The Christian church itself—again, as distinguished from some of its ministers—sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, and the resulting relative well-being of the Western population, was proof of the favor of God. God had come a long way from the dessert—but then, so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, had become—for all practical purposes anyway—black.

—James Baldwin, 1962

The Arabs, as a colored people, should and must make more effort to reach the millions of colored people in America who are related to the Arabs by blood. These millions of colored peoples would be completely in sympathy with the Arab cause!

—Malcolm X, 22 1960

Two events, separated by just over a year, in two very different spheres of cultural activity, marked the extraordinary influence of Islam in the African American community in the 1960s. Two prominent African American men, one an athlete, the other a poet and a playwright, took highly visible and conscious steps away from their old identities and affiliations and began instead to articulate a black
consciousness and politics based on the teachings of Islam. These two public transformations—rituals of self-identification and self-naming—point toward an often-neglected genealogy of black political and cultural affiliation: an African American imagined community in which the Arab Middle East is central.

On 25 February 1964, the twenty-three-year old fighter Cassius Clay defeated Sonny Liston and took the world heavyweight boxing title, the most lucrative prize in professional sports. On the day after his triumph, Clay, who had already become one of the most well-known and controversial figures in boxing world, announced at a press conference that he was a Muslim.3 Until that day, Clay had been known as a playful, rather apolitical youngster with a fondness for pink Cadillacs, extravagant bragging, and comic poetry.4 But in the months before the fight, rumors of his association with the Nation of Islam (NOI) had circulated widely; he had been seen frequently in the company of Malcolm X, whom he had invited to his training camp in Miami.5 A few weeks after the victory, Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, bestowed on Clay his Muslim name, Muhammad Ali. Ali’s victory and subsequent announcement were widely reported; his association with the NOI was often viewed with skepticism or anger. In the spring of 1964, when Malcolm X left the Nation, Ali stayed, and quickly became the most famous Black Muslim in the country and one of the Nation of Islam’s most prominent spokespersons.6 Just a few months later, Ali embarked on a tour of Africa and the Middle East. When he returned, he announced to the press: “I’m not an American; I’m a black man.”7

In 1966, Ali’s status as political figure took a new direction when he refused his induction into the U.S. Army, saying “I’m a member of the Black Muslims, and we don’t go to no wars unless they’re declared by Allah himself. I don’t have no personal quarrel with those Viet Congs.”8 That refusal—that risky stand on behalf of the politics of his religious belief—transformed Ali’s image: he soon became one of the most visible and influential antiwar figures in the country. He was, in the words of poet Sonia Sanchez, “a cultural resource for everyone in that time,” a man whose refusal to fight in Vietnam became an emblem of the far reaching influence of the black nationalist critique of American nationalism and U.S. foreign policy.9

In 1965, a little over a year after Muhammad Ali’s highly public conversion, the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones left his literary circles
in Greenwich Village to move uptown to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS). In Harlem, Jones turned his back on his earlier ties with Beat poetry, and even his more recent success with plays on race relations (*The Dutchman* had won an Obie award in 1964). He focused instead on the task of building a community theater, and on developing the themes and writing styles that would launch the Black Arts Movement. During his time at BARTS, Jones wrote *A Black Mass*, a one-act play that presented in dramatic form the Nation of Islam’s central myth: the story of Yacub, the evil scientist who “invented” white people. Then, in 1968, Jones changed his name to Ameer (later to Amiri) Baraka. He studied Sunni Islam under the tutelage of Hajj Heesham Jaaber, who had been affiliated with Malcolm X near the end of his life. By then, Baraka, whom his contemporaries considered to be “the most promising black writer” in the nation, was also the best-known representative of the Black Arts Movement, a champion of black cultural nationalism, a significant theorist of the re-emergence of committed art, and an articulate critic of U.S. imperialism. Baraka would turn away from Islam and toward Maoism in the 1970s. But from at least 1965 until 1973, he and others saw Islam as a primary nationalist cultural resource, an authentically black religion that would be central to the requisite development of an alternative black culture and a liberated spirituality.

This article analyses the significance of the Middle East in African American cultural politics in the late 1950s and 1960s. In particular, it explores the impact of Islam as a religious practice and as a cultural poetics, including its more diffuse impact even on those who were not converts. In recent years, scholars in religious studies have amply documented the remarkable diversity of Muslim practice among African Americans, from orthodox Sunni Islam to the less traditional doctrines of the Nation of Islam, but the larger political and cultural influence of Islam as a religious/cultural/political nexus has been remarkably neglected. In the 1960s, this influence was significant. By 1965 or 1966, one need not have ever entered a Muslim temple nor read a Nation of Islam newspaper to know that, within the African American community, Islam had moved far beyond the sectarian curiosity it had been just ten years earlier. In a cultural field that ranged from poetry and plays to highly charged sports matches, from local community theaters to the boxing ring, Islam was a significant presence. In various manifestations, Islam—and the Nation of Islam in particular—played a
central role in reconfigurations of black radicalism, challenging both the hegemony of black Christianity’s religious values and the politics of integration associated with it. At the same time, the centrality of the Middle East to Islamic histories and to many Muslim rituals encouraged the increasing visibility of Arab cultures and Arab politics in African American communities.

Islam, like Christianity, has traditionally turned to the Middle East as a “holy land,” making salient not only its ancient histories, but also contemporary political events in the region. In the 1950s and 1960s, this religiously-infused transnationalism gained a broader currency: African Americans in this period constructed cultural, political, and historical links between their contemporary situation and the Arab Middle East. In doing so, they articulated what Michael Shapiro has called a “moral geography,” a mapping of themselves in relationship to the world. This moral geography imagined a community very different from dominant constructions of “America.” And despite the fact that what emerged from this mapping has often been called (even by its adherents) “black nationalism,” the community it envisioned provided an alternative to—and in some sense a fundamental critique of—the nation-state. I will trace several sites for this alternative geography: the religious teachings and daily practices of the Nation of Islam; the influence that the Nation of Islam and other Muslim sects had on cultural producers, especially the young men and women who would become the heart of the Black Arts movement; and finally, the impact of both religion and art on the anticolonial radicalism of a new generation of African Americans. By 1967, these connected influences had become an important factor in African American understandings of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Scholarship on the 1960s, so often interested in tracing the sources of black radicalism, as well as the rising tensions between blacks and Jews in the civil rights movement, has consistently painted the Nation of Islam as simply a political movement with a religious gloss. As a result, a whole history of cultural production and religious belief has been seen as marginal, or merely reactive. This analysis suggests a more expansive framework for understanding black culture in this period. It highlights the cultural politics of non-Christian religious formations, suggesting that a proper understanding of the salience of religion in the African American community (and in the United States more broadly) must look beyond the well-documented influence of the
Judeo-Christian tradition. By attending to this cultural and religious history, our understanding of political events also becomes more nuanced and complex. In particular, we begin to see the ways in which African American investments in, and interpretations of, the Arab-Israeli conflict developed, at least in part, out of the religious and cultural alternatives to black Christianity that become influential in the 1960s.

By History and By Blood

[T]he historic practice of bowing to other men's gods and definitions has produced a crisis of the highest magnitude, and brought us, culturally, to the limits of racial armageddon.

—Addison Gayle, 1968

In the early to mid-1960s, the Nation of Islam brought its interpretation of Islam to prominence in the African American community, and defined Islam as the religion of black American militancy. For African Americans disaffected with the Christian church—those frustrated by the commitment of black Christians to brotherhood with whites or angered by the continuing violence by white Christians against non-violent civil rights activists—Islam offered an alternative. Islam, its adherents argued, provided the basis for a black nationalist consciousness that was separate from the civil rights goals of integration into a white-dominated and oppressive nation. Islam offered a set of values and beliefs that were at once spiritual, political, and cultural. As LeRoi Jones described it, Islam offered "what the Black man needs, a reconstruction ... a total way of life that he can involve himself with that is post-American, in a sense." The Nation of Islam in particular provided an both an alternative religious affiliation and a counter-citizenship, an identity that challenged black incorporation into the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian American-ness.

The NOI emerged as a significant social and political force in the black community in the late 1950s after a period of disarray and declining membership in the 1940s. When Malcolm X was released from Norfolk prison in 1952, he quickly came to play a major role in the organization's expansion, establishing temples in cities all over the country. By December 1959, the Nation had fifty temples in twenty-two states; the number of members in the organization is difficult to estimate, but by 1962 was probably in the range of 50,000 to 100,000,
with many more supporters. In 1962, *Muhammed Speaks*, the major NOI newspaper, founded by Malcolm X, had the largest circulation of any black paper in the country.\(^\text{18}\)

Although the Nation of Islam was an avowedly “black nationalist” organization, its vision of black nationalism cannot be fully understood separate from either its explicitly religious content or its insistently transnational dimensions. In fact, the religious and the transnational aspects were intimately related: while the Nation of Islam was *unorthodox* Islam, Elijah Muhammad had, since the 1930s, consistently affirmed the significance of its connection to other Muslim communities around the globe, particularly those in the Middle East. The Nation challenged the assumption that African Americans were simply or primarily a subset of all Americans; its political imaginary never posited black nationalism as a self-contained sub-nationalism, even when Elijah Muhammad or Malcolm X made claims for the right to control specific tracts of land within the United States. Instead, the NOI built on the fact that Islam was a major world religion with a strong transnational orientation; Muslim governments and Muslim communities often forged ties across borders, politically and culturally, as well as religiously.\(^\text{19}\) Drawing on this global vision, the NOI developed a model of community that linked African Americans both to Africa and to “Asia” (by Asia, Elijah Muhammad seemed to mean primarily what is usually called the Middle East).\(^\text{20}\) By the time it began to reach a larger audience in the 1950s, the Nation of Islam’s vision drew on several decades of black anticolonialist activity, led by intellectuals and activists from W. E. B. Du Bois to Paul Robeson to Walter White, which had envisioned African Americans as part of a pan-African diaspora.\(^\text{21}\) At the same time, the Nation’s theological politics departed from that earlier activism’s primary focus on Africa, opting for a more expansive transnationalism that included much of the non-white world (Latin America is something of an exception). Like the pan-Africanist intellectual and cultural movements of the 1930s and 1940s, however, Elijah Muhammad described the connections between African Americans and colonized peoples through a language of naturalized race. Muhammad simply claimed both Africa and the Middle East as black heritage, insisting that the Arabian peninsula and the Nile valley were the historic home of what he called the “Afro-Asiatic black man” now living in America.

The significance of this religious and racial geography was profound. In the NOI temples being rapidly established in urban areas in
the late 1950s and early 1960s, ministers brought a message of world-
wide black Islam to thousands of African American converts.\textsuperscript{22} The
Nation taught that Islam was the “natural religion of the black man,”
which had been stripped from the Africans who were sold into slavery
and taught their masters’ Christianity. Lectures in the temples often
harshly indicted the traditional Christianity of the African American
city and argued that African Americans should recognize their true
heritage as the descendants of the Muslim prophet Muhammed. Arabic,
the Nation taught, was the original language of black people, not only
because many of the Africans who were taken into slavery and carried
to the new world spoke Arabic, but also because “the so-called
Negroes” in America were descendants of the original Arabic-speaking
peoples to whom Islam was revealed.\textsuperscript{23} As the religious service began,
the minister greeted his parishioners with the Arabic greeting: \textit{As-
salaam-alaikum} (peace be with you) and the members responded, \textit{wa-
Alaikum as-salaam} (and also with you). At the Islamic schools set up
by the Nation, Arabic lessons were an integral part of the curriculum:
Arabic language instruction was said to began at the age of three.\textsuperscript{24}

The Nation’s theology included an alternative genealogy for black
Americans, who were understood to be descendants of the original
inhabitants of Asia in general and Mecca in particular. As Elijah
Muhammad wrote in his 1965 treatise, \textit{Message to the Blackman in
America}: “It is Allah’s (God’s) will and purpose that we shall know
ourselves. …He has declared that we are descendants of the Asian
black nation and the tribe of Shabazz …[t]he first to discover the best
part of our planet to live on. The rich Nile Valley of Egypt and the
present seat of the Holy City, Mecca, Arabia.”\textsuperscript{25}

The Nation of Islam’s assertion that all black people were by nature
Muslims was part of its critique of black Christianity—a critique that
was at once theological, political, and historical. NOI meetings often
had a display, drawn on a blackboard, featuring two flags: on one side
of the board was a U.S. flag with a cross beside it, and underneath it the
caption, “Slavery, Suffering, and Death.” On the other side was drawn
a flag bearing the Crescent, and underneath it the words, “Islam:
Freedom, Justice, and Equality.” Beneath both was a question: “Which
one will survive the War of Armageddon?”\textsuperscript{26} Elijah Muhammad’s
message to African Americans focused on pride and transformation.
The Christianity of their slave masters had functioned to continue their
spiritual enslavement, he argued, but Islam, which built upon the
teachings of the Bible but succeeded them with additional revelations, would provide the key for understanding old teachings in the way they were intended, rather than through the perversions of white Christianity. In this way, NOI teaching revised, without discarding, important aspects of Christian symbolism that were salient in the black community. At the same time, this teaching also carried with it a racial, political, and moral geography: it pitted (black) Islam against (white) Christianity in a world-wide and historic struggle.

This religious mapping of the world—a practice certainly not unique to Islam or the Nation—was directly opposed to contemporary black Christian constructions of the Middle East as a “Holy Land” in which Israel (both ancient and modern) was a strong source of religious and political identification. Black Christianity had traditionally presented African American history as a not-yet-completed retelling of the Hebrew story, a potential site for the re-entry of God into history on the side of a people. By the late 1950s, the Christian-dominated civil rights movement was making highly effective use of the exodus as a figure for African American liberation. The alliance between African Americans and Jews in the early civil rights movement, though grounded in the active Jewish participation in the movement, was almost certainly strengthened by a strong metaphorical affiliation between the narrative of ancient Hebrew liberation from bondage and the purposeful imagining of African American liberation from discrimination in the United States. The exodus trope was a link, one articulated in churches and meetings, in songs and in sermons, as well as in the writings of African American intellectuals and activists, from Martin Luther King, Jr. to James Baldwin to Joseph Lowrey.

The connection that Black Christians felt with the Hebrew story extended into contemporary international politics. The establishment of modern Israel in 1948 was a source of enthusiasm and even inspiration for many African Americans: In 1947, Walter White, the Executive Director of the NAACP, had played a crucial role in lobbying African nations to vote for the UN resolution partitioning Palestine into Jewish and Arab areas. Ralph Bunche, the UN Secretary for Peacekeeping, was active in negotiating the end to the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 on terms generally considered favorable to Israel. And in 1948, the NAACP passed a resolution stating that “the valiant struggle of the people of Israel for independence serves as an inspiration to all persecuted people throughout the world.”
Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplified the move that connected biblical history with contemporary politics. He believed that civil rights was part of an international transformation in power relations. He saw the rise of anticolonialism and the rise of civil rights activity not only as parallel sets of events, but as a connected force, with the two movements affecting and influencing each other in direct ways: everywhere, the enslaved people were rising up against Pharaoh and demanding to be free. The success of the new nationalisms, particularly in Africa, Egypt, and India, provided a living model for the kind of successful struggle that King envisioned in the United States. Within this frame, Israel, as one of the “new nations” seeking freedom and national rights, represented a relevant model made all the more powerful by the biblical story of exile and return, and by the ways in which this rhetoric had played a central role in the successful transformation of the Zionist movement into the Israeli state.

The Nation of Islam’s vision of a world-wide Islamic alliance confronting white Christianity challenged the black Christian sanctification of ancient Israel and offered an alternative sacred geography with Mecca as its center. Significantly, Elijah Muhammad taught that the stories told in the Christian Bible were prophesies rather than histories, and that, as prophesy, they spoke of the contemporary experiences of African Americans rather than the historical experiences of the ancient Hebrews:

Before the coming of Allah (God), we being blind, deaf, and dumb, had mistaken the true meanings of these parables as referring to the Jews. Now, thanks to Almighty God, Allah...who has opened my blinded eyes, and unstopped my ears, loosened the knot in my tongue, and has made us to understand these Bible parables are referring to us, the so-called Negroes and our slave masters.

Within the NOI paradigm, Jews were not those whose ancient history was the prototype for contemporary liberation, as was the case for King and other civil rights leaders, but those whose putative status as “the chosen people” had usurped the position of the black people in relation to God. This scriptural interpretation did a complex cultural work for the Nation. Surely this metaphorical removal of Jews from the stories of the Old Testament had particular salience in terms of the domestic tensions that were already rife in urban areas between African Americans and Jews. Obviously, it carried the kernels of the NOI’s anti-
Semitism, which become more and more pronounced over the decade. But the specifically religious content also worked affirmatively as well, by mobilizing, appropriating, and refashioning an honored tradition to claim for African American Islam, as earlier Christianity had done with Judiasm, or as the Romans did with Greek mythology.

This mixture of denigration and affirmative appropriation was also apparent in the Nation’s attitude toward modern Israel. Like earlier black nationalist movements, the NOI saw in the success of Zionism an example and motivation for black nationalism. Malcolm X often referred to Israel respectfully in his speeches and interviews, even as he insisted on the rightness of the Palestinian cause, as in this remarkably ambiguous passage from his Autobiography:

If Hitler had conquered the world, as he meant to—that is a shuddery thought for every Jew alive today. The Jew will never forget that lesson. ...[T]he British acquiesced and helped them to wrest Palestine away from the Arabs, the rightful owners, and then the Jews set up Israel, their own country—the one thing that every race of man in the world respects, and understands.

This grudging respect did not translate into emotional identification with Zionism’s success, as it did within much black Christian discourse, but it did further establish the complex meanings the Middle East held for the Nation of Islam and its members. If, as nationalists, they respected and even hoped to emulate Jewish nationalism, they nonetheless saw the Arab struggle with Israel as a parallel to the Nation of Islam’s struggle for national self-determination in the United States, where the Nation claimed the right to “separate” from the rest of the United States by taking control of three or four states in the South for black people. Both the Arab (largely Muslim) population in Israel/Palestine and the black (“originally Muslim”) population in the United States were in a struggle over land: control over that land was essential to nationalism and political rights.

In keeping with this sympathy, Malcolm X exhibited a detailed and early attention to international relations. Inspired and influenced by events in the third world, Malcolm X often talked about the 1955 Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, (attended by Egyptian president Nasser, Indian prime minister Nehru, and representatives from twenty-seven other African, Asia, and Arab nations) as one example of the affiliation of non-white peoples against colonialism. After being appointed minister of the Harlem mosque in 1954,
Malcolm X established active contacts with many Arab and African leaders at the United Nations, who in turn seemed to view the members of the Nation as fellow travelers—though their practice of Islam was highly unorthodox, they were potentially valuable allies in the struggle against imperialism.  

Of the many connections the Nation established, those with Egypt were particularly important. The focus on Egypt developed for several reasons: first, like most black nationalists, NOI leaders believed emphatically that Egypt was a black nation and that the greatness of ancient Egyptian civilization was proof of the historical greatness of black culture. Second, Egypt was (and is) largely a Muslim nation, therefore it embodied the link between ancient black greatness and contemporary Islam.

Finally, there was Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had come to power in a bloodless coup against the British-backed king in 1952. In the mid-1950s, Nasser had emerged as the most important nationalist leader of the Arab world and as one of the major figures of the anticolonial non-aligned movement. Along with figures like Castro in Cuba and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Nasser represented an emotionally explosive convergence of anticolonial defiance and postcolonial global consciousness. But Nasser, as the leader of Egypt, also represented a particular connection between black and Arab anticolonialism: Just as Egypt was geographically positioned at the intersection of the Middle East and Africa, in the years after Bandung, Nasser positioned himself as a leader in connecting African and Asian anticolonial movements.

In 1956, Nasser became an anti-imperialist icon when he nationalized the Suez Canal Company, after president Eisenhower had refused to support U.S. loans for the construction of the Aswan High Dam. In response to the nationalization of the canal, Britain (the former colonial power), France, and Israel invaded Egypt; both the United States and the Soviet Union (for different reasons) demanded the immediate withdrawal of the invading forces. The U.S. opposition to the invasion was widely viewed as a refusal to back the imposition of old-style colonialism in the Middle East; not coincidentally, it was also an assertion of American dominance in the region.

But Nasser emerged from Suez the real winner. His successful weathering of an invasion by the colonial powers made him a hero in the decolonizing nations, as well as among many African Americans. Nasser, an avowed Arab nationalist, also came to represent black and African defiance. Not surprisingly, the Nation of Islam endorsed the
Egyptian seizure of the Suez canal and opposed the invasion in its various publications. And though the Suez crisis did not receive as extensive coverage as Bandung had in the rest of the black press (which was focused on the Montgomery bus boycott and other developments in the emergent civil rights movement), many black intellectuals also responded critically. Right after Suez, W. E. B. Du Bois, a long-time supporter of Israel, hailed Nasser (and criticized Israel’s role in the invasion) in a poem published in *Masses and Mainstream*: “Beware, white world, that great black hand/ Which Nasser’s power waves/ Grasps hard the concentrated hate/ Of myriad million slaves.” Observers would later look back on Suez as something of a turning point in African American perceptions of the Middle East—the moment in which Arab anticolonialism came home to black Americans.

The Nation of Islam identified with colonized nations politically, from the standpoint of a “colored” nation oppressed by whites, but it also drew very specifically on cultural and religious identifications with Arab nations, which were understood to be also racial and historical. A year after Suez, in December 1957, Malcolm X organized a meeting on colonial and neocolonial issues that included representatives from the governments of Egypt, the Sudan, Ghana, Iraq, and Morocco. That meeting, hosted by the Nation, sent a cable from Elijah Muhammad to Nasser, who was hosting the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference in Cairo. In it, Elijah Muhammad, describing himself as the “Spiritual Head of the Nation of Islam in the West,” addressed Nasser and the other national leaders as brothers, as co-religionists, and as peers:

As-Salaam-Alikum. Your long lost Muslim brothers here in America pray that Allah’s divine presence will be felt at this historic African-Asian Conference, and give unity to our efforts for peace and brotherhood.

Freedom, justice, and equality for all Africans and Asians is of far-reaching importance, not only to you of the East, but also to over 17,000,000 of your long-lost brothers of African-Asian descent here in the West. … May our sincere desire for universal peace which is being manifested at this great conference by all Africans and Asians, bring about the unity and brotherhood among all our people which we all so eagerly desire.

The cable, and Nasser’s friendly reply, circulated widely within the Nation; these contacts later facilitated Malcolm X’s trip to Egypt in 1959, where he laid the groundwork for Elijah Muhammad’s visit to Mecca in 1960.
The Nation of Islam made explicit the link between a shared heritage and shared origin: a myth of commonality remapped the dominant imaginative geography that separated the Middle East from Africa, instead uniting Africa and North West Asia (the Middle East) into one geographical space deemed “black Asiatic-African.” The vision of one black culture meant that blackness was no longer simply a synonym for Africans and people of recent African descent, but a literal linking together of large groups of non-Europeans—the “Asians and Africans” connected, in Malcolm X’s words, by history and “by blood.”

Elijah Muhammad’s genealogical and political views were well-known in the early 1960s, both within and beyond the African American community. Mainstream media heavily reported the “Black Muslim” phenomenon, in multiple television specials and interviews (often with Malcolm X), paperback “reports,” and newspaper and magazine articles. The Nation of Islam was extensively discussed in public discourse surrounding The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which was published in 1965, just months after he was assassinated. The organization was also covered in magazines with primarily black audiences. In addition, the Nation made a concentrated effort to construct its own, alternative public sphere based on its a system of widely disseminated newspapers and large public meetings. From 1959 to 1961, the organization published five different newspapers and magazines on its own, one of which—Muhammed Speaks, launched in May 1960—became extraordinarily successful. By 1961, C. Eric Lincoln estimated that Muhammed Speaks had a circulation of over 600,000, “making it by far the most widely read paper in the black community.” Nation members also produced plays and songs: Louis Farrakhan (known as Louis X in this period) produced two plays in the early 1960s: Orgena (“a Negro,” spelled backwards) and The Trial, both of which were performed for Muslim audiences at rallies and meetings. Farrakhan, who had been a Calypso singer before converting, also wrote and recorded several songs, including “White Man’s Heaven is Black Man’s Hell” and “Look at My Chains!”

As cultural source and resource, then, the Nation of Islam functioned through diverse sites. As a religious and political organization, it took culture and media representation quite seriously, but it also had an impact in many spaces/locations that Elijah Muhammad did not directly control, and thus wielded significant influence well beyond its membership. One site for this more general diffusion of Islamic
sensibility was the remarkable infusion of NOI mythology into the cultural products of the emerging Black Arts Movement, which would in turn influence the direction of black liberation politics as the decade drew to a close. The signs of the Nation were frequently incorporated into the productions of a new generation of young writers, who took the symbols and myths of this African American Islamic sect as part of the raw material for the production of a new, black, postnational culture.

And We Own the Night

This is an introduction to a book of plays
i am prophesying the death of white people in this land
i am prophesying the triumph of black life in this land
and over all the world
we are building publishing houses, and newspapers, and
armies and factories
we will change the world before your eyes,
izm-el-azam,
yes, say it
say it
sweet nigger
i believe in black allah
governor of creation
Lord of the Worlds
As Salaam Alikum

—Amiri Baraka, 1969

LeRoi Jones left Greenwich Village to found Harlem’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965. Malcolm X had just been killed, and young African American intellectuals and activists found themselves and their communities in upheaval—in shock, torn by heated debates over the split between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad and by questions of who was responsible for the assassination. Then The Autobiography of Malcolm X was released; it became an immediate best-seller, creating a sensation within the circles of young, increasingly radicalized men and women who had listened to Malcolm X’s speeches and were now riveted by the story of his life. It was in this context, coming to terms with the death of the country’s most important spokesperson for black radicalism, that Jones/Baraka set out to form a community-based popular theater, and to invent a form and language that would reach a broad African American audience with a message of
black (post)nationalism. As Baraka later wrote, he and his colleagues wanted "[a]n art that would reach the people, that would take them higher, ready them for war and victory, as popular as the Impressions or the Miracles or Marvin Gaye. That was our vision and its image keep us stepping, heads high and backs straight."55

Though BARTS was short-lived (it collapsed within a year), its founding was an inspiration to a new generation of poets and playwrights. Black theater and poetry burst onto the national scene—a flowering of African American cultural production unlike anything since the Harlem Renaissance. Within a year, small community theater groups were being formed around the country (in San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles). The new community theaters produced plays and held poetry readings, not only in theaters, but also in schools, at local meetings, and in the street.56 Baraka himself was also a model; his transformation from highly literary poet into a radical artist committed to straightforward poetic language and generally short, accessible plays inspired the young writers who were publishing and performing in his wake (and quite consciously in his debt): Ed Bullins, Sonia Sanchez, Marvin X, Ben Caldwell, and Nikki Giovanni, among others.

In the next couple of years, several publishing houses devoted specifically to black literature were born, and new or revamped magazines chronicled the scene, including Journal of Black Poetry, Black Books Bulletin, Black Theatre, and, most importantly, Negro Digest/Black World.57 By April 1966, Negro Digest would have its first of several annual issues on African Americans in theater; later that year, a San Francisco-based group, which included Baraka (who was a visiting professor at San Francisco State), would perform at the annual convention of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).58 By 1967, the new black theater was being widely discussed as a major development in the arts of the decade, so much so that when Harold Cruse published The Crisis of the Black Intellectual, he ended the book with two chapters on African Americans and the theater, analyzing the significance of BARTS and declaring that "there can be a cultural method of revolutionizing the society in which the theater functions as an institution." A year later, the most important American drama journal published a special issue on black theater.59

Poetry and plays were the favored genres of the Black Arts movement, despite the fact that both had, up until this point, appealed to a
very narrow audience. Both forms were, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, sub-fields of highly restricted production, and both carried the cultural capital (and the distance from popular culture) that came with their elite position. But the short poem, the one-act play are often more accessible to new or non-traditional writers, precisely because they are short, and Black Arts Movement artists tried with some success to broaden the audience for both genres. Writing in a self-consciously vernacular language, in free verse and street talk, and distributing work in small pamphlets and in magazines, in paperback anthologies, and in public performance, they aimed for a style and a format that was accessible and relevant to people who might otherwise be uninterested in or intimidated by “art.” Like earlier avant-garde movements, they wanted to eradicate the separation of “art” from “life.” Ed Bullins, a playwright who began writing during this period and who went on to become one of the most prolific and most-produced playwrights of the late 1960s and early 1970s, argued (as many in the movement did) that Black theater and poetry were effectively transforming both the genres and their audiences:

Black literature has been available for years, but it has been circulating in a closed circle. . . . It hasn’t been getting down to the people. But now in the theatre, we can go right into the black community and have a literature for the people . . . for the great masses of Black people. I think this is the reason that more Black plays are being written and seen, and the reason that more Black theatres are springing up. Through the efforts of certain Black artists, people are beginning to realize the importance of Black theatre.

The genuine popularity and broad reach of these new works is only part of the story, however; no matter how many performances they gave in local venues, or how many inexpensive editions they distributed, these poets and playwrights never had the kind of direct reach enjoyed by major political or religious groups, including the Nation of Islam itself. Nonetheless, they could have a significant impact precisely because of the prestige that art, even popularized art, carried—the status it gave within the African American community, as well as the notoriety that the new artists were gaining in the mainstream (white-dominated) media. The mix was potent: cultural capital combined with a new, populist approach and a broader audience. It gave art and artists a highly visible role in the African American community overall, and among younger radicals in particular, and it allowed for the dissemination and generalization of radical political and cultural perspectives. Thus already by 1966, the influence of Black Arts was strong enough
that the new chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Stokley Carmichael, asserted that poetry writing (and by extension, poetry reading) were threatening to overtake other kinds of political work. In a speech reprinted in the Chicago SNCC newsletter, he complained: “We have to say, ‘Don’t play jive and start writing poems after Malcolm is shot.’ We have to move from the point where the man left off and stop writing poems.”63

The Black Arts movement defined political struggle as cultural struggle; this cultural transformation, in turn, required a new spirituality. In literary circles, Islamic symbolism and mythology were incorporated into the self-conscious construction of a new black aesthetic and a revolutionary black culture. The aim was to establish a basis for political nationalism through the production of a set of cultural and spiritual values “in tune with black people.” Those seeking black power were called upon to understand the significance of culture. As Baraka argued, “The socio-political must be a righteous extension of the cultural. . . . A cultural base, a black base, is the completeness the black power movement must have. We must understand that we are Replacing a dying [white] culture, and we must be prepared to do this, and be absolutely conscious of what we are replacing it with.”64 The attempt to construct a new black culture was deeply intertwined with the search for religious alternatives to mainstream Christianity, a search that included not only Islam, but also a renewed interest in the signs and symbols of pre-Islamic and traditional African religions (such as the Yoruban religion), and the study of ancient Egypt. These influences were often mixed together, in Baraka’s thought as elsewhere, in an eclectic, sometimes deliberately mystical, mix.

Baraka’s “A Black Mass” exemplifies the cross-fertilization and appropriation that linked Islam and the Black Arts movement in the self-conscious production of a black mythology. The play was based on the story of Yacub, the evil scientist who created white people, as told by Elijah Muhammad and recounted repeatedly in publications and speeches. “Yacub’s History” was “the central myth” of the Nation; it told the story of black origins and explained the current plight of black people, while reversing the traditional associations of Eurocentric Christianity, making “whiteness” the category associated with evil and thus in need of explanation.65 (The story also provided the background and justification for the Nation’s provocative practice of referring to whites as “devils.”) “A Black Mass” was first written in 1965 while
Baraka was at BARTS; it was first performed in Newark in May 1966 (after BARTS folded and Baraka moved to Newark to form Spirit House) and a month later was published in the little magazine The Liberator. In 1969, it was included in Baraka’s collection, Four Black Revolutionary Plays.66

When Baraka wrote “A Black Mass,” he was not a member of the Nation of Islam, not even identified as a Muslim, though he would affiliate with orthodox Sunni Islam a few years later. Baraka would always mix Islam with his support of Kawaida, Ron Karenga’s syncretic doctrine based on traditional African religions, but his fascination with the story of Yacub and his general interest in the myths of the Nation of Islam was not idiosyncratic.67 Thus, though “A Black Mass” was not produced as often as some of Baraka’s more explicit social commentary, Black Arts critics admired it. The editor and essayist Larry Neal, who was also Baraka’s friend and colleague, described it as Baraka’s “most important play,” because “it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of the Afro-American sensibility.”68 Another commentator writing in Negro Digest called it “Jones’ most accomplished play to date.”69 The play was an early, explicit statement of the ways in which, even after the death of Malcolm X and even with suspicions about Elijah Muhammad’s role in his murder, the beliefs of the Nation of Islam were often presented as black culture, influencing and infusing a new black sensibility even for those who were not NOI adherents. In this sense, “A Black Mass” was both symptomatic and anticipatory of what would happen in the sphere of black cultural production in the next few years.

The play was a revision and a condensation of “Yacub’s History,” which explained the creation of white people from Earth’s original black inhabitants as the product of generations of genetic breeding.70 In “A Black Mass,” Yacub, now called Jacoub, is introduced as one of three “Black Magicians” who together symbolize the black origin of all religions: according to the stage directions, they wear a skullcap, a fez, and an African fila.71 The play’s title alludes to the necessity of black revisions of religious ritual, and the play itself is designed to revise and rewrite implicitly white-centered origin myths (and, not incidentally, to explain and define the theological problem of evil as represented in white people).

Baraka turns the Nation’s myth into a reinterpretation of the Faust story and a simultaneous meditation on the role and function of art.
Jacoub, whose lust for creation echoes both Faust and Dr. Frankenstein, is a complex figure; his desire to "find out everything" makes him in some ways more attractive and accessible than his fellow magicians, who insist that "we already know everything," that creation or innovation is impossible and dangerous (24). But the play's condemnation of Jacoub is apparent, not only in the fact that he is conducting an experiment to try to create "whiteness" (surely the moral weight of that choice needed no further amplification for the primarily black audience to which the play was addressed), but also in his insistence that "creation is its own end" (24). His art-for-art's-sake view was precisely the aesthetic philosophy that Baraka and other leaders of the early Black Arts Movement were determined to challenge, and, if possible, eradicate.

Castigated by the other magicians for his arrogance, Jacoub nonetheless proceeds with his experiment; as he does so, the natural world is disturbed by raging seas and thundering skies that have a Lear-like portentousness. Three women run in from outside, upset and frightened; they wail and moan, serving as a chorus, and as representatives of "the people" who will be destroyed by Jacoub's creation. Undeterred, Jacoub pours his solutions together: there is an explosion, out of which leaps a cold white creature in a lizard-devil mask. The creature vomits and screams, "slobberlaughing" its way through the audience (30). The women and the other magicians are horrified by the creature but Jacoub insists that he can teach the beast to talk. But the creature has only two words, incessantly repeated: "Me!" and "White" (30–32).

The beast immediately tries to attack the women, and it soon bites one of them, Tilia, who is quickly transformed into another monster, white-blotched and slobbering. With this "bite-caress," Baraka adds Dracula to his stock of popular culture referents, and in so doing brings sexuality to the forefront: the depraved and dangerous—and decidedly unsexy—red-caped beast infects the women first, using its lust to spread its "white madness." If the play allegorically represents the rape of black women by white men, it also constructs "Woman" as the first and most susceptible possible site of the spread of "whiteness," thus reproducing the tendency of many nationalist ideologies to make women's bodies the sites of both nationalist reproduction and potential cultural impurity. As Philip Brian Harper has pointed out, Black Arts movement rhetoric consistently associated proper blackness with proper masculinity, a move that not only marginalized women but also meant that racial identification was figured in terms of a potent heterosexual-
ity. Thus "judgements of insufficient racial identification ... [were] figured specifically in terms of a failed manhood for which homosexuality, as always, was the primary signifier." Gender and sexuality infused the cultural/political rhetoric of Black Arts authenticity.

At the end of the play, Tilia and the beast become hideous Adam and Eve substitutes: The two of them then attack and kill the other women and the rest of the magicians, including Jacoub. With his dying breath, Jacoub condemns the two "white beasts" to the caves of the north. These two creatures will reproduce and eventually will create the white race that comes to dominate and enslave the rest of the world. Thus, if "A Black Mass" describes white people as the spawn of monsters, a crime against the natural order, distorted reproduction is the unspoken but crucial undercurrent.

At the end of "A Black Mass," a final narrator voice-over issues a call to racial struggle, now framed in mythical and theological terms:

And so Brothers and Sisters, these beasts are still loose in the world. Still they spit their hideous cries. There are beasts in our world, Brothers and Sisters. ... Let us find them and slay them. ... Let us declare Holy War. The Jihad. Or we cannot deserve to live. Izm-el-Azam. Ism-el-Azam. Izm-el-Azam. Ism-el-Azam. Izm-el-Azam. (39)

The call for Jihad (Arabic for righteous struggle or Holy War) becomes a religious and moral response to the problem of evil, the answer of the present to the history presented in the play. The language of Islamic militancy is mobilized for black militancy; religious struggle and racial struggle are made one.

The influence of Islam and Islamic symbolism went well beyond Baraka; it was highly visible in general in the Black Arts movement, acknowledged, and often supported, even by those who didn't share its presumptions. Members of the Nation of Islam and orthodox African American Sunni Muslims were active in political and cultural organizations all over the country. Baraka's own interest in Islam continued to manifest itself in poetry and essays for the rest of the decade. By the time Baraka and Larry Neal published the field-defining anthology Black Fire in 1968, and Ed Bullins edited the collection, New Plays for the Black Theatre a year later, they were codifying (and of course canonizing) a body of work, produced and written in the previous several years, in which the influence of Islam was highly visible. Many of the plays and essays were either direct translations of NOI ideology
(such as Salimu’s “Growing into Blackness, which instructed young women on the proper Islamic way to support their men), or they simply presumed working familiarity with Islam on the part of the audience. Similarly, work by young poets was infused with Islamic references—references that were also often testimony to the influence of Malcolm X and/or Baraka: Gaston Neal’s “Personal Jihad” is one example; another is the long poem, “malcolm” by Welton Smith, which speaks of “the sound of Mecca/ inside you” and concludes with detailed references to the Yacub myth in “The Beast Section.” The prominence of Muslim-derived names was also significant in both collections: many poems and plays were by writers who had changed their names to, among others, Yusef Iman, Yusef Rahman, and Ahmed Legraham Alhamisi, Salimu, and Marvin X.  

Looking at the cultural products and newspaper accounts of the period, it is clear that the Nation of Islam provided one significant touchstone for a larger project—that of re-visioning history and geography in order to construct a moral and spiritual basis for contemporary affiliations and identities. As Larry Neal described it: “The Old Spirituality is generalized. It seeks to recognize Universal Humanity. The New Spirituality is specific. It begins by seeing the world from the concise point-of-view of the colonized.”  

In A Black Mass, Baraka offered a religiously-infused narrative as empowering myth, as a culture specific to black people. Even though the vast majority of Black Arts writers and readers were not Muslims, this myth and culture became part of the language and geography of black cultural identity. For a new generation, culture then became the basis for constructing an alternative nation; and this (post)nation—with its own sense of spirituality and its own political vision—was the underlying utopian gesture of black nationalist thought and literature. Within this project, Islamic affiliations often functioned as both site and source for those black identities, linking African Americans to the Arab and Muslim Middle East in ways both literal and metaphorical.

It's Nation Time

To be an American writer is to be an American, and for black people, there should no longer be any honor attached to either position.

—Addison Gayle
The cultural and religious influence of Islam would play an important role in African American responses to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—a war that marked the first major armed conflict in eleven years between Israel and Arab states, and which for the first time made Palestinians (the "refugees" from the founding of Israel in 1948) into a highly visible component of the conflict. In May of 1967, the ongoing tensions between Israel, Egypt, and Syria escalated dramatically. Egyptian president Nasser, involved in a war of words with conservative Arab regimes over the direction of Arab politics, had recently been criticized by Jordan and Syria for hypocrisy and cowardice in continuing to allow UN troops to be stationed on the Egyptian side of the border with Israel. The UN troops had been positioned in the Sinai in 1957, to guard the peace after the Suez crisis, but Israel had refused to allow UN peacekeepers on its side of the border. Nasser, stung by the accusations and attempting to regain his prestige as the region's preeminent nationalist leader, moved his own troops into the Sinai in May 1967 and asked the United Nations to withdraw. Several days later, Nasser provocatively closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping. As American and European diplomats scrambled to cobble together a multilateral diplomatic and/or military response (the United States was particularly concerned to act carefully in light of the increasing controversies over the war in Vietnam), Israel insisted on the right of navigation through the international waters of the Strait and declared the closure an act of war. On 5 June with tensions escalating on all sides, Israel launched an air attack that virtually destroyed both the Egyptian and Syrian air forces on the ground. Immediately, Jordan also entered the battle, attacking Israel with artillery and air power. In just six days, the war was over, with Israel the clear victor. As a result of the conflict, the Israelis conquered several territories that had been previously controlled by Arab countries: the Gaza strip (Egypt), East Jerusalem and the West Bank (Jordan), and the Golan Heights (Syria). 

The mainstream African American reaction to the war was generally muted, though decidedly on the side of Israel. But the younger black liberation movement, now moving in an increasingly radical direction, had a very different response. Already, young black activists, building on the cultural politics articulated by leaders like Malcolm X and Baraka and influenced by the writings of anticolonialist and marxist Franz Fanon, had begun to describe the situation of African Americans as one of internal colonization. Increasingly, they drew parallels to the
struggles for decolonization: from Muhammad Ali’s jubilant affirmation that he was “not an American,” but “a black man,” to the young activists carrying around worn copies of *Wretched of the Earth*. These are “The Last Days of the American Empire,” Jones/Baraka wrote in 1964, and for African Americans to love America would be to become “equally culpable for the evil done to the rest of the world.”

This was nowhere more true than in SNCC, which, though it had been originally allied with the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Christian-based civil rights organizations, had become increasingly identified with the internal colonization model for understanding African American oppression. In May 1967, the organization made its internationalist approach apparent by declaring itself a “Human Rights Organization,” establishing an International Affairs Commission, applying for non-governmental organization (NGO) status at the United Nations, and announcing that it would “encourage and support the liberation struggles against colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation” around the world. This internationalist approach was not an innovation, or a radical departure; it built on both the anticolonial activism of earlier generations of black Americans and the more recent cultural and political influence of Islam and African-based religions. But SNCC’s stance was seen—as it was intended to be seen—as a clear indication that the organization was making a decisive break with the mainstream civil rights organizations and their model of liberation in one country.

It was in this context that the SNCC newsletter, in the summer of 1967, printed an article about the Arab-Israeli war. In June, just after the six-day war erupted, the Central Committee had requested that SNCC’s research and communications staff investigate the background to the conflict. A few weeks later, the organization newsletter carried an article that described the war and the post-war Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in a decidedly pro-Arab fashion. The list of facts about “the Palestine problem” was highly critical of Israel (and not just the recent war):

Did you know that the Zionists conquered Arab homes through terror, force, and massacres? Did you know … that the U.S. government has worked along with Zionist groups to support Israel so that America may have a toehold in that strategic Middle East location, thereby helping white America to control and exploit the rich Arab nations?”
The article was accompanied by a two cartoons and two photographs that many people considered anti-Semitic: one of the cartoons depicted Nasser and Muhammad Ali, each with a noose around his neck; holding the rope was a hand with a Star of David and dollar signs. An arm labeled “Third World Liberation Movements” was poised to cut the rope. One of the photos showed Israeli soldiers pointing guns at Arabs who were lined up against a wall, and the caption read: “This is Gaza, West Bank, not Dachau, Germany.”

The newsletter, and the statements supporting it, were widely denounced in the mainstream press and the Jewish community; the executive director of the American Jewish Congress called it “shocking and vicious anti-Semitism.” SNCC historian Clayborne Carson has argued that the article was “unauthorized” and based on the opinions of one individual, a staff writer had been influenced by the Nation of Islam and had Palestinian friends in college. But as Carson also points out, SNCC’s Central Committee had surely expected a pro-Palestinian orientation to the investigation they had requested, and they generally supported the conclusions it drew.

Carson believes that SNCC’s decision to take up the Arab-Israeli war was part of a general trend toward making “gratuitous statements on foreign policy issues”; by 1967, he concludes, support for Third World liberation struggles was the only ideological glue that could hold the fracturing organization together. Others mark the SNCC leaflet as an indicative moment, the coming out of a whole generation of young blacks who were “using Israel as the benchmark for their repudiation of their civil rights past.” Certainly it was the case that the 1967 Arab-Israeli war galvanized Jewish identity in the United States; thus criticism of Israel became a highly charged issue for Jews precisely at the moment that SNCC was making its public statements.

In general, these assessments have built on the assumption that, up to 1967, all available narratives of black liberation had placed African Americans in a defacto and unproblematic alliance with Israel—an alliance that would have continued had it not been for some individual or collective failure to sustain the domestic relationship forged between African Americans and American Jews in the civil rights movement. The fact that mainstream civil rights leaders quickly condemned the SNCC article and made statements in support of Israel seems at first to confirm this argument: the leaders of old civil rights coalition, influenced by the black Christian narratives of exodus and the model of
Zionism for black liberation, and perhaps appreciative of the role that Jews had played in the movement, felt an emotional commitment to Israel.92

But this division over the Arab-Israeli conflict also points to another story, the story of how the religious and cultural influence of Islam in the black community intersected with the increasing importance of decolonization movements worldwide. Placing SNCC's response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war in the context of black Islam and its role in the radicalization of African American culture and politics helps us reframe the questions we ask about that moment and about the history of black-Jewish and black-Arab relations overall.

This alternative analysis avoids the common conflation of black-Jewish relations within the United States, and the concomitant issues of racism and anti-Semitism, with the meanings and significance of the Middle East for African Americans. While it is clear that the two issues—domestic relationships on the one hand, and representations of Israel and the Arab Middle East, on the other—are related, too often the assumption has been that African American views of the Middle East must reflect black-Jewish relations in the United States, and must be, to the degree that these views are critical of Israel or express affiliation with Arabs, an expression of black anti-Semitism.93

This is not to say that anti-Semitism was not present in the black community and the Black Arts movement. It was, and sometimes virulently. And while it is useful to point out the ways in which economic tensions in urban areas framed anti-Jewish feeling, it is not sufficient to say, as James Baldwin once did, that blacks were anti-Semitic because they were anti-white.94 In the case of Baraka, and in many of the pronouncements of the NOI, there is a profound difference, both qualitative and quantitative, in the ways that white ethnicities were targeted. For example, in one well-known poem, "Black Arts," Baraka made offhand remarks about several groups, commenting in the violent rhetoric that was often typical of him, that ideal poems would "knockoff ... dope selling wops" and suggesting that cops should be killed and have their "tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland." But as Baraka himself later admitted, he held a specific animosity for Jews, as was apparent in the different intensity and viciousness of his call in the same poem for "dagger poems" to stab the "slimy bellies of the owner-jews" and for poems that crack "steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth."95

Certainly, anti-Jewish feeling did have a bearing on the ways in which some people (black and white) formed their understandings of
the Arab-Israeli conflict: there were instances at the time of the 1967 war—and there have been since—of people who began by talking about the Arab-Israeli issue and who ended by criticizing Jewish store owners or political leaders in the United States for matters unrelated to foreign policy.96 (Of course, the tendency to conflate criticism of Israeli actions with a criticism of Jews is not limited to African Americans.) But these anti-Semitic expressions simply don’t explain the pro-Arab feelings of many African Americans in this period: it is quite possible to be both anti-Jewish and anti-Arab, as the example of some Christian fundamentalist groups illustrates.

I suggest that African American investments in the Arab-Israeli conflict have a significant history aside from the tensions of black-Jewish relations—a history that developed within the black community as part of a search for religious and cultural alternatives to Christianity. This search was simultaneously as part of an ongoing process of redefining “blackness” in the United States. The struggle to define a black culture was never separable from the process of constructing transnational definitions of blackness—definitions that connected African Americans to people of color and anticolonialism all over the world, including, quite centrally, the Middle East.

Conclusion: Beyond the Black Atlantic

In the few short years since its publication, Paul Gilroy’s study of the transnational circulation of cultures and peoples that comprise the “Black Atlantic” has had a dramatic impact on the study of cultural and political identities. As part of new generation of scholarship that makes “border crossing” and hybridity central to its analysis, Gilroy (along with Lisa Lowe, George Lipsitz, and José Saldivar, among others) has provided a significant new paradigm, one that traces what Gilroy calls the “routes and roots” (the literal travel and the remembered histories) that shape transnational identities. These powerful interventions have moved cultural studies and American studies well beyond the nationalist presuppositions that have explicitly and implicitly defined their previous practice.97

But Gilroy’s analysis, extraordinary as it is, is also symptomatic in its exclusions. Two stand out. First, the reframing provided by the construct of the “Black Atlantic,” though useful, replaces one geographic entity (the nation) with another (the Atlantic). The move
reformulates, but does not overturn, the dependence of nationalist formations on literal, spatial connections for understanding cultural constructs of identity. Second, while Gilroy acknowledges some black (and particularly African American) connections with regions other than the Atlantic, he still refuses to see black identifications with the Arab world as anything other than a failure to identify sufficiently with Jewish history. These two limitations are linked, in that they both can be traced, at least in part, to lack of attention to Islam.

In the penultimate section of The Black Atlantic, revealingly titled “Children of Israel or Children of the Pharaohs,” Gilroy makes a compelling argument against some recent triumphalist definitions of blackness. “Afrocentrism” depends on constructing black history as a narrative of unfettered greatness from ancient Egypt onward. Gilroy challenges the Afrocentric model by insisting on the importance of acknowledging slavery—and thus loss, and dispossession—as central to a transnational black history. Scholars of black culture must not forget the themes of suffering, escape, memory, and identity that transverse black history and which unite certain strands of black and Jewish thought. By choosing to highlight slavery and the corresponding theme of diaspora, Gilroy’s project of remembrance illuminates the commonalities between black and Jewish history. In so doing, it points to the history of western anti-Semitism and anti-black racism as intersecting indictments of the modern construction of race. Such scholarship, Gilroy argues, can play a role in reasserting important political critiques of modernity, and of modernity’s racial categories. In other words, to insist on remembering slavery as a central part of the black experience is also to refuse to forget the centrality of racism in the project of modernity. This approach rejects the Afrocentric tendency to de-historicize black history through its myopic attention to ancient periods of rule, conquest, and triumphant kingdoms, in Egypt and elsewhere. It instead reminds us that a past marked by suffering and persecution, if properly remembered, may offer a special redemptive power to a people—"not for themselves alone but for humanity as a whole."998

Such remembrance is indeed crucial, both intellectually and politically. If it is to avoid its own kind of willful ahistoricism, however, this project also will need to account for the ways in which the meanings of Jewish history were transformed within black cultural production. Within important segments of African American public life, Jews, both
in Israel and in the United States, came to be identified less by their suffering than by their power. Black (post)-nationalism in the United States turned toward other models, beyond the exodus/Zionist model, for narrating hopes of African American liberation. By taking Islam seriously, we can contribute to an understanding of religion in the twentieth-century United States that moves beyond Judaism and Christianity, and attends to attend to the complex religious affiliations that also linked African American identity with the Arab and Islamic Middle East. That attention would then also expand our analysis of transnationalism, and require us to think about identities on a truly global scale—the “roots and routes” of cultural affiliations are not necessarily contiguous spaces.

Such a project also brings us back, in new ways, to one of the fundamental tensions in African American intellectual and cultural history since World War II: how are we to understand the relationships of African Americans to the project of U.S. nationalism and the realities of power in the nation-state? And how is that history bound up with the international relations of the nation as a whole? What does the role of the United States as the chief power of the postwar world (“the chief neocolonialist power” in Larry Neal’s phrase) mean for the notion of black or African American identity? What are the limits of seeing African American nationalisms as merely domestic matters?

Much of the discourse of civil rights viewed blackness as a subnational identity and saw the African American struggle as a striving for rights that would, if successful, transform the nation itself. At the same time, black nationalist writers tended to see blackness as a separate national identity, which would necessarily in time develop its own foreign policy, based on alliance with other peoples in a similar structural position as colonized people. But flowing through both of these visions has been another: that of blackness as a transnational identity, and African Americans as players in a truly global drama.

Thus African American cultural production in the era of black liberation challenged the very notion of a national identity by under- mining the categories—of land, of culture, of politics—that underlay it. That is one reason it matters. Not because transnational identities are magically unproblematic; the cultural radicalism of the 1960s often framed black identity in terms that were a-historical, masculinist, and anti-Semitic. This is its irony, its limit, and its loss. But the intervention was significant: a remapping of the world, an alternative moral
geography, and a new imagined community that did not begin and end with Africa. This alternative was far more than a policy critique, it was a redefinition and a remapping. It was the search for an identity that would be, as both Baraka and Neal put it, "post-American"—something outside of, and in opposition to, the expanding role of the United States on the world stage. Often centered in constructions of spirituality and religious belief, this African American narrative of counter-citizenship mobilized the Middle East as both a crucial signifier and a utopian gesture in the process of constructing black identities within and across national borders.

NOTES


12. The designation of Baraka came from a poll of thirty-eight prominent black writers published in the Jan. 1968 issue of Negro Digest. The writers also voted Baraka "the most important living black poet," and "the most important black playwright." Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: Quest for a Populist Modernism (New York, 1978), 264n.6. On Baraka's transformation to Maoism, see his Autobiography, 308–14.


20. Perhaps Elijah Muhammad was also incorporating some reference here to Asia Minor, which comprises most of modern Turkey.

22. Until Elijah Muhammad’s death in 1975, NOI generally used the term temples; after Wallace D. Muhammad took over leadership and began a transformation of the organization into the American Muslim Mission, with a more orthodox doctrine, the term mosques was used. Eventually, followers simply joined whatever local mosque was in their community, and the organization dissolved. The original NOI was revived by Louis Farrakkan in 1985. Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*, 99–135.

23. On Muslim slaves and early Muslim communities in the United States, see Richard Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington, Ind., 1997). There is some indication, however, that Muslim Africans were less likely than others to be taken and sold as slaves; see Morroe Berger, “The Black Muslims,” *Horizon* (winter 1966), 49–64.


27. On the theological difference between Nation of Islam and both Christianity and orthodox Islam, see Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad*, 144–86.


32. Jonathan Boyarin argues persuasively that the influence of the Exodus trope also worked in the other direction: the civil rights connotations of exodus played a role in the increasing tendency to use that rhetoric to represent Israel. “Reading Exodus into History,” *New Literary History* 23 (summer 1992), 540.


39. For a discussion of black responses to the King Tut exhibit, for example, see my


42. For example, a strong editorial in one early NOI publication, *The Moslem World and the U.S.A.*, quoted by Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 302.


44. Weisbord and Kazarian, quoting an interview with Baynard Rustin, make the argument for the retrospective significance of Suez in *Israel in the Black Perspective*, 31.


48. The book was excerpted in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 12 Sept. 1964, before its official publication. It was widely reviewed; see, for example, I. F. Stone’s review, “The Pilgrimage of Malcolm X,” in *The New York Review*, 11 Nov. 1965.


67. For example, in his pamphlet, “7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & the Need for a Black Value System,” later repr. in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*.

68. Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement” in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, ed. by Michael Schwartz (New York, 1989), 73. Mance Williams points out that the music of Sun-Ra had big influence on *A Black Mass*—Sun Ra performed the music for the original production, also heard on the recorded version of the play. *Black Theatre*, 23.


71. The transformation of the name of the villain Yacub into a name (and a spelling) that looks more like Jacob may have anti-Semitic overtones, though this is not explicit elsewhere in the play.

72. As Werner Sollors has pointed out, Baraka’s version of the story draws on the Frankenstein tale; he conflates the 600 years of Elijah Muhammad’s “history” into a single, terrible moment. *Quest for a Populist Modernism*, 211.

74. The link between sexuality and classic horror films has been extensively discussed; one interesting recent example is Rhona Berenstein, Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema (New York, 1996).

75. Philip Brian Harper, "Black Rhetoric and the Nationalist Call," in Are We Not Men, 50.

76. There have been several other important studies of the masculinist bias of much of the Black Arts movement. See Joyce Hope Scott, "From Foreground to Margin: Female Configurations and Masculine Self-Representation in Black Nationalist Fiction," in Nationalisms and Sexualities, ed. Andrew Parker, et. al. (New York, 1992); and E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism," in Words of Fire, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York, 1992).

77. "From: The Book of Life," for example, written after the Newark riots in 1967 and collected in Raise, Race, Rays, Raze.


91. See Arthur Hertzberg, "Israel and American Jewry," Commentary, Aug. 1967. Taylor Branch, "Blacks and Jews: The Uncivil War," in Bridges and Boundaries. Michael Stab argues that Holocaust memory and Israel were both important to Jews

92. Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, and Bayard Rustin sharply criticized the SNCC leaflet, and Martin Luther King made several statements of support for Israel after the 1967 war. In 1975, several leaders, including Bayard Rustin, William Fautnoy, and Andrew Young, formed BASIC (Black Americans in Support of Israel Committee), pamphlet in Schomberg clipping file, labeled “Israel.”


96. Carson points to one such example in the press conference given by SNCC program director Ralph Featherstone in the wake of the crisis, In Struggle, 268. Since the Nation of Islam was revived by Louis Farakkhan in 1975, these kind of statements have been frequent. Gardell, In the Name of Elijah Muhammad, 246ff. See also Ellen Willis, “The Myth of the Powerful Jew,” in Blacks and Jews.

97. Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts (Durham, N.C., 1996); Jose David Saldivar, Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); George Lipsitz, Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place (New York, 1994). These scholars are often drawing on postcolonial theory, including Homi Bhabha, esp. The Location of Culture (New York, 1994).