

BLACK ARTS AND WHITE DEVILS: THE THEATRE OF BLACK POWER

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1. Introduction

Politics, religion and art have always been closely associated in African-American culture. For instance, religious worship was one of the few areas where black slaves enjoyed scope for self- and social expression; religion offered them a unique space for vocalizing their desire for freedom, often hidden from their oppressors in reference to religious salvation in Negro spirituals. William Cook writes that the black church was designed to “fill a gap in the sociological and psychological life of Blacks.” It provided “a setting in which they could release their political energies, satisfy their desire for power and position, affirm their sense of specialness and worth, and find refuge from the uncertainty and terror of their everyday lives” (168).

In the modern Civil Rights Movement, the ideology of Black Power was cast frequently in terms of a new brand of religion, one that was more innate to black life than historical forms. Larry Neal defines Black Art as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept (“The Black Arts,” In Bean 55). Playwright and activist Amiri Baraka expands on this idea:

Art describes a culture. Black artists must have an image of what the Black sensibility is in this land. Religion elevates a culture. The Black Man must aspire to Blackness. God is man idealized. The Black Man must realize himself as Black. And idealize and aspire to that. ... The Black Man must seek a Black politics, an ordering of the world that is beneficial to his culture, to his interiorization, and judgment of the world. (*Raise* 248)

Since the Harlem Renaissance, the intersection of religion and politics has strongly informed the history of African-American dramatic writing. During the Black Power era, drama in particular

served as an important cultural forum in which black people could contest their political and social exclusion through the production and circulation of oppositional representations of American identity. Hence, drama came to be viewed by many political activists as an integral component of resistance. Playwright and activist Ed Bullins explains why drama came to be privileged as a means of protest over other forms of cultural production in the late 1960s:

I was busting my head trying to write novels and felt somehow that my people don't read novels. For the great bulk of them, they don't read novels. But when they are in the theater, then I've got them.... So I moved away from prose forms and into theater. ... now in the theater, we can go right into the Black community and have a literature for the people... (Marvin X, "Interview" viii).

Drama offered a form of communication that could help overcome class and educational differences in the black community, offering a more accessible avenue to political consciousness than other forms of literature. It did not require the same level of material resources as television or film media, industries in which black Americans had little purchase in the 1960s, and further, it offered an immediacy and visceral impact that other forms of oppositional literature might lack.

For Baraka, drama functions as an ideal vector of black politico-religious culture. In his influential treatise, "The Revolutionary Theater," he posits a dialectical relation between drama and lived culture:

The Revolutionary Theater must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. But it is a political theater, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

Baraka's thesis is an early elucidation of social construction theory in America, a premise often at odds with the author's own racial essentialism that is also a feature of much Black Power discourse. Nevertheless, what Baraka offers here is a paradigm whereby theater represents a social space in which the historical white construction of reality may be denaturalized. Baraka highlights the performative nature of lived culture. He writes:

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What is called the imagination ... is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our 'problems.' The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, and use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world.

Possibility is what moves us. ("Revolutionary Theatre")

As Kimberley Benston observes, Baraka recognizes that "what is at stake in revolutionary action [including theater] is precisely the power to define 'the real' itself" (34). In other words, imagination has a performative force that results in a range of cultural innovations; in turn, drama has a real use-value in day-to-day life by revealing new ways of thinking critically about a vast range of human experience and providing a model for black people to act in new ways.

This essay explores the strategies through which Black Power dramatists sought to transform individual and collective consciousness. The plays addressed are representative of how African-American drama in the late 1960s and early 70s revealed the ideological underpinnings of American identity and created counter-narratives of citizenship, and they illustrate how dramatists aimed to provide audiences (and readers) with an alternative possibility for American selfhood by developing a revised, black-centered version of American civil religion.

2. Militant Ministries

In 1967, sociologist Robert Bellah argued that America's constitutional separation of church and state did not deny the political realm a religious dimension:

Although matters of personal religious belief ... are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion.

Bellah identifies Biblical archetypes as the basis of this civil faith, for example, Chosen People, Promised Land, and New Jerusalem. However, he considers it also something that is "genuinely American and genuinely new," and concerned primarily "that America be a

society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men [sic] can make it, and a light to all nations”.

Werner Sollors notes that political and religious discourse, rooted in seventeenth-century Puritan thought, remained an important source for an amazingly heterogeneous range of ethnic and cultural definitions, including those forged within the Civil Rights Movements. (41) Just as mainstream American culture emphasized the role of religion in the formation of national identity, so too did African-American thought, in which a theologically inflected political code that casts the American subject as unique in its relation to God also features prominently. Historically, American politico-religious discourse reinforced a belief in white supremacy. As Vincent Harding points out, from the arrival of African-Americans in the US, they were confronted with a “Christ ... painted white and pink, blond and blue-eyed — and not only in white churches but in black churches as well. Hen — e, a key strategy for subverting the dominant civil religious sensibility was to re-configure the racial identity of God, and thereby, transform also the status of black Americans in the political order.

Black Power plays often colorized God, altering his racial and cultural complexion to reflect that of African-Americans. In Ben Caldwell’s *Prayer Meeting or, the First Militant Minister* (1967), a black man embodies the voice of God, making God into an advocate of Black Power; in this way, the play reverses the privileged position that white Americans claim in relation to Christianity, substituting African-Americans as God’s Elect.

The dramatic premise of *Prayer Meeting* is simple. While hiding behind a dresser to avoid detection by a black Christian minister, whose house he is robbing, a burglar overhears the minister asking God to save his people. When the burglar speaks, the minister mistakes him for Jesus, who has returned to earth in response to his prayer, and he capitalizes on this to re-educate the minister according to the tenets of Black Power.

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton comment on the nature of the power churchmen historically possessed in black life: “because ministers could invoke the authority of God, their word had almost a kind of divine authority in the black community” (111). But they point out, their authority was limited largely to their own communities, for it did not carry real weight with the white power structure. Nevertheless, their observation points to the importance of staging the conversion of a minister to the cause of Black Power. *Prayer Meeting* sends out a call to harness the authority of the black

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ministry in the service of communal self-determination, because church figures who encourage worship of a corrupted (read white) image of God offer no real protection to the majority of black people, and they actually stymie revolutionary potential.

As a spokesperson for American Christianity, the minister represents a figure of disequilibrium within the black community. When he objects to forms of action that disrupt white community order, he helps reinforce the socio-economic status-quo that places whites on top. Caldwell offers the minister as proof that black people need to dissociate themselves from American Christianity, which Harding defines as a religion that fosters “separation and selfishness and relentless competition” (89). This is encapsulated in the class divide that separates the characters; the minister comes from the middle-class, while the burglar represents the underclass, and these distinctions, as well as the generational divide between the men, impede the achievement of equality between blacks and whites, and among blacks.

Clayton Riley identifies a characteristic theme of Caldwell’s work as the exploration of “that painful break between the young who are Black, and their elders – parents – who were not allowed to be” (xvi). In so far as the minister may be said to have a black identity, it is a white-authored one, which accords with the stereotype of the Negro who craves to mimic his white superiors. This is immediately detectable in the play’s setting, which replicates the design of typical WASP suburban home. The minister’s bedroom is decorated in French provincial furnishings, and strewn around it are the consumer items that come as a reward for cooperating with the dominant order of things.

The generational divide also plays out with reference to the characters’ interpretation and use of Christian doctrine, reflecting the increasing divide among black Christians at the time of the play’s production. Before the 1960s, the majority of African-Americans who professed a Christian faith retained a belief in the God of American tradition, and most worked for civil rights as well as personal spiritual salvation within the bounds of that tradition. Such conservatism informed the manner in which black churches approached civil rights, which advocates of Black Power viewed as overly accommodating toward the white power structure.

In 1966, however, the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) issued a groundbreaking response to the political and religious controversies that were engulfing black and white

communities. The “Black Power Statement,” published in the *New York Times*, was signed by 48 leaders of influential churches across the country. In keeping with politico-religious convention, the NCBC interpreted the social upheavals of the 1960s as a sign of God intervening in American history: as “the judgment of God upon our nation for its failure to use its abundant resources to serve the real well-being of the people, at home and abroad” (265). At the same time, the Committee questions the connection between God and America by referring to the blasphemous tendency of those in power to assume a position equal, and sometimes even superior, to that of God.

James Cone considers the NCBC’s “Statement” to mark the beginning of a conscious black theology, one which cast white theology as morally bankrupt. According to Cone, the new black theology dissociates the Gospel from white Christianity and connects it explicitly with blacks’ contemporary struggles for social justice (11). Caldwell’s play reflects this key transformative moment in black politico-religious thinking, particularly the increasing dissatisfaction felt by Black Power activists regarding Dr. Martin Luther King’s non-violent approach to race issues, and which encouraged close alliances with white religious communities.

The minister’s use of religion to quell social protest reflects the NCBC’s observation that “Too often the Negro church has stirred its members away from the reign of God in *this world* to a distorted and complacent view of an *otherworldly* conception of God’s power” (268). The play highlights how adherence to an *otherworldly* God results in personal and social alienation for blacks, and indeed, separation from any meaningful sense of the spiritual. The minister’s prayers are hollow, illustrated by the stage directions: “*It’s as though he’s rehearsing a role he plays, checking to hear if he sounds convincing in his role*” (Caldwell 30).

The minister’s spiritual lack reflects the traditional faith he embodies. Prayer *Meeting* illustrates one of the focal points of Black Power discourse, that is, the idea that white churches had been the “moral cement” of racist structures in American society throughout its history (NCBC 208). This is evidence by the minister’s prayers to the “American Christ.” Harding defines this Christ as the mascot that blesses “every mad American act, from the extermination of the original possessors of this land to the massacre of the Vietnamese on their own soil” (92). That he serves such a mascot is evidenced most clearly by the minister’s reaction to the beating and murder of a black

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man by the police: "What a trying, troublesome day. Trying to console my people 'bout brother Jackson's death... They say the officer hit him a few times. Brother Jackson could've taken a little beatin'" (Caldwell 30).

For the burglar, the hypocrisy of American religion is invested in the figure of Christ, and thus his first move to convert the minister involves denying the primacy of Jesus. He insists that there is only one divine being, God: "And stop calling me Jesus. My name is God!" (Caldwell 35), thereby disconnecting the God of American Christianity – embodied in Christ – from the God of Black Power represented by Jehovah.

The burglar condemns the minister's response to the institutional murder of Brother Jackson as treasonous to the cause of black freedom. The minister advocates "turning the other cheek" because he has been warned by the mayor that if he does not intervene to stop the unrest "there'll be trouble . . . and more killing!" (Caldwell 31).

The burglar describes this response as "bullshitting God." He warns the minister that God knows: "You ain't worried 'bout what's gon happen to your people. You worried 'bout what's gon' happen to you if something happens to your people ... and whitey won't need *you* no more" (Caldwell 31).

American Christianity, as far as it enables the partial assimilation of some blacks, is configured as a depoliticizing and even lethal agent: in particular, it siphons off middle-class blacks who possess education and leadership potential, like the minister, and whose talents are viewed as especially needed in the vanguard of the movement.

Accordingly, *Prayer Meeting* follows the NCBC's "Statement" where it adheres to American tradition and invokes the idea of a special relationship between God and Americans, while significantly rewriting its racial history. Explicitly identifying black Americans as God's "chosen people" (Caldwell 33), the burglar orders the minister to organize a protest march to avenge Brother Jackson's death: "You tell my people to be ready. Ready for whatever might come. Tell them I don't want no more cheek turning'. Tell them I will be with them (Caldwell 34).

J. Deotis Roberts, however, speaks of the need to remain "aware of the perils as well as the promises of the idea of the chosen people."

The concept has been more frequently exploited and misused than it has been properly and fruitfully used. The usage has often been deadly to an oppositional group, but it has likewise been negative in its effects upon the sponsoring group as well.

Nonetheless, he concludes by asserting that “the promises outweigh any difficulties”. (22)

Caldwell, too, appears to trust in the promise of re-inscribing dominant cultural myths, for *Prayer Meeting* ends with optimism concerning the ability of the black community to repair the divide between self-defined Christian ‘Negros’ and self-determined black men. The minister completely reverses his position. He is shown preaching before a Bible and a gun, demonstrating that he no longer fears upsetting powerful white interests; to the contrary, he voices support for the *Old Testament* injunction to take “an eye for an eye,” implicitly advocating a holy war against those who are responsible for the destruction of black life.

Ultimately, the way in which Caldwell interweaves religion and politics represents both progressive and regressive inclinations. *Prayer Meeting* fails to challenge regressive nationalist beliefs about America as the New Jerusalem, nor does it contest the tendency of mainstream rhetoric to combine Christian and militaristic images. Nevertheless, the play is significant for how it demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of American civil religion, even within radically dissenting communities, and *Prayer Meeting* reflects an important strategy of resistance, based on co-opting elements of American Christianity, that informed the black liberation struggle in the late 1960s.

In contrast, Jimmy Garrett’s *And We Own the Night* (1968), argues for the need to jettison outright the American version of Christianity, and perhaps religion itself. Garrett’s play pits Johnny, a young revolutionary, against his mother, a devout mainstream Christian who follows Dr. King’s teachings. The play focuses on the role played by women in dampening black revolutionary potential, in particular how their allegiance to white Christianity causes the disintegration of the black community in its nucleus by fracturing mother-child bonds. Neal considers Garrett’s mother figure to represent an “Old Spirituality” that equates manliness with white morality, while Johnny and his revolutionary brothers represent an emergent black spirit: “even though she claims to love her family and her men, the overall design of her ideas are against black manhood. In Garrett’s play, the mother’s morality manifests itself in a deep-seated hatred of Black men (“The Black Arts,” In *Drama Review* 38).

Mother’s antagonism toward Johnny is revealed within the context of his participation in an armed street protest against white oppression. Garrett’s revolutionary fighters are modelled on the Black

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Panthers, who saw their struggle for racial justice as part of a global anti-colonial movement, in which Marxist and Maoist doctrines often overrode religious ones. For this reason, more conservative African-American churches saw Black Power, especially as practised by the Panthers, as actively threatening the political progress made by blacks since the end of World War II. Whereas Martin Luther King preached that there was no need for any but passive resistance because "God is able to conquer the evils of history" (111), Black Power advocated "any means necessary" to achieve the movement's aims, and the emphasis placed on the community's defence of its rights, including armed defence if necessary, often led to its depiction as un-Christian, and actively irreligious.

Within the world of the play, the actions of Johnny and his "brothers" are meant to be viewed as justifiable self-defence against institutionalized racist violence. However, Mother perceives their actions as an instance of anarchic aggression, and she vehemently condemns Johnny's involvement. She appeals to God to help her put an end to her son's sinful behaviour -- "fightin the police" and "burnin' down White folks' businesses." She prays for strength to persuade him to leave the movement, but Johnny rejects his mother's pacifism. Her stance, he argues, serves only to give the white man the chance to "shoot you in the back while you're on your knees prayin' to [his] God" (Garrett 536). He explains what he is doing in the movement is finally "being a man. A black man. And I don't need a white man's God to help me" (Garrett 534).

Johnny depicts his mother as the product and purveyor of a creed that transmits debilitating, even deadly values to black male youth. She is shown to be so thoroughly programmed in white Christian ways of thinking that she rejects her own son for the son of a white God. As Johnny lay on the ground after the riot, his mother condemns him for "stealing, killing and cursing God, for becoming a heathen" (Garrett 540); then she abandons him to die in an alleyway. By showing Johnny's mother to be more distressed over his destruction of white property than his fatal injury, Garrett reveals how the "values of capitalism are so ingrained into American culture that many church persons assume that they are the same as Christian values" (Cone 184).

Cornell West describes Dr. King's perspective on the struggle for civil rights as a product of a prophetic black church tradition, in which faith would lead to freedom. In other words, Martin Luther King accepted prophetic American civil religion, which views secular and

sacred history as connected and combines Christian themes of deliverance and salvation with political ideals of democracy, freedom and equality (426). Similarly, Benjamin E. Mays, in a comprehensive survey of the idea of God in black literature, identifies a compensatory pattern in which writers trust in God to usher in a righteous American democracy that will include people of color; it envisioned God as one who answers prayers – the prayers of the just. This idea encouraged the belief that blacks must simply be patient and wait for God to act in response to their prayers and against white oppression, rather than agitate to eliminate the sources of their social ills (23-4, 193-94).

And We Own the Night is exemplary of the new genre of black dramatic writing that emerged in the late 1960s and that stands as the anti-thesis to protest literature, which argued for full social inclusion in national life based on a shared relation to God between black and white Americans. The play suggests that King's methods, rooted in the prophetic, compensatory black church tradition, achieved only a paper freedom: although blacks might have enjoyed new liberties as a result of Civil Rights legislation, in reality nothing much had changed day-to-day in black life, particularly among poor urban communities in the North. Like Caldwell, Garrett represents American Christianity as a venomous mix for blacks – a system that works to keep them subordinate by virtue of preaching non-violence as the best hope, and only moral stance, in the struggle for equality. To the contrary, Garrett posits that by professing a Christian faith black people are in effect committing cultural, if not literal, suicide, for their desire to be Christian is equated with a desire to obliterate their own black identity.

However, Garrett's play is less clear about the future role of religion *per se* in the Black Power Movement than is *Prayer Meeting*. On the one hand, the play embodies an embryonic Marxism, presenting Christianity as incompatible with black struggles for equality; the play gestures toward Christianity as an American myth: one that serves to create a "tranced desire to be the thing that oppressed [blacks], and 'programmed' ... [us] into believing that our greatest destiny was to become white people" (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 240). On the other hand, though, *And We Own the Night* encompasses some of the same aims as emerging black liberation theology in the period, that is, to "speak realistically and cogently for a people whose lives have been worn down, defeated, forgotten, and ... reclaim that people from the humiliation and shame of being Black within the context of a pro-White culture" (Jones 3).

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3. White Devils

Another significant theme addressed in Black Power drama is a vision of Black Nationalism based in Islam. As one of the two leading spokespersons of the Civil Rights era, Malcolm X made an appealing figure for dramatic treatment. N. R. Davidson's play *El Hajj Malik: a Play about Malcolm X* (1968) uses his Islamic faith to emphasize the importance of religion to contemporary black politics.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in 1925 to a practicing Christian Baptist family. In 1953, after becoming a Black Muslim, he renounced his 'slave name' Little to become Malcolm X, the X symbolizing his lost African tribal name. Then, in 1964 after leaving the Nation of Islam, he took the name El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz. Davidson's play, however, is much more than the life-story of an iconic Black Power activist. *El Hajj Malik* interweaves and frames Malcolm's personal experiences with a communal "I." Ten different actors play Malcolm so that his personal experience registers as typical of life stories in the larger community.

The play employs Malcolm's history to reiterate the argument that allegiance to Christianity is nothing short of a suicidal act for blacks, with the passive "Negro" victim represented as the effect of its ideology. For example, Act one recounts the night that Malcolm's home was attacked by the Ku Klux Klan when he was 6. During this assault, his father, the Reverend Earl Little, was killed. The Klan, described as a group of "good Christian white people," highlights the frequent hypocrisy and immorality of the Christian church in America concerning racial politics. In addition, the murder of Reverend Little, a minister in the Baptist Church, foregrounds the futility of blacks trusting in white institutions for salvation, spiritual or otherwise, for, the play suggests, color prejudice undermines true religious values in America.

Malcolm casts American Christianity as one of the most significant parts of racist discourse because it taught the 'Negro' that:

his Native Africa ... was peopled by heathens, black savages, swinging like Monkeys from trees. This 'Negro' was taught to worship an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin and blue eyes as the slavemaster. He was taught that black was a curse. He was taught to hate everything black, including himself. (Davidson 237-38)

Consequently, all of white culture, even seemingly innocuous aspects, must be rejected. For instance, Actor Ten, posing as Malcolm's brother, insists that Malcolm must abstain from cigarettes and Pork because they are the "symbols and filth of the devil" (Davidson 229).

The explicit connection between whiteness and evil is a key theme in the play. The evil of the 'White Man' is identified as rooted in his racism, expressed most notably in his creation of the 'Negro,' and the consequent denial of the black person's humanity. Actor Nine explains: "You don't who you are... You don't know who you are because you are your history, and your history has been hidden from you. You don't know that the white devil in his evil has hidden your identity from you" (229).

The equation of whiteness with evil aimed to counteract more than 200 years of politico-religious discourse that had used images of the racialized other as symbols of malevolence and vice. Thus, salvation for Malcolm cannot come solely through acknowledging Allah as the one, true God; it is necessary at the same time that he recognizes the 'real devil' and the 'devil's works' that are taking place around him. Only after Malcolm accepts The Nation of Islam's story of genesis and the origin of good and evil does Actor Three confirm that "You are saved, Malcolm, you are saved" (231). Salvation in this sense refers to a traditional sense of religious deliverance in the here-after, but perhaps more important, it signifies a new valid political awareness that can be translated into a social revolution, which will enable black people to resist oppression and create a better life for themselves in the present. That Malcolm X argued for the necessity of reparations even after splitting with The Nation is a case in point. According to The Nation's teachings, white repentance must involve granting to blacks a separate land base and destiny financed by the repayment of the economic debts incurred during slavery.

John Wilson explains the better life envisioned by the Nation of Islam. The Nation's brand of nationalism was aimed at self-determination within the geographical borders of the US, but, nevertheless, separate from white communities. The Black Muslims, Wilson records, "achieved considerable public attention during the 1960s because their hostility toward whites and the demand for black self-determination resonated so well with the emerging theme of black power" (376). According to Carmichael, Black Power represented "Cultural and psychological self-determination:"

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The underlying and fundamental notion was that black folks needed to begin openly, and had the right and the duty, to define for ourselves, in our own terms, our real circumstances, possibilities, and interests relative to white America. To consciously and publicly free ourselves from the heritage of demeaning definitions and limitations imposed on us, over centuries of colonial conditioning by a racist culture. (527)

While this program of self-determination involved cultural practices that did not depend upon the denigration of white society, such as an expressed preference for the term black over “Negro” and the celebration of traditions drawn from African connections, it would be disingenuous to suggest that some proponents of Black Power, both those associated with The Nation and other secular followers, did not posit the new black social, political and religious order that they were working to bring about as superior. There is a clear sense in *El Hajj Malick* that as the black man, in his Islamic guise, is being raised closer to God his racial antagonist – the ‘White Man’ – is being demoted in the hierarchy.

This stance reflects Malcolm’s early position on race relations, best summarized in his response to the white girl who comes to him and asks: “Minister Malcolm, what can I do?” in the movement. Malcolm as Actor one, responds: “Nothing.”

After three centuries in which we were lynched and forced to strangle on our manhood, and our women forced, forced to submit to White men, *you* ask what it is you can do. And what have you to offer? The glory of Western civilization and your white breasts. They are worthless. (Davidson 237)

Yet, the play recognizes also the progressive development in Malcolm X’s politico-religious thinking. Davidson notes the changes in Malcolm’s views after his resignation from The Nation of Islam. Following his travels in the Middle East, particularly his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X’s position shifted away from an uncritical anti-white bias. His autobiography records that even before arriving he experienced an epiphany concerning how different race relations could be to what he had known in America. He writes, obviously amazed: “Packed on the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair – all together, brothers! All honouring the same God Allah, all in turn giving equal honor to each other” (436).

The play mirrors this reformation in thought, with Malcolm, as Actor Eight, remarking: “I no longer subscribe to the sweeping

indictments of one race. My pilgrimage to Mecca ... served to convince me that perhaps American whites can be cured of the rampant racism which is consuming them and is about to destroy this country” (Davidson 240). The emphasis though is on *perhaps*, for Malcolm undergoes a broadening rather than a complete reversal of thinking. Again, the play follows the biography of its namesake as recorded by Alex Hayley, when Malcolm claims: “No religion will ever make me forget the continued fighting with dogs against our people in this country. ... No God, no religion, no *nothing* will make me forget it until it stops....” (Davidson 240). *El Hajj Malik* does not proffer a solution to the fundamental tension between Islam’s call to embrace all humanity in peace and the need of blacks to fight the power and corrupt privileges of white society, but the play offer the possibility at least that embracing Islam can contribute toward a civil rights movement that can ameliorate the scars of America’s racist history. Unusually for Black Power plays, then, Davidson’s treatment of Malcolm X’s life explores a potential path to greater freedom for both black and white Americans.

In contrast, Marvin X’s *The Black Bird (Al Tair Aswad)* [1969] takes a more combative stance in its presentation of Black Islam. The play contains an explicit evangelical objective: it openly calls for the black spectator to adopt the Muslim faith as the surest path to political freedom. Specifically, the play supports the brand of Islam practiced within The Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, with the stage set dominated throughout by a large poster of Muhammad, who is referred to as the Messenger of Allah.

The play illustrates how some strands of Black Power activism in the 1960s and 70s intersected with the beliefs and practices of the Nation. However, the Nation’s origins date to the Depression era, with the zenith of its influence coming after the Second World War in part due to Muhammad’s charismatic style. His followers, who were more popularly known as Black Muslims, worked to systematically reverse blacks’ traditional mind-set: the idea of blackness that had been promulgated historically through the white imagination. The Nation’s teachings appealed particularly to poor black people based in America’s inner cities, and the group reached out to some of the most alienated members of the community. It ran an extensive self-help program for convicts, for instance, resulting in a high conversion rate among black men who had served time in prison, including, as touched upon in Davidson’s play, Malcolm X. Accordingly, Marvin X

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makes the two young heroines of his play representative of the black under-class.

J. Herman Black identifies the Nation's strong social component as the binding force in the organization. Tied to scriptural readings and prophecies, The Nation prescribed a set of rituals that gave members a sense of shared experience and identity, with the aim of enabling them to resist the inferior status imposed on them by American mainstream society. Black describes the rituals as including: the study of Islam (as interpreted by Muhammad), the study of black history both in its African and African-American contexts, a program of economic nationalism involving the foundation and support of independent black business, and a complete renunciation of the vestiges of slavery: slave names, English as a first language, the American flag, even Southern food like pork chops, and the rejection of Christianity (45).

The Black Bird represents a dramatic unfolding of the "mental resurrection" that presumably would result were The Nation to succeed in creating a separate black state based on their program. By means of his young protagonist, called simply Brother, Marvin X asserts that only The Nation can lead black Americans to political freedom because material freedom is viewed as inextricably tied to valid religious liberation. Brother, an oppositional figure of Black (male) Power, represents an idealized example of the Fruit of Islam – the male paramilitary arm of The Nation. The action of the play follows Brother as he conducts a dialogue with two sisters over the nature of God. Brother's speeches resemble sermons, based in part on Muslim prayers, but ironically incorporating the traditional form of black Christian worship known as "call and response." In fact, despite the Qu-ran featuring as the central text of Islam, Brother focuses at least as much on the language of *The Bible*.

On the surface, this may seem to contradict the play's political objectives, yet The Nation did not deny biblical scripture. The problem as they saw it was that scripture had been perverted by the American religious establishment, in collusion with the white political order, to render blacks powerless; thus, it required reinterpretation so that "mankind will not be snared by the falsehoods that have been added to it" ("What the Muslims Want" n. pag.). Brother is shown to be a master of Biblical as well as Islamic discourse; thus, he symbolizes a suitably qualified opponent to his named enemy — the 'White Man' — who has abused Christian teachings in his quest for domination.

Edward Said writes that the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (xiii). Brother relies upon the power of narrative when he puts forward a black nationalist interpretation of *The Bible*, firstly with reference to God’s racial identity, and, secondly, concerning the surpassing of Christian doctrine by Islamic scripture. Similar to Caldwell’s *Prayer Meeting*, *Black Bird* attempts to undermine conventional politico-religious belief by remaking God as Black. Brother insists that: “Allah is God, The Only God — Allah is the Black Man — Allah is your daddy” (Marvin X 113).

Brother replaces white Americans as God’s chosen people with black subjects, declaring a patriarchal relation between Allah — the true God — and the black race. In this way, he refutes the founding construction of the American subject. John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” (1630), for instance, makes this claim for the Puritan settlers:

the Lord loves the creature, so far as it hath any of his Image in it; He loves his elect because they are like Himself, He beholds them in His beloved son. So a mother loves her child, because she thoroughly conceives a resemblance of herself in it.

In this passage, Winthrop naturalizes the relation between the Christian God and white humanity. In direct opposition to this, Brother substitutes Allah for the Christian God in the divine equation, thereby making it appear natural for the black subject to follow the God of Islam given that s/he has been made in Allah’s image. In this way, he removes one of the planks supporting the idea of America as the New Jerusalem, refashioning dominant myth into a reflection of a Black Nationalist moral and political lexicon.

In turn, this amendment of the divine order challenges white Americans’ authority to govern the nation. This is demonstrated most clearly when Brother gives 2nd Sister a catechism in naming, during which he dissociates the founding fathers from the idea of divinity with which they are conventionally associated in American nationalist discourse.

Brother. Well, what’s your daddy’s name.
2nd Sister: Thomas Jefferson Jones

...

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Brother: His name ain't Thomas Jefferson Jones. Thomas Jefferson Jones is a white man's name. Your daddy ain't white, is he?

2nd Sister: Naw, he ain't white.

Brother: Better be glad.

1st Sister: He cullud!

...

Brother: He's Black, little Sister. He ain't cullud. Black ain't no color it just is — it always was. Be glad you Black. We all Black. Black is the best. White wish they was Black. God is Black!
(Marvin X 112)

Instead of a set of divinely inspired heroes who established a New Jerusalem, *Black Bird* links the founding fathers to the creation of a profoundly unjust society and a set of white racist institutions – in Jefferson's case the continuation of slavery itself, and a system that the play indentifies with demonic forces. In accordance with The Nation's black liberation theology, *Black Bird* depicts a Manichean divide between white politico-religious discourse and black Islam. As demonstrated also in *El Hajj Malik*, The Nation's teaching rendered the qualities of whiteness, physical and psychological, as evil — exemplified most notably in its oft-quoted description of whites as "blue-eyed devils."

In "What do the Muslims want?" published in the Nation's newsletter in 1962, blacks are identified as the true people with whom God wished to make a new covenant — not the heirs of the founding white fathers. They were "the people of God's choice because it had been written that God would choose the rejected and the despised. "We can find no other persons fitting this description in these last days other than the so-called "Negroes" in America" (reprinted in Bracey 406).

The play transmits this message in the form of the Parable of the Black Bird, which Brother introduces as a story about Allah's children. Brother tells of how the bird sings his master's song instead of bird songs, and prefers the crumbs from his table to "righteous soulfood." The bird is so alienated from his sanctified nature that he appears happy in captivity. One day the black bird nearly dies when his master's house catches fire and he is left behind, because, despite his cage door being open, he refuses to fly away. The tale ends happily, though, when another bird intervenes: he grabs the Black Bird and flies him home, just as Brother saves the sisters at the end of the play by converting them to Islam. The moral of the tale is that black people can never be assimilated into white America, where they

will always be the “other,” still mentally, if no longer physically, enslaved.

The purpose of plays like *Black Bird*, Samuel Hay asserts, is to depict seizures of power, rather than represent appeals to share power (96); accordingly, they create an atmosphere in which change seems plausible provided correct action is taken. This accounts for the play’s fantasy elements (including the bird’s flight), which, taken out of context, could be seen as creating a political paradox. For instance, the play credits The Nation with having already successfully circumvented the American politico-religious order, while, at the same time, it argues the necessity for wholesale black conversion to Islam in order to bring about a new world order.

In the play, blacks and whites have retreated already to separate spheres, separatism being fundamental to Black Muslim thought as preached by The Nation. In these distinct spheres, blacks live a peaceful existence in an Islamic state under the leadership of their president and spiritual leader, Elijah Muhammad, whose seat of power is the Black House. In contrast, the White House, occupied by “their” President Nixon, is identified as the source of a chaotic, immoral system – it is described as the “home of the devil,” explicitly racially designated as the “White Man” (Marvin X 114). Thus, *Black Bird* gives a new twist to millennial beliefs when it represents white America as the old order, a perverted enterprise that has degenerated to the point where it has no choice but to make way for a righteous black nation.

El Hajj Malik demonstrates the potential for theatre in the Black Power era to serve as a space alongside the traditional black church and political arena where people could go to confirm their humanity in a racist culture. In keeping with the other representative examples of Black Power drama addressed here, Marvin X’s play reveals how drama formed an important part of the process of challenging and revising American mythmaking surrounding the discriminating reading of national identity in the late 1960s and early 70s. Moreover, whether addressing Christianity in the context of civil rights, or Islam, Black Power drama afforded spectators a utopian vision of sacred black identity and nationhood, one in which religion was a mainspring for both revelation and revolution.

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RESUMO: Neste artigo, exploro como o teatro do Black Arts Movement constituiu um importante fórum público no decurso do movimento em defesa dos direitos civis nos EUA. A representação dramática das identidades branca e negra professada pelos dramaturgos do Black Power desafiou a validade da ideologia dominante que rodeava a identidade nacional, sobretudo por subverter os dogmas da religião civil norte-americana. Demonstrou, assim, que os mitos que rodeiam a identidade nacional unem alguns americanos e causam fraturas violentas entre outros. Contudo, histórias dissidentes da vida e identidade norte-americanas que caracterizaram o drama do Black Arts Movement no final dos anos sessenta e início dos anos setenta ofereceram mais do que meras respostas à corrente dominante. Antes, as peças que emergiram no contexto do ativismo e da filosofia do Black Power proporcionaram às audiências novas e alternativas concepções da identidade americana, com as quais os afro-americanos, historicamente excluídos das narrativas do eu nacional, se identificaram e puderam emular.

ABSTRACT: This essay explores how theater of the Black Arts Movement served as an important public forum in the American Civil Rights Movement. The dramatic representations of black and white identities proffered by Black Power dramatists challenged the validity of dominant ideology surrounding national identity primarily by subverting the tenets of American civil religion, and thereby demonstrating how myths surrounding national identity bind some together while causing violent ruptures between other kinds of Americans. However, dissenting stories of American national life and identity that characterized drama of the Black Arts movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s offered more than mere responses to the mainstream. Rather, plays that emerged out of the context of Black Power activism and philosophy provided audiences with new, alternative conceptions of American identity, with which black Americans, historically excluded from narratives of the national self, could identify and emulate.