy made him a folk hero. Malcolm's words were oracular. His searing image of impending racial conflict, the fecklessness of white liberals, and the failure of black leadership accurately predicted the dawning age of national political rebellion.

Malcolm and Martin found common ground in an understanding of the global nature of racial struggle. They both fervently believed in the moral and political rightness of anti-colonial movements and in the right of self-determination for indigenous people. King called the personal and political ties that bound humanity together the "world house," where the fates of individual nation-states, cities, towns, and hamlets were inextricably linked. Malcolm satisfied his own search for international political inspiration in the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, an event that symbolized the

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Third World's political coming of age. Malcolm and Martin's political activism took place against the backdrop of the decolonization struggle, an epic fight where political revolutionaries challenged the prevailing social and political order of the last century.[15]

Yet each leader drew distinctive, at times contrasting, lessons from his worldliness. Revolutions raging across the Third World generally, and in Africa specifically, inspired Malcolm's personal imagination and political ambition. For him, black solidarity on a global scale might achieve what many thought to be impossible: a political revolution that brought genuine freedom, dignity, and liberation to black people the world over. He often criticized American democracy, blasting the United States in domestic and international speeches as an unrepentant empire—the proverbial "wolf," he often remarked in homespun allegories, disguised as humankind's liberator.

King, on the other hand, transformed American democracy by placing the civil rights struggle at the center of the nation's origin story. On this score, King's "dream" implicitly acknowledged democracy's jagged edges, what Malcolm called a "nightmare" of political and economic oppression made worse by the nation's perpetual state of racial denial.

Complex legacies of black political, cultural, intellectual, and religious activism shaped Malcolm and Martin. Malcolm found his religious and political calling in prison, but he traced his political lineage back to the Jamaican-born Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and his own Baptist preacher father, Earl Little. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) captivated millions of blacks around the world with a defiant call for political self-determination that attracted a wide range of followers, including working-class entrepreneurs, black intellectuals, and professional revolutionaries. The Nation of Islam partially owed its existence to the Garvey movement, which for a time attracted both Malcolm's biological father and his political mentor, a young Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole), to its burgeoning flock. Black nationalism would rise from the ashes of the Garvey movement and steadily grow in the postwar era, buoyed by movements for self-determination abroad and Malcolm's interpretation of a philosophy that had inspired his own father at home.

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King grew up in the black church, enrolled at Morehouse College at fifteen, found his passion for the theological underpinnings of social justice in seminary, and finished a doctorate at Boston University, where his work contained seeds of the religious and philosophical interpretation of racial justice that would animate his political activism. King's intellectual genealogy emanated from the political ferment of the war years, particularly the interracial, social democratic, labor, and religious groups that characterized Jim Crow as a moral and political catastrophe.

The political afterlives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. continue to shape American democracy. Their shared history offers up new ways to view the struggle for racial justice in America and around the world, from the postwar era to the present. America in the Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X years found itself irrevocably transformed by their galvanizing political rhetoric and activism. The iconography surrounding these historical titans has produced a national holiday and memorial, postage stamps, movies, and Pulitzer Prize–winning biographies and books. In death, their symbolic power has launched a cottage industry trumpeting the superficial myth of the two men as opposites, which often obscures their actual political accomplishments, failures, and shortcomings. A full appreciation of Malcolm and Martin and the historical epoch that shaped them requires taking them down from the lofty heights of sainthood and rescuing both of these men from the suffocating mythology that surrounds them.

Throughout this book I use the metaphor of the sword and the shield to argue for a new interpretation of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Conventional depictions of Malcolm wielding a sword in pursuit of black dignity while King carried a shield for the defense of black humanity tell only part of the story. *The Sword and the Shield* argues that Martin and Malcolm, after beginning as rivals, developed a political partnership more clearly illuminated by examining the destinations they, respectively, reached toward the end of their lives. The personas they comfortably assumed at the start of their political careers grew as they matured. In the halls of the United States Senate during their sole meeting, Malcolm and Martin traveled down a shared revolutionary path in search of black dignity, citizenship, and human rights that would

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trigger national and global political reckonings around issues of race and democracy that still reverberate today.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. transformed the aesthetics of American democracy through social justice advocacy that altered national conceptions of race, citizenship, and democracy. By illuminating the relationship between black oppression and white supremacy, Malcolm and Martin permanently altered America's racial landscape. Their words both persuaded and coerced. Malcolm's and Martin's shared rhetorical genius and organizing skills compelled large audiences to freedom's cause and attracted praise, controversy, and condemnation. In popular culture they represent opposing visions of racial equality; where King dreamed of carving a stone of hope from a mountain of racial despair, Malcolm forcefully identified a growing nightmare of racial injustice, Jim Crow segregation, and simmering rage. This neat juxtaposition obscures more than it reveals, erasing the profound ways in which their politics and activism overlapped and intersected, and oftentimes helped to transform national and global debates over racial and economic justice, the role of the criminal justice system, the use of violence, and the resilience of American democracy.

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CHAPTER 1

The Radical Dignity of Malcolm X

Malcolm X inherited the legacy of his parents, Earl Little and Louise Norton Little, proud disciples of the legendary Jamaican organizer Marcus Garvey. Malcolm grew up in a home that celebrated black pride, boldly proclaimed black dignity, and brandished political activism as practically a familial birthright. The members of the Little family were pioneer black nationalists who endeavored to follow Garvey's dictum of establishing black political power across urban and rural American landscapes. Garvey tapped into deep currents of black political radicalism swirling in a newly reconfigured urban American landscape, one populated by black southern migrants and Caribbean immigrants. The Great Migration, which started between the world wars and crested in the immediate years after blacks won the right to vote, dispersed millions of southern migrants across the nation's vast expanse, in the process creating archipelagoes of black cultural and political power in small and large cities. Inspired by the bootstrap racial uplift politics of Booker T. Washington and intrigued by anti-colonial rhetoric, Garvey promoted a philosophy of black nationalism that he offered, like Promethean fire, to any black person courageous enough to take it.

Millions passionately embraced black nationalism, turning "Garveyism" into a global movement for self-determination. As a political philosophy, black nationalism promoted racial solidarity, the recognition of black history, culture, and beauty, and the right for black people to define solutions to their own problems as the keys to individual freedom, collective liberation, and political and economic power. Garvey's personal stature grew until his 1924 arrest on charges of mail fraud related to his efforts to establish a

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his political hero. Malcolm had attended political meetings with his father, read black newspapers at home as a child, and listened to his father teach the entire family about the importance of faraway happenings in Africa and the Caribbean. He fervently admired Earl's rugged political determination in the face of white racism. Earl cast a shadow in death better than he had alive, bequeathing his young son with a model of itinerant political organizing that Malcolm would adopt for the rest of his life.[5]

Earl's death hastened Malcolm's departure from a Michigan public school system he found to be incorrigibly racist. Malcolm recalled his time at Mason Junior High School as an abject lesson in racism, where white teachers referred to him as "nigger" and even friendly white students thought of him as little more than a mascot. "I was unique in my class, like a pink poodle," he remembered. He had a natural affinity for reading, debating, and social engagement, and early on he was touted as a charismatic leader. His predominantly white classmates voted him class president, an honor later blunted by a white teacher's dismissal of his dreams of being a lawyer. At fifteen, he dropped out of school and entered a sordid world of hustling—one populated by young black men with little education and even fewer prospects. The bowels of black urban American neighborhoods in New York City and Boston became a proving ground for a teenage Malcolm. He came of age in those cities during the 1940s, learning to rely on his intelligence, quick wit, and charisma to survive the streets.[6]

In February 1941, Malcolm departed Lansing by bus to move in with his twenty-seven-year-old, Georgia-born half sister, Ella Mae Collins. A formidable woman whose obsidian skin, sharp intelligence, and outspoken manner reminded Malcolm of Earl, Ella offered the closest example of parental love that the fifteen-year-old had ever received. They lived in the Hill neighborhood of Boston, where small groups of working-class black families thrived during the war years, enjoying job opportunities as blue-collar and, at times, white-collar professionals. Ella fit neither of these categories. Despite a veneer of middle-class respectability, Malcolm's sister was a habitual thief, one whose criminal exploits included arrests for shoplifting and assault and battery. In 1942, Ella married her third husband, and Malcolm became fast friends with Malcolm "Shorty" Jarvis, who schooled him in the ways of

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Muhammad, Allah's messenger, who held the key to black liberation. The Nation's eclectic philosophy combined aspects of black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and religious mythology to preach a version of Islam that identified whites as the creation of a misguided black scientist named Yacub. Blacks were not Negroes but "Asiatic-African" people who once ruled civilization. The group's tiny membership of several hundred followers recognized Elijah Muhammad as Allah's handpicked messenger, capable of uplifting the black underclass from the depths of poverty, imprisonment, and death.[14]

Garvey's promotion of black history and culture found new energies in the Nation, but with a twist. Muhammad promoted black political self-determination as part of God's design to restore black people to their former glory. In this sense, the NOI's teachings represented the opposite of the Protestant Social Gospel, which insisted that religious faith be tied to worldly deeds. The Messenger predicted doom for whites, who were characterized as "devils" for crimes against blacks that stretched from slavery to the present. Malcolm Little's jailhouse conversion in Massachusetts transformed the group. Malcolm's intelligence, wit, and devotion shone through in his correspondence with the Messenger, who began to write to him regularly. Over time, Muhammad treated Malcolm as a son, protégé, and heir apparent. Malcolm, in turn, credited the Messenger for his rehabilitation, editing out Earl Little's role in shaping his political consciousness.

Members of the NOI abstained from drugs, alcohol, and extramarital sex. Muhammad's "laborers" worked multiple jobs, including in NOI businesses, to pay tithes, fees, and special collections to support the Messenger's rising standard of living and the group's increasingly grand ambitions. Located primarily in Detroit and Chicago, the Nation recruited from the depths of black America's poor: prisoners, ex-convicts, and drug addicts. After his release from prison, Malcolm quickly traversed the organization's hierarchy through hard work and dogged commitment, rising in a short time to assistant minister and then head minister. In time, Malcolm proved to be Muhammad's most outstanding laborer. He distilled rough truths about racial slavery, black identity, and white supremacy to local temples, black newspapers, and increasingly curious sectors of the black middle class. But he truly

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