"The Prophet Murdered for the Profit of the Beast": Christianity, Capitalism, and Slavery in the Work of Amiri Baraka

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“THE PROPHET MURDERED FOR THE PROFIT OF THE BEAST”: CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM, AND SLAVERY IN THE WORK OF AMIRI BARAKA

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A thesis submitted to the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of the Arts

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# Table of Contents

Abstract..................................................................................................................................................iii

INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................1

1) “MONEY, GOD, POWER”: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN
THE EARLY WRITINGS OF AMIRI BARAKA.........................................................6

   I) Bohemian Religious Scholarship...............................................................................................8
   II) Christian Slavery and Divine Law............................................................................................12

2) RAISE RACE: THE QUEST FOR A REVOLUTIONARY GOD.........................18

   I) Home: New Nationalism and Christian Subjugation.........................................................21
   II) Raise Race Rays Raze: Reaffirming Nationalism with Religion......................................27
   III) Islam as Alternative.............................................................................................................31

3) THIRD WORLD REVOLUTION AND THE PROPHET’S PROFIT...........37

   I) Daggers and Javelins: Social Essays......................................................................................39
   II) A Few Notes on Selected Plays............................................................................................46
   III) Funk Lore: Re-evaluating Christianity within African-American
       Culture.......................................................................................................................................49
   IV) Who Really Blew Up America? The West as the Power-Seat of the
       Devil..........................................................................................................................................57
   V) “Why Are They So Crazy?” Baraka’s Marginalization by the
       Mainstream...............................................................................................................................67

CONCLUSION.................................................................................................................................68

REFERENCES.................................................................................................................................71

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH..............................................................................................................73
ABSTRACT

In Hard Facts, Amiri Baraka’s first volume of Marxist poetry, the poem “When We’ll Worship Jesus” catalogues the poet’s disillusionment and ambivalence about accepting religion as a possible weapon to combat racial and economic injustice. Baraka writes:

capitalists racists
imperialists not afraid
of jesus shit they makin money
off jesus  […]
jesus aint did nothing for us
but kept us turned toward the
sky (him and his boy allah
too, need to be checkd
out!)  (251-252)

Aside from his insistence on the inability of Christianity to positively influence the political realm (“capitalists racists / imperialists not afraid / of jesus”), Baraka reveals the power of subjugation that religion holds over the politically and socially disenfranchised since its inception into mainstream culture by the culturally and economically elite:

we aint gonna worship jesus cause jesus dont exist […] except in
slum stained
tears or trillion dollar opulence stretching back in history, the
history
of the oppression of the human mind  (253)

For Baraka, Christian religion is just another slave-system—an instrument of economic subjugation that forces the lower classes to view their subservient status as natural and sanctioned by a higher, abstract form.

“Beginnings: Malcolm” from his most recent volume of poetry, Somebody Blew Up America reveals the origins of the devil in Western capitalistic systems:

When the Beast emerged from the western sea […]
he had no soul, and they’d
created money, the animal king, the coin, the khan,
the con, hard currency (3)

The Beast’s origin in “the western sea” accounts for Baraka’s view of capitalism as an instrument of evil designed to oppress the lower economic classes. Capitalism is also posited as a residual element of the West-African slave trade. Just like slavery, religion keeps “us turned toward the sky,” constantly promoting submission to the cultural elite. In this way religion advocates “slum stained tears” and the creation of cultural martyrs that view oppression and pain as a viable and necessary part of the social order. Baraka also maintains that the bourgeoisie and its “trillion dollar opulence” advocate these oppressive systems in order to limit social mobility and ensure the continued exploitation of the lower classes and the continued dominance of the cultural elite.

Baraka’s attention to economic striation and the burdens of capitalistic systems in his Third-World Marxist phase seems to inform his recent adoption of religious imagery to delineate the difference between the oppressor and the oppressed—the predator and the prey. To the extent that world religions—particularly Christianity—do not address class difference and the liberation of subjugated peoples, Baraka maintains an overt aversion to their embrace of victimization as a vehicle to attain abstract notions of comfort in otherwise oppressive capitalistic systems.

But while Baraka is quick to point the finger at Christianity for its complicity in maintaining the status quo, he does not go so far as to identify exact points of reference for his criticisms. Rather, he often concerns himself with vague attacks and incomplete evaluations of Christianity’s influence on the motion of world history. He is also quick to associate the Roman Catholic Church—the main beacon of Christian philosophy prior to the reformation—with other post-reformation sects that each harbored distinct beliefs regarding the ownership of slaves and the ability of the lower-classes to ascend the social and economic ladder.

Tracing Baraka’s beliefs about the inability of Christianity to address the potential liberation of subjugated peoples globally, one must inevitably conclude that his assessments are based on very broad, subjective situations and outcomes. As an artist, Baraka has the unique ability to ask certain questions and reach certain conclusions.
without resorting to scientific methods of evaluation, which may, if they are employed properly, lend credibility to his assessments. But Baraka is neither concerned with an objective class analysis or with positing a true scientific theorem within the existing body of cultural studies. His concerns are steeped within an artistic platform that utilizes emotionalism and spontaneous shock values in order to posit the inevitable decline of Christianity and its lack of a true scientific base.

To reach such conclusions within a constantly shifting subjectivity such as Baraka’s is to inevitably undermine the entire enterprise, but Baraka’s views on Christianity should not be side-stepped or written off as the incoherent ramblings of a reactionary. His beliefs are steeped within an expanding body of historical data and are, for the most part, in accordance with the ebb and flow of modern history, despite his tendency to fracture or reduce certain historical points into easy-to-digest—and sometimes skewed—vantage points.

But with regard to Baraka’s belief that Christianity lacks the capacity to tangibly improve the life of subjugated peoples, we must lend an open ear. His work takes us on a ride through the ups and downs of modern history in order to show us the true face of modern religious movements and their tendency to subjugate peoples and resort to violence as a manifestation of the prophet’s message.
INTRODUCTION

While preparing for this study, I was shocked to realize that no work had been done on Amiri Baraka’s critique of Christianity or religion in general. Although one can easily find a few lines dedicated to his study of Buddhism in the Beat phase and volumes written on Islam in the Black Nationalist phase, no one seems to have picked up on the importance of Christianity in the formation of his politics. However, few artists have written as extensively as Baraka on the intimate historical link between Christianity, slavery, and emergent capitalism—and few topics have been as thoroughly revisited throughout each of his respective “phases” as Christianity.

In his essay, “Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ,” Frederick Douglass describes his position as the slave of a Christian master as “the greatest calamity that could befall me” (101). Douglass’ assessment hinges on the historical basis of American chattel slavery within Christian belief systems that view non-Christian peoples as inherently evil and worthy of divine corporeal punishment. Despite the Catholic Church’s repeated attempts to challenge the Biblical basis of the American slave system throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, pro-slavery Christian ministers and slaveholders continued to cite the extensive list of papal bulls issued in defense of the early Portuguese slave trade as justification of the continued enslavement of African-Americans.

In the Bible, Jesus of Nazareth often used slave metaphors to describe the relationship of Christians to their God, and often alluded to servitude as a pre-condition for entrance into heaven. As servants of God, Christians were asked not to question the benevolence of their divine master and to follow unquestionably the divine law of love and compassion. Because Jesus began teaching within a Roman social structure that allowed slavery, his teachings evolved to accommodate the institution, despite its semantic differences to the unique brand of slavery that emerged as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

There are obvious differences between the type of slavery practiced during the early formative stages of Christianity and the type that resulted from the mass import of African slaves beginning in the 15th century. Firstly, Roman slave systems did not identify entire races of people as inherently flawed or worthy of corporeal punishment so
that African slaves could be found working alongside Arab, Asian, and European slaves; secondly, few people had the means or the capacity to maintain large numbers of slaves so that excessive economic exploitation was not generally a motivating factor; thirdly, following the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, slaveholders were barred from taking baptized persons as slaves (Glancy 71). But to assume that all Roman slaveholders acted in accordance with these guidelines is rather erroneous; Augustine, writing in the 5th century, defined a “breakdown of the social order” that contributed to abominations within an already abominable system of slavery including the enslavement of Christians and the kidnapping and selling of free North Africans to the extent that the population there was being significantly reduced (71).

My point is not to vindicate early Christian slavery or to suggest that these early slave systems were any more justified than American chattel slavery; indeed, early Christian slave systems were much like those practiced in America in that they viewed slaves as mere “bodies” so that women could be forced into prostitution if her master desired it and men could be beaten at will (Glancy 9). But to the extent that the early Portuguese and subsequent slave traders invaded West Africa and stole millions of persons indiscriminately in the name of Christ and sold them to the founding fathers of a nation built upon the Bill of Rights in order to satisfy the demand of global mass markets, the American chattel system should be regarded as a more severe version of any pre-Enlightenment slave system.

My intention is to document Amiri Baraka’s beliefs about the influence of Christianity on the formative stages of capitalism and their collusion in initiating the American chattel slave system. I begin by looking at the earliest traces of these beliefs in the Beat phase and document the progression throughout the Nationalistic and more recent Third-World Marxist writings. To the extent that Baraka grounds his politics in the history of African-American cultural aggression, it is interesting to note critics’ apparent lack of attention toward Baraka’s identification of Christianity and capitalism as the lynchpin of those aggressions. But Baraka may also be lambasted for his inability to delineate the various sects of Christianity in order to ground his critiques within a more evaluative, scientific method. In the Black Nationalist phase, Baraka maintains an overt aversion to any non-Muslim religious philosophy, despite its communal similarities to the
religion he was purported to have followed. Despite these inconsistencies, Baraka’s
general critiques about the tangible saving powers of Christianity appear to be somewhat
firmly grounded.

In the first chapter, I discuss Baraka’s early bohemian affiliations and his brief
study of Buddhism, while also dedicating a considerable amount of time to his belief in
the symbolic murdering of the Self. An analysis of the early writings also reveals his
gradual politicization from the disillusioned passivity of Preface to a Twenty Volume
Suicide Note to the increasingly affirmative Dead Lecturer. The first chapter also goes
into a considerable amount of detail regarding the Catholic Church’s history of
complicity with the slave trade, including discussions of the papal bulls of 1452, 1455,
and 1493 often cited as justification for slavery.

The second chapter focuses on Baraka’s Black Nationalist phase and covers the
years 1965-1974—from the death of Malcolm X to the African Liberation Support
Committee at Howard University in 1974 which Baraka defines in his autobiography as
the official turning point in his conversion to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought. Baraka’s
Home: Social Essays, published under the name LeRoi Jones, offers much by way of
assessing the Christian Critique. Although the earlier Beat poem, “Black Dada
Nihilismus” defines the “money, God, power” moral code that Baraka associates with
Christianity, Home’s “Tokenism: 300 years for five cents” goes even further and defines
the commercial basis of slavery and its collusion with Christianity as a means of
repression:

   Slavery was not anything but an unnecessarily cruel and repressive method of
making money for the Western white man […] Even though the slave trade, for
instance, was entered into for purely commercial reasons, after a few years the
more liberal-minded Americans began to try to justify it as a method of
converting heathens to Christianity. (77)

Baraka’s wording here echoes the logic of the papal bull, “Romanus Pontifex,” issued by
Pope Nicholas V in 1455. The document grants Portugal exclusive rights to West Africa
and asks Prince Henry the Navigator to “subdue all pagans […] and to convert them to
his and their use and profit” (Native). Although the document also expressed a desire to
convert Muslims, the Portuguese expeditions did nothing to bring about this end.
In the second chapter I also discuss Baraka’s conversion to Sunni Islam and its relationship to the nationalistic platform and his theories of religion in general. Although Baraka may have at one time possessed a large understanding of the Qur’an, many of his writings from this time reflect an incomplete understanding of the faith, which he may have used to reach purely nationalistic ends. His study of Islam may also be a way to counter Christianity and its extensive history of slavery, although many of my sources point to the overwhelming history of slavery within Islamic culture as well.

The third chapter offers the most extensive study of the Christian critique as it appears in his latest Third-World Marxist phase. In 1974, Baraka rejected Nationalism, metaphysics, and Islam in favor of socialist philosophy that views free-market capitalism as the lynchpin of contemporary repressive systems, although he still maintains a keen awareness and attention to the position of the African-American within broader American culture. In this most recent phase, Baraka writes extensively about the Christian moral code and its complicity with capitalist profiteering, which he often sums up using the catchphrase, “the Prophet murdered for the Profit of the Beast.” The “low-coup” poem, “Heaven,” also reflects the same line of thinking:

Heaven appeared
    with property
        God
            with slavery  (Un Poco Low Coup 18)

Baraka views the Protestant work-ethic, which may be defined as rigidly individualistic and short-sighted, as closely bound to American imperialism so that repressive foreign policies are often masked by the benevolence of the Western moral agenda. The connection Baraka makes between profiteering and Christianity has allowed him to disrupt the boundaries of signification so that western exploitation of the Third-World becomes associated with evil, death, and destruction—images generally associated with the “devil” and “hell” in the Christian context. His recent poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” which concludes this study, offers one of the most profound glimpses into Baraka’s identification of the west as the power-seat of oppressive capitalistic and imperialistic practices.
Although I have no direct experience with the Afro-centric themes Baraka presents in his work, my Catholic upbringing has motivated my continued interest in the history of Christian imperialism. Although Christianity possesses many positive qualities and ameliorates the pain and hardship of life for millions of people, one must also be well informed about its dogmatic aspects in order to make accurate judgments about its contemporary position within the global political schema. I hope that the information contained in the following pages offers at least a glimpse into one man’s assessment of the Christian belief system and its impact on history and socio-political thought.

I had the privilege of meeting Amiri Baraka and asking him questions directly related to the trajectory of this study during a lecture-visit to Florida State in March, 2007. We discussed the importance of the 15th century papal bulls and how they shaped the American socio-political environment. I told him that I was using his catchphrase, “The Prophet murdered for the Prophet of the Beast,” as the title of the study, and he simply remarked, “that’s it!” as if not another sentence needed to be written.
CHAPTER 1

“MONEY, GOD, POWER”: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE EARLY WRITINGS OF AMIRI BARAKA

I used to be ignorant
& thought I cd live
without killing (WHOOSH!, AAR 191)

Baraka’s declaration of the need for violence and death in “Whoosh!” reveals his need to constantly reaffirm political and aesthetic allegiances in often-violent ways. To “live / without killing” would put Amiri Baraka back in the role of LeRoi Jones—and Leroy Jones before that—without any of the political vehemence that has contemporarily defined Baraka. Moving throughout each of his phases—from Beat to Transitional to Black Nationalist to Third World Marxism—Baraka “murders” the Self through a symbolic re-writing of his ideological position. But to define Baraka’s death as a complete destruction of the previous Self is to deny the temporality of his aesthetics and the reciprocity that operates between the neat ordering of his “phases.”

To erect the boundaries of Baraka’s individual “phases” is to break up a multi-lateral web of influence and direction in order to construct a uni-lateral timeline for easy digestion. What we are left with is a fractured image of the artist that sequesters feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty to the “Beat” or “Transitional” phase, representations of violence, isolation and Pan-Africanism to the “Black Nationalist” phase, and anything remotely concerned with leveling the status quo to the “Third World Marxist” phase.

Although these orderings neatly package the multi-lateral dimension of his philosophies, they must be invoked as a progression of a single consciousness and not as individual personalities alienated or estranged from the contemporary artist. But to what extent do these individual periods maintain dialogue with, or build off the vestiges of, their earlier ideological loyalties?

Baraka’s assessment of his own ideological transformation is partially catalogued in “Whoosh!”:

I used to be quiet
I used to look at things
& wonder
That was before
the war
before the other
war & the war
before
that

His assertion of quietude alludes to earlier Beat affiliations when aesthetics super-ceded politics. Baraka comments on his apolitical past in *Conversations*, stating, “I was much more interested in literature in general; in fact, I used to make statements that I was just a poet, I didn’t care anything about politics” (152). Baraka would later confess that his ambivalence about the intersection of politics and poetry was shattered by the realization that the contemporary African-American is “so constantly and blatantly affected by politics” that to deny art’s revolutionary power “is to deny reality” (152-153).

But to completely write off Baraka’s early Beat affiliations is to deny a revolutionary aesthetic that provided the backdrop for his adoption of a more ethnocentric revolutionary position. My purpose here is to bring attention to Baraka’s dynamism in order to discuss a few aspects of his ideology as occurring universally throughout his career—namely his views on the necessity of revolution and his views on religion. His propensity for revolutionary thought has been thoroughly discussed by Gerry Watts in his book, *Amiri Baraka: Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*; but what has not been discussed is Baraka’s tendency to evoke religion and religious iconography in the political arena as fuel for his fiery invectives against oppressive institutions.

Grouping Baraka into the category of the disillusioned intellectual atheist oversimplifies the situation. In his Beat period, he remarked, “I’m a materialist—I believe in matter in motion” (“The Source”). This dictum has followed Baraka throughout his career and provides a brief insight into a spiritualized aesthetic. His belief in “matter in motion” follows a line of organic thought that does not deny the inclusion of any world religion, or more specifically its individual philosophies, apart from its pragmatic and often oppressive manifestations.
But if Baraka’s work provides a comment on religion or spirituality, it does not hinge on his own ideas about personal salvation; it serves to comment on its existence as a medium of economic and social oppression with its origin in the chattel slave system and the capitalist environment it was bred from. Baraka’s main contention seems to be the interconnectedness of capitalism and Christian belief systems, which, according to Baraka, has succeeded in changing the “Prophet to Profit” (Baraka 25) in an effort to consolidate power for the bourgeois elite.

**Bohemian Religious Scholarship**

Baraka’s religious scholarship emerges during the early Greenwich village years, although the early chapters of the Autobiography reveal mixed feelings about religion in his childhood, including a description of his Church’s hymnal scribed with “halleluiah” in gold leaf and a statement of institutional Christianity’s oppressive tradition: “the stark-raving corny non-grandeur of those stiff shows would make great films for our archive of torture and cultural aggression” (46).

Despite being married in a Buddhist temple, naming his literary magazine *Yugen* after the Zen word for “a special quality of being,” and fraternizing with the Beat literary circle who pulled from an extensive list of religious-philosophical influences, Baraka’s early religious scholarship was more a reflection of his bohemianism than a statement of belief. While Allen Ginsberg ingested Buddhist and Kabbalah philosophy by the plateful, Baraka used Buddhism as a way to “avoid the normal straight up and down middle-class thing” (149). In a way, it was an alternative to the bourgeois Howard life Baraka rejected on the grounds that it served only the best interests of the elite middle-class African-American; in fact, Howard, what Baraka referred to as “the pimple of pretended progress,” would later find good company with his bohemianism as another obstacle to a completely realized, African-American Self.

What is important for the trajectory of this study is Baraka’s acquiescence to a philosophical spirituality in the early Beat phase. It reflects a willingness to engage religious philosophy as an intellectual phenomenon apart from institutional manifestations that often result in marginalization and elitism. According to Baraka, this willingness stems from an uncanny eagerness to define the essence of the African-
American Self—a process that can be distorted by institutional ambitions. In an interview published in Conversations, Baraka discusses the need to re-define spirituality along more Afro-centric lines and reject dogmatic misinterpretations of religious philosophies:

It’s not a matter of going back so much as it is cutting through the mass of lies and distortions we have been subjected to here in the West. It’s getting to the core of our true religious tendency. Because if we find out that, if we find out facts about ourselves as a people, then we find out who we really are. We can find the substance of our real life-force. And then, once we know the powers we have, we can find out who are the gods that we are really supposed to worship. Then we’ll understand we cannot possibly be a subject people, because our gods won’t allow it. (36-37)

Although this interview took place in 1968, there is a thread of spiritual attentiveness that runs throughout Baraka’s work well into the present day; his more contemporary writings address the pragmatic, oppressive forces of institutional religion—namely, Christianity—and the possibility of attaining spiritual stability, although he now defines the latter in secular moral terms.

In his second volume of poetry, The Dead Lecturer, LeRoi Jones’s poetry takes a more consciously political turn, although it does not yet hinge on a stable ideological platform like Third World Marxism. The disillusion of his first volume, Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide note, typified by the title poem’s opening lines, “Lately I’ve become accustomed to the way / the ground opens up and envelopes me / each time I go out to walk the dog”, continues in The Dead Lecturer, although Jones seems less willing to acquiesce to a subdued social position. Rather than simply cataloging his disillusion and viewing his position as natural or inescapable, many poems in The Dead Lecturer begin to point fingers at the oppressive underpinnings of the social order and reveal Jones’ ambivalence about redemptive Christianity. This volume alludes to the destruction of the Bohemian Self and reflects what Jerry Watts refers to as “the costs to black humanity of trying to integrate/assimilate into the cold, antihuman, rational world of the parent society” (101). What is important here is Jones’ conscious turning away
from the private, personal toward a more collective thought process that views his experience as a microcosm reflecting systematic oppression on a global scale.

In “A Poem for Willie Best,” Jones allies himself with the Hollywood actor who played the role of Sleep ‘n Eat, “a stereotypical black buffoon” (Watts 103). Jones imagines Best as “a renegade / behind the mask”—a more actively subversive version of the split identity of “An Agony. As Now.” Rather than being burned from the inside out, as in An Agony, Willie Best challenges the preconditions of his existence and becomes a conduit through which Jones re-evaluates the benevolence of the Christian God:

At this point, neither
front nor back. A point, the
dimensionless line. The top
of a head, seen from Christ’s
heaven, stripped of history
or desire.

Fixed, perpendicular
to shadow. (even speech, vertical,
leaves no trace. Born in to death
held fast to it, where
the lover spreads his arms, the line
he makes to threaten Gods with history.
The fingers stretch to emptiness.

As an instrument of Hollywood, Best becomes merely a fragment of a personality—a head “stripped of history / or desire” for the purpose of entertainment. Viewing Christ’s heaven as also “stripped of history / or desire” opens up a critique of Christianity that Baraka draws heavily from throughout the Third World Marxist phase—the detriment of denying Christianity’s history of oppression and maintaining archaic guidelines that view the consolidation of power in God’s name as a worthy spiritual pursuit.

To “threaten Gods with history” is to raise awareness about institutional Christianity’s history of violence and capitalistic manipulation, although the latter point is not fully articulated until the Third World Marxist phase. Traces of the argument, however, can be found in “Black Dada Nihilismus”: 
‘member
what you said
money, God, power
a moral code, so cruel
it destroyed Byzantium, Tenochtitlan, Commanch

In this passage, the intimate link between Religion and Capitalism is made. But the “money, God, power” moral code is not limited to the destruction of these civilizations at a specific historical moment; the implication is that this “moral code” continues to be the aggressor against independent, autonomous civilizations like the Byzantines, Aztecs, Native Americans, and African-Americans. The poem ends with a plea for pardon to the Vodou deity Damballah:

(may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
against the murders we intend
against his lost white children
black dada nihilismus

Damballah suggests an alternative to Christianity and the “lost white children” that become the “naïve fools” of the poem “Green Lantern’s Solo”:

Truth, Lie, so close they
defy
inspection, and are built into autonomy by naïve fools,
who have no wish for wholeness or strength. Who cannot but yearn
for the One Mind, or Right, or call it some God, a thing beyond themselves, some thing toward which all life is fixed, some static, irreducible, constantly correcting, dogmatic economy

of the soul.

The idea of a “fixed, static, irreducible, constantly correcting” God fits Jones’ idea of Christianity’s unapologetic historical stance. The rigidity of its “dogmatic economy / of the soul” reinforces its ability to subjugate people for the benefit of a higher “static” moral order.
But these final lines of “Green Lantern’s Solo” expand the definition of God to include other religious philosophies as well; the reference to “One Mind” may refer to Buddhist philosophies that deny the individual ego in favor of a collective consciousness that enforces a “dogmatic” management of the “soul.” But Jones’s movement from the passivity of Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note to what Werner Sollors calls the “increasingly affirmative voice” of The Dead Lecturer rejects the cloudy mysticism of “fixed, static, irreducible” anti-historical and anti-scientific thought. Although he would later return to Islam and metaphysical Kawaida in the Black Nationalist phase, it becomes a “luxury” in “Political Poem” (DL 74)—an abstract notion that cannot be held up to the scrutiny of reason:

Luxury, then, is a way of
being ignorant, comfortably
An approach to the open market
of least information. Where theories
can thrive, under heavy tarpaulins
without being cracked by ideas.

The luxury of ignorance Jones exhibits in Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note gets “cracked by ideas” as he begins to actively pursue the management of his own soul, rather than relying on a static moral order.

**Christian Slavery and Divine Law**

In 1968 Jones explained his thoughts on religion in an interview with Austin Clarke and discussed his disdain for western influence on what was originally conceived as a pure tradition of religious philosophy. It is interesting to note that Jones’ critique of religion seems to be limited to institutional Christianity—a religion revolving around “a god who allows them to be slaves” (37). Here, Jones partially articulates the intimate relationship between Christianity and western social and political systems. Although he had not yet embraced Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theories, Jones’ preoccupation with defining the oppressive nature of underlying social structures as they affect the African-American communities provides a brief glimpse into his later critique that hinges on a Marxist revaluation of economic distribution.
By 1968 Jones had already been influenced by a variety of religious philosophies. During his childhood, his mother and grandmother were very active in the church community and encouraged Jones to participate (*Auto* 45-46). In his autobiography, Jones mentions the class struggles that echoed beneath the pews:

“But dig, the struggle in that church was classic too. Class and Classic and Class-sick struggle. The browns vs. the yellows and the blacks with the browns vs. the yellows. Under the huge tarpaulin of the white. (Amen!)” (45-46)

DuBois’ “double-consciousness” seems to motivate his description of the various “colors” of African-American class analysis; in order to become thoroughly American, the various colors sacrifice some element of “fundamental black life” in order meld with the capitalistic social structure:

“Black Brown Yellow White […] These are some basic colors of my life, in my life. A kind of personal, yet fairly objective class analysis that corresponds (check it) to some real shit out in the streets in these houses and in some people’s heads […] The black was fundamental black life, the life of blues people, the real and the solid and the strong and the beautiful […] The brown was my family and me, half real and half lodged in dream and shadow […] The yellow, the artificial, the well-to-do, the middle class really. Described by a term like petty bourgeoisie” (42-43)

Going back to Jones’ previous description of the church environment, it is interesting to note that the “yellows” operate from the opposite polarity of the “blacks” and “browns.” This may be due, in part, to the “browns” ability to maintain vestiges of “the solid and the strong and the beautiful” of black life; despite their being “half real and half lodged in a dream,” they still maintain some element of “realness.” In this way, both black and brown are allied against the yellows. Jones elaborates on this point further: “But the brown, while caught between the black and the yellow, did not, in spite of themselves, like the yellow. They hated it, them” (43).

Despite the class differences, everyone is the same under the banner of Christianity—or so it might seem. Indeed, one of Baraka’s main contentions is that institutional Christianity operates in the realm of magic and smoking mirrors. So while
there may be class struggles in daily life, the church has the ability to unite disparate
groups “under the huge tarpaulin of the white”—a deceptive device meant to quell the
reality of racial and economic injustice within a Christian system that allows such events
to take place. The seduction of a gold-clad room also reinforces the deceptive powers of
excessive wealth and eventually gives way to Baraka’s more contemporary preoccupation
with identifying evil as closely linked to Capitalism and the excessive accumulation of
assets:

“HALLELUIA it was spelled in gold leaf on the hymnal with white
cherubim straight from heaven. The stark-raving corny non-grandeur of
those stiff shows would make great films for our archive of torture and
cultural aggression. You thought you was being moved (those chills
through you) but that was rigor mortis on your ass with hobnailed boots”

(46)

As a vestige of “torture and cultural aggression,” Christianity—or the spiritual, church-
going feeling—points back to the very slave system it created and housed. Feelings of
rebirth and spiritual fortitude mask the feelings of death and stagnancy that accompany
compliance with the same religion that was used as justification for—and even given to
alleviate the pains of—the chattel slave system. Jones description of “the stark-raving
corny non-grandeur of those stiff shows” echoes his 1968 interview with Austin Clarke in
which he describes the mystical “priest-craft” and its ability to “twist” the true nature of
religion.

If Jones views Christianity as an oppressive episode in the African-American
“archive of torture and cultural aggression,” it seems to rely on the dogmatic
interpretations apart from the philosophical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, many
of the basic tenants of Christianity are shared by most major world religions: patience,
kindness, love and compassion; but the application of these primary tenants is often
distorted by the worldly ambitions of the interpreter. In Conversations, Jones remarks:

When I was younger I studied Christianity and then Buddhism, but I think
that religion is, finally, the most admirable attempt man makes to shape
his life. I know that, because of what we may call “priest-craft,” religious
ideals can often be twisted by the people who are supposedly keeping
those ideals alive. A lot of times, the ideals are distorted to further the worldly, non-religious ambitions of the priests.

This is especially true of Christianity, where it is all “priest-craft” and no religion. (36)

The distinction between the philosophy of Christianity and its worldly manifestations is especially important here; the Christianity of slavery is not necessarily the true religion of Jesus, but it is, rather, a distorted derivative of his philosophies that has been manipulated to authenticate a cruel slave system.

Frederick Douglass’ essay, “Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ,” reveals the same disdain for institutional Christianity insofar as it subjugates people and gives birth to slavery. The “piety” of slaveholding Christianity gives rise to the self-righteous master who believes his duty is to destroy, debase and degrade in the name of virtue and morality. Douglass remarks:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection […] I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. (101)

The “priest-craft” religion of the south gives rise to “the most appalling barbarity” of slavery, but it is not sanctioned by true Christian philosophies. It is also interesting to note that Douglass posits the Christian slaveholder as the cruelest master; any attempt by a slave to challenge his subordinate status is viewed as an affront to the Christian God and grounds for punishment:

A mere look, word, or motion—a mistake, accident, or want of power—are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out […] Does he forget to pull off his hat at the approach of a white person? Then he is wanting in reverence, and should be whipped for it. (101-102)
Douglass’ attention to the paradox of the “priest-craft” does not necessarily lead to a broad distrust of religious tendencies as a whole; like Baraka, Douglass recognizes the potentiality of Christian goodness but maintains an aversion for any philosophy used as a tool of oppression. Douglass also touches on the idea of the African-American as inherently evil, an idea that fostered the hierarchical ordering of peoples based on their religiosity and skin color. Any man that refused to accept Christianity as his true religion was subject to punishment by divine forces, and since God could not journey to earth and commit these acts himself, the supposed instrument of his earthly divine justice, the white slaveholder, would administer that punishment.

Douglass’ main point is to reveal the contradictory message within “the slaveholding religion” of the South and ally himself with a broader view of Christianity that condemns slavery as evil and corrupt. He writes, “What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper” (104). A philosophy which advocates love and the destruction of evil has become the very instrument of that evil: “We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery […] Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other” (104-105). Douglass formed these words into an appendix that followed his main narrative; his willingness to vindicate true Christianity in the face of such an abominable slave religion attests to his belief in its saving powers. But while Douglass used the biblical and philosophical bases of Christianity to reveal a potentiality for solidarity and comradeship across racial boundaries, southern clergymen plowed through the scriptures to authenticate their systems of bondage.

“Nachash: What is it? Or An Answer to the Question, ‘Who and What is the Negro?’”—written by a Southern minister from Georgia in 1868—describes the Biblical foundations of slavery and echoes the logic of the Papal bulls of 1452, 1455, and 1493 authenticating both the slave trade and the colonization of non-Christian lands. “Nachash” grounds many of its ideas in Genesis and draws parallels between the Old Testament serpent and African peoples. The author reaches erroneous claims based on the figurative language of the Bible and eventually reaches the conclusion that “slavery—not necessarily chattel slavery—but low, crouching, menial, abject slavery of the negro is
the idea taught by the curse on the serpent. The Bible teaches it; facts teach it; all history teaches it [...] It is the voice of God” (41). This essay does not provide any means for salvation; rather, it describes an inherent stain that can never be washed clean. All who possess this stain are to be deposed for the benefit of Christian absolutism: “In one word the whole idea is, Christ is to be universal and absolute master, and all are to acknowledge and acquiesce unquestioningly in the fact, or be destroyed and removed out of the way” (40). The logic of this kind of Christian theorizing denigrates the entire message of the prophet; rather than focusing on love and compassion as the basis of human interaction, a tyrannical rift is created to ensure a destructive hierarchy. This same thread of logic can be traced well into the 1960’s and throughout the Civil Rights Movement as a motivating force behind institutional segregation, social discrimination, and attempts to deny African-Americans basic voting rights.

Although Baraka and Frederick Douglass both acknowledge the potentiality of a stable, essential Christian philosophy, Christian theologians have long argued for an imperialistic, euro-centrism that has always made room for institutional slavery. Indeed, the Vatican has a long history of being intimately tied to the politics of Europe and has published extensively on the necessity of subduing, colonizing, and punishing non-Christian peoples. In the Papal bull “Romanus Pontifex” of 1455, Pope Nicholas V gave Portugal’s King Alfonso V the right to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ [...] and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery [...] and to convert them to his and their use and profit” (“The Bull”). The same logic and terminology was used in the “Dum Diversas” and “Inter Caetera” bulls of 1452 and 1493, respectively, and authorized Portugal to open West Africa to the slave trade which eventually evolved into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, this logic of enslavement did not originate with Pope Nicholas V and was not strictly limited to non-European peoples; in 1375 Pope Gregory XI ordered the suppression and enslavement of excommunicated Florentines who refused to acknowledge the Papacy (Fogel & Engerman 30). The Catholic Church justified its actions by defining enslavement as a corporeal punishment strictly limited to physical bondage and not affecting the spiritual body (51); in this way, Baptism could be used to alleviate the physical suffering of slavery by giving the enslaved person a new sense of
self-worth with the promise of eternal union with God. But while Baptism may have released the spirit, it did little to release the physical body from divinely sanctioned corporeal punishment.

The slave systems advocated by the Church also served capitalistic and imperialistic ends as well. Insofar as it allowed European nations to invade and colonize foreign lands and peoples, aggregate and consume their resources, and establish colonial municipalities that would remain well into the 19th and 20th centuries, the Church’s policy of discovery and domination had an enormous effect on profit generation and agricultural production. Although the Portuguese slave-trade generated thousands of bodies for European interests prior to the discovery of the New World, by 1500 it took on a whole new meaning as it struggled to keep up with the rapidly expanding American markets (Rawley 24). By this time, most slave-traders stopped viewing themselves as instruments of divine law and began embracing capitalistic economies of the trade. From 1451 to 1500 Portuguese traders imported roughly 33,500 slaves to Europe and the New World; over the next century the number jumped to 241,400; the numbers steadily increased over the next few centuries, and by 1870 the total number of Portuguese slave imports had reached over 4 million. In the States, the economy of slave-labor was well known; the Southern plantations generated 35 percent more profit than the free plantations of the North (Fogel & Engerman 5). Increased production margins sparked by the creation of multinational mass markets could not be met by wage labor alone; millions of acres of American sugar, tobacco, and cotton farms needed to be planted and maintained by the cheapest possible means—and this meant forced pain and servitude for African slaves and pleasure and relaxation for Southern bourgeois capitalists.

Amiri Baraka’s attention to economic striation and the burdens of Capitalistic systems emerges from these socio-historical trends reaching back to the origins of the slave trade and its intimate link with Christianity and emergent Capitalism. His more recent Third-World Marxist perspective embraces a socio-religious economic critique that often utilizes Christian images and tropes in order to reveal the absurdity of a history of Christian cultural and economic aggression. Although this position is most fully articulated in his later Marxist phase, his earlier writings must be viewed as an
introductory chapter in the development of these ideas. In this way, we can define the “money, God, power” moral code of “Black Dada Nihilismus” as an earlier version of “Beginnings: Malcolm” published in his most recent volume of poetry, *Somebody Blew up America and Other Poems*:

When the Beast emerged from the western sea […]

he had no soul, and they’d

created money, the animal king, the coin, the khan,

the con, hard currency (3)

Both poems reinforce the destructive powers of money and power, although “Beginnings” takes a step further in identifying the West as the origin of evil and the power-seat of the Devil, the Beast of Revelations—an image that constantly emerges in his later work.
CHAPTER 2
“RAISE RACE”: THE QUEST FOR NATIONALISM AND A REVOLUTIONARY GOD

Discussing Baraka’s transformation from the idealistic avant-garde of the 1960’s to the more vehement realism of cultural nationalism and socialism in the 1970’s can be difficult if one does not take into account the continuum of biographical data. Indeed, his name change from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka and the tendency to fracture his individual phases accounts for a critique of inconstancy, but Theodore Hudson’s assessment that “The Jones-to-Baraka movement was an evolutionary process, Barakan characteristics always having been present to some degree and in some form” accurately describes the multi-lateral web of influence and artistic development without attributing ideological changes to personal disloyalty or falsity. But while this may lend credibility and coherence to the early post-Bohemian revolutionary ideology, it does little to account for his oscillation between socialist, Pan-Africanist, and religious ideologies apart from his near-constant belief in the destructive powers of institutional Christianity.

Although I am primarily concerned with Baraka’s treatment of institutional Christianity as a medium of economic and racial oppression, understanding his general attitude toward revolutionary ideology yields a certain level of confidence in the viability of the Christian critique. In the closing remarks of his book, Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual, Jerry Gafio Watts discusses Baraka’s tendency to engage and, subsequently, disengage various modes of revolutionary thought:

The carcasses of former allies and political causes are scattered along his life’s journey. The priority of maintaining his individuality has made him a uniquely irresponsible political ally. Baraka can champion a cause, but the moment enough other supporters come aboard, he abandons the cause and turns to another. (478)

Watts’ argument hinges on the author’s need to constantly re-define himself in order to maintain a unique individuality within a social structure which may—over time—absorb and homogenize radical thought. But while Baraka’s various ideologies primarily address the oppression of marginalized peoples, it is interesting to note Watts’ indictment of a selfish tendency:
Some critics have confused Baraka’s quest for individuality with a constant desire to change. But change benefits Baraka only to the extent that it protects his individuality. Consequently, Baraka’s embrace of the most dogmatic and disreputable tradition of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism has endured for more than a quarter of a century, and I suspect that Baraka will remain a Stalinist for the remainder of his life. It gives him an outsider identity that cannot be incorporated into the mainstream of America. (478)

According to Watts Barka’s need to remain a radicalized individual constantly opposed to the status quo motivates what Theodore Hudson refers to as “Barakan characteristics”—those traits that prompted the initial transformation from passive to proactive. But while we may cite any number of temporary alliances—Bohemianism, Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, Karenga’s Kawaida, Marxism—it should be noted that the economic and social critique of institutional Christianity has remained a constant in Baraka’s ideological repertoire since his earliest writings.

**Home: New Nationalism and Christian Subjugation**

Although Hudson wrote *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka* in 1973, prior to his adoption of Third World Marxism, many of his points about the poetics of cultural nationalism are still relevant to current discussions of the author’s politics. His claim that “[Baraka’s] non-fiction prose, more than any other genre, is revelatory of his ideologies, philosophies and theories” is still accurate and offers much by way of assessing the importance of *Home: Social Essays*. Although the collection was published in 1966, many of the essays were written during the Beat phase and reflect the nascent nationalistic thinking that characterized the late-bohemian and transitional writing.

*Home*’s “The Legacy of Malcolm X” provides a good segue from his abandoned bohemianism to his budding scientific social critique. The key to understanding this movement is Baraka’s adoption of a more scientific approach—a logical objectivity—birthed from his observations of the Cuban Revolution as catalogued in “Cuba Libre,” which supplants the personal subjective of his earlier bohemian writings. This scientific approach is heavily indebted to historical, political, cultural, and biological data as the basis of his formation of a distinctly black cultural and political agenda. Although his
later nationalistic work would stray into the more mystical areas of Islam and Kawaida, “Legacy” is one of Baraka’s first attempts at defining scientifically the position of African-American culture within the broader American culture. It succeeds in laying the groundwork for a methodological study of the differences between black and white culture and the inherent difficulty of subjective religiosity:

God is man idealized (humanist definition). Religion is the aspiration of man toward an idealized existence. An existence in which the functions of God and man are harmonious, even identical. Art is the movement forward, the understanding progress of man. It is feeling and making. A nation (social order) is made the way people feel it should be made. A face is too. Politics is man’s aspiration toward an order. Religion is too. Art is an ordering as well. And all these categories are spiritual, but are also the result of the body, at one point, serving as a container of feeling. The soul is no less sensitive. (246)

This passage reveals much about the historical and cultural implications of a Christian belief system founded and maintained by an all-white cast. If “God is man idealized” and if religion is a spiritual institution that is “also the result of the body, at one point, serving as a container of feeling,” then the Christian God must have, at some point, become the idealized version of a white man. In this type of a system converted slaves are not allowed access to the same level of godliness as white Christians and must remain slaves of the body. A few pages later, Baraka elaborates on the racial striation of religious ambitions:

Art, Religion, and Politics are impressive vectors of a culture. Art describes a culture. Black artists must have an image of what 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 idealize himself as Black. (248)

For Baraka, African-Americans must aspire to a self-determined, self-realized version of God in true Karenga style. Although Baraka had not yet been introduced to Karenga, the essays in Home reflect certain aspects of Kawaida principles, namely “kujichagulia” or “self-determination”—a key concept that Baraka continues to develop well into the present day.
Other essays in *Home* more fully articulate the Christian critique, particularly “Tokenism: 300 years for five cents,” “‘Black’ is a country,” and “What does nonviolence mean.” Each of these essays associates Christianity with emergent capitalism and the formation of the slave trade. The earliest of these, “Tokenism,” discusses the continued exploitation of African-American peoples since the “supposed” ending of slavery after the Civil War. It refutes the notion that African-Americans have made social, political, and economic progress since Emancipation and reveals the use of media ploys to deceive the mainstream into believing that institutional systems are now hospitable to the rising African-American. One of these ploys is a Lockheed Airplane employee in Marietta, Georgia who was given a five-cents-an-hour increase and a promotion from a manual labor position to a clerical position:

There are almost 20,000,000 Negroes in the United States. One of these 20 million has been given a two-dollar raise and promoted to a clerical job that my two-year-old daughter could probably work out without too much trouble. And we are told that this act is *symbolic* of the “gigantic strides the Negro has taken since slavery.” (69)

These “gigantic strides” must be considered symbolic because freedom has been weighed down with “so many ands, ifs, or buts” that only a select few may be personally assuaged by such trivial advancements. These “tokens,” as Baraka defines them, do not reveal emergent feelings of trans-racial camaraderie at the realization of historical or traditional moral shortcomings, but rather, manipulate the capitalistic system in order to maintain and harbor the assets of rich northern industrialists and landed southern agrarians while appeasing the masses of disenfranchised African-Americans. To the extent that the masses have not been given the same “progressive” treatment as these select “tokens” Baraka asserts that the pre-Reconstruction status quo remains, essentially, the same. What is left for the ruling class is a need to temporarily alleviate the growing pains of “freedom” while at the same time ensuring that any Reconstruction effort remains dwarfed:

*Tokenism*, or what I define as the setting up of social stalemates or the extension of meager privilege to some few “selected” Negroes in order that a semblance of compromise or “progress,” or a lessening in racial repression might seem to be
achieved, while actually helping to maintain the status quo just as rigidly, could not, of course, really come into being until after the emancipation. Before that, there was no real need to extend even a few tokens to the slave. (73)

Among these tokens, Baraka lists Howard University, which he defines in his autobiography as a “pimple of pretended progress”—a mechanism intended to provide a taste of progress while at the same time ensuring that mass conditions remain repressive.

“Tokenism” succeeds as one of Baraka’s most articulate pre-Marxist assessments of slavery and capitalism. Written in 1962, three years prior to the death of Malcolm X and his subsequent removal from Greenwich Village bohemia, the essay provides an accessible critique of the chattel slave system without the often-overly-abrasive rhetoric that characterized his later nationalistic writings. It is interesting to note the nascent critique of Christian absolutism and capitalist gain in defining the institutional foundations of the slave-trade. What is lacking, however, is a willingness to engage in a completely objective assessment that posits capital gain, the creation of global mass markets, and the continued domination of a narrowly-defined Christianity as the progenitor of the chattel slave-system and the grounds for sustained oppression of black peoples globally. Not until his adoption of “scientific” Third World Marxism does the critique gain momentum, being posited as the ultimate assessment of contemporary race relations as opposed to being inserted as an afterthought or a premise to a tangential argument.

Baraka’s essay, “What Does Non-violence Mean?” seems to be a dialogue with “Tokenism” in an effort to define Christian and Capital investment in the American slave-system and put a finger on the nature of progress within a social system that has left the bulk of African-Americans—aside from the black bourgeoisie—high and dry:

The liberal white man insists also that there is no such thing as a Negro, except the thing he has invented. They are simply underprivileged, the have-nots, the emerging. They are the same as we, given an education, a livelihood, etc. And this is the rhetoric. But where did all these underprivileged people, these have-nots, come from? What, for instance, are all these black people doing in this country in the first place? (135)
The obvious answer to these questions is slavery—a system that elevated white, capitalists in the face of the global market’s growing demand. But which “need” came first—the need to make money or the need to “subdue pagans and other enemies of Christ”? In Tokenism, the former is more applicable:

Slavery was not anything but an unnecessarily cruel and repressive method of making money for the Western white man. Colonialism was a more subtle, but equally repressive method of accomplishing the same end. [...] Even though the slave trade, for instance, was entered into for purely commercial reasons, after a few years the more liberal-minded Americans began to try to justify it as a method of converting heathens to Christianity [...] As I put it in a recent essay on the sociological development of blues: ‘You can see how necessary, how perfect, it was that Christianity came first, that the African was given something ‘to take his mind off Africa,’ that he was forced, if he still wished to escape the filthy paternalism and cruelty of slavery, to wait at least until he died, when he could be transported peacefully and majestically to ‘the promised land.’” (77-78)

This passage puts capital gain at the forefront and conceives the imposition of Christianity as an afterthought meant to quell the possibility of insurrection.

Although the papal bull of 1452 places matters of the Church before capital interests and enforces slavery as divine law meant to further the teachings of Christ, to what extent can we trust the Church’s motivations behind this “divine” law? Leading up to 1452, the Church had a long history of being intimately tied to the politics of Europe while also moonlighting as an entrepreneurial institution, so that missionary interests usually intersected with capital interests (Rawley 24). In 1441, Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal received 10 African slaves as a gift which prompted a capitalistic re-valuation of the African continent, eventually yielding the papal bull of 1452 which gave exclusive rights of exploitation to Portugal (Salley and Behm 24). Following the discovery of the New World by Columbus in 1492, the trans-Atlantic slave trade became a grotesque reality and was only stoked and augmented by Church complicity, despite its obvious conflict with the Judeo-Christian moral structure.

In What Color is Your God, Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm suggest that the imposition of Christianity on African slaves was merely a loophole exploited to allow the
forced oppression of millions people. Indeed, the claim that “the development of the new territories across the Atlantic demanded millions upon millions of African slaves” puts more emphasis on the capitalistic value of forced labor as opposed to the moral foundation of such cruel subjugation (18). Baraka discusses the imposition of Christianity as an afterthought—as an expression of Liberal consciences after coming face-to-face with the blunt violence of the chattel system; but the theoretical groundwork had been laid by both the papal bulls granting access to Africa and the extensive use of slavery throughout the history of the early Church. So while many of the Liberal southern-agrarians may have authorized slavery with Christianity, they were merely late-comers to the on-going narrative of divinely-sanctioned physical bondage—a narrative that, according to Salley, Behm, and Baraka, still exists.

In “Tokenism,” Baraka claims that, “for me, the idea of ‘progress’ is a huge fallacy. An absurd Western egoism that has been foisted on the rest of the world as an excuse for slavery and colonialism. An excuse for making money” (79). Baraka’s “tokens” and the inability of the American cultural landscape to appropriate the entire black mass, as opposed to select “trophies,” attests to the fallacy of progress that Salley and Behm identified fifteen years after the publication of Home: “having documented our perspectives on these and other questions almost eleven years ago in Your God Is Too White, we must conclude today that very little has changed in White-racist America vis-à-vis Blacks” (14). Although What Color is Your God? was written in 1981, I believe Salley and Behm would agree that little progress has been made since then. Their line of thought follows Baraka’s own logic condemning material wealth and the attainment of bourgeoisie status as a true marker of progress. Indeed, the contemporary American social and economic landscape does not translate well into traditional categories of economic distribution, so that one may possess many of the physical markers of bourgeoisie status without actually being considered a member. Salley and Behm cite the National Conference of the Black Theology Project in opposition to claims that progress should be commensurate with material gain:

We do not believe that better jobs and bigger houses, color televisions and late-model cars prove that people have attained the abundant life of which Jesus spoke. That abundant life cannot be experienced by a people captive to the
idolatry of a sensate and materialistic culture…Commitment to physical
gratification as the purpose of life and voidance of the gospel’s moral, ethical
standards provide false foundations for hard choices. Such false values divide
and separate a people who would be free. (14-15)

So how should real progress be brought about or measured? Although the bulk of
American politicians might point to statistics, economic relief programs, or some other
rigid evaluative measure, Baraka’s Home calls for more physical and tangible
revolutionary tactics.

The jacket summary’s assessment that Home is Baraka’s “ideological
autobiography” carries a lot of weight even today, thirty-one years after its initial
publication. Despite his ideological journey since the mid-1960’s, his primary platform
of Third-World-Marxism still takes into account many of the ideas expressed in Home,
namely his condemnation of institutional Christianity, his belief in black self-
determination, and his aesthetic allegiance to process writing, as opposed to product, as
catalogued in “Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall.” Baraka has not yet adopted the
vehemence and overt violence that generally categorized much of the rhetoric of Black
Nationalist period, although many of the essays may be considered aggressive or hostile
in terms of their honesty. But in terms of morality, most of the essays in Home
presuppose the existence of an inherent morality that favors the oppressed over the
oppressor. This teleological thread can be traced well into the present day, even as his
adoption of scientific socialism advocates the inherent and impending rise of the working
class as a quasi-“divine” act of social leveling. But while Baraka goes to great lengths to
deny the institutional basis of Christianity, his belief that “the subjugated are inherently
more moral than the oppressor” is an inherent belief in Judeo-Christian moral structures,
so that while denying Christian belief systems Baraka ends up absorbing some of its
revolutionary notions (Watts 179). But most religions offer the same position on the
oppressor-oppressed relationship, so that one cannot attribute a belief in moral superiority
to a particular sect or belief system.

Raise Race Rays Raze: Reaffirming Nationalism with Religion
Baraka’s second volume of socio-cultural essays, *Raise Race Rays Raze*, deals more heavily with questions of metaphysical Islam and spirituality than *Home*. The essays reflect his immersion in the avant-garde of Black Nationalism and his conscious rejection of bohemia’s “Empty furies [and] love of SELF (destruction)” (*Raise* 22). Ironically, the essays would not exist were it not for the destruction of LeRoi Jones, the emergence of a new brand of fury in Imamu Amiri Baraka and the “empty furies” of his brief study of Sunni Islam. The essays offer a profound glimpse into Baraka’s character of Blackness—a conscious embrace of Pan-Africanist ideologies that seeks to bridge the gap between the African and the American in order to combat DuBois’ double-consciousness and forge a new, distinctly Black identity. This includes embracing Islam as a precept of the Nationalistic agenda and as a viable alternative to Christianity. What is important to understand is that Baraka’s conversion to Islam should be viewed as a political conversion rather than a religious one; the essay, “7 Principles,” calls for “first faith in *Blackness*—that it will win. Faith in Nationalism” (143). Like his later scientific socialism, Baraka’s faith in Islam seems to be a fascination with its revolutionary aspects—its alliance with the oppressed in its fight against the oppressor.

Baraka’s essay, “From: The Book of Life,” is heavily indebted to mystical Islam and acts as a more self-determined version of *The System of Dante’s Hell*. Where *The System* imagined a demoralized LeRoi wandering the maze of a Judeo-Christian hell, “The Book of Life” re-creates a spiritualized dominance manipulated by Islam and a connection to Africa. Baraka is careful to mark the divide: “Newark St. years later—Dante vanished, a Black Man in his place. Beaten, for a time. Humbled, for a time. This time to be given to strengthening and wisening. Blackening. To the first virtues. The first virtue, which is Blackness!” (49). Baraka’s need to return to “the first virtue”—to “relearn who he is. His origins. His powers. His destiny”—coincides with allegiance to Islam as the first step to a fully actualized Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist platform. The essay also seems to make enormous leaps to posit Blackness as an inherent quality of the natural world—a quality which has been distorted over time but will return again in an act of purification: “We are creators, the first to walk the earth. Allah-God made Black Man first. Our color is what the closest substance to the sun would be. [...] All beings come from Allah-God [...] The white races are a last raw turn before the
stretching and reaching of return recycle evolutionary movement Black” (51). Baraka’s self-determined vision is more focused on elevating a Black aesthetic than understanding and reporting the Islamic faith. His claim that “the white races are a last raw turn” is an identification of the enemy within an American context, as opposed to an overall Islamic worldview, and mimics what Malcolm X viewed as a detriment to Black Liberation (Autobiography 224); it is also ironic that Baraka signed the essay, “Essex County Jail / Summer 1967 / Year of Rebellion,” as a possible evocation of Malcolm X’s own jailhouse study of Islam, despite Baraka’s narrow view of the primary tenants and his tendency to exaggerate the importance of violence. But ultimately, Baraka’s belief in an imminent “reaching of return recycle evolutionary movement Black” is a belief in the efficacy of the Black Art/Liberation movement and reinforces his allegiance to “Blackness” rather than Islam. Baraka reinforces this in his autobiography, claiming, “The religious practice interested me less than the black nationalism” (207).

The rest of the essay attempts to define an essential quality of Blackness to tie together and unite a people that Baraka views as “weak flesh” in the face of Allah; it also succeeds in laying the groundwork for a continued embrace of the image of the “devil” as a symbol of any oppositional forces: “Devils are devils because they need to be devils to exist at all. They are opposites necessary for change. […] We rise past devils, past that resistance” (51). The image of the devil is a rhetorical gemstone; anyone who champions justice, freedom, and equality is inherently opposed to the devil. But Baraka’s use of the image may meet with harsh critics who oppose his classification of the contemporary “devils.” Consequently, anyone opposed to devils becomes aligned with God—in this case, a God of violent revolution:

Pow pow pow Boom!! The flame The flame. Red shadows moving near the darkness. Devils whirling round and round, frightened that God is near and their deaths are imminent! […] Doom to the devil total death will come soon Doom Doom to the Devil. Young armies of God reformed after 400 years attacking with the most natural of weapons holding against the scourges of Satan our honor our lives our holy Blackness! (54)

His evocation of “jihad” highlights his fascination with Islam as a vehicle for retribution and violence—rather than a spiritual or religious tool—and as necessarily opposed to a
Christian value system that has allowed the enslavement and continued social and economic oppression of Africa and African-Americans.

The latter point is more fully articulated in the essay, “Newark—Before Black Man Conquered.” The essay discusses race relations in Baraka’s hometown of Newark, New Jersey and indicted a number of local Christian churches as being more concerned with “profit” than the “Prophet.” For Baraka, the main problem is the church’s lack of progressive political goals and over-inflation of the church-goer’s need to tithe: “Our Lady Queen of Angels on the Belmont Hill does a thriving bizness on Black folks […] The nigger-o churches have worked for nothing in the Black community, with a few exceptions, but collections and Cadillacs” (67). But while Baraka challenges the intentions of Newark’s Black churches, he also cites “Rev. Sharper of Abyssinia Church who has always lent himself to the Black spirit of change” as a “beautiful exception” and defends church’s right to exist when confronted with potential razing:

“Running the Black People out of town, Plus 3 highways also scheduled to come through. The 16th District has already been leveled and soon on up West market Street including a hundred year old Baptist church, with a framed bronze plaque to my Godfather in the lobby. No Roman Catholic churches will be leveled. That God don’t have to leave for the highway, the med school or nothing the fuck else!” (70)

Although Baraka indicts these churches as do-nothing institutions, he still advocates their right to exist; furthermore, the destruction of “a hundred year old Baptist church” reflects a racial tension that runs deeper than the foundations of the building. The comparison between the Roman Catholic and the Baptist church is a comparison between an institution of enslavement and what Baraka views as its more “democratic” counterpart—a point he articulates in Home. In this instance, Baraka’s allegiance to a Baptist church reflects his willingness to combat “white” aggression and does little to establish an affinity for that religion. If the essay posits any definitive statement about how Baraka views Christianity and contemporary race relations, it exists as an ominous dirge—as “the idiot roar of scared police guns. Popping and popping and still clogging Black People’s ears. The pure white terrible evil Jesuitical pall of murder” (69).
Islam as Alternative

In a 1968 interview with Austin Clarke, Baraka—then LeRoi Jones—discusses the “foolishness” of black allegiance to Christianity and the “high moral quality” of Islam. His assessment hinges on Islam’s tolerance for violent revolution as an alternative to the oppressive slave systems advocated by Christianity: “Most of the Negroes […] pray to a god who allows them to be slaves. Now if you pray to a god who allows you to be a slave, you are a fool” (37). “Foolishness” seems to be contingent on capitulation with European Christianity, which Baraka refers to as the “debased form of an Eastern religion” as a deviation from the original teachings of Jesus, which he considers within the eastern vein:

They allow Christianity because Christianity doesn’t exist the way they practice it; it’s a debased form of an Eastern religion […] they allow this debased form […] because it allows the black people to have a certain amount of emotional liberation. You can get happy in church. They’ll let you scream in church. They think all these niggers are going to be sitting up and screaming Halleluja and what not, and then they are going to head back and start eating that pig and drinking that wine and working for the Man. If they thought there was going to be a whole lot of black people saying “Allah be praised!” and talking about righteousness and cleaning themselves up and stopping to eat that pig and drink that wine, they wouldn’t allow that kind of religion. (38-39)

According to Baraka, Western governments use Christianity to authenticate cruel social and political structures and vindicate a moral fabric that ensures the continued domination of the white elite. As a debased form, Salley and Behm discuss the American colonies’ manipulation of secular-religious ties to ensure that slave conversions did not effect the ability of plantations to maintain their work force, despite the Christian belief that “a Christian could not be held as a slave” (20): “To settle any doubt, the leading colony of Virginia in ‘a series of laws between 1667 and 1671 laid down the rule that conversion alone did not lead to a release from servitude’” (Handlin qtd. in Salley & Behm).

Despite the three papal bulls of 1452, 1455, and 1493 often cited as justification for slavery, several Popes throughout history have issued bulls refuting divine
authorization of the institution. In 1435, prior to Portuguese exploitation of the African continent, Pope Eugene IV condemned the enslavement of Black natives from the Canary Islands in “Sicut Dudum”; in 1462, to combat the bulls of 1452 and 1455 authorizing Portuguese enslavement of Africans, Pope Pius II issued “Magnum Scelus”, which condemned slavery as “a great crime”; to combat the belief that the Native Americans were sub-human and should be reduced to slavery, Pope Paul III issued “Sublimus Dei.” But despite conflicting Vatican attitudes toward slavery, “Christian” slaveholders and other colonists often disregarded or selectively complied with Church doctrine only insofar as it allowed them to keep slaves. Furthermore, Vatican pleas to “evangelize” non-believers often led to the adoption of servitude, while in 1680 the Anglican Church accepted that “Christianity and slavery were fully compatible” (Salley and Behm 20).

Baraka’s assessment that Western religious traditions advocate a “debased form” of the original religion translates well into colonial tendencies to selectively engage Christian theology. Indeed, the willingness of early colonists to engage in deceptive religious practices can be traced all the way back to the first settlers as Thomas Harriot’s “A Briefe and True Account of the New Found Land of Virginia” attests to. In this report, Harriot records an instance where Native Americans are tricked into believing that an eclipse is a manifestation of an angry god. The Native Americans are threatened with violent retribution unless they feed the settlers in payment for their non-compliance with God’s chosen people—the settlers. They refer to European diseases as “invisible bullets” inflicted by their moral superiors. But while the Native Americans proved to be yet another “primitive people” in obvious need of Christian conversion, they were deemed less marketable than black slaves.

With the acquiescence of the Anglican Church and capitulation by Southern ministers, slaveholders often taught Christianity to slaves as a form of release. What Baraka terms “emotional liberation” eventually became a way to ensure that slaves submitted to both secular and religious laws. According to Salley and Behm, “religious instruction had favorable effects on their slaves: There was greater enthusiasm for obedience and less thievery and mischief” (22). But if Baraka champions both emotional and physical liberation as the basis of his adoption of Islam, then questions must be raised about Islam’s traditional use of slavery. Although his main point may be that Islam
offers a violent counterpoint to Christian moral structures and that agents of Christ—and not agents of Allah—are responsible for bringing his ancestors across the Atlantic, Islam should not be regarded a safe alternative to “a god who allows you to be a slave.”

In his book, The Image of God, David Brion Davis describes the early history of Islamic conquests “whose speed and geographic extent […] were even more breathtaking than the expansion of the European maritime powers nine centuries later” (141). Despite its “breathtaking” nature, the Islamic conquests opened Africa and Asia to slavery and conversion and perpetuated a system of racial prejudice and social striation that could be likened to the American chattel slave system except in its lack of primarily capitalistic organizing principles. Despite the broad ethnography of slaves in the Islamic system, Eurasian slaves were generally assigned to more specialized jobs and given a higher status than African slaves who were generally “reduced to the most menial and arduous labor” (147). For Davis, however, the non-economic basis of Islamic slavery should be taken into consideration when evaluating the lasting impact of both Christian and Islamic imperial conquests:

In contrast to Europe’s later imperial system, this explosive expansion of Islam did not lead to capitalist markets and investment, to dramatic economic growth, or to a widespread system of colonial plantation production. Therefore, slavery in the Muslim imperial system had purposes very different from the profit-making “mode of production” that developed in European plantation economies. (142) Davis goes on to address the tendency of Western countries to irrationally romanticize slavery within Islamic systems or diminish its overall impact on the socio-economic history of Africa by claiming that Islam established a great working relationship with its servants; but he eventually makes the point that “the arguments of European orientalists who defended slavery in Islam in the 1880s could easily have been lifted word for word from standard American proslavery writing of the 1840s and 1850s” (139).

In his interview with Austin Clarke, Baraka discusses the inability of the American religious environment to accept Islam as a viable religion based on its “high moral quality.” But again, Baraka fails to address Islam’s history of “allowing you to be debased”: 

33
it [Islam] is a unifying force of high moral quality [...] Once you unite around any kind of moral issue, you are certainly not going to allow yourself to remain the chattel of a debased creature [...] Unlike the morality of the west, eastern morality would not allow you to be debased and that’s why the morality of the west is so self-defeating and so self-extinguishing to us. (39-40)

His earlier claim that “religion comes out of the East” is accurate in describing the physical origin and point from which modern religion has deviated. In defining “the morality of the west,” Baraka defines a moral structure which has evolved out of its original point of origin toward a more “debased” form. Both Christianity and Islam, however, arose out of what Davis calls “colorblind” societies so that both should be considered “debased” for their coexistence and cooperation with slavery(143); neither The Bible nor the Qur’an address the superiority of races or the inherent domination of one race over another, despite the frequent use of slave metaphors in both texts. Because slavery precluded the origin of both Islam and Christianity, each system evolved to accommodate and rationalize it. But while each slave system maintained provisions to ensure that co-believers were free from enslavement, Davis makes the point that Muslim slaveholders were more apt to follow such provisions (143); because Christian slaveholders often defined bondage as corporeal punishment they were able to reconcile their faith with the enslavement of co-believers.

Baraka’s adoption of Sunni Islam seems to be motivated by his nationalism so that Islam becomes a way of uniting and staying connected to the disparate groups of subjugated African-Americans. In Malcolm X, Baraka found a model of self-determination and organization with the ability to command large black masses toward the actualization of political and social liberation—although Baraka does, at various points, use Malcolm X to justify both his allegiance to, and aversion for, Islam and the Nation of Islam. In a 1968 interview with Marvin X, Baraka discusses his initial fascination with the religion as a vehicle for social and political change:

Islam first influenced me through Brother Malcolm, Hajj Malik, because he was, actually, the first black man that I associated Islam with progressive social thinking. At that time, that is as much impact as it made on me—the idea that
Islam was being connected with progressive social thought and with Black Nationalist thinking. (Reilly 51)

The crux of Baraka’s adoption of Islam seems to be his desire to find a supreme, unifying element to accurately define the true essence of black culture and consciousness. His continued study of Islam, insofar as it offered that unifying element, also represented an official break from the Christian value system that was responsible for American slavery and opened up new avenues of Pan-Africanist thought that would provide a socio-historical framework for contemporary Nationalistic aspirations:

It wasn’t until I got back to Newark that I began to get serious about Islam in terms of a spiritual philosophy, rather than just a connective issue with political activism. I began studying the root and history of Islam and associated philosophies and trying to get to the spiritual key to the Black man. (Reilly 51)

Whether or not Baraka’s study of “the root and history of Islam” yielded an understanding of its history of slavery and subjugation, it must be noted that Islam provided a revolutionary backdrop for Nationalistic agendas in this country and effectively mobilized liberation movements that resisted continued oppression and domination by the economic elite.

Looking back at Home, it is easy to identify Baraka’s attraction to Islam as a motivating force for the nationalistic agenda. In “The Legacy of Malcolm X,” Baraka champions Black Muslims for their political aspirations aside from the spiritual:

Any talk of Nationalism also must take this concept of land and its primary importance into consideration because, finally, any Nationalism which is not intent on restoring or securing autonomous space for a people, i.e., a nation, is at the very least shortsighted. […] And the Black Muslims seem separate from most Black People because the Muslims have a national consciousness based on their aspirations for land. […] What the [Black] Muslims wanted was a profound change. (242-243)

We must exercise skepticism in identifying his temporary allegiance as deeply spiritual or religious as some of his more recent work discusses the oppressive nature of religious endeavors as a whole and his non-belief in the existence of God. But as Baraka often presents two, and sometimes many more, seemingly contradictory platforms, nailing
down a stable ideological base can be rather difficult. What we can be assured of is that after turning his back on Greenwich Village, Baraka adopted as his primary goal the liberation of oppressed peoples both in this country and abroad, although his definition has gradually grown to accommodate those affected by imperialism and capitalism as well.
CHAPTER 3
THIRD WORLD REVOLUTION AND THE PROPHET’S PROFIT

In 1974, Baraka again switched ideological alliances and rejected Black Nationalism in favor of Third World Marxism. Having gone through a number of nationalistic organizations—including the Congress of Afrikan People (CAP), The Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), The Committee for United Newark (CFUN), and various loose affiliations including Karenga’s Kawaida and US—Baraka eventually rejected Nationalism on the grounds that “it is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy […] in fact, a form of fascism” (Harris xxviii). He had long been a follower of Ron Karenga’s Kawaida and had suffered as a result of it. Karenga’s “dictatorial style of leadership,” his belief in a “never-never-land” version of Africa, and his systematic mistreatment of women led Baraka to reject the Pan-Africanist ideology but not before writing the collection of essays, Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism. According to Barka, “the big three cornerstones of our backwardness [were] feudalistic, one-man domination; male chauvinism given legitimacy as “revolutionary”; metaphysics. These three deeply rooted errors led to many others for which these were the base, but I feel these are the most important” (299). Baraka was not the only nationalist to switch sides; at the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) conference at Howard University in 1974, which Baraka defines as the turning point in his conversion to Marxist-Leninist-Maoism, Baraka, Owusu, and Abdul Alkalimat each made presentations championing Marxism and calling for a shift in focus from nationalism and Pan-Africanism toward the destruction of capitalism and its monopoly form, imperialism.

His conversion to anti-imperial thought did not so much downplay his attention to Black liberation as it did open up the pool of the oppressed to include those others adversely affected by imperialism. During this phase—which continues into the present day—Baraka has most fully articulated the intimate link between Christianity, imperial capitalism, and the creation of slave systems. Although he does not as explicitly indict Islam in its pursuit of imperial slavery, his list of contentions has grown to accommodate
a broad distrust of any rigid, dogmatic belief system—of which Islam may be considered. But while Baraka has grown skeptical of these systems, he often relies on them for images and metaphors including, but not limited to, the image of the devil, which is often equated with imperial pursuits, and the use of such clear-cut comparisons like “good” and “evil.” His expansion into Marxism has also given him access to a broader network of alliances spanning multiple ethnicities and has reduced the amount of rational holes critics may poke in his philosophical platform. For an example of this we could turn to Baraka’s appearance on “The O’Reilly Factor” in which the poem “Black Art” was read as an indictment of the poet’s militant anti-white tendencies. It was very clear that O’Reilly had no interest in responding to the poem “Sombody Blew Up America”—which was supposed to be the main topic of conversation—and chose instead to tear into Baraka’s nationalistic past as evidence of his irrationality. Baraka defended himself by attributing his distrust of whites to the death of Malcolm X and the reactionary response it created and by citing his deviation from that trend of thought, which took place nearly thirty years prior in 1974.

But Baraka’s adoption of this new thought process was not simply a way to reduce the amount of criticism thrown his way. Indeed, according to Gerry Watts, his adoption of Third-World-Marxism has made him even more of an outsider than his alliance with the self-proclaimed “narrow-minded nationalism”:

During the period when he was a cultural nationalist and an advocated of the Black Aesthetic, Baraka was beyond criticism, for he became, in effect, the standard for himself. There was criticism of his work, but it was often easily dismissed as the mutterings of the reactionary. [...] In recent decades, as Baraka has become increasingly politically marginalized because of his advocacy of a dogmatic Marxism, his polemical and political writings have been ignored. As a “Marxist,” he no longer commands a large audience of writers and is virtually ignored as a serious thinker. (470)

Throughout history, Marxist philosophy has often materialized as violence and fascism so that proponents of the nationalistic agenda may find it hard to relinquish self-determination for economic autocracy. Furthermore, one of the main criticisms of Watts and other critics is that Baraka is too selective and does not pull from the entire body of
Marxist writings, choosing instead to focus on Lenin, Mao, and Cabral, without integrating any critical commentary or attempting to rationalize the “anti-emancipatory” nature of many modern socialist countries. But Baraka should not be entirely written off for his adoption of a controversial Marxist position; his desire to constantly challenge the dominant social structure and ally himself with disenfranchised peoples who lack access to the appropriate critical channels is nothing short of commendable.

His undying belief in the efficacy of revolution is evident in his first volume of Marxist essays, *Daggers and Javelins*. This collection utilizes a line of thought Baraka defines in the introduction as “overwhelmingly political in the most overt sense […] roughly categorized as political-literary-general culture” (9). This movement away from the more personal subjective of *Home* attests to Baraka’s emergence as an icon of contemporary liberation movements and a staple figure in the abrasive dialogue between proponents of American Imperialism and the oppositional forces of Third World revolutionary movements. *Daggers and Javelins*, while mostly concerned with the propagation of what Baraka refers to as M-L-M (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought), succeeds in painting another layer on his critique of Christianity, albeit a thin layer. The essay, “Ngugi wa Thiongo” discusses contemporary African writing and shows how the authors struggle with colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, and the need for revolution. According to Baraka, many contemporary African writers pull from the same reservoir of themes, so that a discussion of Sembene Ousmane’s *Petals* yields a certain amount of knowledge about the issues affecting African artists. One of the common themes throughout the list of reviewed books is an attention to Christianity, “a lingering undercurrent and overcurrent” that acts as a pacifier to smother revolutionary tendencies (202). But while Baraka does not indict Christianity as harshly as he did in the past, the accusatory nature is still evident:

Sembene, focusing on West Africa, and Senegal in particular, shows the original Wolof culture and its successive transformations under the Islamic invasion and then the Christian one. So that one can see the complex reality of contemporary African life where the animist African culture is overpainted with an Islamic coat, a Christian-colonial one, and these all spark and ignite in constant confrontation with the present neo-colonial regime, where black “Frenchman” run the country.
for their own aggrandizement and profit, the complete exclusion of the people’s needs. […] He portrays these neo-colonial functionaries, these government, church, business “leaders,” for what they are, human carrion, feeding on African lives. He lets us see for once and for all that these are monsters. (203-204)

For Baraka, Sembene and Ngugi’s books retell the destruction of African life and culture at the hands of imperialists and attest to the viability of revolution in the African third-world. Aside from the cultural rift, Baraka draws many commonalities from these writers, including the belief that “there remain only two sides […] one that of the people, the other that of the enemies of the people” (207). What is left is a need to pursue “high revolutionary art” in order to regain some vestige of culture that existed prior to the Islamic and Christian invasions.

Baraka’s essays in Daggers and Javelins seem to be a somewhat sharp drop-off from the nationalistic essays, primarily with regard to his adoption of calmer voice and a more serious regard for broad historio-cultural sources. His essay, “Notes on the History of African/Afro-American Culture,” which catalogues Africa’s history of foreign exploitation and subjugation, maintains a relatively relaxed and objective vantage point, despite its volatile subject matter; had this essay been written 10 years prior, it may be heavily indebted to racist sensationalism to get its points across. In his introduction to the book Baraka mentions that “these essays now might seem to some […] unreasonably optimistic”—a point that reveals itself in his revolutionary forecasting (15). Baraka seems to be excited about an impending Marxist revolution; in this way the terrors of history can be viewed as an energizing and uplifting force in line with the words of Mao Tse-Tung: “Mao said, nothing moves in a straight line, certainly not revolutionary struggle. The twists and turns and agonizing resistance which change must struggle to overcome are the brutal facts of our epoch” (15). The optimism of the essays cannot be overshadowed by the bleak catalogue of history since it all points to the inevitability of sweeping social, cultural, and economic changes, which Baraka heavily forecasts throughout the book.

In the essay, “Notes on the History of African/Afro-American Culture” Baraka addresses Africa’s cultural exploitation by imperial forces and goes to great lengths to relate everything back to the dollar sign and the creation of global markets. This leads to
the over-conflation of capitalism and oppression and distorts the true origins of slavery, even though the American chattel system can be said to have grown from the bowels of the Christian capitalist monster. According to Baraka, “Modern slavery is created, nevertheless, in the main, by newly capitalist European Christians” (227-228). To equate “modern slavery” with American slavery is to deny the historical, non-religious basis of European, Middle-Eastern, and African slavery and the archaic feudal and Islamic slave systems that continued well into the 19th century. But Baraka’s main point may be that modern slavery is contingent on profiteering and mass markets and is opposed to slavery as corporeal or spiritual bondage—a point that David Davis also makes clear in *In the Image of God*. The essay ends with an indictment of Christian and Islamic capitalists, their complicity in the creation of slave systems, and the erasure of African history and culture from the minds of the slaves:

Africans, who first founded civilization, who were the first *Homo sapiens*, the parents of the human race, as the slave trade progressed, and grew ever more profitable, were relentlessly downgraded ideologically as a people and culture by the need the Christian and Islamic capitalists had to explain and legitimatize their stinking business. The idea that Europeans are *a priori* racists is metaphysical. On the contrary, it is a particular mode of production, a specific economic base, creating a superstructure—philosophies, institutions, customs, etc.—that creates, strengthens, and supports racism. (233)

Baraka’s assessment that Europeans are not *a priori* racists confirms an official divorce from what can be considered a “metaphysical” racist attitude stemming from his immersion in unconventional black nationalistic politics; although he never bought in to the Nation of Islam’s belief in Yacub—the mad scientist who created white people after thousands of generations of selectively breeding light-skinned Africans—Baraka’s metaphysics often posited an inherent racist tendency as a foundational, if not biological, aspect of white Americans.

This passage also reinforces his newfound Marxist belief in the inherent evil of the dollar sign and its role in corrupting what was once conceived as a relatively pure Christian belief system. Although slavery as a cultural practice was generally accepted during Christianity’s formative stages, Baraka seems to indict capitalism ahead of
Christianity and attribute any abominations that may be linked to these religions—Islam included—to the human agents acting in their names. Even though these destructive practices often become the rigidly dogmatic and normative actions of religions practice—and in some cases are even considered the “official” church position—the human element must always be factored in; Barka’s final thought addresses this flip-flopping tendency:

At first it was said that the slave trade was a method of conversion to Christianity. But by the middle seventeenth century even some of the Christian churches themselves could not stomach the lie. The reason so many blacks are Baptists is that they had taken on more democracy than the other sects, a feature which appealed to workers and even slaves. (233)

His admittance of the more “democratic” Christian sects may reflect his own nostalgia for a childhood reared in Baptist churches; it may also point back to the assimilation of religious doctrine at the hands of one’s captors, so that the adoption of the Baptist faith may be likened to the adoption of Islam by the masses in North Africa. In his autobiography, Baraka is quick to point out how his community amended the spiritual practice to include “some life and some warmth, some word of black Jesus and black God and black heaven translated to mean some good that included them, some life after death in which they would be much more than silent servants on the fringe of reality,” so that the appropriation of a religious belief is not so much a blind adoption of someone else’s faith as it is an affirmation of an individual’s right to his own belief (46).

While “Notes on the History of African/Afro-American Culture” seems to end on a positive note of assimilation, most of Baraka’s Christian-themed work is not nearly as optimistic. “When We’ll Worship Jesus,” published in his first collection of Marxist poetry, *Hard Facts*, discusses the necessary social, historical, and cultural precursors required to forge an alliance with Christianity. These precursors are so far-reaching that one wonders whether Baraka can ever imagine stable common ground. Although he seems to represent or speak on behalf of a certain segment of the African-American population, Baraka champions a general call to arms, an embrace of “reality” rather than religious metaphysics, that views violent revolution and tangible political actions as viable alternatives to passive, faith-based revolutions:

We’ll worship Jesus
When jesus do
Somethin
When jesus blow up
the white house
or blast nixon down
when jesus turn out congress
or bust general motors to
yard bird motors
jesus we’ll worship jesus
when jesus get down (Harris 251)

Baraka not only indicts Christianity for its inability to change political affairs for the better but for its role in assisting capitalistic gain and maintaining oppressive political systems:

cops not afraid
of jesus
pushers not afraid
of jesus, capitalists racists
imperialists not afraid
of jesus shit they makin money
off jesus

For Baraka, Christianity does nothing to dissuade “pushers, capitalists, racists and imperialists” and in certain cases offers unique opportunities for exploitation. These images of what Baraka has referred to as the “declining West” are directly attributable to capitalist profiteering—a trend that, according to Baraka, will soon be supplanted by the growing influence of the Third World revolutionary movements. In Daggers and Javelins’ “National Liberation Movements,” Baraka champions the rise of socialism and the fall of imperial capitalism: “It is the confrontation between that which is dying and going out of existence, imperialism and monopoly capitalism, and that which is coming into being and therefore invincible, socialism” (123). The decline of Western imperialism equates to the destruction of a Christian system that allowed its appearance
in the first place; the conditions for worship that Baraka lays out in the poem then become unattainable, mocking, and sarcastic:

we’ll worship jesus when mao
do, when toure does
when the cross replaces Nkrumah’s star
Jesus need to hurt some a our enemies, then we’ll check him out […]
we’ll worship jesus when he get a boat load of ak-47’s and some dynamite and blow up abernathy robotin for gulf
jesus need to be busted
The poem offers little room for compromise and rather than proposing conditions for the vindication of Christianity in the eyes of the African-American community, Baraka runs through a litany of accusations in order to both indict its destructive history and propose an alternative based on ethnic and class self-determination. This train of thought has been present since his early bohemian days and was the driving force behind much of his nationalistic ideas, including his adoption of Sunni Islam—a religion that also gets lumped in with Christianity as a vehicle for black oppression:

jesus aint did nothing for us but kept us turned toward the sky (him and his boy allah too, need to be checkd out!) […]
need to worship yo self fo you worship jesus need to bust jesus ( + check out his spooky brother
Baraka’s past associations with Islam, Karenga, his personal study and observations of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and his continuing distrust for rigidly dogmatic belief systems seems to motivate his distrust for Allah. But the main point of the poem is not to turn followers away from either Christianity or Islam; it is meant to motivate the black working-class to take on a self-determined revolutionary position in order to pursue tangible rather than metaphysical revolutionary ideologies.

Baraka’s attention to Christianity is an attention to the working-class members of the Black Belt south as both a continuation of the nationalistic agenda and the actualization of what Baraka views as a truly disparate African-American population worthy of nationhood. Because slavery took root in the south, the south must be viewed as the focal point of a revolutionary front. In “Black Liberation/ Socialist Revolution,” published in Daggers and Javelins, Baraka claims:

> It is essential that we understand very clearly the relationship between the Afro-American nation in the black belt in which the majority of black people still live, and the black oppressed nationality scattered in twenty-six cities across the United States multinational state. The fundamental democratic demand of the Afro-American people must be self-determination for the Afro-American nation in the black-belt South!! Liberation for the black nation! This is the only guarantee of equality. (91, his italics)

In order to fully embrace the dogmatic aspects of revolutionary Marxism—including its traditional non-belief in the existence of God—the black-belt south must abandon its traditional ties to Christianity and replace it with scientific Marxism.

Baraka’s thoughts align with E. Franklin Frazier who views the black church as an archaic weapon used to combat an ever-changing enemy. But Frazier does not so much as provide an alternative as he does indict the church for its inefficacy. He says:

> The Negro church can no longer serve as a refuge as it did in the past when the majority of Negroes lived in the South under a system of racial segregation and the majority of the Negroes in the South lived in rural areas. […] New avenues have been opened to all kinds of business ventures in which secular ends and values are dominant. The church is no longer the main arena for political
activities which was the case when Negroes were disenfranchised in the South.

(368)

These “new avenues” have been created by capitalism and the demand of global mass markets; what remains in its wake is an archaic socio-cultural device that no longer functions as a beacon of diplomatic progressivism. For Baraka and Frazier the goal is no longer greater self-esteem or existential value within a society that has outlawed black self-worth; the aspirations are now commensurate with a leveling of the social and economic status quo that can only be attained by denying metaphysics and embracing action. In “When We’ll Worship Jesus,” Baraka writes:

stop moanin about jesus, stop sweatin and crying and stompin
and dyin for jesus
unless that’s the name of the army we building to force the land
finally to
change hands. And lets not call that jesus, get a quick
consensus, on that,
lets damn sure not call that black fire muscle
no invisible psychic dungeon
no gentle vision strait jacket, lets call that peoples army, or
wapenduzi or
simba
wachanga, but we not gon call it jesus, and not gon worship
jesus, throw
jesus out yr mind. Build the new world out of reality (254)

Baraka’s evocation of “simba wachanga”—Karenga’s The Young Lions—demonstrates his continued embrace of Kawaida doctrine in the fledgling stages of his Marxism, although Karenga’s influence by this time was beginning to fade (Autobiography 307).

A Few Notes on Selected Plays

In his Third-World Marxist phase, Baraka’s plays have also evolved to question the role of Christianity in the creation of global markets. Although Baraka had often borrowed Biblical themes and images to color his earlier plays, rarely did they describe
the intimate link between Christianity and emergent capitalism like the 1983 play, “Primitive World: An Anti-Nuclear Jazz Musical.” In this surreal play, two money gods, Maso and Sado, and a statesman, Ham, attempt to trick a man and a woman—in true Garden of Eden style—to give their lives over to the power of money. The couple eventually defeat the money gods with the help of jazz music and “Music Lovers / Soul People / Heart Companions” (447).

“Primitive World” succeeds in articulating the “money, God, power” moral code described in his earlier Beat poem, “Black Dada Nihilismus,” but offers little by way of new accusations or criticisms. The play sets out many of the same themes found in Hard Facts and Funk Lore and provides a more mystical version of the earlier Marxist play, “What Was The Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production.” It also makes a few points that seem to be elaborations on ideas set forth in the earlier play, “The Motion of History”—namely the idea that tangible, political solutions should be pursued rather than metaphysical, spiritual ones.

“Primitive World” begins with a disillusioned Man pondering the dismal reality of the world. Ham, the statesman—who we are led to believe orchestrated much of world’s despair—interjects a “frightening” plea to give in to the “holiness” of the capitalistic free-market:

HAM: We pleaded with them. We showed them light. We told them we were better than the world. More holy. More red and white more blue. We said Hold mother of profit, make these people, these all these people love us as we are. (403)

Throughout the play, Ham’s economic policy is intimately bound to his spiritual philosophy so that any discussion of money immediately evokes religion. Because the play also has elements of a musical, each character creates his own sounds with instruments and stage props; as Ham recaps the above passage a few pages later, we hear the discordant sounds of banging trashcans and the “shrieks” of his “death chant”:

Begged and pleaded, pretended to be mortal, acted humble like humans but none of that worked, none of it made them see who we were. And now
And now, Money Gods, answer, Money
Gods, speak to us, now and now the time
is now, we’ve acted like humans and other
passive things too long (407)

His “doomlike song” heavily contrasts with the harmonious jazz music the Man and Woman attempt throughout the play; the Money Gods also play their own dissonant music which sounds like “telegraph messages from all over the world […] stock exchange jargon and atmosphere and the entire range of television, radio, and billboard commercials—one after another, and intermixed, the national anthem of commercials is their lyrics” (408).

The play continues in this manner as Man and Woman discuss the need and necessity of “life” and Ham, Maso, and Sado discuss the need for “death” and “destruction” in very abstract terms. A “drummer,” who is also referred to as the “heart,” eventually summons “Music Lovers / Heart Companions / Soul People”—the “Life Orchestra”—to destroy the Money Gods with jazz in one last great battle reminiscent of the battle between good and evil in the Book of Revelations. Following the Money Gods’ destruction, the Life Orchestra asks the audience to join them in their celebration chant:

ALL:

YES TO LIFE!
NO TO DEATH!
YES TO LIFE!
NO TO DEATH! (449)

Although several of Baraka’s plays mention something about the destructive powers of money, monopoly capitalism, and the western moral code that intimately binds the two, none of them focus on it entirely. “Primitive World,” despite the overly-mystical nature of its critique, has some merit in the realm of Marxist criticism although it is primarily intended for audiences already keenly aware of the destructive powers of capitalism. Baraka’s evocation of money gods also seems to indict the Christian work-ethic that is generally affiliated with the pursuance of excessive profit and individual
gains and points a finger at the social system that places a dollar value on happiness and self-worth.

**Funk Lore: Revaluing Christianity within African-American Culture**

In 1996 Baraka published another volume of Marxist-inspired poetry titled, *Funk Lore*. As its title suggests, the poems deal heavily with Afro-centric themes characteristically tweaked by the Barakan value structure and retell African-American history in terms of its commodification by Christianity and capitalism. Baraka draws heavily from a small pool of Christian motifs and seems particularly drawn to the clear-cut, almost childish divisions set up within terms like “hell,” “devil,” and “good and evil.” Despite Werner Sollors’ and Jerry Gaffio Watts’ assessment that Baraka’s Marxist-inspired poetry offers little by way of actual “poetry”—i.e., careful attention to rhythm, the construction of the line, evocation of archaic tropes and devices, and its reception within the critical body—*Funk Lore* should be considered a gemstone within the Baraka canon for its ability to unite politics and poetics without the strict didacticism that often overpowered his nationalistic writings. With this volume Baraka continues to question Christianity and capitalism over its role in the creation of American chattel slavery while also maintaining subversive poetic devices that still place him within the realm of the avant-garde.

Baraka’s tendency to invert contemporary moral signification is evident in his adoption of images of the “devil” and “hell” so that while some posit Western governments (i.e., Great Britain and the United States) as bastions of morality, Baraka’s view is quite the opposite. This is evident in the short poem, “Brother Okot”:

Our people say
death lives
    in the West
(Any one
can see
    plainly, each evening
where the sun
goes to die)
So Okot
is now in the West

Here w/ us
in hell (20)

Baraka is very careful in his choice of words, and “hell” is not meant to be just another terrible place; it represents the absence of morality and the pursuance of evil and evokes morality only insofar as it is directly opposed to it. “Ode to the Creature” utilizes the same images to discuss the current social environment under President H.W. Bush who he calls the “Nazi dream of Yale”:

I never wanted to be in Hell
Yet here we is
Bushman
Bushman
are you the devil
or just a devil? (37)

Many of the poems in Funk Lore indict Christianity for its successful outlaw of what Baraka views as inherent human emotions and passions. Churches, he contends, strip people of creativity, beauty, and life, and this has motivated Baraka’s adoption of images of death to describe the tendency of religions to destroy and debase emotions essential to life. His use of ghosts, evil spirits, and devils also supplants the Christian view of angels as being uplifting or life-giving messengers. “Why It’s Quiet in Some Churches” discusses the church’s tendency to quell emotion, debase religions that advocate emotive reactions, and engage in profiteering:

Not a pin drops. No breathing. Please, please no sound.
(“Make them niggers cut out that ‘tom foolery’. Jesus, ain’t in Georgia!”)

You cannot make noise or the spirit will hear
We’ll nail up your mouth if you try to sing
We changed the spelling of Prophet to Profit
We changed Soul to Sole
We covered spirit with a ghost (25)

For Baraka, the individualism of the Christian work ethic seems contrary to the compassionate and communal message of Christ and has distorted the “prophet’s” initial message, replacing it with profiteering and an exclusive concern for the “sole” individual. Baraka also contends that Christianity’s elevation of Christ’s death as the focal point of worship debases the religion further and creates necrolatry, the worship of the dead: “We took the head and nuts off the ankh / changed the life sign to a cemetery advertisement. Then had mfs / wear death around the necks they wd long for it so” (25). The worship of death reflects a distortion of the natural order of things and is further complicated by Christianity’s refusal to advocate any feminine version of God:

we took the mother out. We burned broads from Salem to troy […]

The Father The Son And The Holy Ghost is a Joke
What happened to the Mother, Fools! There is no life without the mortar and the pestle, the thing and the thang (25)

Although Baraka has an extensive history of misogyny, his post-1974 work challenges those ideologies; Funk Lore’s “Size Places” utilizes the Christian image of Hell to make a similar point:

The unresolved future
The one dimensional delusion
like chauvinism is sickness

HELL
He Ill
He Will

Only He.

Both “Why It’s Quiet in Some Churches” and “Size Places” reflect the disconnection Christianity has historically imposed on various cultures and provide a good segue into the long poem, “Sin Soars!”

In the first lines of the poem, Baraka points a finger at corporate America for erasing dissent with carefully crafted marketing campaigns. He claims that monopolized
media creates a single voice in order to drown out or dissolve the voices of the American people. We are left with nothing but objects to buy:

The American people voice

Eurocentric Cultists

of white supremacy own it

they own the super structure

for the business of planets

shit namers

we call them

ey, name shit

& get us to buy

shit & eat shit

ey voice is

ey voice is, is always,

is

heard

But Not the American people (28)

Baraka’s dissatisfaction stems from his observations of a free-market economy gone mad. The American dream of a wife, children, and existential self-worth has been supplanted by a desire to purchase and consume. Even the churches are profiteering under sly, deceptive names like “Allah u” and “Akbar oil Gods, Inc.” (30); an America that has always been cast in a redeeming light of high morality has been overtaken by capitalism and faith in the holy dollar sign. If capitalism is our church, the president is our prophet:

the snake is

rolling

cross

the

ground

Our saviour rolls across the clouds

in Air Force One Is our voice
riding high w/ him? […]

he speeds
toward Cuba

Atomic Enema Devil (35)

Baraka makes a clear comparison between the devil, the biblical serpent, and the President in order to reveal the absurdity of pursuing capital gains at any cost while also attempting to maintain the status of a morally-upright nation. The poem ends by linking religion to profiteering in true Marxist style:

    Are you a cripple?
    Are you the people?

Does your church have a joke
    it tells
a long interesting payment
    of a story

there myth is welcome
    as green
    hills
    of Public School
    Mexico

that it was money, the articulate stuffing, and lives
the history of flashes
    & gasps. Sudden shut metal doors
    & bullets whacking
into the walls (36)
Baraka’s critique reiterates what many of Funk Lore’s poems claim—that profiteering is often undertaken by followers of the Christian prophet and that both “profit” and the “prophet” initiated the slave trade and the continued aggression against poor, third-world countries. The final image of the poem reveals society’s unwillingness to face the consequences of these historical aggressions and highlights what Baraka sees as the continuing fight against Christian profiteers.

The poem “I am” reiterates these points and continues Baraka’s historical critique of Christian exploitation:

anti-life & history were they
who put Mali & Songhay &
all Africa
in Slave Ships

for money, whose profits
were numbers not visionaries
Life as a low thing
worshippers of Mines not Minds
War Lovers not Peace makers […]
who style themselves God
whose New World Order
Seems old & Miltonian in that they rule
& do not serve

But somehow the term Satan seems too narrow
The word Devil is too limiting (44-46)

Baraka’s attention seems to be focused on political figures and people of affluence with the capacity to “put all Africa in Slave Ships.” Although many of Baraka’s anti-Christian poems indict the clergy for their continued complicity with a historically destructive institution, many of his more contemporary poems broaden the spectrum and isolate the criticism to the more powerful and influential Christian profiteers. James Miller’s assessment that Baraka has evolved from the role of the “poet-priest” and has become
what Lenin calls one of the “advanced workers” seems to be applicable insofar as Baraka has divorced himself from personal religious affiliations in order to publicize the impending fall of capitalism (Miller 185). However, his role as political commentator has made him complicit with simply cataloging problems and pointing accusatory fingers without actually proposing solutions. The poem, “Black Reconstruction,” attempts to find this resolution and picks up where these critiques leave off.

In the first part of the poem Baraka describes a post-emancipation situation in spiritual terms; the freed community rejoices in liberation, thanks God for his assistance, and offers pain as proof of their religious commitment. But the community does not, or cannot, fully embrace liberation; their internalized victimization does little to vindicate the past and leads to a more profound understanding of self-determination as a true path to worldly redemption. For Baraka, “that we had / plagued our liberators / to let us be liberated. / And offered our whole selves / as proof that God is real” is not enough; once-upon-a-time, “the speech / of the prophets fashioned / out weapons of fire”, but this has been supplanted by a “Screaming madness high up / John Coltrane Savage Nigger / African Explosion Color” (84). Spiritual liberation cannot provide physical or existential freedom—that must come from within:

We knew we wd be saved
that it was in ourselves
our understanding
& acceptance of our salvation. (85)

This push toward self-determination supplants faith in spirituality or religion as a liberating force and reiterates many of the points that he outlines in “When We’ll Worship Jesus.” Baraka’s appeal to look “in ourselves” for the strength and knowledge to overcome oppression is a plea to abandon any philosophy that “keeps us turned toward the sky.”

In “When We’ll Worship Jesus,” Baraka condemns Allah for working in conjunction with Christianity in order to “keep us turned toward the sky,” but in other poems, he is more willing to defend the faith. This may be due, in part, to the cultural implications of religious practice independent of its rigid dogmatism. In “Reichstag 2” Baraka condemns American anti-Muslim aggression as an excuse to monopolize global
markets and pursue Imperialism. The poem acts as a defense of radical ideology rather than a concession and posits American “greed” as the aggressor:

How perfect that it was a Muslim
Fundamentalist, one who shot Meir
Kahane (and was acquitted) the one
who was to be deported, one eyed
priest of an evil violent Muslim
cult. And it smells like Saddam or
The PLO, Quaddafi, Khomeini, the death threat
on Rushdie. Their hatred of Jews, their bloody
terrorism. And cheap greasy brown foreign
primitive violence. (52)

In this passage, a single crime committed by a Muslim is justification for a wide range of aggressions. The poem defends Islam insofar as it is linked with maintaining autonomy and is a victim of imperialism. As an enemy of Israel and a perpetrator of terrorism, Islam is opposed to American values and subject to propaganda campaigns and destruction:

The Mossad could do it, with the Serbs, cover the slaughter
of Muslims in Bosnia. The Spook, Lee,
explained to niggers, for us, how Nigger
Muslims killed Malcolm. Farrakhan’s
A Muslim. Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm
X was a Muslim. (52)

For Baraka, the aggressions are clearly defined and represent the West’s broad distrust of Islam insofar as it is used to justify violence. It is interesting to note that Baraka views aggression toward middle-eastern Islam as tantamount to denigrating Malcolm X and the Black Nationalist Muslims, so that defending Islam becomes an attempt to maintain some vestige of Black Nationalist sentiment or allegiance to Malcolm X. The poem ends with an indictment of America’s tendency to oversimplify and profiteer:

It will be simple, like Americans,
& greed will become
moral outrage.
The poem’s defense of Islam is tangential to the indictment of profiteering, fascism and imperialism. The title, “Reichstag,” describes the destructive power seat of America and, like the last stanza suggests, highlights the unwillingness of the American people to fully comprehend the implications of its foreign policy. The force of the poem is in its denunciation of these policies, rather than its alignment with Islam; it restates “Art Against Art Not” whose propaganda campaigners “confuse naked people / that knowledge is sin” (61). For Baraka, American morality is a monopolized market out to destroy the competition.

**Who Really Blew Up America?: The West as the Powerseat of the Devil**

The title poem of Baraka’s most recent volume of poetry, Somebody Blew Up America & Other Poems, made headlines for its indictment of pre-9/11 intelligence handling and cast a large shadow over the right-wing’s moral crusade against terrorism. As a result of the publication, Baraka was stripped of the New Jersey Poet Laureateship and forced to defend his words in the limelight. In his defense, Baraka released a statement on his website titled, “I will not ‘APOLOGIZE’, I will not ‘RESIGN!’”, refuting false interpretations of the poem, restating the factual basis of the poem’s claims, and defending his right to free speech. Despite the mainstream media’s refusal to downplay their initial assessment of the poem as hateful and without historical basis, Baraka has continued to travel and lecture about the necessity of questioning American imperialism, the religious right-wing, and the continued exploitation of the third-world.

In this volume of poetry, Baraka’s appropriation of images of “satan” and the “devil” seem particularly appropriate given the self-righteous nature of the current president’s moral crusade against terrorism. According to Baraka, America’s “blood-for-oil” foreign policy and its continued pursuance of aggressive military tactics distorts its status as a morally upright nation; similarly, imperialism and the pursuit of capital gains should not be cited as justification for foreign invasion, occupation, and the imposition of an inverted Christian value system. According to Baraka, we are left with a distorted system of religious images that views anyone or anything opposing American foreign affairs as “evil” or possessed by the “devil.” The inversion of these images plays a
crucial role in Baraka’s most recent work as he attempts to inform the reader of the evils of imperialism and its designation as an instrument of “satan”.

In the introduction to Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems, Kwame Dawes discusses Baraka’s position as a “public poet” intimately bound to national and global politics. His writings are in constant dialogue with Western signifying structures in an effort to “challenge it and in some ways undermine it” (xiv). Dawes cites the “western mythos” as the focal point of Baraka’s criticism—a series of value structures intended to establish American integrity and authority and manipulated as an excuse for interference in international affairs. In terms of spirituality, it is the platform of pious Christian-based morality meant to elevate the West in the global political realm that becomes, for Baraka, a manifestation of its backward, shortsighted ethos of cultural aggression.

This re-writing of the western mythos is the lynchpin of his cultural and literary relevance and is pervasive throughout the pages of Somebody Blew Up America. This is evident in “Beginnings: Malcolm” as Baraka describes the West as the power-seat of the devil in his re-writing of the Book of Revelations from an Afro-centric jazz perspective. Baraka prefaces the poem by evoking Duke Ellington’s “Airconditioned Nightmare” to set the rhythm and tease out the tensions of the various polarities he constructs and deconstructs throughout the poem:

(Airconditioned Nightmare, by Duke Ellington)

When the Beast emerged from the western sea
as a fictitious ghost who was an actual ghost
to the niggers He carried in his pouch of filth
his Moby Dick ship called Jesus (3)

In the opening lines Baraka deconstructs the traditional opposition between Jesus and the Beast of Revelations; rather than being oppositional forces, they are allied in the pursuit of a common evil—money:

his brother had sold
the Beast had bought, he had no soul, and they’d
created money, the animal king, the coin, the khan,
the con, hard currency, the cold return, was a ghost
fools screamed, and he did not exist, not as a ghost
was a Beast who was a man, rose to power in the land (3)

Baraka’s re-writing of Revelations indicts the creation of money as the origin of cultural
and racial aggression. The “fictitious ghost who was an actual ghost” exposes Baraka’s
own non-belief in the existence of God and reveals the absurdity of evoking an abstract,
mystical basis for pursuing both good and evil. For Baraka, evil is a man-made
phenomena which has been manipulated to appear abstract and other-worldly, so that its
chief pursuers may exploit it and champion a solution that appears just as abstract and far
reaching as the problem.

Baraka’s solution to the evils of money eventually comes in the form of love and
a renewal of Malcolm’s message of self-determination; but the poem is not so much a
call to arms as it is a retrospective look at Malcolm the prophet and his potential to
combat the problems facing contemporary African-Americans. But while the prophet’s
message appears determined and uplifting, the poem’s ominous images detail the
impregnable evil of money and forecast the prophet’s impending destruction:

the Beast who was a man and the ghost who
never existed sat across the
evil of money and glistened with evil like slobbering
pain. […]
The Lamb sent a nightingale, wearing the red crescent
of Marvin Gaye, mercy mercy me, O Lamb of Allah,
of black sheep,
of wooly feeling, oh nigger with only three pennies
worth of Dis
in the devil’s world. (4-5)

Baraka’s view of capitalist society as “the devil’s world” becomes the point from which
Malcolm’s destruction by “evil”, anti-divine forces emanates; as a Muslim, Malcolm
becomes the “Lamb of Allah” and the battle against the evil of money becomes an epic
battle between good and evil. Like the Biblical Messiah, Malcolm’s weapon against evil
is love:

his desire
like the burning, was love
not suffocating fire. “who is that handsome young
minister,” said the Prophet’s
nurse? The Prophet not the profit, the good not the
gut, bread is not pain,
money is the jewelry of the bowels.
The image of “the Prophet not the profit” neatly defines the contradiction of American Christianity and its capitulation with capitalist profiteering. Although Malcolm X’s nationalistic platform primarily addressed the plight of African-Americans within a white-dominated social structure, Baraka’s internalization and gradual widening of these nationalistic values to include socialism and the leveling of the status quo becomes the point from which Malcolm X’s legacy grows to accommodate these beliefs. The poem then expands itself into a comparison between the poet and Malcolm X so that Baraka’s fight against imperial capitalism becomes synonymous with Malcolm’s fight for nationalism while their respective lovers provide the passion for resistance in the form of love:

Was Black Betty there, Betty, beautiful, looking into
the Prophet’s eyes
following him inside blackness with the tales of her
fire with the fiery tail
with the kiss divine, like the poet’s Amina, sitting there
staring at the once Satanic
issue, like joy from a hidden fissure in the earth,
oh woman of the beginning, oh wife
of the Prophet, O, Lover! (5)
The conclusion of the poem describes a “once Satanic / issue” that emanates “like joy from a hidden fissure in the earth,” both plaguing and providing solace to the women of the poem’s prophets. In his autobiography, Baraka describes Amina’s disgust with some of the more narrow-minded aspects of his Nationalism, namely his misogynistic tendencies, and her role in helping him overcome these shortcomings; the death of those ideals and his subsequent rebirth and embrace of revolutionary Marxism seem to be
likened to the pain of Malcolm X’s death—the disillusion and despair—and the
Messianic rebirth of his legacy as a beacon of hope for all those engaged in revolutionary
struggle. Baraka’s attention to the feminine counterpart of the prophet is in line with
Funk Lore’s “Why It’s Quiet In Some Churches” and its embrace of “the mortar and the
pestle, the thing and / the thang” as the more logical option to Christianity’s tradition of
anti-feminine divinity.

“Beginnings: Malcolm” succeeds in linking Baraka’s past to the present and
bridges the gap between the fight for nationalism and the fight for Third-World
liberation. The poem also acts as a bridge between the emotionalism of his bohemianism
and what may be considered a more consciously poetic, less rigidly dogmatic phase of
Baraka’s poetry. To view the love of Malcolm and Betty—Amiri and Amina—as a
weapon against contemporary evil is to embrace the polarities Baraka sets up in the 1961
poem, “In Memory of Radio”:

& Love is an evil word.
Turn it backwards/see, see what I mean?
An evol word. & besides
who understands it?
I certainly wouldn’t like to go out on that kind of limb. […]
An evil word it is,
This love. (Harris, 10-11)

On the journey from bohemianism to Marxism, Baraka seems to have gone out “on that
type of limb” and has returned with a newfound appreciation for the liberating,
revolutionary power of love. “Betty and Malcolm”, the poem immediately following
“Beginnings: Malcolm,” evokes a similar image:

the earth is not still
habitable
for humans
& Love is turned
backwards
to evil (6)
Although the images appear similar, the latter is more uplifting. In the second image, rather than being its doppelganger, evil is an abominable derivative of love, “love turned backwards.” No longer intimately bound in a mess of contradiction, the image allows room for a possible solution; “Betty and Malcolm” envisions that solution in terms of human love:

Don Pullen Played

Duh da Duh
Dah Duh
Du […]

of that Love
Bound by Human

feeling
as fire & light
& music
in the world
Betty & Malcolm

Duh Duh
Duh Duh
Dah Duh Duhhhhh (6)

Although Baraka still views the fight for liberation in political terms, his poetry allows room to celebrate the wide range of human emotion. This may be due, in part, to the retrospective look that seems to eclipse the hell fire of many great poets when they reach the twilight hours. But whatever introspection may underlie his more recent poetry, one should not confuse reminiscing with a softening of Baraka’s primary agenda; his attention to third-world liberation, the destruction of Judeo-Christian imperialism, and the legacy of Malcolm X persists with the homophonic catchphrase: “The Prophet / Murdered / for the profit of the Beast” (9).

The surreality of the first two poems eventually gives way to Baraka’s more pragmatic voice as each of the poems questions the many social and political atrocities that the American political field constantly tries to sweep under the carpet. But whatever level of social awareness these poems may approach seems almost immediately eclipsed
by the controversial 9/11 poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” with its sweeping condemnation of American foreign and domestic affairs. Although Baraka received an unhealthy amount of criticism following his reading of the poem at the Dodge Poetry Festival—mostly reactionary, non-literary, near-sighted criticisms—my fascination with this poem is not a sensational one. Indeed, as William J. Harris and Aldon Lynn Nielsen point out in their essay, “Somebody Blew Off Baraka”, Baraka’s history of controversy is extensive: “He is a poet who has heard his own poetry read back to him by a sentencing judge as evidence that he is a dangerous man who should be put away” (AAR, 186). But any true Baraka scholar understands that his perpetual controversies are generally ignited by incomplete or misinformed readings, and that upon closer examination of the poem, one might notice the extent to which Baraka goes to indict those actually guilty of raging anti-Semitism. As Harris and Nielsen point out, the anti-Semitic charges leveled at Baraka seem erroneous if one bothers to read the entire poem, rather than simply quoting the following lines:

Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion
And cracking they sides at the notion […]
Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers
to stay home that day

Why did Sharon stay away? (SBUA 47-49)

Whether or not this information is correct, one cannot make the argument that an attack on Israel is commensurate with an attack on the Jewish people; according to Harris and Nielsen, “if it is the case that Israel is a democracy with Arabic citizens, then it cannot be the case that attacks upon the government of Israel are automatically attacks upon Jews, nor could it even be the case that a lie about Israel is inherently anti-Semitic” (185). Few people engaged in these illogical attacks seemed to factor in the earlier lines indicting the real anti-semites:

Who killed the most Jews […]
Who put the Jews in ovens,
and who helped them do it
Who said “America First”
and ok’d the yellow stars (44, 48)

Despite its critical adherents, the poem succeeds in questioning the logic of American imperialism and points an accusatory finger at the shroud of moral decency the West evokes as justification for its continued economic and socio-political dominance.

Given the volatile, accusatory nature of the poem, Baraka begins by allying himself with “all thinking people” in a collective indictment of terrorism. The poem will eventually accuse the United States of systematic terrorism—both domestic and international—despite its continued attempts to claim victim status:

(All thinking people
oppose terrorism
both domestic
& international…
But one should not
be used
To cover the other) (41)

When performing the poem, Baraka speaks these lines calmly as if contemplating the dismal history of oppression and what may be called America’s covert intervention in foreign and domestic affairs. These lines also protect Baraka from critics who may view the poem as vindication of the 9/11 attacks, despite the recurring theme of indicting those guilty of atrocities against civilians and over powerless individuals. But throughout the litany of questions and accusations in the poem, we eventually lose track of 9/11 and begin to understand who the “somebody” is that really blew up America. The real aggressor is not “some / barbaric / A Rab” but what Kwame Dawes identifies in his introduction to Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems as “pax anglo-Saxon America—wealthy, conservative America and the very historical philosophies that undergird such a community” (xxii). Dawes goes on to remark that “Christians ought to be more offended and disturbed by Baraka’s statements than Jews,” a statement that is very accurate given the poet’s undying belief in socio-political revolution as a realistic, viable alternative to anti-emancipatory, metaphysical Christianity (xxii). And because many of Baraka’s accusations address America’s history of oppressive race-relations, one
cannot help but notice the parallel between wealthy, conservative, Christian America and the continued pursuance of imperialistic exploitation often buried deep within a supposedly Judeo-Christian moral code.

Baraka’s eerie list of accusations reads like an inverted version of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”; but rather than cataloging the oppressed as Ginsberg does in his famous Beat poem, Baraka is concerned with cataloging the atrocities of the oppressor. His main point is that the violence and destruction of American imperial pursuits far outweighs, and may even be the cause of, foreign aggression; that a complicated system of propagandistic mental conditioning has distorted any accurate, objective reading of history; and that as responsible Americans it is our duty to question the implications of our foreign and domestic policies. Following his parenthetical preface, Baraka presents a brief list of domestic atrocities committed against African-Americans as a segue into the broader, global discussion:

They say its some terrorist, some
barbaric
A Rab, in
Afghanistan

It wasn’t our American terrorists
It wasn’t the Klan or the Skin heads
Or the them that blows up nigger
Churches (42)

Once the litany of “who’s” begins, any good student of history can understand the relationship between the accusation and the Christian moral-code that authorized it:

Who had the slaves […]
Who got fat from plantations
Who genocided Indians […]
Who say they God & still be the Devil […]
Who bought the slaves, who sold them […]
Who owned the slave ship […]
Who change the Bible
Who do the most evil […]

65
Who have the colonies
Who stole the most land
Who rule world
Who say they good but only do evil  

Although the bulk of the accusations are directed at the United States government and wealthy capitalist profiteers, Baraka also points a finger at the underlying system of Christian morality that has buttressed Western politics since The Vatican appeared in the political arena hundreds of years ago. And considering the trajectory of this study, it is easy to understand the Church’s role in perpetuating the atrocities listed above.

When considering the final lines of the poem it seems evident that Baraka is concerned with exposing the Christian moral code that has given America access to these destructive avenues. His continuing evocation of images of “hell” and the “devil” reflects an intimate understanding of how these moral codes may be exploited or manipulated in order to pursue imperialistic ends and does not reflect any metaphysical or religious belief by the author:

Who you know ever

Seen God?

But everybody seen

The Devil

Like an owl exploding
In your life in your brain in your self
Like an Owl who know the Devil
All night, all day if you listen, Like an Owl
Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise
In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell

Who and Who and WHO (+) who who
Whooooo and whooooooooOOOOOOooooOoooo!  

(50)
By subverting normal religious signification Baraka is speaking on “their” level in order to reveal the tangible, non-metaphysical origin of “evil”; once this is established, we may be able to pursue tangible, political solutions rather than appealing to lofty abstractions.

“Somebody Blew Up America” succeeds where earlier poems fall short by listing very specific accusations rather than simply generalizing or using specific keywords to link images of the “devil”, “evil”, and “hell” to broad terms like “capitalism” and “imperialism.” Although many other poems more accurately describe the link between Christianity, capitalism, and global oppression, the sensationalism of the media’s coverage of “Somebody Blew Up America” has allowed Baraka’s message to reach some of America’s largest media outlets like CNN and FOXNews, despite their conservative slants.

“Why Are They So Crazy?”: Baraka’s Marginalization by the Mainstream

In Baraka’s recent volume of short poems, Un Poco Low Coup, the poem, “Question w/ no Aire,” repeats for 12 lines the question, “Why are they so crazy?” (22). Baraka has been asking himself this question since the early days in Greenwich Village, and it is doubtful that he will ever find a coherent answer. These days he may come close to an answer grounded economic terms, but that will do little to ameliorate the pervasive problems he identifies within free market capitalism and hegemonic social thought. While Baraka continues to write in the name of oppressed peoples who lack access to the appropriate critical channels, Baraka’s critics in the mainstream will continue to ask the question back, “why is he so crazy?”
CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have argued that Amiri Baraka’s work reveals a critique of Christianity that hinges on its repressive ties to capitalism, the excessive exploitation of the Third-World, and the emergence of American chattel slavery. This thread of logic can be traced all the way back to his earliest bohemian writings and should be considered an integral part of his ideological platform despite his oscillation between various avant-garde, Pan-Africanist, Nationalistic, and socialist philosophies. Together with the recurring theme of jazz, the Christian critique appears to be one of most stable thematic elements throughout the entire Baraka corpus.

In concluding, I would like to look at a 1993 interview conducted by Maya Angelou in which Baraka discusses the need to pursue objective truths. When asked how he approaches “the multi-racial classroom,” Baraka remarks:

I am consistently trying to hold on to the truth, and the truth ought to be valuable to anybody, regardless of race or nationality. If there are people in my classrooms who don’t understand that, that’s part of why they need educating. They need to understand the truth is exactly that: what is objective? what is real? (263).

Although Baraka is speaking very specifically about the classroom environment, his words accurately describe his primary motivations as an artist and political activist. In an effort to describe, “what is real,” Baraka has passed through a variety of subjective vantage points until finally reaching what he terms “scientific” socialism—the objective truth of economic distribution. It seems ironic that in this final “scientific” stage of Marxist thought, Baraka has most fully articulated the anti-communal link between Christianity and capitalism, despite the quasi-socialistic underpinnings of Jesus’ message in the Bible.

In his prose poem, “Allah Mean Everything!,” written in 1998, Baraka discusses the similarities and differences between religious and moral philosophy and reaches the conclusion that, “there is not God, there is Good” (Reader 561). Throughout his career, Baraka has struggled to find objective truths in order to rationalize the repressive conditions around him. After plowing through the extensive corpus of world religious philosophy, Baraka seems to have become aware of their interconnectedness—their collective belief in the triumph of “good” over “evil.” What humans have done,
however, is defined religious dogma in very subjective human terms so that the basic belief in goodness becomes convoluted, manipulative, and evil. He writes:

> Allah mean everything, before the word
> Before the slavemasters, before the kings
> Everything. So how can there be God, since
> Everything is the one, the whole, to understand this is what holiness Means. […]

So those who did not dig the above, did not dig the sun, those who created histories of words which dealt with nothing but the transportation of their appetites, who thought there was nothing after the tree, and didn’t understand the tree, those who made lies into laws, death into trick endings and mystery. Those who created God because they could not be what they wanted with Good. (560-561)

For Baraka, Godliness is goodness—a secular desire—and should not be confused with metaphysics. Such confusion leads to manipulation and exploitation while the disenfranchised struggle to find hope within the very system that dissolved it in the first place. What was good was replaced with God and the pursuit of money. Baraka writes:

> There is Good and There is Evil and there is not God and No Devil.
> But the rulers of the world make themselves rulers measures masters of the terror because they want to eat and have expensive doo doo.
> The most expensive doo doo is money.

Although Baraka makes explicit mention of Christianity, he seems to indict all world religions for their complicity in maintaining manipulative belief systems, while at the same time expressing the need to unify across religious boundaries: “Why / the Indians say OHMMMM. Krishna is Blue like Monk, and the / same word as Christ” (563).

As Baraka mentions in his 1968 interview with Austin Clarke, we must be careful in identifying human scriptural interpretation as the true message of the God. As such, rigid church dogma represents a necessarily flawed human attempt to translate divine law into material terms—a situation that often results in skewed and subjective “truths” often manipulated for individual gain. Baraka’s work attempts to deconstruct these boundaries of repression and remove misplaced faith in metaphysical systems in order to attain
realistic political solutions to non-metaphysical political problems. As Baraka writes in “Allah Mean Everything,” “there is not God, there is Good” (561).
REFERENCES

Baraka, Amiri.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert Fayze Pellicer grew up in Jacksonville, Florida before journeying to Tallahassee to attend Florida State University in the Fall of 2001. On September 11, 2001, the men and women of the Bryan Hall Learning Community filed into Robert’s room to watch the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the dormitory’s largest privately owned television. It would be a pivotal moment in Robert’s ideological journey; his efforts thereafter focused on avant-garde, counter-culture, and fringe literatures attempting to speak for subjugated peoples globally. After graduating with a B.A. in the Spring of 2005, Robert stayed on at Florida State to pursue a Master’s in English Literature. His literary interests include The Beat Generation of writers, The New York School, Contemporary African-American writers, and issues of race, class, and religion throughout the entire canon of Western literature. Robert Fayze Pellicer currently lives and works as a fine art painter in Portland, Oregon.