II.
GENRES AND IDEOLOGIES

6
A Black Mass as Black Gothic
Myth and Bioscience in Black Cultural Nationalism

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BLACK FRANKENSTEIN

In "The Black Arts Movement," the defining and definitive manifesto of the radical current of African American arts and letters that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, Larry Neal famously described the era's cultural activism as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister" of black power political insurgency.[1] United in the shared goal of black liberation, the twinned movements differed in emphasis: black power activism centered on the "art *of* politics," while the performers, poets, playwrights, and novelists of the Black Arts Movement were dedicated to forging the "relationship between art *and* politics."[2] Neal declared the task facing the latter group as nothing less than "a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic," a creative revolution aimed at redirecting the impetus of African American art, raising political consciousness, and rousing racial pride.[3]

Neal's essay identified Amiri Baraka's play, *A Black Mass*, as one of a small number of works that exemplified the ideal form of Black Arts Movement cultural praxis and politico-aesthetic philosophy. *A Black Mass* is a moral narrative that, in Neal's words, dramatizes the costs of "the aesthetic impulse gone astray" and puts forth a black creative demiurge as salvation and substitute.[4] Gathering influences from African American folklore, religious cosmology, and popular culture together,[5] Baraka portrayed scientific and artistic experimentation as analogous generative principles that emerge from opposite political imperatives—the former stemming from ambition unmoored from social sanction and racial purpose, the latter organically rooted and crafted solely for the good of the black nation.

First performed in the spring of 1966, with accompaniment from experimental jazz musician Sun Ra and his Myth-Science Arkestra, and subsequently presented at community centers throughout the United States, *A Black Mass*

staged the story of Jacoub, a black mad scientist who, in a moment of transgression and hubris, disregards the warnings of his fellow scientists and creates a white Beast (metonymically white people) that wreaks havoc on the prelapsarian black world. The play was a dramaturgical adaptation of the story of Yakub, a central mythology of the Nation of Islam (NOI) that had circulated since the 1930s, and which by the late 1960s was beginning to find broader circulation in the writings of Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, among others.[6] The transformation of this NOI cosmology into a theatrical performance served to dramatize what was believed by some to be the inherent incommensurability of black and white experience, a theme that was present in a good deal of Baraka's work during this period and in much of black power ideology also.

For the most part, *A Black Mass* has been overshadowed by analyses of Baraka's better-known plays, especially *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. Among those scholars who have commented on the play, many have noted its deep roots in African diasporic religious traditions, reading Jacoub[7] as a twentieth-century derivation of an ancient African priest, while others have highlighted allusions to black magic and witchcraft.[8] While acknowledging these thematic currents, I interpret *A Black Mass* primarily as a narrative about bioscience and race.[9]

In this general sense, the play was mostly in keeping with the cultural nationalist legend that inspired it. Early NOI cosmology and ideology evidenced a strong and positive engagement with the biosciences, including anthropology, genetics, and molecular biology, as well as a current of "scientism"—the application of the analytical approaches of the sciences to other spheres of life. For example, most probably extrapolating from developments in physical anthropology and archeology, the NOI famously asserted that blacks were the Earth's first men. Black Muslim belief further held that these "original men"—a cohort that included Yakub—were also the world's first scientists. The Yakub story, therefore, is less a disavowal of scientific experimentation run amok than a warning about how the noble pursuit of science, left in the wrong hands, can produce deleterious social aftereffects.

A Black Mass shares key character and narrative elements with the Yakub myth. This Black Muslim inheritance has been well rehearsed by critics.[10] However, little has been made of the key point on which Baraka departed from the NOI's origin story: the racial stakes of bioscientific experimentation. Contra the somewhat cautionary, but ultimately pro-science, tone of the NOI mythology, Baraka's play is a thoroughgoing critique of the biosciences. While scientific experimentation is characterized as an inherently black practice in the Nation's genesis story, in Baraka's drama, it is depicted as anathema to authentic black creative expression. Indeed, in Baraka's re-telling, alchemists are substituted for the scientist protagonists of Nation of Islam cosmology; African-derived (black) magic is posited as the ethical substitute to the biosciences. To what factors might we attribute this dramatic shift in the moral register of the Yakub story? In the pages that follow, I trace the emergence of *A Black Mass* from the Nation of Islam's Yakub story, and place both in a larger

context of derivations of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein story, which is in a sense the primal scene of artistic meditations on the consequences of science.

A Black Mass is a particularly rich cogitation on race and bioscience because it depicts a moment when "race" (in the form of a population of white beings) is literally created by the mad scientist Jacoub. In this way, Baraka alludes to (and reverses) the centuries-old processes through which medical and scientific practice have scrutinized, codified, classified, and otherwise constructed black bodies.[11] Ultimately, the playwright not only upends the laboratory power relations that typify the history of racial science, but, as befitting Black Arts Movement cultural politics, he also critiques the epistemological underpinnings of bioscience. Importantly, Baraka's play also foreshadowed the uneasy nexus of racial politics and bioscience that would take center stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *A Black Mass* dramatically depicted African American skepticism about biomedicine and scientific experimentation, a sentiment that would find wide-ranging assent in black communities following the revelation, in the early 1970s, of state-implicated scientific and medical research abuses. In this way, the play provides insight into how some African Americans perceived bioscience on the eve of these developments.

While it was an exemplar of Black Arts Movement aesthetic politics, *A Black Mass* is also in keeping with a long tradition of artistic reflections on the intersections of bioscience and society. Jacoub could easily take a place in the literary pantheon of mad scientists such as Dr. Faust and Dr. Frankenstein. Considered from this perspective, Baraka's play could be said to have appended an explicit racial politic onto Shelley's nineteenth-century gothic tale. I propose that by understanding *A Black Mass* (and the Yakub myth that preceded it) in a continuum of iterations of the Frankenstein myth, we might come to better understand its larger symbolic importance.

It has become commonplace among science studies scholars to look to cultural narratives as a way of understanding popular attitudes about science and its applications.[12] Such representations shape and inform public perception of scientists and scientific and medical research practices. The mad scientist, or reckless originator of anomalous inventions, the social impact of which is not fully known prior to conception, remains a central metaphor for the power of science and medicine within and beyond the laboratory.[13] And the misbegotten monster, made at the hands of a transgressive researcher, is an enduring icon of the potentially disastrous outcomes of scientific experimentation. Though this allegory has roots in older Western myths, including those of Prometheus and Faust, its most well-known source is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818.[14]

The tragic tale of Victor Frankenstein has been depicted in many cultural forms since the publication of Shelley's novel, including drama and film, but it has always been interpreted as a social mirror. Its precise meaning, at any given historical moment, has been closely linked to developments in science and technology. Historian of medicine Susan Lederer explains that the novel was initially received as "a moral lesson illustrating the punishment for

ambitious scientists who seek to usurp the place of God by creating life."[15] Yet, beginning in the early twentieth century, as versions of the story proliferated in mass culture, the "Frankenstein story [became] a powerful metaphor for addressing the ways in which American society responds to the rapid pace of discoveries in biology and medicine, discoveries that challenged traditional understandings of what it means to be human."[16] According to Lederer, in the current moment, the metaphor of Frankenstein retains "continuing power" to "articulate concerns raised by new developments in biomedicine such as cloning and xenografting (the use of animal organs in human bodies), and the role responsible scientists and citizens play in the ongoing dialogue to determine the acceptable limits of scientific and medical advances."[17] What has remained consistent across the many permutations of the Frankenstein myth is an underlying unease with biomedical research and an acute awareness of the potential costs of pushing the envelope of experimental science.

"YAKUB'S HISTORY"

Although the finer details of *Frankenstein* are often lost in the diverse re-tellings it has received since its initial publication many decades ago, the novel's popular re-imaginings are typically faithful to the broad contours of the original narrative. One case in point is the portion of the Nation of Islam's cosmogenesis myth known as "Yakub's story" or "Yakub's history" from which *A Black Mass* is adapted.[18] The myth tells of a disaffected black "god-scientist" named Yakub who, millennia prior to the research of Gregor Mendel, deploys his knowledge of the mechanics of dominant and recessive genes to eliminate black humanity by inventing and propagating a conquering tribe of white people.[19] As with Mary Shelley's novel, this myth portrays a transgressive scientist whose unrestrained curiosity results in the murder of members of the scientist's kin. However, in this NOI narrative, the mad scientist is also a traitor to his race whose unbridled experimentation causes the decimation of a large segment of a population and sets the stage for the impending racial oppression of the survivors.

Emerging in the crucible of the Great Migration and the Great Depression, the Black Muslim community afforded safe haven to recent arrivals to urban centers, while the NOI's belief system—in which the Yakub myth figured prominently—explained blacks' position in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis white Americans, "rationalized the predicament of the black race," and forecast the imminent upending of the pecking order.[20] Described by sociologist C. Eric Lincoln as "the central myth of the Black Muslim movement," the Yakub story has been in circulation since the establishment of the Nation of Islam in 1930.[21] According to the legend, in the beginning of human history, many types of black people inhabited the moon. A black god-scientist, unhappy that all the moon's inhabitants did not speak the same language, exploded the planet, one piece of which became the Earth. The Earth was inhabited by a surviving community of inherently righteous black people, many of whom settled in

Mecca.[22] Yakub, who was born twenty miles outside of Mecca, was among the thirty percent of citizens of this all-black, utopian society who were dissatisfied with their lives.

As a child, Yakub was nicknamed "big head," a tag that was reputedly both literal and figurative, and referred to the unusually large size of his skull as well as his extreme arrogance and intelligence.[23] A formative experience in his youth would inspire Yakub's life's work. Playing with iron bars one day, he discovered the properties of magnetism. He observed that similarly charged magnetic poles repel one another while opposite poles attract. From this physical law, Yakub hypothesized a social one: if he could create a race of beings diametrically opposite to black people, he could reign over them. Blacks would be attracted to this opposite race and would thus be blinded to the "tricknology" used to rule over them.

Yakub carried this idea with him into adulthood. He excelled at school and quickly outgrew the education available to him at the local university. He subsequently turned his complete attention to the task of developing a technique to "breed races scientifically."[24] At the same time, Yakub began to spread his mutinous racial philosophy and drew a large following among other dissatisfied Meccans. Alarmed authorities were fearful of Yakub's dangerous ideas and his hubris; they attempted to contain the scientist's ambitions by banishing him and his 59,999 disaffected followers to a distant island.

On this island, Yakub set up a laboratory and continued his efforts to create the white race. Yakub discovered that black men contained two "germs," a dominant black one and a recessive brown one. As Malcolm X explained, the scientist "conceived the idea of employing what we today know as the recessive genes structure, to separate from each other the two germs, black and brown, and then grafting the brown germ to progressively lighter, weaker stages."[25] Although his precise methods are not elaborated, Yakub purportedly used genetic science to mutate and cross-breed the black race into the white race—creating the "red, yellow and brown" races along the way.[26] He also instituted a eugenics policy in which infanticide was practiced (black babies were killed and brown ones were allowed to live) and established "selective birth control" by encouraging lighter-skinned people to mate with each other and outlawing marriages between darker-hued residents.[27]

Although Yakub died before the human "bleaching" process was complete, many centuries after his death the island was exclusively populated by a white race. This group migrated back to the mainland. Because they did not possess the inherent righteousness of the original black man, the white race became corrupt, immoral, and atavistic—more animal-like, covered with body hair, and impervious to frigid climes. This devolution was accompanied by the initiation of a master plan to oppress and eliminate black people.[28]

As with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "Yakub's history" is an origin story in which unfettered scientific experimentation serves as the engine of epic creation and cataclysm. Perhaps owing to its science fictional elements, the Yakub myth is

regarded, in the words of historian Claude Clegg, as the "most peculiar part of the [Black] Muslim's theology."[29] Yet, however unusual it might appear at first glance, the myth clearly draws on more familiar and conventional cosmologies. Religious studies scholar Michael Lieb characterizes the NOI's creation story as a "reinscription of the Genesis narrative" of the Old Testament.[30] Extending Lieb's argument, Clegg maintains that the Yakub myth is "at least partially anchored in both Judeo-Christian and Islamic theology."[31]

Yakub's story is also redolent of recurring themes in African American folklore, most notably narratives that invert conventional accounts of racial origins. Lawrence W. Levine has observed that during slavery oral legends circulated which were based on "the assumption of a black creation [and] allowed slaves to stand the white creation myths on their heads."[32] For example, the conceit that all creation stemmed from the black race was also found in the famous Uncle Remus tales that were popular among African Americans in the South.[33] In one witty story, "Origin of the Races," Uncle Remus tells of a time when all of humanity was black, until a pond was discovered that turned black people who were submerged in it white.[34]

While aspects of the Yakub story draw on ancient and folkloric mythologies, its scientific themes and modern temporality make it distinct from them. The myth evinces an engagement with contemporary research developments. Black Muslim leaders were known to be widely read in genetic science and probably "interpreted" the writings of Gregor Mendel as proof of the Yakub myth.[35] As the references to coercive birth restrictions reveal, the architects of the Yakub story were most certainly aware of eugenic science. This theme additionally anticipated fears of race genocide that would permeate black power discourse some years later. NOI leaders have also acknowledged that the theories of early twentieth-century archeologists and anthropologists, particularly the "out of Africa" thesis, figure centrally in their worldview. Most recently, the NOI has claimed that advances in medical genetics supply a new basis of evidence to bolster its beliefs.[36]

In addition to these scientific influences and borrowings, the NOI injected scientism into its beliefs. In the strict sense of the word, scientism refers to the application of the analytical approaches of the sciences to other spheres of life. This practice was best exemplified in the numerological bent of the NOI's biblical exegesis and cosmology.[37] A form of scientism was also apparent in the appropriation of science-like terms as tropes and metaphors. For example, the word "tricknology" allocated a measure of rigorous calculation to what Black Muslims believed to be age-old cunning on the part of whites, while the frequently used term "science" referred to any and all exacting knowledge about Islam and the experiences of black people. A similar strategy was employed in the Yakub story: Michael Lieb has described the myth as a cosmogony that "anchors its narrative in the language of scientific discourse . . . distinguished by an emphasis on racial difference."[38] The NOI's leaders, Clegg adds, also used a "façade" of science and other "modern trappings"—including mention

of "genetic experimentation"—to confer "a rational, calculated veneer" and twentieth-century credibility to the Yakub story.[39] Both forms of scientism provided a semblance of scientific epistemological authority to NOI ideology in general and to its creation narrative in particular.

As an African American Frankenstein story, the Yakub myth is a paradoxical statement on race, science, and society. The Yakub story evidences skepticism about the use of knowledge to alter the "natural order" (that is, the "racial" order) of things and depicts a scientist's act of misconduct as the principle catalyst of the epic dispersal of black people and the central cause of their generations-long subjugated status. While the myth clearly conveys some uncertainty about bioscience, it is less of a critique of scientific experimentation per se and more a cautionary tale of the possible consequences of it should the aspirations of ambitious researchers go unchecked. "Yakub's history" would become the blueprint for Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Movement-era play, *A Black Mass*. But the play would offer an even more dour assessment of biomedical research; it would declare the risks that science posed for black people even more directly.

BARAKA'S EXPERIMENT

Amiri Baraka penned *A Black Mass* at a critical juncture in his development as an artist. According to literary theorist William J. Harris' timeline, the play was composed at the beginning of Baraka's "black nationalist" phase—after the playwright had left his life as a Beat poet and New York City bohemian and at the beginning of his ascension as a leader of the Black Arts Movement.[40] The transition from bohemian to black cultural nationalist began with a visit to Cuba in 1960, which Baraka described in retrospect as "a turning point" in his life.[41] Baraka traveled to Cuba with a delegation of artists, activists, and writers assembled by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee—the group included critic Harold Cruse, historian John Henrik Clarke, and radical Robert F. Williams—at the invitation of Fidel Castro. The trip was sponsored by the Castro government in the hope that first-person accounts of Cuba from members of this influential group upon their return would serve as a counterbalance to Cold War red-baiting.

Recalling the impact of his trip on his political evolution Baraka wrote, "I carried so much back with me [from Cuba] that I never was the same again. The dynamic revolution had touched me . . . . The growing kernel of social consciousness I had was mightily fertilized by the visit . . . . It was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must act! One *could* act."[42] The production of *A Black Mass* and other dramatic works in the mid-1960s reflected Baraka's radicalization as well as his aesthetic strategy of linking artistic form with political content. He recalled, "[T]he dramatic form began to interest me because I wanted to go 'beyond' poetry. I wanted some kind of action literature . . . [Drama] is an *action* form . . . . It reaches more people."[43] Just as Baraka had been stirred by the Cuba trip to act for social change, with his creative work, he aspired to produce action in art and to provoke his audiences to act politically.[44] Writing for the stage, Baraka realized, served both these agendas.[45]

Baraka learned of the Yakub myth—the seedbed for "A Black Mass"—from Malcolm X, whom he greatly admired.[46] Not surprisingly, the assassination of the former NOI leader on February 21, 1965, marked another defining moment in the playwright's life.[47] According to Baraka, the death of Malcolm X stirred him to sever all ties with his downtown Manhattan life and to solidify his total commitment to black cultural nationalism.[48] Within a month of the assassination, Baraka left his family and Greenwich Village, and took up residence in Harlem.[49] There, he and other African American activist-artists formed the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS), an arts center that, among other programming, held studio art classes and organized public performances including street theater and music.[50] At BARTS, Baraka worked collaboratively with musicians—including Sun Ra, who has been described by John Szwed as Baraka's "silent partner"—on cultural nationalist projects to entertain and mobilize the local black community.[51]

A Black Mass was first staged on a spring evening in May 1966 at the RKO Proctor's Theater in Newark, New Jersey. Performed by the Spirit House Movers—the in-house acting troupe of Spirit House, Baraka's recently established cultural institution—the play presented his reinterpretation of the Yakub myth.[52] The partly improvised drama was fittingly accompanied by the experimental jazz of Sun Ra and the Myth-Science Arkestra, which created aural vertigo—a sense of the world spinning out of control—with music that simultaneously banged, screeched, and undulated.[53] With this performance, Sun Ra and Baraka married their distinctive styles of avant-garde cultural politics to striking effect.[54]

As the play opens, the audience encounters three "black magicians" working in the darkness of "some fantastical chemical laboratory . . . with weird mixtures bubbling, [and] colored solutions."[55] The shadowy space is furnished with Arabic and Swahili signage, "strange drawings, diagrams of weird machines" (22), signifying the lab's African and scientific inheritance. Two of the alchemists, Nasafi and Tanzil, are working at a "leisurely, casual" pace, humming to Sun Ra's gentle musical accompaniment (21).[56] Jacoub, the third experimenter, is laboring more feverishly and more deliberately.

Nasafi announces his successful creation of a potion that will render "time, that white madness" meaningless (22). Expressing pleasure with the news of Nasafi's invention, Tanzil complains that time "drives brothers across the Earth" and anticipates the day when the potion will have eliminated "time" and "the animals who bring it into the world" (23). Alluding to the NOI myth's claim that a black god-scientist had first fashioned the whites from the "germ" of the black race, Nasafi reminds Tanzil that "the animals" to which he refers, "are ourselves . . . . We thought them up. We have deserved whatever world we find ourselves in. If we have mad animals full of time to haunt us, to haunt *us*, who are in possession of all knowledge, then we have done something to make them exist" (21).

It is then revealed that "time" was the result of one of Jacoub's experiments:

> NASAFI: You deal in a strange logic, brother Jacoub. You spoke once of time and we forgot about it. Now there are animals who hiss time madness in the air, and into our lives. I had forgotten but now I'm sure it was you, Jacoub. (23)

The mad scientist Jacoub has a track record of composing inventions that have not served black people well. Nasafi has crafted an antidote to Jacoub's prior handiwork. Jacoub disagrees that his prior act of creation was a negative affair. He asks, "Can knowledge be evil?" and proclaims "we must find out everything" (24).

Turning to Jacoub, Nasafi asks what presently holds his attention so intently. Jacoub responds that he is engrossed in the task of "Creating a new organism . . . . A man like ourselves, yet separate from us. A neutral being . . . . Neutral because I have created him. And can fill him up as I will. From beyond the powers of natural creation, I can make a super-natural being" (27). An alarmed Tanzil warns Jacoub that "[i]t's a fool's game to invent what does not need to be invented" (24). Nasafi concurs, "Jacoub, you speak of a magic that is without human sanction" (25). Jacoub boldly counters, "Let us be fools. For creation is its own end" (24). (In the midst of this debate, three women enter the lab, and are reproached for encroaching on male space but are permitted to stay.) Tanzil and Nasafi try to persuade Jacoub of another understanding of creation that derives from the inherent intellectual and spiritual wisdom of black people:

> NASAFI: We already know everything.
> JACOUB: That is not possible. (24)

And later,

> NASAFI: We know what is evil and what is perfection . . . . We know beyond knowing, knowing there is nothing to know. And knowledge is repetition, and the bringing forth again of things that were so anyway. Everything already exists. You cannot really create. (25)

Jacoub continues his experimentation.

Sun Ra's musical accompaniment grows louder and more violent, and suddenly a "new organism" is born from a cacophony of sparks, light, smoke, and music. We are told that the being is "absolutely cold white" in color, with the awkward gait of an "animal robot" (33). Incapable of developed speech, he gurgles, slobbers, and repeatedly howls: "White. White. Me. White." The white beast lashes out at those around him, including Jacoub, and succeeds in attacking a nearby black woman, who is transformed into a beast after losing her

pigment (she is turned white); her grace (she begins to walk clumsily); and her humanity (she is now an animal, too). Whiteness, here, is contagious, a meme. Jacoub says, "The whiteness spreads itself without effort. For the thing is sexless. It cannot breed" (34).

Distressed by the destructive power of the monster, Jacoub's fellow scientists rebuke him. Nasafi declares, "Jacoub, your error . . . the substitution of thought for feeling. A heart full of numbers and cold formulae" (34). Tanzil reprimands the mad scientist for "Asking God's questions, and giving animal answers!" (34). Nasafi and Tanzil demand that the beast and his "bride" be sent away to the "cold north"; but Jacoub, convinced that he can teach them language and imbue them with humanity, demands that they be allowed to remain. After the beasts kill all but him, Jacoub realizes that his fellow scientists were right. As the performance concludes, he expels the beast to "the evil diseased caves of the cold" and then dies from wounds inflicted by it (39).[57]

Several textual parallels support a reading of *A Black Mass* as an African American Frankenstein story. Like Shelley's novel, the play centers on the actions of a compulsive scientist set on the goal of fashioning life. Both Jacoub and Victor Frankenstein carry out their experiments with little forethought of, and utter disregard for, the potential consequences. In both instances, the power of creation was harnessed by men (and specifically precluded the contribution of women).[58] Although Victor Frankenstein immediately rejects the Being he creates, and Jacoub hopes to nurture and educate his creation, both eventually come to confront the fatal consequences of their incautious creative deeds. More troubling still, both narratives leave the question of the respective Beings' prospects unanswered; each concludes with an opening up of an uncertain future in which the actions of the Creatures can only be imagined, anticipated, and dreaded by the audience.[59] It is this speculative opening, this lacunae, I would argue, that has caused *Frankenstein* and its many iterations to be so easily taken up as both reflections on, and forecasts of, the societal effects of biomedical science.

A few scholarly observers have read the Jacoub character as a transgressive scientific investigator not unlike Victor Frankenstein. Commenting upon the gothic elements of *A Black Mass*, Kimberly Benston suggests that Jacoub alludes to "the 'mad scientist' of Romantic and post-Romantic 'horror' stories."[60] And critic Werner Sollors observes that "Jacoub's mistake is the flaw of countless scientists in science fiction."[61] Certainly, Jacoub deserves a place among the pantheon of characters whom Theodore Roszak has called "titans who create monsters," a group in which he includes Victor Frankenstein, Dr. Moreau and Dr. Faustus, among others.[62] Created through hubris and blind ambition, and in keeping with the dystopian genres of Enlightenment commentary, these monsters become the very *betes noires* of the protagonists—the cause of their makers' annihilation and of unknowable future social damage as well.

Yet, in *A Black Mass*, Jacoub's "new organism" is also his *bete blanc*, for it is implied that in conceiving the white Beast and in failing to destroy it when he had

the opportunity to do so, he has created the source of black people's oppression and sown the seeds of anti-black racism. In keeping with the original Yakub myth, the mad scientist falls victim to white "tricknology," attracted as he was to the very thing that, in the logic of the NOI's black nationalist ideology, was most opposite him. And because the Beast can turn black people white with its mere touch, Jacoub's transgression additionally poses the threat of annihilation by means of assimilation and miscegenation.[63] Unlike the NOI's origin story, which is in many ways an uncritical embrace of racialized experimental science, including eugenics, Baraka's play is an unambiguous indictment of scientific experimentation without limits and "without human sanction." With the play's treatment of "time," Baraka explicitly critiques the relentless rationalization of life that is metaphorical for a way of living that is antithetical to "traditional" black forms. Tanzil's statements imply that a Western orientation to "time" was one factor that set the Middle Passage and the African diaspora in motion.

Perhaps the most consequential moral of *A Black Mass*, in striking dissimilarity to the NOI cosmology, is its suggestion that black people are right to be suspicious and mistrustful of scientific experimentation, given the negative consequences it has held for them. Through the characters of Nasafi and Tanzil, Baraka criticizes the valuing of scientific discovery for its own sake. Yet he also articulates an alternate ideology of invention and experimentation. He puts forth another definition of the creative process that is more akin to magic or intuition than medical or scientific research. Baraka counterpoises artistic creation against Jacoub's self-interested, scientific, and ultimately destructive experimentation.

CONCLUSION

The broad critique of a "Western" mode of thinking presented in *A Black Mass* made it an iconic piece of Black Arts Movement ideology. The play characterized scientific and medical experimentation as the epitome of the Western "aesthetic impulse gone astray," in Larry Neal's words, against which Black Arts Movement advocates defined their craft (Neal argued that the Beast was "created merely for the sake of creation," and was in this respect similar to the non-functional nature of Western art). Yet its focus directly on the sciences, rather than the arts, also made it unique. In *A Black Mass*, the biosciences and the pursuit of scientific knowledge are considered superfluous and dangerous. The audience is confronted with the philosophical possibility that all that is necessary to know about the world is presently known and the blame for many of the problems of black life is laid at the feet of scientific research.

The power of the admittedly far-fetched *A Black Mass* lay not in its literal truth but in the fact that African Americans who saw or read the play might perceive resonances with their lived experiences. Perhaps unconsciously, *A Black Mass* harked back to African American communities' historically based anxieties about biomedical malpractice; the play was in keeping with a rich mythology that encoded blacks' lived experiences of medical maltreatment into folklore and oral tradition. For example, Gladys-Marie Fry's study of the black

oral tradition that originated in slavery around crimes that occurred at night asserts that tales of "night doctors" were exploited by southern whites to control black behavior, to discourage slaves from running away at night out of fear of the supernatural evils and, following Reconstruction, to discourage blacks from migrating to the North. Fry explains that the phrase was "applie[d] to both students of medicine who supposedly stole cadavers from which to learn about body processes, and professional thieves, who sold stolen bodies—living and dead—to physicians for medical research."[64]

Similarly, Spencie Love has argued that historical atrocities linking race and biomedical research have sedimented in the collective memory of African American communities. She cites the 1950 death of Charles Drew, a noted African American surgeon and contributor to the construction of the U.S blood bank system during WWII, after sustaining serious injuries in a car accident. When blacks in rural North Carolina learned of the incident, many believed that Drew had been denied services at the nearby "whites only" emergency room, despite his standing in the medical community; rumors to this effect spread within hours.[65] Love discovered that white doctors had in fact attempted to save Drew. However, months prior to his death, a black GI had been denied access to another nearby segregated hospital and died as a result. Love concludes that it was not the veracity of the rumors about Drew that mattered, but that they could have been true.

While *A Black Mass* was of a different order of myth from the tales described by Fry and Love, taken together they reveal that Baraka's play tapped into a deep vein of community memory and collective consciousness with regard to African American experiences with bioscientific research. In that sense, *A Black Mass* could be described as crystallizing African American attitudes about scientific experimentation into a potent, condensed series of images that, while obviously not literally factual, did feed off larger truths about the historical relationship between African Americans and biomedicine. It also fed into more immediate historical developments. In the summer of 1972, the *New York Times* disclosed that hundreds of black men in Macon County, Georgia had been left with untreated syphilis for four decades. In a recent anthology on the topic of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, historian of medicine Susan Reverby describes the unfolding of the study from its origins in 1932 to its final denouement as "[p]laying out with all the drama of a southern gothic tale."[66] A gothic tale in its own right, *A Black Mass* re-inscribed a longstanding tradition of skepticism about scientific experimentation into the radical context of its times, and presaged (and perhaps preconditioned) the explosion of mistrust and anxiety that would develop in African American communities following the revelation of Tuskegee.

NOTES

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1. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Black Aesthestic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 272.

2. Ibid., 272; emphasis added.

3. Ibid., 272.

4. Ibid., 284.

5. Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a 'Populist Modernism'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 37, 52–57, and Harry Elam, Jr. *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 56–57.

6. Both Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver make reference to the Nation of Islam's Yakub myth; see Malcolm X (with Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 1965), 164–76, and Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 101.

7. "Jacoub" is the spelling Baraka uses in the play. Throughout this essay, I use this spelling to refer to the antagonist of "A Black Mass"; when invoking the mad scientist of the Nation of Islam creation myth, I use "Yakub."

8. Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, *Contemporary African American Theater: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Charles Fuller* (New York: Garland, 1997), 101, 105; Kimberly Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 238; Alain Ricard, *Theatre and Nationalism: Wole Soyinka and LeRoi Jones*, trans. Femi Osofisan (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1972), 136–46; and Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 211.

9. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines bioscience as: "Any of several branches of science, such as biology, medicine, anthropology, or ecology, that deal with living organisms and their organization, life processes, and relationships to each other and their environment," January 28, 2004, http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=bioscience.

10. See, for example, Sandra G. Shannon, "Manipulating Myth, Magic, and Legend: Amiri Baraka's Black Mass," *College Language Association Journal* 39 (1996): 357–68.

11. The construction of race and blackness in the biomedicine and the social sciences is detailed in: Lee Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1991 [1952]); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981); and William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815–59*, reprint edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

12. Scholars working in this vein include, Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Susan Lederer, *Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lidee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (New York: Freeman, 1996).

13. See, for example, Peter H. Goodrich, "The Lineage of Mad Scientists: Anti-Types of Merlin," *Extrapolation* 27 (1986): 109–15; Roslyn Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins

University Press, 1994); Lederer, *Frankenstein;* and Theodore Roszak, "The Monster and the Titan: Science, Knowledge and Gnosis," *Daedelus* 103 (1974): 17.

14. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

15. Lederer, *Frankenstein*, 1.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid. Tellingly, the Frankenstein metaphor has also recently taken on new linguistic power in the context of new developments in biotechnology, as denoted by the recent use of the term "Frankenfoods" to refer to the dangers that might be inherent to genetically modified foods, and to their preternaturalness.

18. The Nation of Islam origin myth was frequently referred to as "Yakub's history"; for example, Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *Autobiography*, 190, 194, and Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 101. See also Warith Deen Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth from the East* (Chicago: WDM Publishing, 1980), 17.

The transformation of the Yakub myth into a play was not an unusual treatment of NOI philosophy, for as sociologist C. Eric Lincoln observed, the group frequently staged large-scale cosmological and moral dramas including "The Trial," in which whites were tried for crimes against black humanity. See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994 [1961]), 1–2.

19. Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 176; E. U. Essien-Udon, *Black Nationalism: The Search for an Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1962]), 133. While incarcerated, Malcolm X read Mendel's "Findings in Genetics," a book suggested to him by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *Autobiography*, 202.

20. Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press); Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 7–8. Essien-Udom explains: "The ostensible enemy of the Nation of Islam is, of course, the Caucasian race and specifically the American white man, who is responsible for the moral and material conditions of the Negro. The enemy is not simply the white race. It is their claim to cultural, moral, and spiritual superiority . . . ," 124.

21. Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 72.

22. My synopsis of the Yakub myth is drawn from W. Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth*, 13–14, 17, 149–51; Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Chicago: Muhammad Mosque of Islam, No. 2, 1965), 103–22; Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 128, 133–34; Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 72–73; and Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *Autobiography*, 164–76.

23. Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *Autobiography*, 165.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid. Also, Elijah Muhammad quoted in Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 72.

26. Lincoln, *Black Muslims*, 72. Obviously, these procedures for obtaining racial purity through "breeding" and birth control regulations are similar to racist eugenics of the early twentieth century.

27. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 50.

28. Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman*, 68.

29. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 50.

30. Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race and the Advent of the End Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 140.

31. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 50. Lieb concurs: "Yakub the black scientist is thereby ultimately the figure the Bible refers to as Adam," 141.

32. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 85.

33. Harold Courlander, ed., *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Recollections, Legends, Tales, Songs, Religious Beliefs, Customs, Sayings and Humor of Peoples of African Descent in the Americas* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1976). Also, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

34. Courlander, "Origin of the Races, According to Uncle Remus," 497. Similar tales of blacks who become white are present in later African American fiction, most famously, George Schuyler's *Black No More* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).

35. Gardell, *In the Name of*, 176.

36. Ibid. NOI leader Louis Farrakhan has said that his favorite anthropologist is "Dr. [Louis] Leakey [who] discovered that the root and the origin of man was in Africa," quoted in Gardell, *In the Name of*, 175.

37. Gardell, *In the Name of*, 174–85.

38. Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 139.

39. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 46, 50.

40. William J. Harris, "Introduction," *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. W. J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), xvii–xxviii.

41. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997 [1984]), 243, also 241–46.

42. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 246 (emphasis in original).

43. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 275. (emphasis added).

44. Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Ecco, 1998 [1966]), 210–15.

45. Ibid.

46. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 306.

47. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 306; also mentioned in Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 210. Baraka's time in Harlem was short-lived. Difficult internecine politics compelled Baraka to move away. Coming full circle, he returned to his birthplace of Newark, New Jersey, where he established another cultural institution, the Spirit House.

48. Amiri Baraka, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation," *Home: Social Essays*, 238–50. Baraka offers other reflections on Malcolm X in "November 1966: One Year Eight Months Later," in *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1969).

49. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 293–94. Several years prior, Baraka had written of the significance Harlem held for him and black Americans more generally; see "City of Harlem" in *Home: Social Essays*, 87–93.

50. Baraka, *Autobiography*, 294–97. For additional details about the founding of the BARTS, see Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 63–68.

51. John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: De Capo Press, 1998), 209. On the relationship between Sun Ra and Baraka, see also Baraka, *Autobiography*, 298–299. As a critic, Baraka wrote about Sun-Ra's music in articles reprinted from columns in *Down Beat* magazine, LeRoi Jones, *Black Music*

(New York: William Morrow & Company, 1968) 128–30, 134–37, 173–76, 193–95, 198–200.

52. Amiri Baraka, "A Black Mass by Amiri Baraka: The Black Arts, Spirit House, Sun Ra, Creating What Needs to Be Created!" Liner notes. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) with Sun Ra and the Myth Science Arkestra, *A Black Mass* CD, Son Boy Records, 1998.

53. A recording of this performance was recently re-released: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) with Sun Ra and the Myth Science Arkestra, *A Black Mass* CD, Son Boy Records, 1998. It was previously released in 1968 on Baraka's Jihad Records.

54. Baraka used music in his dramas because he felt it provided "an added dramatic dimension." He collaborated with Sun Ra precisely because the musician's compositions provided "the feeling of some kind of otherworldly wisdom or dimension, which changes sometimes to fear, terror, contemplation of the laboratory, contemplation of what wisdom and knowledge really are." Quoted from Sandra G. Shannon, "Amiri Baraka on Directing," *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charly Reilly (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 232.

55. LeRoi Jones, "A Black Mass," *Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 21. Page numbers will be cited in text for the remaining discussion of the play. This discussion also relies on a recently re-released recording of the 1966 performance and its accompanying liner notes written by Amiri Baraka.

56. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) with Sun Ra and the Myth Science Arkestra, *A Black Mass*.

57. Note the similarity here to Victor Frankenstein's self-imposed Artic exile with his Creature. In Shelley's text, the Creature was described as being impassive to the cold.

58. Notably, what is not altered in this inverted Frankenstein story is the fact that reproduction remains solidly in the hands of men. There is an extensive body of scholarship that deals with the way reproduction is gendered in Shelley's narrative and specifically excludes women from the creative process. On gender and creation in Frankenstein, see Margaret Homans, "Bearing Demons: Frankenstein's Circumvention of the Maternal," in *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," in J. Paul Hunter, ed., *Frankenstein*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 241–51; Anne K. Mellor, "Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein," in Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 274–86; and Marc Rubenstein, "'My Accursed Origin': The Search for the Mother in Frankenstein," *Studies in Romanticism* 15 (Fall 1976): 165–94.

59. Sollors observed that the majority-black audiences of "A Black Mass" are frequently more outraged by and disapproving of mad scientist Jacoub's acts than by the Creature he created. In performance call-and-response, "verbal criticism [was] launched only a Jacoub." Sollors interpreted this as more of an "indictment of blacks who create" white beasts than of the beasts themselves. In this way, Baraka's play might be said to be less effective as black power agitprop than it was as a challenge to unchecked experimental science. Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 214 and 296, fn. 22, fn. 26.

60. Kimberly Benston. *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*, 239.

61. Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 213.

62. Roszak, "The Monster," 31; Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 214.

63. Benston, *Baraka*, 240.

64. Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 171.

65. "Johannas," a Black Arts Movement-era play by Bill Gunn parses similar territory. The play's eponymous lead character is a child prodigy born to a mother, Hilly, whose other children had died from untreated illness after a white physician insisted that they be taken to a "colored" doctor for treatment. Bill Gunn, "Johannas," *The Drama Review* 12—Special Issue on "Black Theatre" (1968): 131–32.

66. Susan Reverby, *Tuskegee's Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.