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Articles which cross conventional borders between academic disciplines are particularly welcome, as are comparative studies of American and other cultures. The journal also publishes notes, comments, book and film reviews. Details about the submission of manuscripts are provided on the back (inside) cover of this issue.

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Mg. G. Stephens is the author of 22 books, including the critically acclaimed novel *The Brooklyn Book of the Dead;* the travel memoir *Lost in Seoul*; and the award-winning essay collection *Green Dreams*. In 2020, a large collection of prose poems will be published by Mad Hat Press; it tells the story of an out of work actor who lands the part of Hamlet, and is entitled *History of Theatre, or the Glass of Fashion.*

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Introduction

I got to know Amiri Baraka's work as LeRoi Jones through a poetics essay I read in an undergraduate poetry class, where my professor Dr. Barış Gümüşbaş (former editor of *JAST*) introduced the Donald Allen collection, the now classic, *New American Poetry* anthology. Therefore, my initiation was through avant-garde poetry, which constitutes just one strain in the greater context of Baraka's work—an incomplete one, if the reader just stays with it. It was not until the paths I took in my PhD research that I came back to the poetics of New American poetry, but this time digging deeper into the context of the Jones/Baraka oeuvre, especially his music history and criticism. The essay I read, as an undergraduate, was "How You Sound??" which later dawned on me as crystal clear about the way that the poetics of New American Poetry could speak to African American vernacular or musical idiom. Charles Olson's epigram "from the head by way of the ear to the syllable, from the heart by way of the breath to the line" can very well be translated into bebop, free jazz, and actually all forms of jazz—an idiosyncratic syntax and rhythm that emerge from the head and heart of its interlocutor. The poem is the score on the page to be performed on the stage.

Baraka invested a great deal of his effort in historicizing and theorizing African American musical expression. Although the blues continuum, the roots and the fruits, is recognized today as world heritage, let alone American classic, in the late 1950s and early 1960s the music was new, "out"; and Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) was among its first translators. In these first examples of music criticism, there were lessons to be taken. The first is, music is a great analogy for artistic life, daily life and way of thinking and feeling in the African American context. Blues music was created by "blues people" under specific historical and geographical circumstances. And once out there as the African American expression, music (blues, jazz, R&B, funk, rap, hip hop) went on to create the lives of its people. On the power of music that animates the inner world of a people, Baraka comments, "Music makes an image … By image, I mean that music … summons and describes where its energies were gotten" ("Changing Same" 185-186). For Baraka, Black music is

not *out there* as a model or inspiration but *in here*, carrying breath and memory in its substance. It is a place of being, a mental-spiritual-physical *soundscape*. Baraka says, "But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength" ("Changing Same" 186-187). Baraka reveals Black music as a language, an emotional world and a way of being and knowing and speaking and walking that walk and talkin that talk…

Not having the fortune to meet him in person, I am hooked on to the recordings available on the Internet to make up for the immediacy of his voice and physical presence through performances, interviews and lectures. One of those lectures I would like to bring up is "Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out," recorded on the occasion of Charles Olson Memorial Lecture, held at the Gloucester Writers Center in October 2013.[1] In 1960s slang, the expression of being "out" meant to be awesome and far ahead than anyone else, which seems to have occupied Baraka both in the title of his latest short story collection mentioned above and this particular lecture. Baraka begins by saying, "If you cannot make the connection [between Olson and Ra] you cannot understand the topology of that time." He presents their life stories from the lens of their preferences—or better, their "preferring not to." Both were dropouts from the academy, from institutions and stable professional positions. Both planted mythical personae into the present world: Maximus and Sun Ra, to "put the hinges back on the door, [2] so that we can go back and forth in a living history of space as well as time to begin to know ourselves and the place we are" (Baraka). Sun Ra dropped out to see and speak about the problems of the planet Earth from the vantage point of outer space; Olson dropped out to speak from an ancient philosopher's persona moved by his passion to detach himself from American imperialism. So this, for Baraka, is the "out"telligence[3] of these two figures that defined the "topology of that time" of which he was/is a living product. One might say, he is out, too.

Another text of interest is *The Essence of Reparations*, very "unpoetic" in subject matter, but essential to understand his continued activism. He lays his case for reparations and proposes a program with the same spirit in which he proposed the Kawaida Towers Project in 1971. [4] As a patriot, I am almost compelled to say, Baraka pushes for better days in his country:

> Reparations are a form of justice in the philosophical

> sphere. They are, in essence, a revolutionary democratic thrust that must force the yet unfinished United States democratic revolution, viz. the Civil War, and the sharp social and political upsurges of the decades of the twentieth century, including the most recent Civil Rights, Black Liberation, and anti-imperialist and anti-war movements, closer to completion. (*Essence* 22)

This issue lies at the core of his poetic and political thrust. In my mind, the image that he crafted with the life that he led is composed of these inseparable creative and political strains that speak beyond the boundaries of the U.S.

However, there is another image attributed to him, which is more readily available and consists of labels only: anti-Semitic, anti-white, misogynist, homophobic, racist, etc. His nuanced and historical-minded critique almost always disappears in the cracks of blunt and shallow -isms. With his unapologetic and factual tone he is very anachronistic at this time of political correctness and identity politics. Even the mention of his name in the academia is enough to raise controversy. I, for one, received a hostile e-mail shortly after launching the CFP for this issue. There is not much more to be said of this highly generalizing attitude so let me quote another poet, Claudia Rankine commenting on the vital nuances that characterize Baraka's thinking: "Baraka's poems criticized the black bourgeoisie, Nixon, 'the owner Jews,' the 'superafrikan Mobutu,' 'boss nigger,' Kissinger, 'Tom Ass Clarence,' 'Spike Lie' and on and on—basically everyone in our global community whose motives and actions he questioned." The criterion is politics as it throws daggers and javelins to the abuser, rather than a vulgar simplification of politics reduced to skin color. Rankine continues, "His struggle to form a black poetics that could marry his activism, politics, history, culture and imagination represented his struggle to exist." The world as it is gets into the poet's value system and goes out defined; awakening the people about the state of affairs and calling for change. Poet and choreographer Harmony Holiday, who works historically and creatively with audio-visual archives, comments,

> It's nauseating the way we take Baraka's immense and untamable body of work, and attempt to divide it neatly, into personal and political, as though one cannot write about the world critically in an intimate and tender way that transcends those categories and proves the extent

> to which one can be a citizen of himself in a manner that considers the nation a part of that selfhood and criticizes and orients his country and fellow countrymen accordingly.

I am aware that Amiri Baraka's artistic and political significance is yet to be recognized by a larger community than it is today. The valid question for me is, "what is his legacy?" Is it the number of labels and an attributed blind anger; or is it the poet's demand for historical context, clinging to facts with a journalist's passion, and his attention to the spontaneity of speech/music/breath—and never falling short of punch(ing)lines all this while. The rest seems to be false questions and false discussions that just simplify and miss the gist.

The scholar or student in American Studies in Turkey, or elsewhere, who is sympathetic towards the topic, would find in this issue a number of scholarly and personal essays that reflect insights on Baraka's work and personality. Dike Okoro provides a necessary chronological introduction for the uninitiated. Pierre Joris explains the role of Baraka's work for his poetics, commenting on his own digging into what began as a romantic fascination with Black music. M. G. Stephens reflects on the significance of the understudied classic text *Blues People*, as he remembers his own coming of age in the Village of the 1960s. If Amiri Baraka and food studies sound too distant and irreconcilable, Psyche Forson-Williams' essay proves to the contrary. Sultan Komut Bakınç calls the readers to reconsider Clay and Lula outside of stereotypes while Kate Siklosi registers the geo-social aesthetics/ethics of "nation time" and "terribleness" as Baraka invented New Ark. I address the oral quality in Baraka's poetry as epitomized in *Funk Lore* and *Real Song*. Finally, you can read the insightful perspective of Ammiel Alcalay who kindly responded to my somewhat proverbial questions, sent via electronic mail. The fact that the contributors have their own creative ways of writing, translating and teaching also tells me that Amiri Baraka's politics, aesthetics and personality is not just subject to conventional academic scholarship confined to print but resonates with diverse poetic practices. I am grateful to all those who contributed, gave me ideas, helped me spread the word for the issue (because sometimes a CFP does not reach everywhere) and reviewed manuscripts in their busiest time. I also thank my editor and editor-in-chief for making this issue available.

Özge Özbek Akıman

Notes

[1] The video is uploaded with another title, as in the Works Cited.

[2] One section in Charles Olson's *Proprioception*, published by then-LeRoi Jones, was entitled "the hinges of civilization to be put back on the door" [sic].

[3] The word play belongs to Baraka—*in*telligence and being *out*.

[4] See Sullivan.

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An Appreciation for Amiri Baraka: Remembering a Remarkable Voice in American Literary History

Dike Okoro

Introduction

Amiri Baraka was indeed one of America's greatest writers and, in fact, it would be amiss for me to eschew my personal contact with him in the 1990s. Our paths crossed during the 1998 Gwendolyn Brooks Writers' Conference in Chicago, when a fellow graduate student and I were selected by Chicago State University's literature program to perform Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" as an opening act to what would later amount to a spirited and emotional speech/poetry reading by Baraka. I have cherished the opportunity and remain ever so grateful to have graced the same stage with an author of such monumental stature. His contribution to black literature and the American literary tradition is unparalleled. He is accredited as the co-founder of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and "one of America's most important literary figures" (Chideya). Indeed, like many great writers, Baraka had his regrets during the later years of his career but seemed to have handled them appropriately before he passed away. In the introduction to his glowing book of essays, *Home: Social Essays*, he admits, "One heavy and aggravating problem with [my] early writings is that I've long since changed my views on some topics" (15). He prances through several examples, specifically noting his indulgence in Marxism, admitting: "For instance, the homophobic language in several of the essays … is wrongheaded and unscientific" (16). This shift from his rhetoric in the 1970s, for good reasons,

suggests what many great writers have pointed out about writing and its influence on the writer. Perhaps this seems to be what James Baldwin attempted to explain when he observes, "Unless a writer is extremely old when he dies, in which case he has probably become a neglected institution, his death must always seem untimely. This is because a real writer is always shifting and changing and searching" (604). I agree with Baldwin. Perhaps when Baraka's corpus is re-examined to situate his influence on writers from the younger generation and writers belonging to other literary traditions but whose hindsight parallels his, he will be remembered as one poet, playwright, essayist and cultural spokesperson, whose voice and visionary commitment helped in settling anxieties in what is today recognized globally as American literature.

Baraka was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1934, and attended Howard University, Washington DC where he met the notable poet, Lucile Clifton (Hollins). To date, he remains a writer whose versatility made it difficult for critics and scholars to locate his penmanship within a particular genre. Admired for his penetrating and insightful essays on music, in particular jazz, Baraka's passion and critical perspectives on jazz musicians have been well received over the years. In fact, *Kirkus Review* claims that "[Baraka] is at his best when writing about jazz musicians." He has authored numerous books, including the play *Dutchman* (1964) and books of poetry, *Preface to a Twentieth Century Suicide Note* (1961) and *The Dead Lecturer: Poems* (1964). As a poet and activist, Baraka shifted in ideology on numerous occasions and this trend affected his writings which took on many issues and changed with time. Recognized as the pioneer voice of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, many of Baraka's contemporary keenly asserted their views of him when pressed to reflect on his legacy. Etheridge Knight, in an interview with Charles Rowell, the editor of *Callaloo Journal*, situates Baraka within the role of the political artist, contending, "If you are a black artist in this country, at this time, you cannot help but be a politician" (qtd. in Betts 12). Sonia Sanchez remembers Baraka in the same spirit of the artist who saw art as a political tool, stating, "And one of the things that [Baraka] wrote is that…the function of art [is] to give us light, to let us fly, to let us imagine and dream, but also to create, in the real world." And that is what our dear brother did" ("Remembering").

Sanchez's allusion allows me to begin to look at Baraka's

monumental stature in African American literary tradition as a gift to the younger generation who saw in his early poetry the highest level of craftsmanship that must be acknowledged. Terrence Hayes, in a piece titled "Journal, Day One," published in *Poetry Foundation*, reflects on a lecture he gave on voice and craft and offered his incisive view of Baraka's poetry as a notable example, averring, "In the lecture I brought in poems by poets who demonstrated a 'mastery' of craft in their first books, but inevitably moved beyond craft to something else. Amiri Baraka is an easy example. The poems in 1961's *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* show that he obviously knows (or knew) 'the rules'" (Hayes). Hayes digresses later and elaborates on Baraka's poetry five years later, focusing on the poem "Black Arts," to demonstrate the change Baraka undergoes in his craft but does not offer any form of condemnation of the poet's verse. Instead he tendered the following declarative: "Which is better depends on your tastes, I suppose" (Hayes).

Interestingly, Baraka's influences as a poet are grounded in the affinity he shares with his American literary forerunners. In a radio interview hosted by Farai Chideya, he was asked to shed light on the influences of the African griot tradition and the poetry that informs his work and he replied:

> I've always wanted to write pretty much like I speak. And I got that from people like Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams, that you should try to get your own natural sound, your natural voice and rhythms. And the line breaks in the poems should be your breath phrases. Those things come from a poetic tradition that is American, yet as far as the Afro-American tradition, it certainly is similar to the old, the ancient rappers, you know. (Chideya)

Indeed the penchant for writing poetry the way he speaks is a quality that is synonymous with Baraka's poetry. In his book *Eulogies*, a collection of eulogies he wrote for famous artists, heroes/heroines, relatives, family and friends, Baraka included the poem "Brother Okot," which he penned for Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan poet and author of revered book of African poetry "Song of Lawino." The poem is a riveting example of Baraka writing as the speaker's voice embodies the way he speaks. The poem reads thus:

…
I have heard
his songs
felt the earth
drum his
dance
his wide ness
& Sky self

Ocoli Singer
Ocoli Fighter

Brother Okot
now here w/ us
in the place

Where even the Sun
dies.

The significance of Baraka's literary impact and influences are fully understandable because he is committed to a literary destiny that is tied to an African diasporic and multiethnic heritage. Komozi Woodard attempts to explain this characteristic of Baraka's work when he contends,

> One thing that distinguished Amiri Baraka's cultural work was that in searching for answers he returned to the Black source that was routinely obscured by white domination. His research led him to examine a range of African American, Latin American, Caribbean and African vectors and traditions: thus, he examined the spiritual, musical, dance, sports, labor, literary and arts, intellectual and political aspects of Black life. ("Remembering")

I agree with Woodard because I find Baraka's interest in examining the aforementioned literary traditions as a deliberate attempt to leave a legacy for the younger generation of black writers in America. He is a writer who has never avoided the opportunity to take on the role of a custodian to the African American literary tradition.

In fact, when twentieth-century African-American literature is re-examined to discuss its principal writers, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) will certainly merit mention as a groundbreaker for younger African-American writers and American writers from diverse ethnic groups because of his fearless rhetoric, pan-Africanist allegiances, and devotion to Black American oral resources. In a writing career that lasted almost five decades, his versatility has been rewarded with the publication of over a dozen books. On top of that, he has won numerous prestigious awards including the Guggenheim, American Book Award, National Endowment for the Arts, among other notable recognitions that placed him among the pantheon of America's literary giants. Widely recognized for his poetry, drama, essays, fiction and music criticism, Baraka built a following among writers, academics and critics from different generations. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa rates him so highly that he contends that, "If there is literary heir to Langston Hughes, it is Amiri Baraka" (33). Award-winning playwright August Wilson cites him as one of the major voices of the Black Arts Movement that paved the way for his own emergence as a playwright (Wilson).

In a speech on Black Theatre and Performance titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson took a reverential stance as he remembers fondly how his own writing was influenced by the Black playwrights of the 1960s, a group that includes Baraka:

> I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and woman who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction.
>
> It was this high ground of self-definition that the black

> playwrights of the '60s marked out for themselves. Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Philip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonne Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and Amiri Baraka were among those playwrights who were particularly vocal and where remain indebted to them for their brave and courageous forays into an area that is marked with land mines and the shadows of snipers—those who would reserve the territory of arts and letters and the American theatre as their own special province and point blacks toward the ball fields and the bandstands.

Wilson pays homage to a laudable group of men and women whose definitive role in playwriting helped in situating black life within the spatial distribution of American theatre. Furthermore, Wilson's quotation places Baraka as a writer whose forays into the terrains of serious writing helped in situating and revitalizing black art in America.

Like Wilson, E. Ethelbert Miller recognizes Baraka's imposing legacy in the academy as a major source of inspiration for younger African-American writers, observing:

> Baraka was my hero because his voice actually triggered the Black Arts Movement, creating the transformative awareness and consciousness which is necessary for African-African-American culture to survive…I think there is a direct link between Baraka and Langston in terms of true artists who write in every genre: autobiography, short stories, plays, poems. Baraka is one of the major writers who has literally affected a generation. (xvii)

Haki Madhubuti, on the other hand, postulates a sense of continuum and cultural responsibility in Baraka's artistic commitment and states thus:

> Amiri Baraka is a master at manipulating blackmusic rhythms. His rhythms are black and original in part because often they are based on other principles than having stressed syllables come at predictable intervals. Rather, Amiri creates internal rhyme as well as rhythms by repeating stressed sounds at intervals

that are dictated by his feel for black liferhythms and blackmusic. For example, in the beginning of "The Nation Is Like Ourselves," from *It's Nation Time*:

> The nation is like ourselves, together
>
> seen in our various scenes, sets where ever we are
>
> whatever we are doing, is what the nation … (30)

Madhubuti's contention provides necessary insight into the transparency that is evidenced in Baraka's work. Like most African-American authors influenced by the emotional spirit of the 1960s and 70s literary renaissance in America, Baraka felt the urge to use his art to generate a national consciousness that inspired black Americans and other marginalized minorities to realize the viability of the arts as a vehicle that promotes social awareness. Put simply, his poetry mediated bonds across ethical and moral lines. Perhaps one can argue also that as a spokesperson for his people, Baraka fit the profile of the artist Kofi Awoonor describes when he intimates, "I'm aware not only of the intrinsic value of art, but also of art serving the function of social commentary … putting together the multiplicity of, not only intellectual, but also social experiences" (190). Given that Baraka is held in high regard by many of his peers from the black American literary tradition, it is admissible for one to conclude that his literary career, though marred by angry rhetoric against oppression suffered by black Americans from mainstream culture, seemed to have carved for him a symbolic role as a forerunner for many of the African-American poets and playwrights cultivating their talents in America's artistic landscape.

Aspects of His Aesthetics and Visionary Commitment

Perhaps it is essential to note also that Baraka's career experienced, at different points, a sort of metamorphosis that great writers are prone to undergo. Nevertheless, it is the candidness with which Baraka asserted his search for both a human and an African philosophical system that would vindicate his quintessential essence

as a serious writer. His proposition is very intriguing and is crucial to our understanding of the fundamental basis that undergirded the political and cultural beliefs that occupied his thoughts during the sixties and seventies. That America was still undergoing political transformation that influenced race relations is important to be noted if Baraka's intellectual and cultural beliefs must be understood. Both his associations with the BAM and the Nation of Islam helped in shaping and molding the individual that he became. However, it is his creative energy and penetrating insight on the black condition in America and the legacy of black arts that gave preeminence to his role as a literary heir to the great black authors whose shoes he inherited. Yusef Komunyakaa posits that "To date, Amiri Baraka is one of the first names that light on the tongue if one were to ask, Who is the rightful heir to the Langston Hughes Legacy? This is mainly due to his long allegiance to jazz and the blues through essays and poetry" (33). He links Baraka to the great poet Langston Hughes in manner that is both remarkable and politically recognizable. Hughes, for all his accomplishments as an author of vast literary genres, possessed the extraordinary resources that gave his intellectual productivity both relevance and candor. It is the same qualities that critics such as Komunyakaa see in Baraka.

For Amiri Baraka, the writer embodies preoccupations and ideals that might be fulfilled or not fulfilled during his/her lifetime. His work, especially his poetry, functioned under the aegis of cultural values in opposition to oppressive mainstream values in the sixties and seventies in America. Yet the logic of Baraka deviating from contentious issues that waded in historical and political terrains seemed to have formed the vortex of his worldview. In his essay "Words" he launches into a futuristic meditation as he situates his own adventures in writing, declaring, "The purpose of myself, has not yet been fulfilled. Perhaps it will never be" (178). Admirably, one ought to respect an artist for his sincerity, but Baraka's levity sometimes hides his seriousness. Here he is not only projecting into the future but is also asking questions indirectly. This aspect of his writing, like many critics have written, helps in facilitating the serious artist. Haki Madhubuti once averred that "Writers should be questioners of the real world and doers within the world" (21) and added "Question everything. And don't be satisfied with the quick surface answers" (21). It is this insistence on questioning the world that Baraka had embraced steadfastly as he probed the very culture and society he knew best.

Gwendolyn Brooks uses an anecdote to present this aspect of Baraka's poetry by way of a comparison with Langston Hughes:

> Langston Hughes … in many of his poems was able to put his keen ear to the latter Black ground, was able to hear the "militant" rumblings therein, was able to interpret correctly a portion of the latter significance:
>
> I could tell you
> if I want to
> what makes me
> what I am
> But I really
> don't want to
> and you don't
> give a damn.
>
> Baraka, feeling much the same, could bring it all down into the succinct, no-nonsense incandescence of "SOS." (6)

Brooks' conclusions helped in explaining how Baraka reached his reader with the kind of passion and grit that made his messages accessible tersely. This, perhaps, is what Brooks also hints at as she states, "Then came Baraka, rejecting all lovely little villanelles and Sonnets—to Orpheus or anything else. Prettiness was out. Fight-fact was in. Baraka demanded black poems. Poems must be teeth, fists, daggers, guns, cop-wrestlers. Why? These would be cleansers! 'Clean out the world for virtue and love,' Baraka ordered" (7).

The idea of "cleaning out the world for virtue and love" was aimed at making available the cultural imperatives necessary for change. Racism and social injustice had been two forces that impeded the progress of minorities and race relations in America in the past. To help avert these social ills, Baraka saw the need to use poetry as a weapon for effecting change, in addition to the artist serving as a model to his community. The logic embedded in Brooks' assertion finds relevance several poems published by Baraka and especially in the poem "Black Art," where he declares

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth or trees or lemon piled
> on a step. Or black ladies dying
> of men leaving nickel hearts
> beating them down. Fuck poems
> and they are useful, wd they shoot
> come at you, love what you are,
> breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
> strangely after pissing… (*Reader* 219)

Here, the attempt to promote the role of the poet as an activist voice concerned with bringing change is visible. In this sense the poet is not merely relegated to the status of a wordsmith but rather is held in high regard to that position of one endowed with the wisdom to lead his community. But first, he must accept his status as a model to others, an idea espoused by James Stewart, who insists: "Our models must be consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles. In doing so, we will merely be following the natural demands of our culture. These demands are suppressed in the larger (white) culture, but, nonetheless, are found in our music and in our spiritual and moral philosophy" (3). Indeed Stewart's underlying message had been the catalyst for Baraka's modus operandi, thus affirming his intimation concerning his obligation as a writer when he shares the following:

> My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what. (xiv)

Amiri Baraka's voluminous publications situate his visionary commitment within the purview of American and African diaspora discourse because of the aesthetic principles that inform his poetics, dramaturgy, and critical logic. Global literature of the African diaspora, especially African-American literature, is governed by the quest for

truth and the attempt to negotiate a future that recognizes the distinction between black identity in a racially divided society and culture that pretends to give cognizance to people irrespective of culture and race. In his writings, especially poetry, Baraka sought to claim the ideals and artistic forms necessary for the progress of black art in America. In his poetry conceptual forms and oral resources standout however interrelated or imbricated to each other. Therefore, when one reads the poet Haki Madhubuti's declaration that "Writers should be questioners of the real world and doers within the world. Question everything. And don't be satisfied with the quick surface answers" (21), there emerges a sense of urgency concerning the function of literary text and its peculiar role in negotiating a black destiny through creative writing predicated on historical, cultural, spiritual, and geographical expressions directly drawn from *African cosmology* and black art.

For Baraka, these ideas are inherent in the imaginative representations of his writings and intersect with intractable lines in American literary history. When he founded the Black Arts Movement he emerged as a major intellectual voice for the black community in America, considering that he was a poet, playwright, essayist, and scholar, who wrote zestful and angry writings that captured the emotional spirit of the 1960s and the 1970s. His formation of the artistic movement was particularly crucial because of the context of the movement and the political events of the era, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Amiri Baraka's voluminous poetry, plays and essays were practically statements aimed at overturning every notable contraction in American letters that disregarded the cultural and political significance of black art.

It seems to me that Baraka's daring works, especially his poetry, served as an urgent attempt to vilify the spirit of African-American consciousness in the Americas. While he was perceived as an angry voice, he clearly produced literary works empowered by both language and style that attempted to reach out to the black world and marginalized groups that shared in his belief that Western capitalism, imperialism and colonialism preoccupied the black mind and formed a coalition with political and cultural forces that slowed the progress of the black community and other marginalized groups. Before I go further in illuminating ideas pertinent to Baraka's worldview and artistic philosophy, it is fitting that we grasp his inspiration for writing

and how that inspiration functioned in his artistic expressions. In his preface to the *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones Reader*, he notes, "My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what" (xiv). The candidness with which he asserts his search for both a human and an African philosophical system that would vindicate his quintessential essence as a writer is without a doubt perceivable in the above statement.

Brook's statement affirms Baraka's poetic genius and his full participation in the civil rights struggle for black Americans and other ethnic Americans. It is for this reason that conscious poetry readers regard Baraka very seriously and remember how productive his writings were in making memorable the historical moments that shaped and influenced the literature representation of the 1960s and 70s in America. Let me add also that undoubtedly the philosophical sweep of Baraka's prodigious imagination was widely admired by those who sought meaning from art that eschewed oppression and dared convention. Among these authors were the poet Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), The Last Poets (Felipe Luciano, Oyewole, Nilija Obabi, Gylan Kain, David Nelson), Kalamu ya Salaam, August Wilson, E. Ethelbert Miller, among others.

Conclusion

Amiri Baraka may be gone but I sincerely hope his achievements as a writer in the past fifty one years plus will not be forgotten. This is important because history treats those whom it chooses fairly and Baraka undoubtedly belongs to the group of American authors whose works transformed lives and pushed generations to rethink the political, cultural, and philosophical perspectives that shaped American literature and culture. As a Black writer who saw the Civil Rights Movement and championed the course of the Black Arts Movement, he would be remembered in a myriad of ways by his critics. Nevertheless, if there was something about him and his corpus that could not be overlooked, it would be his unrelenting commitment to a Black destiny and American legacy in his writings. Undoubtedly, his corpus represents literature that evades every attempt to compromise the importance of black American art and other forms of the oral tradition. Indeed, he was a

creative force in America's literary landscape and will be remembered as a committed writer whose works speak to the importance of African-American literature as a cultural production with historical and social relevance.

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For Amiri Baraka[1]

Pierre Joris

The literary, cultural, political importance of Amiri Baraka's life and work is there for all to see. I would like to briefly say why his work has been important for my own vision of the world. Indeed, it was his writing and example that helped set me straight about America when I started seriously reading Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka after getting to the U.S.A. in 1967—at exactly the date, I was to find out later, when he was jailed in Newark.

Before that, growing up in Europe after WWII Europe, my experience of African-American culture was a more or less unthought-through romantic love-affair with an attractive, fascinating, strange, sexy and also at times dangerous other. At 12, on holiday in Belgium, away from perfectly white Luxembourg, my parents took me to a Nat King Cole concert and a year later to a Louis and Ella concert; at 15, I got mother to drive me into France to catch Ray Charles in Metz. On AFN radio I listened to Fats Domino, the Platters, Chubby Checker, etc. I bought Bessie Smith records. I fell in love with jazz and my first published piece of writing in the high school catholic students' paper was a potted bio of Charlie Parker. In Paris as a medical student in 1965 I started to read *Invisible Man* and the poetry of Hughes and Bob Kaufman. I got dissed at my first poetry reading there—for a bad poem in honor of Langston Hughes—by Ted Joans, but saved by Jimmy Baldwin who told Joans to stop; I drove with friends to Orly airport to welcome various free jazz musicians come to play at the Huchette clubs; I played pinball with Memphis Slim; I learned pages of dialogue from Baldwin's *Another Country* by heart, etc...

I was, in one word, a well-meaning cultural tourist getting

his vicarious kicks from the luxury of Euro-bourgeois distance and safety. As Baraka says in "Political Poem": "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."

Well, coming to America cracked much of this, by ripping off the tarpaulin, by foreshortening the distance, and my relationship to African-American culture got thrown off-kilter. I was no longer in Kansas, I mean Paris. Now all of those vicarious experiences moved out of the realm of just art, aesthetics, entertainment and fascinating other-ness, moved beyond a kid's mimetic desire to be as hip and cool as his jazz heroes, all of this mess got anchored and reframed and given an actual dimension in the real world, in an actual real cultural and political context—and studying Baraka's work, from the poetry to the essays to the plays and on taught me how to see that world, taught me how to reframe my sense of what I had already experienced through a glass pinkishly European and opened new vistas I did not know existed. I owe him for all of that.

This was possible, I now realize, because Amiri's work was deeply connected to the other work from the White World that deeply engaged me, namely the Euro-American avant-garde tradition. I came to his work at the same time as I came to the work of the major American avant-garde poets of that time, such as the Beats (the connection to them is obvious and well-documented), or the great modernists like WCW (a NJ poet whose decision to write up the minute particulars of his town of Paterson is not that far, even if very different—and for good reasons—from AB's move to and concentration on Newark), or, closer to my generation, the Black Mountain poets (Olson's political rants at Gloucester, another New Ark gone wrong) or Edward Dorn (to whom *The Dead Lecturer* is dedicated—check out AB's lecture *Ed Dorn & the Western World*). It is, to put it too briefly, his guidance through the complex reality of that multi-dimensioned, even if often partitioned, yet totally enmeshed America that allowed me to overcome the romanticism of my early love affair with Black America.

When Jerome Rothenberg and I published our *Poems for the Millennium* anthology (a book, for which Amiri gave us the lovely blurb "From real Soup to real Nuts") we wrote a commentary for the Baraka section: It was Baraka's genius to grasp the ferocity (theatrical,

poetic) of Artaud's "theater of cruelty" & to redirect it—in the context of his own time—into a "revolutionary" poetry & theater, of which [Baraka] wrote: "This is a theater of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this." (525-526)

And at the close of the commentary:

> As a declaration of [Baraka's] sources & directions, his late ongoing poem *Why's/Wise*—"about African American (American) History"—is described by him as "in the tradition of the Griots [African Singer-Poet-Historians] but also like Melvin Tolson's *Liberia,* William Carlos Williams's *Paterson,* Charles Olson's *Maximus* in that it tries to tell the history/life like an ongoing-off-coming Tale." (526)

But let me give Amiri the last word. In his lecture on Ed Dorn, he analyses and frames Dorn's quest in terms that apply to him too:

> Is there a genuine alignment of progressive concerns? Is there an attention so rigorous that it makes us common workers for some as yet unclearly stated alternative to all this. The pettiness of the evil around us and in us to whatever degree we cannot fend it off, is not actually petty at all. If it is petty we are safe in our germ free sanitized intellectual niches of not so quiet self-regard. We are safe because we will not question, we will not work to actually change what might be simple annoyance or unjust criticism, or oppression or torture or death.
>
> What is this Place? And what has it made us? Where does it come from? We are shaped by what it has made us as we shape what it is ourselves. It was Sekou Touré saying the same thing essentially as Olson. I was moving from one locus to another but prepared as much by what I had gleaned as by what I was entering. (xix)[2]

That last line, and its double movement, forward, avanti!, into the new & unexplored while *eingedenk*, with awareness of, past experience ready for use, resonates very deeply with my own sense of poetics, what I have for some years now called a Nomad Poetics. Baraka's next sentence states:

> It was Wittgenstein who taught me Ethics and Aesthetics are one.

I would like to say:

> It was Baraka who taught me Ethics and Aesthetics are the same.

Thank you, Amiri, for all the gifts of the spirit.

Notes

[1] The text is the revised version of the talk given at the Amiri Baraka celebration at the Brooklyn Pratt Institute, Wednesday 12 February 2014, organized by Tracie Morris and Maria Damon.

[2] The page reference is to the reprint edition of the text, which appears as Preface in *Amiri Baraka and Edward Dorn: The Collected Letters* (guest editor's note).

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Blues People and the Poetry of Amiri Baraka

M. G. Stephens

> Blues is *not*, nor was it ever meant to be, a strictly social phenomenon, but is primarily a verse form and secondarily a way of making music.
>
> —*Blues People* (50)

In the downtown world of 1960s New York City, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) was primarily a poet. He was associated with various avant-garde groups, a diverse assortment of nonacademic outsider writers from Allen Ginsberg (the Beats) to Charles Olson (Black Mountain), Frank O'Hara (New York School) and other Black writers (Umbra and Ishmael Reed), and an unclassifiable group of poets, such as Paul Blackburn and Diane DiPrima, who seemed to fit in everywhere and nowhere at once. Besides his poetry, Jones wrote regularly about jazz and had a burgeoning playwriting career. He was a key figure socially in the Lower East Side and the Village, his home often a gathering place for writers and artists (painters, musicians, dancers, etc.). The poet's eclecticism was most apparent in the Joneses' (LeRoi and his then wife Hettie's) incredibly catholic magazine *Yugen*. I still think that *Yugen* #7 is the best magazine I've ever read. That issue included work by Gilbert Sorrentino, Robert Creeley, Kenneth Koch, George Stanley, Frank O'Hara, Gregory Corso, Stuart Z. Perkoff, John Ashbery, Philip Whalen, Larry Eigner, Max Finstein, Joel Oppenheimer, Diane DiPrima, Charles Olson, Edward Marshall, Allen Ginsberg, and LeRoi Jones himself. The cover was by the artist Norman Bluhm, who figures in a later short story of Amiri Baraka's

called "Norman's Date."[1] To put that list of people in perspective, today it is a who's who of prominent writers; in 1961, the year *Yugen,* no. 7 was published, none of the writers was known outside these small alternative literary circles.

I first encountered Jones' poetry around 1961 when I ran away from home and wound up on the Lower East Side. I was fifteen years old. One night I wandered into the old Eighth Street Bookshop at the corner of McDougal Street in Greenwich Village, went down into the basement, and found an assortment of small press poetry books to purchase—or steal—and then read, including *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, Jones' first book of poetry, which quickly became my favorite book. The following year (1962), Jones' name came up again when I ran away for the second time, in a stolen car with a childhood friend who wanted to visit his mother in Elmira, New York. The car was stolen from one of my older brothers, so was not likely to be reported; my friend lured me to Elmira on the unlikely pretext that Mark Twain had lived there. As he visited his mother in an out-of-the-way part of town, I went into a corner general store and began looking at the magazines, improbably coming upon one called *Kulchur*, in which LeRoi Jones' play, *The Toilet*, was published. By the time my friend found me, I had read the entire play and was already a different person than the one he left moments earlier. Elmira was certainly an unlikely place to expand my reading knowledge of LeRoi Jones, and yet it shows how far afield his work was disseminated. I was already a daily reader of Jones' poetry by that point. The year before, when I first ran away, I had encountered one other genre of writing he practiced, and that was the essay form.

The essay was "Cuba Libré," about his trip to Castro's Cuba in the summer of 1960, and it had been published in *Evergreen Review* at the end of that year. Until I read "Cuba Libré" I had this poet's belief that prose was a second-rate kind of literature—that poetry was everything. Now I had to grapple with the idea that prose could be as energetic and powerful as poetry. During that first foray into running away from home, I was holed up on the Lower East Side for a few weeks in an East 11th Street and Avenue B crash-pad for runaways, then managed to secure a single-room-occupancy in a hotel on Bleecker Street. In order to conceal my age, I grew an unconvincing mustache, the kind a fifteen-year-old boy might grow. With some beer and pizza slices from McDougal Street, I sat in the Bleecker Street hotel room

reading Jones and his compadres in books of poetry by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Diane DiPrima. Besides purchasing LeRoi Jones' poetry book, I also bought a copy of *Evergreen Review* for one dollar, which is how I came to read the essay about Cuba. In the *Evergreen Review* I read work by Samuel Beckett, Kenneth Koch, Arrabal, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti; then that magnificent essay about Cuba by LeRoi Jones.

The trip to Cuba had been arranged for July 1960 by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. The editor's introduction to the essay states: "While there, he went to Sierra Maestra in Oriente province to attend a mass anniversary rally of the July 26th movement" (139). For me, it was the best piece of literary journalism I had encountered; it was right up there with James Baldwin's essays, which I had read in a high-school class. What I took away from the essay was the detailed, vivid descriptions—the long progression of travel from Havana into the boondocks of Cuba for the massive celebration at which Fidel Castro was to speak. Jones has to travel by train, cattle car, and truck, and then walk to get to the foothills of the Sierra Maestra to attend the rally. On the train, he has a political discussion with a Mexican graduate student. He says to her: "I'm a poet … what can I do?" (141). The woman calls him a "cowardly bourgeois individualist," and other Latin writers berate him too. In theatre, this is what is known as the "recognition scene," in which someone suddenly has an epiphany, and this encounter on the train was LeRoi Jones' political awakening. In the mountains where Fidel speaks, Jones writes that sixty or seventy thousand people showed up to hear their leader. The entire essay is about that teeming, energized, beaming, celebratory humanity. The endless celebration had been interrupted at one point by five minutes of rain.

After three days, he arrives back in Havana, without having bathed or slept very much, exhausted and yet exhilarated by what he has seen. This horde of near biblical humanity is contrasted with what Jones faces when he returns to the city and reads the headline from a Miami newspaper: "I came out of the terminal into the street and stopped at a newsstand to buy a newspaper. The headlines of one Miami paper read, 'CUBAN CELEBRATION RAINED OUT.' I walked away from the stand as fast as I could" (159).

Blues People was published a few years after the Cuban essay. It is often said that Jones changed after that trip to Cuba, that he became

more radicalized. “Cuba Libré” is carefully observed and factually reported journalism; *Blues People* is scholarship, erudite writing in musicology, sociology, anthropology, Black Studies, American Studies, and Urban Studies. In order to understand *Blues People*, one needs to understand its voice, and how it relates to Jones’ other writing. The impulse of *Blues People* is a lyrical one, which comes from the inherent poetry in the prose. Poetry is at the heart of all of Jones’ writing, and social justice is its theme. Though primarily known for his angry street persona, that particular voice was just one of many registers in LeRoi Jones’ poetry. He also could be tender and lyrical, and was a sublime writer of love poems. There are two poems, in particular, that I was drawn to early on in reading this poet, and if Jones was considered one of the angriest poets in the *lit biz*, these two poems were counterweights. One of those poems inaugurated his first volume, and was the eponymous “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note.”

Lately, I’ve become accustomed to the way
The ground opens up and envelopes me
Each time I got out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus . . .

Things have come to that. (*Preface*, 5)

It ends with the poet observing his daughter seemingly talking to someone in her room, and when he tiptoes up to her room, he observes: “Only she on her knees, peeking into / Her own clasped hands” (*Preface*, 5). Marvelously, wondrously, the poem was written in March 1957, two years before his daughter Kellie was born (May 16, 1959).

The other poem that caught my attention, and which I found myself reading regularly in the 1960s was one entitled “For Hettie” (she was his then wife). It begins:

My wife is left-handed.
which implies a fierce de-
termination. A complete other
worldliness. ITS WEIRD, BABY.

The way some folks
are always trying to be
different. (*Preface*, 13)

He goes on to note that his wife is a bohemian … black stockings … refusing to take orders … writing left-handedly … But to no avail. He says that it shows: "Left-handed coffee, left-handed eggs…it's her left hand offered for me to kiss." It ends:

& now her belly droops over the seat.
They say it's a child. But
I ain't quite so sure. (13)

Blues People is unique in the Jones/Baraka literary canon because it is not obviously lyrical nor particularly angry, though anger comprises some part of its construction. Its lyricism is the result of an overall effect, not individual moments in the narrative. Researched and written in the late Fifties/early Sixties, it was published in 1963. It is the almost academic account of Black American history told by way of its music, especially the blues and jazz, which are the result of the experiences of slavery. Its tone is scholarly and its command of its subject is monumental. Though not a long, thick volume—my copy is only 236 pages long—nonetheless, it is well researched and full of new ideas and insights: "It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods. *Expression* issued from life, and *was* beauty" (29).

The voice of *Blues People* is, at times, that of the sociologist or anthropologist from the New School of Social Research in Greenwich Village. It is no doubt derived in part from Jones' education at Rutgers and Howard, and possibly his mentors from that time, as well as the classes he took or sat in on at Columbia University and the New School. It is also a product of his encyclopedic knowledge of blues and jazz, and his years spent as a jazz critic in the fifties and sixties. I suspect there is also a bit of Charles Olson in the writing; Jones puts on a different hat, more worldly, less ethereal and ideal, more hard-nose observer, like the Olson of the Mayan anthropological travels in Mexico. Charles Olson is even quoted in *Blues People*:

> … the race
>
> does not advance, it is only
>
> better preserved (122)

In the Introduction to *Blues People*, Jones modestly states: "I am trying in this book, by means of analogy and some attention to historical example, to establish certain general conclusions about a particular segment of American society" (ix). What this book is *about* comes into focus on its opening page in that Introduction, in which Jones further observes:

> The Negro as a slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the *path* the slave took to "citizenship" is what I want to look at. And I make my analogy through the slave citizen's music—through the music that is most closely associated with him: blues and a later, but parallel development, jazz. And it seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music. (ix)

The intellectual idea of joining up the journey of a people—their very history—with their music is *sui generis*, but in the case of the African slaves in America, it is an almost necessary conflation, as these slaves had little or no artifacts to study. It was their oral traditions that allowed such a history to survive. The blues were a long time coming, and they were distinctly, uniquely African American in their origins and practice. This is what LeRoi Jones traces in his study.

> Only religion (and magic) and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Music, dance, religion, do not have *artifacts* as their end products, so they were saved. These nonmaterial aspects of the African's culture were almost impossible to eradicate. And these are the most apparent legacies of the African past, even to the contemporary black American. But to merely point out that blues, jazz, and the Negro's adaptation of the Christian religion all rely heavily on African culture takes no great amount of

> original thinking. How these activities derive from that culture is what remains important. (16)

So how did the blues happen? Jones writes: "The African slave had sung African chants and litanies in those American fields. His sons and daughters, and their children, began to use America as a reference" (18). In another section of the book, Jones refers to it as "European words cast into an African grammatical mold" (22). However way it is described, the outcome is eventually the blues, the indigenous music of Black America. How that came about is the point of *Blues People*. The forced journey of Africans to America, and their subsequent assimilation of American rhythms into their own speech patterns is yet another way to put it. Jones gives a Dahomey river god ceremony as an example; it probably had no chance of surviving after the Africans arrived in America, except for one thing: that it resembled the Christians in the New World with what they called baptism. (27)

It is not just the blues that African Americans introduced into American life. They were also the carriers of unique instruments never seen in the New World, including "the banjo (an African word)" (27) and "the xylophone," (27), which were brought over from Africa. It was not just the musical instrumentation, it was the stories themselves, which people conveyed orally, person to person, generation to generation that were important: "folk tales in song lyrics, riddles, proverbs, etc., which, even when not accompanied by music, were the African's chief method of education, the way the wisdom of elders was passed down to the young" (28). The knowledge in *Blues People* is cumulative, steadily accreting page to page. The story journeys through religion and geography, early Black Christian churches, and how "the converted slave had only to alter his lyrics to make the song 'Christian'" (45). Once the end of slavery arrives in the 1860s, "there was now proposed for the Negro masses a much fuller life *outside* the church. There came to be more and more backsliders, and more and more of the devil music was heard" (49).

Now migrations started to occur primarily towards the North because of new opportunities (jobs and housing in places such as Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York). A people who had lost the family unit because of being torn away from loved ones during slavery were now seeking new definitions of how to live and work together. Though women often had second-class status in some African

societies, as Jones notes, "certain traditions that were usually given their impetus by the male members of an African community could, in the strange context of the slave and post-slave New World society, be developed equally by women, and in some cases could be brought to their perfection by women. Blues, at a certain point of its development, was one of those traditions" (56-57). The blues was a direct result of the shout-and-response and the spiritual (62). "Blues was a kind of singing that utilized a language that was almost strictly American" (63). But what is the point of the blues, especially in the context of a people brought, against their will, to the New World? LeRoi Jones tells us: "The movement of the Negro into a position where he would be able to escape even this separation from the white mainstream of America is a central theme of this book." (65)

In the autumn of 1966, I was working at the Music Library at the newly opened Lincoln Center and living in a sixty-dollar a month three-room cold-water railroad flat on East 10th Street. It was half a block from the St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, and its newly formed Poetry Project. For the next couple of years I regularly attended the various writing workshops. I now had another LeRoi Jones book, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), which I walked around reciting aloud to my Lower East Side poetry friends. I probably said the line—"I will fuck you even if you don't like art"[2]—so many times that people must have thought that it was my own. But it was pure LeRoi Jones. 1966 was a year of absences and ghosts. That previous summer, just a few months earlier, the poet Frank O'Hara had been killed in a freak accident by a dune taxi on Fire Island; his ghost pervaded the new Poetry Project. LeRoi Jones was nothing if not conspicuous by his absence from the East Village, too. He was uptown in Harlem, running an arts center, and when that ended, he migrated back to his hometown of Newark across the North River, where he would live for the rest of his long, fruitful life.

The year before, Malcolm X had been assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom at 165th Street and Broadway in Washington Heights. Nineteen-sixty-six was the year that Black Power became prominent with national figures such as Stokely Carmichael; the Black Panthers became a force, introducing new leaders like Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. In LeRoi's old stomping ground, the Lower East Side was now being called the East Village. He would soon rename himself and eventually be called Amiri Baraka. Another absence was

Blues People: copies of the book were impossible to find, the publisher having let it come and go without much fanfare and/or commitment to its promotion.

By the time I arrived on East 10th Street, LeRoi had already moved away from the Lower East Side. In those days, my own take on writing was influenced by my friends and teachers; all of us were on the same page with regard to literary taste. With one exception, we were young, educated, white poets living in America's version of bohemia. (The African American poet Tom Weatherly was the only Black member of our group of young writers.) We all knew each other because of the free poetry workshop we attended at the new Poetry Project. The Black Mountain poet Joel Oppenheimer was the director and also our poetry teacher. We attended his class in the Old Courthouse at East 2nd Street and Second Avenue. The Poetry Project rented it from the City of New York for—we were told—one dollar a year. It was Joel Oppenheimer who kept the flame of LeRoi's poetry alive at the table, because Joel had once been a close friend of Roi's, the name which Oppenheimer called his old drinking buddy and fellow Lower East Side poet.

The mid-1960s was a time of urban riots, in Detroit, Harlem, Los Angeles (Watts), and Philadelphia. Newark was one of those cities in upheaval as whites fled to the suburbs and the urban poor—mostly Black—were left behind. By the time of the riots, Amiri Baraka was living back in Newark, his hometown. 1967 was the year that Newark experienced its own riots. Ten years later, in the eastern part of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, the 1977 riots transformed Broadway from a bustling commercial district into a ghost town. I note this community because that is where I grew up, and the riots in Newark a decade earlier were identical to those in Brooklyn in their effect upon a poor community. After the whites fled, businesses packed up and never returned. East New York and that part of Bedford-Stuyvesant became known as the most dangerous neighborhood in New York City. What was Newark like? It was like that war-torn neighborhood in Brooklyn, only larger, poorer, angrier. That is the Newark to which Amiri Baraka returned. I may have known him for his poetry, plays, and nonfiction, but in Newark, Baraka became known as a community organizer, a local who knew how to get things done. He would be arrested and charged with possession of firearms during the riots. A famous Fred McDarrah photograph shows Jones/Baraka in prison stripes, handcuffed, a huge

gash in his forehead that was inflicted by the Newark police. When Baraka was in jail after the Newark riots, I had demonstrated with some other writers outside of Columbia University, handing out a broadsheet with his poems and the 75-point headline: POETRY IS REVOLUTION / REVOLUTION IS POETRY. At Baraka's trial, the judge read his poetry aloud and accused the poet of inciting the Newark riots because of those writings. Later, Amiri Baraka would say that he was convicted of possessing two revolvers and two poems.

What does this have to do with *Blues People*? The answer is "everything." There may be a different voice in this nonfiction work, but that does not mean it is much different from Jones' other work, in his public persona as a community organizer or in his role of the gifted Black poet. *Blues People* is not a narrative with an ending; it brings the reader up through Charlie Parker and bebop and then the various jazz greats of the Sixties, including Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and Thelonious Monk, but its story, being a history of Black America as told through its music, goes on and on. The music is the story of social justice—or its lack thereof—in contemporary America. Violence is its backbeat. Both Basil King, the Black Mountain painter, and Gilbert Sorrentino, the poet and novelist, recounted to me, almost verbatim and on different occasions, the story of LeRoi Jones' encounter with some white thugs outside of McSorley's Alehouse on East 7th Street when all of them were young men on the Lower East Side. Jones was not a big guy, but he certainly was tough and streetwise. He grabbed a garbage can lid and wailed on the white men as they shouted racial slurs against him. Having witnessed similar kinds of fights in Brooklyn many times, I was thrilled with the tale. Jones/Baraka enjoyed a mythical place in my mind, somewhere between Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali, Hubert Selby and William Butler Yeats. Baraka's poetry, more and more, verified these mythological stories, as the poems were often violent and street smart. That is not the tone, not the voice, of *Blues People*, though there is a subtext in which this dissonant rhythm may be found.

In the 1960s, it was almost impossible to find a copy of *Blues People* to read, although I knew several young poets who had read it. The book seemed to go out of print quickly, without a trace. I once saw a copy in a tiny bookshop on West 4th Street, but I didn't have the money to buy it. *Blues People* would have to wait more than fifty years before I found a hardcover copy of the British edition in a used

bookshop in Camden Town, when I was living in London. Just before I found that copy, I attended a reading by Amiri Baraka at the British Library on Euston Road, just a few blocks from where I lived. The interview and short reading took place in March 2013. (He died on January 9, 2014.)

He read "Somebody Blew up America," a section of which reads:

> Who got the tar, who got the feathers
>
> Who had the match, who set the fires
>
> Who killed and hired
>
> Who say they God & still be the Devil (*SOS: Poems* 425)

It was a brilliant performance, dramatic, funny, an energy field, as Charles Olson would call it, full of street-smarts and toughness. Performance was a cornerstone of all Lower East Side poetry, and LeRoi Jones was no exception to that rule. That reading at the British Library was testament to Amiri Baraka's great performance abilities. Hip-hop and rap no doubt came from this poet almost the same way that jazz came out of the blues.

After reading *Blues People*, I thought it should be read by all people who wish to become U.S. citizens. It is a story of becoming an American, but people who became Americans against their will, through no fault of their own, because of slavery, and then became the backbone of American history and culture. Without Black music there is no blues, no jazz, no rhythm & blues, no rock 'n' roll, no hip-hop, no rap, no distinctly American musical style, no American history, even no American language.

> The twist is that if you are black and believe in the supernatural, and are issued from an ecological determinant that does not permit of such a psychological extreme as American Puritanism (which, said William Carlos Williams, is a "thing, strange, inhuman, powerful, like a relic of some died out tribe whose practices were revolting"), the circumstance of finding yourself in a culture of white humanist pseudo-Puritanical storekeepers must be revolting. And if you

> are a slave of such a culture, your sorrows must be indeterminable. (*Blues People* 10)

Reading *Blues People* for the first time all these years later was a life-affirming experience; very much akin to the energy I felt when I first read LeRoi Jones' poetry as a fifteen-year-old runaway on the Lower East Side. At the British Library talk and reading, Baraka was mellow in a way I had never seen him, although he did resemble the person that his downtown friends (Joel, Gil, Basil, et al.) told me about, time and time again. He was erudite, witty, literary, occasionally bristly, but mostly that energetic wordsmith, the poet of particulars, of music and social justice, of feet and measures, the open field, of breath and syllable, the poet of the street.

Notes

[1] Story published in *Tales of the Out and the Gone*.

[2] The line appears in Baraka's poem "The Politics of Rich Painters" (*SOS: Poems* 72).

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Food as Hieroglyphics:

Amiri Baraka and Black Expressive Culture

Psyche Williams-Forson

> Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course… Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact—must add action to it to make it do. So we have "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So, we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (79-80)

Writing in 1934, Hurston's anthropological skill and cultural familiarity allow her to capture soundly an essence of the beauty and art of African American cultural expression. She notes, "Black people speak in hieroglyphics"; in visuals and in movements, tastes, and sounds. Often, these performances do not "meet conventional standards" but they "[satisfy] the soul of the creator" (Hurston 80). These forms of cultural expressions or hieroglyphics are the ways in which African Americans perform group identity using dance, clothing,

music, language, art, and food.[1] These are some of the ways African American people *do* Blackness. J. Allen Kawan notes "groups utilize expressive culture to reassert control over their bodies, critique white culture, challenge stereotypical representations in mass culture, and develop collective identities that transcend geography and time. Groups censor these cultural performances for mainstream audiences who often appropriate them without knowledge of their hidden meanings."[2]

One of the many appropriations of Blackness is food and one of the earliest writers to call attention to this phenomenon was Amiri Baraka. Most widely known as a poet and leading figure in the Black Power and Black Arts Movement, few, in contemporary food studies (or any discipline), associated Amiri Baraka with African American food culture until Doris Witt resurrected his contributions in *Black Hunger*. She writes, "Baraka began valorizing [soul food] as an expression of pride in the cultural forms created from and articulated through a history of black oppression" (80).

But context is very important. Baraka wrote his essay on soul food as a rebuttal to critics—in this case an African American writer for *Esquire Magazine*—who stated Black people had neither a characteristic language nor cuisine. Baraka penned the essay "Soul Food" in his collection titled *Home: Social Essays*, wherein he describes what we know today as foods primarily associated with the South, but indeed eaten all over the world: grits, hoppin' John (black-eyed peas and rice), fried fish and chicken, buttermilk biscuits, dumplings lima beans and corn, string beans, okra, smoky, hot barbecue, everything from the hog—from neck bones to pork chop—sweet tea or lemonade, and sweet potato or other pies and cakes.

The myriad debates sparked by Baraka's observation have been well documented.[3] My concern is less with those conversations, though very important, and more to highlight Baraka's radical use of food to illustrate the ways Black people "speak in hieroglyphics." Yes, these are all foods eaten by many Southerners, but in conjoining food and soul, food and Blackness is "highly dramatized…[It] is acted out" (Hurston 79). By adding "soul" as a signifier to food, Baraka "add[s] action to [food] to make it do" (Hurston 79). By calling out the ways these foods are cooked—the ingredients, the spices, and the flavoring as well as the methods of frying, stewing, and smoking—he signifies on a mood of ingenuity, creativity, and skill learned out of necessity and hard times.

It was a mood of keeping on, in spite of and yet because of whatever was happening around them. As Issac Hayes says about the song "Soul Man," it was "a story about one's struggle to rise above his present conditions. It's almost a tune kind of like boasting, 'I'm a soul man.' It's a pride thing" (Bowman 128).[4] With soul food not only do Black people play the culinary dozens by trying to one up one another in the cooking, but they also moan when the food is good, and they show with ingenuity and creativity and boast loudly about how, anything—including hog's intestines, chicken feet, back, and necks—can make for a good dinner. Though food—both the word and the material—generally speaking, was "transplanted" on the tongues of Black folks "by contact," by adding soul, Amiri Baraka added action to it "to make it do" (Hurston 79). And this is the drama. Not in today's parlance, necessarily, but to reflect the levels of depth, emotion, and nuance. Soul food is multisensory. It is not just food; it is a way of being. And not only does soul food satiate but it also reflects perseverance, resourcefulness, and creativity by Black people in the face of life's myriad oppressions; actions as relevant today as they were back then.

Notes

[1]See Lawrence W Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*; Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*; Gena Dagel Caponi, ed, *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*; Tanisha Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*.

[2] Kawan J. Allen, "Expressive Culture."

[3] Shortly after Baraka's treatise was published several debates emerged around the benefits and harm of eating soul food; many of these persist today. While Baraka argued for its merits and was supported by the likes of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor others such as the nation of Nation of Islam, along with Dick Gregory, and other advocates of nonpork and whole food diets. Frederick Douglass Opie discusses the arguments of European American food critics like Craig Claiborne who insisted, "soul food was a southern regional food that belonged to southerners." See chapter 9, "Food Rebels: African American Critics and Opponents of Soul Food," *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. See also Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*; Dick Gregory, *Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin' With Mother Nature*, James R. McGraw, ed., with Alvenia M. Fulton.

[4] The song "Soul Man" was written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter, the other half of the recording artist Sam (Moore) and Dave (Porter), who sang the song, see Bob Bowman.

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A Rereading and Repositioning of Roles in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*

Sultan Komut Bakınç

Abstract

Amiri Baraka's well-known and both vastly praised and criticized play *Dutchman* is a primary example of Revolutionary Theater, which Baraka conceptualizes as a theater that "forces" its audience to confront the realities of social injustice, and "accuse" and "attack" its practitioners. In this sense, *Dutchman* is a model text of Baraka's compulsion toward destruction through art. This article argues that the prevalent view in the scholarship on this play reduces Clay and Lula as victim and victimizer. This article aims to present these characters in a postmodernist light, as more complex and less stereotyped. Thus, they can be seen as having equally the potential to change and the potential to destroy (themselves and/or the society). In the final analysis, Baraka presents a true piece of Revolutionary Theater in *Dutchman*: powerful, accusatory and destructive.

Keywords

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*, Revolutionary Theatre, Myths, Intertextuality, Deconstruction

Amiri Baraka'nın *Dutchman* Oyununda Rollerin Yeniden Okunması ve Konumlandırılması

Öz

Amiri Baraka'nın çok bilinen ve övgüler kadar eleştirilerle de karşı karşıya kalan oyunu *Dutchman*, Devrimci Tiyatronun ilk

örneğidir. Baraka, Devrimci Tiyatroyu, izleyicileri sosyal adaletsizlik gerçeğiyle yüzleşmeye "iten" ve sosyal adaletsizliği yaratanları "suçlayan" ve "hedef alan" bir tiyatro türü olarak tanımlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, *Dutchman*, Baraka'nın sanat aracılığıyla yıkım yaratma dürtüsünü yansıtan bir metindir. Bu makale, eser üzerine yazılmış incelemelerde hakim görüşün Clay ve Lula karakterlerinin mağdur ve zalim olarak indirgendiğini ileri sürmektedir. Makalenin amacı, bu karakterleri postmodernizm ışığında, daha karmaşık ve basmakalıplardan uzak bir şekilde göstermektir. Nitekim, her iki karakter de (kendilerini ve/veya toplumu) eşit oranda değiştirme ve yıkma potansiyeline sahiptir. Baraka son çözümlemesinde, *Dutchman* oyunundaki Devrimci Tiyatronun gerçek bir örneğini gözler önüne sermektedir: güçlü, suçlayıcı ve yıkıcı.

Anahtar Kelimeler

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*, Devrimci Tiyatro, Mitler, Metinlerarasılık, Yapısöküm

Art is a
substitute
for murder.

—D. H. Weisgram

Dutchman is a highly controversial play, full of allusions, images and symbols which question black social status within twentieth-century North American society. While on the surface, *Dutchman* has a rather simple plot with only two main characters and one setting, yet as this article will argue, the play offers to take the audience on a challenging quest, laden with multifaceted meanings and powerful political implications. *Dutchman* must be understood as a representative of the Black Arts movement, which in turn was threaded through with the politics of Black Power. As Larry Neal argues:

> Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black

> America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (55)

Thus in *Dutchman*, Baraka challenges western cultural codes by rephrasing, redefining, rewriting and, if necessary, destroying them because the Black Arts movement believed that "it [was] impossible to construct anything meaningful within [western culture's] decaying structure" (Neal 55). Baraka's significance to the movement and influence upon it was key, Neal argues, positing him as the "prime mover and chief designer" of the Black Arts concept (60).

The play pivots around a chance interaction between a black subway rider, Clay, and a white older woman, Lula. On the train, their first contact is flirtatious, yet as time passes the woman starts to be offensive, accusatory and seductive. The play's climax is reached when Lula finally stabs the young man to death. Once Clay dies at the hands of Lula, he is thrown out of the subway by the other white passengers. The play ends on a sinister note with Lula preparing to find the next black man to sit next to.

Amiri Baraka won the 1964 Obie Award for *Dutchman.* Before converting to Islam and changing his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, he was a prolific writer who had been "working, writing, and publishing in Greenwich Village as Le Roi Jones [both] for and from within a white system of power [that] he ultimately attempted to subvert" (Kern 2). His political development saw him become "an aggressive black nationalist and black art aesthetician" (Reid 44) and his acute consciousness of the political purpose of the art he produced led to many accounts of the role of art. Thus his works of art have been understood as aesthetic means to elucidate political ends. Over time Baraka's political views and involvement in Black Politics shifted; by the 1970s he had become a very strong left-wing Marxist (Reid 44). His life and mindset have been a source of inspiration in particular for his community. His famous essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre" was

rejected by *The New York Times* in 1964 because the editors, reported at the time, that they could not understand it. *The Village Voice* also rejected the piece on similar grounds. Finally it was published in *Black Dialogue* ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 1). The article is a key record of his personal beliefs about what art is and how it should act. The arguments set forth in his essay will inform this article.

Baraka asserts that the Revolutionary Theatre is "... a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on" (2). Thus, Baraka's plays, as well as his poems and articles, must be seen in this light, as the means not only to undermine but to actively attack white hegemony both in art and in life itself. As an art aesthetician Baraka proclaims that:

> The Revolutionary Theatre should force change: it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves). We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, toward what seems the most constructive use of the word. ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 1)

His very first and most important idea about The Revolutionary Theatre is that it should force change because, at the time the essay was written, change was not only desirable but obligatory on account of the fact that black Americans were facing grim discrimination in American society. Racial segregation meant that black citizens were deprived of basic human rights and were structurally disenfranchised, disregarded and despised in the society; in short, they faced physical, systemic and psychic violence in multifaceted aspects of life. These unfortunate and inhuman conditions caused them to have a negative opinion about themselves, most lost their self-esteem and were made to believe that their lives not having value at least not as much as whites'. Frantz Fanon's ideas on Black subjects and their positions in white societies are significant to understand Clay's position as well as other black subjects' positions and behavior. Fanon's popular book *Black Skins, White Masks* investigates the psychology of black subjects and is considered one of the pillars of the issue. In the preface to its 2008 edition, Ziauddin Sardar writes that the book examines "how

colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors" (Fanon x). Imitation and mimicry, which in the long run resulted in assimilation, might be argued to be an obligation not a choice because some have felt a strong necessity to transform themselves so as to be accepted in the society. Baraka's art asserts the fallacy of such a position; for Baraka, black imitation of white concepts is a trap that eschews self-determination and undoes political progress; rather, it makes problems worse than ever.

Using his art as a means, as "a weapon," Baraka wrote plays, poems and articles which foregrounded brutal racism and the punitive realities of Black society. Consequently, his works have provoked controversy, which in turn has rendered them both widely read and widely criticized. Some critics have hailed his works as revolutionary, but many have also criticized Baraka harshly for his divisiveness and for encouraging racial tensions. Nita N. Kumar, for instance, describes Baraka's position as an "aggressive and un-yielding anti-white position" and writes that in Baraka's works "[t]he White world is repeatedly described as evil, sick and dying, and the creation of a positive black consciousness is crucially linked to the declaration of white culture as evil and insane" (272). David L. Smith also states that "Baraka's career has been a persistent chronicle of controversies, most of them having been provoked by Baraka's own deliberately incendiary polemics" (235). In his own autobiography, Baraka also addresses criticisms against himself and his play writing that he was called "foul-mouthed," "full of hatred," "furious, angry"; nevertheless, he asserts, "the play had made its mark" (*Autobiography* 276). Within his terms of the ends justifying the means, then, he was able to reach an audience, convey his message and provoke debate, and that, for Baraka, was what was important.

Dutchman is Baraka's most popular and widely known play. In his own terms, *Dutchman* accuses, forces and works to destroy several aspects of white hegemony, impulse which he himself states are the primary goals of Revolutionary Theater. In the play, Baraka uses intertextuality which helps him create a playful language and allows him to suggest that the play operates on multiple layers. In this sense, the play does not privilege one finite, stable or consistent meaning. Julia Kristeva provided one of the earliest elucidations of the implications of using intertextuality within texts by using Bakhtin as a

starting point. Kristeva contends that "what appears as a lack of rigor is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37).

Thus, Kristeva posits that all literary or non-literary texts are interdependent; they refer to, conclude from, rephrase each other and are always-already interacting with preexisting texts. Consequently, texts cannot ever be said to be truly original because there is nothing that can be said that has not already been said and every text will and does have relations with prior texts, reproducing and transforming them in the acts of reading and writing (Zengin 300). Alfaro expands on the theory further; "the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system" (268). As Zengin states, "intertextuality's approach to text and its meaning is a poststructuralist and postmodernist one with its emphasis on the interdependence of texts and on the unstable sliding meaning of the text changing through reworking of earlier texts" (317).

The destabilization of concrete meanings implied by the use of postmodernist techniques, such as intertextuality, has been cited by many as evidence of the political impetus of postmodernism towards the dismantling of established hierarchies. If *Dutchman* is an early example of the use of postmodernist techniques, then its themes of racial inequality and violence have also been mainstays of postmodern literature. Read through postmodern lenses, it might easily be argued that the text generates multiple possible readings, because neither the author nor the characters are reliable; indeed, as we can see, their actions, words and manners often work to be deceiving.

The play is littered with literary allusions, symbols and myths. To begin with, the title of the play is of great significance, alluding as it does to the myth of the "Flying Dutchman" in which a cursed captain is trapped on his vessel and cannot reach the shore until doomsday (Nelson 53; Baker 110 and Brown 144). Willard Hallam Bonner writes about the different versions of the "Flying Dutchman" myth and gives a simple outline:

> A Dutch sea captain, Vanderdecken, is condemned by the Devil to beat futilely and forever around the Cape of Good Hope because he once swore a blasphemous

> oath that he would round the Cape if it took him till Doomsday. […] He is allowed to visit the shore once in a long while (though it is every seven years in Wagner's opera of I843), often for the purpose of wooing a bride. He fails and is condemned to return to his ocean wanderings, usually by a spectacular sinking of both ship and captain in the sea. (283)

Following Bonner's outline, it can be assumed that Dutchman figures of the play wander around always failing and the subway train is a symbol for Vanderdecken's ship. Similarly, Hugh Nelson argues that the subway train is a perfect example of "the autonomy of the inanimate which confronts us everywhere in our mechanized society" (54). For Christopher Baker, the mythical allusion contained within the title bears historical implications for the setting (110). Basing his argument on Paul Gilroy's emphasis on Dutch slave ships being major representatives of "the institutions of slavery," the subway in *Dutchman* is reconfigured as "[the] modern, subterranean slave ship of his unredemptive dramatic fable" (qtd. in Baker 110). Baraka himself also refers to the play as myth: "In the flying underbelly of the city Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth" (Baraka, "Dutchman"). Hugh Nelson explores the myth of the *Flying Dutchman* and claims that there is not just one Dutchman but two; Clay and Lula (56). While he considers the Dutchman figure as trapped on a doomed ship, he sees Clay as the victim of the situation. Nelson asserts "She [Lula] is the figure trapped by a curse from which she seeks release and, finding no release, she is destined simply to pile up victims, to make corpses" (56). The claim that Lula is also trapped in the society is convincing but Clay's positioning as Lula's victim needs to be discussed further. It is true that Lula stabs Clay fatally and she is the one who provokes Clay; however, she can be seen as both the victim of misogyny and at the same time the perpetrator.

Baraka evokes the biblical story of The Fall of Man, using the pieces of apple that Lula offers Clay as a symbol highlighting the temptation her character represents. Also, the name Clay suggests Adam, because several translations of the Bible suggest that he was formed out of clay. As a consequence, Clay's victimization pivots on the allegory of Clay as Adam, while "sexy, flirtatious, playful, and intriguing, yet sinister, devious, insulting, and finally murderous," Lula is Eve (Baker 111). The metaphor expands with the subway being an

ironic Garden of Eden and finally the apple as the forbidden fruit taken from the Tree of Knowledge (Adams 57; Baker 111).

When Lula gets on the subway, she sits next to Clay, eating an apple. She offers some pieces to Clay. The initial interactions between the two characters seem very conventional: a man and woman sit on a subway train and begin flirting. Yet the historical context of the play, written in 1964, renders the situation thwart with dramatic tension. That same year saw the passing of the Civil Rights Act, dismantling Jim Crow segregation in the South and combating racial discrimination across the country. In such a context, inter-racial interaction, especially sexual interaction, was at best subversive and radical, and for others absolutely forbidden. This context swiftly bears down on their interactions as their conversation becomes tenser and they start to question each other's words and behaviors. In this way, this change in dynamic can be understood to illustrate a more accurate example of black and white interaction in 1960s America.

If *Dutchman* partly retells the biblical story of the Fall, then it may be claimed that it is Clay who is offered the forbidden apple and thus falls from grace. In *Dutchman*, heaven or grace is a free and unbiased world where Clay assumes or desires to live and the interaction between Clay and Lula causes Clay to be fallen from by both raising his consciousness and killing him. Nevertheless, this explanation does not help us understand the motivation behind Lula's actions. It is Lula who starts the interaction between the two, by offering Clay the apple and asking him questions, flirting with him. Why does Lula want to interact with Clay? Does she provoke him? Is she an enabler, a consciousness-raiser or victimizer? Who does she actually represent? Is not Lula yet another victim of the society? Who is *in fact* fallen and doomed?

It is true that Baraka deconstructs the story of Adam and Eve, but he does it in such a way that at the same time he destroys the perception of Eve. The deconstructive approach allows the reader to find diverse meanings because, through this lens, signs are not absolute but generate new meanings in different contexts at different times. In the *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida writes that:

> Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing,

> practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces. (329)

A similar impulse can be found at work in Baraka's echoes of the Fall. Baraka deconstructs the biblical story by changing, distorting and finally destroying it. It can be claimed that Baraka achieves a double writing and overturns the classical oppositions, and is thus in tune with Derrida's compulsion. Nita N. Kumar, defining Lula as a postmodernist, writes that "in *Dutchman*, Lula is already a Derridean in her interpretation of 'self'" (276). Kumar further asserts that "[s]he is, or rather represents herself as being, an indeterminate creature for whom being is a form of game playing. Soon after confronting Clay, she begins building up his persona through a series of conjectures that have no verifiable source" (276). Through these conjectures, Clay begins to construct his own consciousness. In this way, Lula could be understood as the opposite of a villain who finally kills the hero, but rather a consciousness-raising agent who wakes Clay from his quietism and gives voice to his disenfranchisement. To put it clearly, at the beginning of the play Clay is shown and acknowledged to be a middle-class conformist. He is presented as a conformist who tries to act, dress and behave "white." He does not question the status quo; instead he conforms to it, which makes him the opposite of a hero. On the other hand, as a potential white "enemy," Lula raises his consciousness by means of her actions that are seen as tempting, seductive and evil. This makes Lula the opposite of villain. In his book *Designs of Blackness: Studies in the Literature of African-America,* A. Robert Lee takes a similar position and argues that even though Lula provokes Clay, she has the power to enlighten him first, then "punish for that same enlightenment" (166).

Baraka's decision to gender the white character a woman and the black character a man is also telling. Patriarchal practices shadowed racial discrimination in American society, rendering Lula both powerful and weak, persecutor and persecuted. Indeed, in *Dutchman*, Baraka turns the characters and stereotypes upside down, thus changing, distorting and transforming the binary oppositions of hero/villain. At the end of the play, the position, status, levels of consciousness

and indeed almost everything that the audience might assume about the characters change—the quiet Clay becomes a fierce, conscious man who stands up for himself only to have his very consciousness-raising agent, Lula, kill him in response. In this reading, in contrast to common presumptions about *Dutchman*, the play proves itself to be a slippery postmodern text. Barbara Johnson writes that, for Derrida, reading encloses "other" logics of configurations which might not be in line with conventional "logics of meaning, identity, consciousness, or intention" and for that reason one should take into consideration these logics which will be disregarded by "a standard reading" (46). With a standard reading, Lula would not stand as a positive character in the text, yet with a Derridean perspective, Lula becomes a consciousness-raising agent, a reinforcer for Clay.

Consequently, Baraka deconstructs the myth of Adam and Eve, Eve tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. What Eve does is to encourage Adam to reach for reality instead of being content with a dream and this is precisely the role Lula plays in the character development of Clay. Even the scholars who claim that Lula is a "beautiful seductress" define Clay as "a conformist, buttoned-up behind white conventions" (Weisgramm 219). While Dianne H. Weisgram claims that Clay is manipulated by Lula, we can use the very same quote from the text to argue that by insulting him and denuding his assimilationist impulses, Lula is encouraging Clay to remember his identity and heritage: "Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man. Get up, Clay. Dance with me, Clay" (Baraka 1905).

Despite the fact that on one level Lula is tempting Clay to engage in sexual intimacy, one might also argue that she is trying to get him to fight with the oppressor, which she paradoxically represents herself. She even goes on to say: "Be cool. Be cool. That's all you know... shaking that wildroot cream-oil on your knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of white man's words. Christ. God. Get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces" (*Dutchman* 1905).

In the biblical version after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they are sent out of the Garden of Eden. It is Eve who is tempted by the serpent and who first eats the forbidden fruit and Adam who follows her in temptation. In *Dutchman*, it is Lula who

offers Clay an apple, the symbol of forbidden truth. Many scholars have seen Lula's flamboyance, seductiveness, and flirtatiousness as biblical symbolism. For instance, Weisgram argues that "Jones makes [Clay and Lula] unmistakably clear, emblems of Black and White America" and claims that "[t]he Whites premeditatedly tantalize the Blacks in order to arouse Black aggression and justify White violence" (219). Weisgram claims that Lula is a stereotype of white woman and that "[t]hey are mutual stereotypes merging in conflict" (222). Weisgram's claim is consistent with those who understand Lula to be a provocateur and manipulator, such as Daniel Matlin who describes her as a "vindictive, white, bohemian temptress" (94) and Christopher Baker, as "sociopathically abusive" (110). Nevertheless, by choosing to gender the white character a woman, which allows Baraka to retell the Fall, it is possible to interpret Lula as yet another victim of a society built on racism and patriarchy. In this way, her provocations facilitate Clay's self-awareness, which could be seen as helping him in addition to harming him. Further, the shock that her use of violence and the revelation of her predatory nature provoke at the end of the play ultimately subverts the expectations of the audience, and calls on them to question their own preconceptions. Thus, rather than simply a violent and manipulative white antagonist, it is possible to read Lula as problematizing and deconstructing multiple levels of violence, both race and gender-based. In this reading, Lula in fact reshapes the rules of the patriarchal society; she does everything that a woman was not supposed to do and in fact rehearses a litany of men's actions towards women, including violence and murder.

Jochen Achilles writes that "*Dutchman* leads to a deconstruction of behavioral patterns and the revelation of the underlying atavistic emotions that shape both the gender and race conflicts" (224). Baraka, similarly, deconstructs the fall of man and makes Lula a hero rather than a villain, thus re-assigning Eve to the correct position that she deserves. We can interpret both the Fall of Man and *Dutchman* as narratives foregrounding women's agency in revealing the reality of lived conditions; Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden and become mortal, and Clay rids himself of the mask he is forced to wear, and can thus become "black" again, reasserting his real identity. While Clay's murder indeed casts him out of "earth," the only "earth" he has known is one that masks the realities and iniquities of the society he is compelled to live in. Lula's cruelty ironically awakens him to the cruel

realities of assimilating white America, a world which once realized, is impossible to live a true life within.

In "The Revolutionary Theater" Baraka also highlights the significance of the positioning of Clay as a victim: "Clay, in *Dutchman,* Ray in *The Toilet,* Walker in *The Slave* are all victims" (Baraka 1). Such decisions are central to Baraka's aesthetic vision, as he believes that Revolutionary Theatre is "a theatre of victims" (1). In *Dutchman*, it is possible to read Clay's final outburst as Baraka's attack on the structures of white supremacy. Having been provoked by Lula's "tactics of verbal entrapment and sexual exploitation" a dramatic return of repressed anger at the insults and levels of disdain he has endured from white society occurs (Baker 117). Clay cannot help himself and starts his attacks and accusations:

> CLAY. […] Shit, you don't have any sense, Lula, nor feelings either. I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. Even if they expected it. That man there… *(Points to a well-dressed man)* I could rip that Times right out of his hand, as skinny and middle-classed as I am, I could rip that paper out of his hand and just easily rip out his throat. It takes no great effort: For what? To kill you soft idiots? You don't understand anything but luxury (*Dutchman* 1906).

Clay's outburst after the long build of tension between the characters has also been interpreted as a "verbal ejaculation" by Saddik Gohar (8). He asserts that Baraka tries to establish a sexual union through the motif of a knife, as well as via Clay's outpour. In addition, the whole relationship between Lula and Clay can also be considered as a cipher for violent sexual union. Gohar proposes that the knife is a phallic symbol and Lula's stabbing Clay at the very end of the play is "a symbolic union between Clay and Lula (that) leads to the victimization and murder of Clay" (8).

The predominantly white passengers' throwing Clay's dead body out of the train signifies the complicity of the society in Clay's

murder. Paradoxically, Lula is both in collusion with the white society in victimizing blacks and also a victim herself at the hands of that same society. Thus she can easily deny moral culpability. The action might be read as evidence that while Lula has tried hard enough to enlighten him and change his perspective for the better, no matter how angry Clay becomes at the end of their dialogue, Clay fails to take the necessary actions. His continued acquiescence can be seen ultimately as provoking Lula to violence. In the atavistic moral universe where racism and patriarchy continue to govern and stymie social relations, Lula represents a bitter truthsayer. Clay's inability to profoundly change his situation even in the face of such provocation, for Lula, renders him a deserving victim. In his review of *Dutchman*, Thaddeus Martin has a similar comment about Clay's position: "[b]ecause Clay fails to see the value inherent in his Blackness and, indeed, in himself, his fate is sealed" (62).

The dramatic impact of the presence of white passengers on the train who are indifferent to blacks' position is also vitally important to Baraka's larger social critique. Passive observers of the action, witnesses of the incident who take sides with neither Clay nor Lula as they trade insults and physical abuse at the hands of one another, the fellow passengers step in only to clear away the evidence of violence. Thus, Baraka presents a scathing critique of the complicity of the wider white society, who stands by and does nothing in the face of social abuse. At the same time, he implies that Lula too is just another victim of the society since the passengers who symbolize white society do not attempt to stop Clay in any way when Clay shouts, harasses, and slaps her.

> CLAY. [*Slaps her as hard as he can, across the mouth. The back of the seat. LULA's head bangs against the back of the seat. When she raises it again, CLAY slaps her again*] Now shut up and let me talk [*He turns toward the other riders, some of whom are sitting on the edge of their seats. The DRUNK is on one knee, rubbing his head, and singing softly the same song. He shuts up too when he sees CLAY watching him. The others go back to newspapers or stare out the windows*]. (*Dutchman* 1906)

They are as voiceless as the seats in the subway, and turn their

heads away. Just as they do not empathize with black Americans, they disregard women in the society; both groups are ignored, disregarded and left alone by the very society they live in. Thus, Baraka shows that conformist white society is both racist and patriarchal, and whatever is said, is ultimately apathetic about the fate of both racial minorities and women in general. It is possible, then, that Baraka's larger social point is that these groups should support each other against the privileged white men of the society, or those that subscribe to their views.

To Baraka, Revolutionary Theatre "must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims" (1). It has been argued that Lula has a bigger role to play than it seems at first. She does not simply seduce or provoke Clay, so to speak, but awakens him to the reality of his lived social conditions. It is Lula who makes Clay feel uncomfortable, who forces Clay to express himself and who encourages him to become himself, which can be read as a forceful embrace of black identity and as reinforcing the right to own one's subjectivity. By means of Lula's actions— indeed, only because of Lula's actions, Clay regains his own identity, finds his voice and is able to both accuse and attack the persecutors around him, just as the creator of the character desires. Prior to his meeting with Lula, Clay has been living in a dream with his "three-button suit and striped tie"; he has deluded himself that in 1960s America a black person shares equality with a white person and that there can be a relationship between them that exists on equal terms. His assimilation has bred attachment to the very system that oppresses him. The folly of doing so is viciously mocked by Lula:

> LULA. I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger. [*Mock serious, then she howls with laughter. CLAY is stunned but after initial reaction, he quickly tries to appreciate the humor. LULA almost shrieks*] A black Baudelaire.
>
> CLAY. That's right. (*Dutchman* 1901)

It is Lula who tries to wake him up from that dream and in a way helps him to enlighten and save him from the risks of subjective annihilation which assimilation poses. As Kumar asserts, for Baraka, Blackness is a value that has to be learned and that "The Black Man must idealize himself as Black. And idealize and aspire to that" (Baraka

Home 248). Before Lula's intervention, therefore, Clay's positioning himself in white society is symbolic and problematic for Baraka, and he tries to alert the audience to the destructive power such acquiescence poses for the position of black Americans in white America. In Gohar's words, Baraka "criticizes middle class Negroes for having no strategy of socio-political protest against white racism" (7). The playwright claims that "[t]he Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality" (2) and Lula by destroying Clay's dream world of racial equality materializes the playwright's position. One might disagree by simply putting forward that it is also Lula who stabs Clay to death, which is true. Yet this would be to miss Baraka's larger point. Rather, through Lula, Baraka shows readers that without embracing a true black identity, black Americans will continue to be victimized and, in the long run, will ultimately be assimilated and co-opted into a society that is structured against them. As a result, Clay's death is symbolic in that it shows his own victimization at the hands of white society; the redemption that exists by its absence in the play is the message that comes with his death that if black people are conscious of their heritage and history, and hold onto their traditions and true selves, then their chance of survival increases.

It must also be mentioned that Lula does not consider herself as a representative of white society. Indeed, she consistently distances herself from the rest of society by means of using the words "them" and "they," emphasizing her difference. Indeed, her distancing might be interpreted as indicative of her belief that the same society also excludes her, as it does Clay. Lula suggests "May the people accept you as a ghost of the future. And love you, that you might not kill them when you can" (*Dutchman* 1902). This "love" is questionable and must be questioned since it is not real, it just bears fear, contempt and hate. Love cannot be a result of fear. Lula, in contrast to others, might love Clay as he actually is. While she seems to be disgusted by Clay's appearance, it is the *whiteness* of his apparel, which offends her, "a three-button suited, black Baudelaire," nothing but an imitation, an assimilated character. It can be argued that Baraka makes Lula kill Clay precisely because of his current position in the society. Ultimately, Baraka implies, the failure of the relationship between them, the absent redemption present in the play, results in Clay's victimization, which could have been prevented.

Thus it could be that Lula is not as ruthless as she is assumed to

be, rather doomed to live in the very same society which limits, restricts, and labels her, and she is unable to rid herself of the traditional "gender roles" imposed upon her by the patriarchal society. Lula is stereotyped as a woman who sins, seduces, provokes and lures just as much as Clay is stereotyped as a black man who wagers his right to rage and identity in exchange for being shown affection and love by the very society which criminalizes and forces him to be a source of fear. By means of reminding Clay of what people think about him, in reality, Lula helps to rid him of the trappings of polite white society and embrace his rights to anger. In so doing, he turns his back on his desire to be "a ghost" figure, acceptable because unseen by white society, and is awoken to his true circumstances and true emotions.

Lula affirms her otherness as she offers Clay an alternative future with her, where they exist out of their own history and are hidden from the eyes of "the citizens," as she says, "And we'll pretend that people cannot see you. That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both anonymous beauties smashing along through the city's entrails (*She yells as loud as she can*) GROOVE!" (*Dutchman* 1902).

With this statement Lula further distances herself from the society, the ones who are considered to be "the citizens." Yet, who the real citizens are is not stated or even implied by Lula or Baraka. The citizens are most probably white people in the society who seem to love Clay so as to make sure that Clay, as a black man, is not a threat to society. Further Lula might be pointing at black people, who vote for candidates that in the long run would harm black society, who try to blend in the society and be a member of the "melting pot"; in short, those who are ready to forget about their own identity, heritage and are ready to be assimilated. However, it is certain that Lula includes neither herself nor Clay in this group of "citizens." The use of the word "pretend" shows that they are both aware of the fact that they do not belong in this society of discrimination. Acknowledging the fact, Lula goes on to say that they will both pretend to be free from their histories, but of course, this is not possible for either character. Being free from one's history is simply not having a consciousness and losing identity, both of which make a person whole. Hence, Clay is not the only Dutchman of the play—not the only doomed character, but that Lula, too, is circumscribed by society and can escape neither her past,

nor her fate. In this way, then, Nelson's point is proved: there are two Dutchman figures, Clay and Lula aboard the doomed subway train.

Having claimed that Lula is also a "Dutchman," it is difficult to explain the dynamics of the attraction between Lula and Clay. Willene P. Taylor claims Lula to have "a deep desire for love and brotherhood" (129). Taylor further claims that Lula is "the forbidden fruit" for Clay and the reason for his destruction (129). Nelson's comment is that Lula needs to be loved but as a result of not being able to "have his love, she can take, absorb, and use his hate as a vampire uses blood" (57). Nelson considers Lula as a woman who needs human interaction and Clay as a man "who will commit himself to her until death with love and respect, someone whom she can possess and will possess her, someone who will estimate her at her proper price" (57). However atavistic her intentions may seem, Nelson argues, humanity remains; ultimately what Lula wants is to be treated "not as a sexual instrument but as a human being" (57). Nevertheless, it is possible to read Lula far more nihilistically, as a character eschewing any relationship that would threaten her independence.

Destruction can be understood as the key word in unlocking the whole play. By retelling the biblical fall and mythical allusions to the Flying Dutchman, Baraka destroys the façade of racial relations in the US while also destroying the position of "the integrationist Civil Rights Movement of the preceding decades" (Baker 272). For him, the pacifist Civil Rights Movement was no solution to America's racial divisions. Instead, he adopted a more radical position that defined his art and life. Thus LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka and a spokesperson for the Black Nationalist movement, and he went on in his creative life to create works which contradict the premises upon which the Civil Rights Movement's non-violent resistance tactics were based. *Dutchman* is, in its message that violence might indeed be the legitimate means of resistence, an example of this rejection of non-violent strategy.

As this reading shows, it would be misleading to suggest that Baraka holds only the white community responsible for racial inequality in the U.S. As Kumar argues, for Baraka, "[t]he enemy is not only the white person, who is easily identifiable, but the whiteness hidden in shades of blackness, where it can be more difficult to detect" (273). Baraka believes that blacks can inflict harm upon themselves just as much as whites can, because "the enemy" is more dangerous

when it is difficult to identify. In the play, Clay is not only a victim but a culprit, as the assimilationist positions he practices are detrimental not only for himself but also for the whole black community. Without a concrete identity consciousness, he places others in danger of being the next targets of "the enemy" (Kumar 273). Thus, when Lula plunges the knife into Clay's chest, no solace is offered—neither to Clay nor to the bystanders:

> LULA. Sorry is right. [*Turning to the others in the car who have already gotten up from their seats*] Sorry is the rightest thing you've said. Get this man off me! Hurry, now! [*The others come and drag CLAY's body down the aisle*] Open the door and throw his body out. [*They throw him off*] And all you get off at the next stop. (*Dutchman* 1907)

In Clay's death, Baraka suggests his own culpability. By tying his fate to the oppressor, Clay threatens others and reinforces the same structures of oppression. This results in the vicious circle, which makes Clay the other Dutchman in the play.

Poet Don L. Lee states that:

> We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetuators of evil. It's time for DuBois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: destroy the culture and you destroy the people. This must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilizers; bringing back old values and introducing new ones. Black Art will talk to the people and with the will of the people stop impending "protective custody." (qtd. in Neal 55)

This call to cultural arms is vital in understanding what is meant here by destroying language. It is not the language itself that must to be destroyed; rather it is the system of meanings which underpin it—of what language represents for the Black community, because language and culture are historically crucial in oppression. Don L. Lee calls for cultural reparation and repopulation with black voices signifying more truthful meanings. Lee also emphasizes the importance of the language and signifying systems used by black artists inasmuch as new generations can be better educated and can reclaim their own histories

via more truthful, meaningful accounts. Given that, it might be claimed that Lula's position as a provocateur urges Clay towards a search for true meaning. She accuses Clay of forgetting his ancestry and trying to fit into society by wearing white men's clothes and, instead, makes him remember his past saying that "Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (*Dutchman* 1901).

The final scene of the play is deliberately portentous, and pregnant with the threat of new violence as the stage directions indicate:

> [*Very soon a young Negro of about twenty comes into the coach, with a couple of books under his arm. He sits a few seats in back of LULA. When he is seated, she turns and gives him a long slow look. He looks up from his book and drops the book on his lap. Then an old Negro conductor comes into the car, doing a sort of restrained soft shoe, and half mumbling the words of some song. He looks at the young man, briefly, with a quick greeting*].
>
> CONDUCTOR. Hey, brother!
>
> YOUNG MAN. Hey. [*The conductor continues down the aisle with his little dance and the mumbled song. LULA turns to stare at him and follows his movements down the aisle. The conductor tips his hat when he reaches her seat, and continues out the car*]. (*Dutchman* 1908).

The entrance of this new young man, who the audience knows by now to be highly vulnerable, shows that, in the absence of a change of tactics, racial victimization is a vicious circle, doomed to repeat itself just as the captain of the Flying Dutchman is doomed never to make port. Overtly sinister, Baraka's dramatic implication is that if assimilation is not rejected and if only the tactics of non-violent resistance are utilized, then the fate of America's race relations is bleak and the position of the black community will remain highly vulnerable. Baraka places the emphasis on individual responsibility: in this fight, every individual matters because, as a result of their actions, the fate of others might change. Action is necessary, assimilation must be rejected and compliance must be punished. Sollors argues that "[t]his murderous cycle remains the play's last statement on interracial

relations" (qtd. in Achilles 226). In the end, another young black man is offered up to be the new target of white society. The symbolism of the elderly black conductor greeting Lula with respect, drives home the message that, in this backdrop, complicity kills. Without taking proper aim at the system itself, the structure of racism will continue to harvest its victims.

Conclusion

Reading *Dutchman* through postmodern lenses renders its racial politics starkly powerful. By means of understanding the intertextual references in the play and using Derrida's idea of "play of differences," we might reread, analyze and find unexpected points of views for the apparently simple plot. Baraka, as a political artist, believes that art should force its audience, and in *Dutchman* he forces his audience to confront their own positions and complicities regarding race and gender. The impending doom of a new character that is offered by the ending burdens the audience with dramatic responsibility. No character in the play, nor the audience, escapes the moral implications of an America built on racial violence and gendered oppression. Baraka wishes to provoke change in people through his art—to raise awareness and incite consciousness. In many ways, this aligns his position with Lula. While many critics have seen Lula as a one-dimensional character who rehearses various traditional stereotypes of femininity, this article claims that Lula's function is more complex. Rather than simply a temptress, seducer, provocateur, she is rather another victim of a society built of patriarchy as well as on racism. As a result, Lula and Clay turn out to be both Dutchman figures; both are victimized and, without the intervention of others, it is almost impossible for them to rid themselves of this vicious circle. Finally, Lula's ultimate act which results in Clay's death might in fact be almost perversely natural, given the social restrictions placed upon the characters. Lula, from the very beginning, goads Clay into standing up to the bullying that society inflicts upon him, but he does not defend himself. The consciousness that Lula tries to raise, desires and hopes for is not fulfilled, which becomes a failure also for Lula. Baraka, through Lula, tries to construct this identity. However, Lula's failure clarifies for her that Clay's existence means nothing to himself, to her, or to his race. Her failure and his are locked together, and thus his fate is sealed.

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It's Nation Time: The Demonic Poethic of Amiri Baraka's New Ark

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Abstract

This article examines the work of Amiri Baraka during the 1960s and 70s using a fused geographic and poetic lens that is inflected by Katherine McKittrick's (via Sylvia Wynter) concept of "demonic ground." In works such as *It's Nation Time* (1970) and *In Our Terribleness* (1970), Baraka articulates an imagined, communal, demonic black urban nation and mirrors this vision back to his community so they may uprise from the deliberate invisibility and geographic dispossession at the hands of the white establishment. Through its imperative balance of poetic action with transformative activism beyond the page in post-rebellion New Ark, Baraka's demonic poethic demonstrates how space is inherently alterable, and how uneven geographies may be contested and transformed in art and in social practice.

Keywords

Amiri Baraka, poetry, poetics, geography, postwar, social transformation

Ulus Zamanı: Amiri Baraka'nın New Ark'ı ve Şeytani Po-etik-a

Öz

Bu makale Katherine McKittrick'in (Sylvia Wynter'dan etkilenerek) geliştirdiği "demonik/şeytani zemin" kavramıyla kaynaştırılan coğrafya-şiir merceğinden Amiri Baraka'nın 1960'lar

ve 70'lerde ürettiği eserleri incelemektedir. *It's Nation Time* (1970) ve *In Our Terribleness* (1970) gibi eserlerde Baraka, ulus bilinci olan demonik siyahi bir topluluk ve kent (New Ark) kurgular ve bu vizyonunu kendi toplumuna yansıtarak onları beyaz sistemin mahkum ettiği görünmezlikten ve mülksüzlükten çıkarmayı amaçlar. İsyan sonrası New Ark'ta, şiirsel eylem ve politik aktivizm arasında kurduğu yaşamsal dengeyle Baraka'nın demonik poetikası ve etik anlayışı (po-etik-a), mekanın doğası gereği dönüşüme ne kadar müsait olduğunu gösterir. Sorunlu coğrafyaların sanatta ve sosyal pratikte tartışılabileceğini ve dönüştürülebileceğini de gözler önüne serer.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Amiri Baraka, şiir, poetika, coğrafya, savaş sonrası, sosyal dönüşüm

Land
will change
hand
s

—Amiri Baraka "Whas Gon Happen" (*Selected Poetry* 160)

For what is liberty but the unhampered translation of will into act?

—Dante Alighieri (107)

For many postwar poets of the 1950s and 1960s, the page provided a "field" for experimentations with place, for locating community, and for developing a resistant aesthetic practice against the spatial controls put on them by the State. One of those poets was Amiri Baraka, (formerly LeRoi Jones). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the young Baraka was cutting his teeth as a poet, he was influenced by the Black Mountain school of poets, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan. Specifically, he began practicing their

poetic methodology of "open-field" poetics or "projective verse." In this poetic methodology, the page is considered a dialogic "field," a site of convergence wherein various larger discursive fields—history, politics, culture, geography—interact and produce new networks of meaning and associations through their often-paratactic frictions. Each element of the poem is thus conceived as a "participant" in this larger poetic assemblage where no one thing is privileged over another, but rather circulate within the poem with equal force in an "open" politics of communion, exchange, and responsivity. In his autobiography, Baraka notes that "Projective Verse" "was for many of us the manifesto of a new poetry" (253). But more than that, for the young Baraka, this poetic represented a radical new way of articulating "How You Sound," the particularities of black experience in space.[1] As Baraka writes in an early essay, "Environment … becomes total, i.e., social, cultural, and physical, and not merely scenery. Thought is landscape, in the way the poet Charles Olson has used the word: what one can see from where one is standing" ("Introduction," *The Moderns* xii). [2]

In his later transitional work into his Black Nationalist phase, however, Baraka's work manifests both extensions and challenges to the Black Mountain conception of open field poetics. While Baraka shared the Black Mountain ideas of space and place as a field of interactive particulars with bodily experience, he nonetheless grew increasingly distant from what he conceived to be the empty politics of this poetic. He was initially attracted to the political form of open field poetics as a form of cultural rebellion against middle class bourgeois American values; however, this revolt, he would discover, was rooted in white privileged ideologies and did not reflect, for Baraka, the growing needs of black urban American space and experience. It became increasingly clear to Baraka that poetry without direct political action was no longer feasible.

Baraka thus continued to agree with the Black Mountainers on the political, open form of poetry; however, after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, and after witnessing the transformative uprising of the Cuban Revolution, he viewed the politic of their poetics as too idealistic and immaterial. As Kimberly W. Benston writes, "Baraka found that, while his peers in the avant-garde were content to be 'neutral' witnesses to cultural fragmentation, he was impelled as a black poet to be a chronicler of exile and an annunciator of nationhood" ("Introduction" 13). One had to act, he discovered, not just within the

space of the page, but beyond, by using one's art to actually transform the place of one's experience in the world. As a result, he left the politics of his Black Mountain peers aside while still maintaining the open field form and extending it to pursue the radical *geographic* project of black nationalism. I emphasize "geographic" because a spatial poetic analysis of Baraka's work is long overdue. Most of the existing critical work on Baraka's poetry deals with his cultural nationalism and jazz aesthetics; however, as James A. Tyner argues, "Geographers have paid scant attention to the political geographies of black radical intellectuals and, specifically, the Black Power movement. And yet a contestation over space was prominent in the varied approaches to the black freedom struggle" ("Urban" 229). [3] In an effort to mend this lack in literary and geographic scholarship, my discussion here inflects Baraka's poetry and poetics with what human geographer and critic Katherine McKittrick (via Sylvia Wynter) calls the *demonic ground*—those fugitive geographies and ways of knowing that lie outside colonial schemes and epistemologies. [4] This concept's importance to this discussion is twofold: first, it places Baraka's poetic activism in the geographic context of the colonial project that profits from dispossessing black peoples of space; second, it usefully demonstrates how in the face of such dispossession, a communal, active, lived poetics can not only "say" space, but can *create* it.

In her groundbreaking critical text *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), McKittrick argues that black geographies have largely been rendered invisible by traditional geographical discourses, which are built on capitalist systems of value and metanarratives of dispossession that "*require* black displacement, black placenessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays 'in place'" (9; original emphasis). To fix racialized bodies "in place," dominant geographic metanarratives such as the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism, and the slave plantation, as well as the continuing colonial project of the present, create spatial schemas that "naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong" (McKittrick xv). While McKittrick argues that "existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways" (x), she also suggests that such rules are not entrenched, but are alterable and can be paralleled with alternative geographic schemas.

As a means of "rethink[ing] the complex linkages between history, blackness, race, and place" (McKittrick 143) the demonic mode emphasizes spatial contestation and occupation by means of "paralleling" existing schemas. "Geographies of the everyday," (McKittrick 12) such as "[o]wnership of the body, individual and community voices, bus seats, women, 'Africa,' feminisms, history, homes, record labels, money, cars" (McKittrick 3) can be reimagined through lived reclamations of these signifiers from narratives of (dis) possession and limitation put on black women's lives, in particular. By recontouring these classifications of erasure with subjective, lived geographies of place, McKittrick suggests, "more humanly workable geographies can be and are imagined" (xii). McKittrick's work unveils the subversive power of the imagination, and of untold stories, to conjure alternative conceptions of space, place, and movement beyond traditional material geographies. In this way, her work provides a framework for shedding critical light on the ways in which racialized people develop resistant strategies of constructing place—both in their art, and in their everyday lives.

McKittrick's understanding of geography and of place therein exceeds the obvious signifiers of cities and neighborhoods to consider the ways in which one's sense of location results from an ensemble of multiple factors—social, political, cultural. Since the open field poetic also considers space as a field of dynamic and interactive elements that together create place, the demonic ground serves as a critical tool with which to narrate Baraka's significant challenges to and extensions of the field poetic throughout his work. Whereas many critics see the open field poetic as primarily an aesthetic methodology, I wish to depart from this trend here by situating Baraka's use of the field in his work as a demonic *poethic* practice, one that inextricably links aesthetics with social action on the ground of reality. Here I borrow the term "poethic" from Joan Retallack to describe a combined poetic and ethical practice of bringing together aesthetic experimentation and sociopolitical engagement. [5] The open field poethic of works such as Baraka's *It's Nation Time* (1970) and *In Our Terribleness* (1970) forms a wayfinding manual of black style, sound, and movement to (re)root the black community within the urban landscape; having been subject to sociopolitical barriers that intentionally limit access to a sense of place that benefits the black community, Baraka's poetic interventions inspired the uprisings of the community and the transformation of controlled space into occupied place in Newark.

My discussion herein focuses on *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* not only because they are representative examples of Baraka's demonic *poethic*, but because *In Our Terribleness*, in particular, remains largely ignored by critics. It is important to note, however, that Baraka's fused aesthetic and geographic resistance was firmly established in his earlier work, most notably in his poetic manifesto "Black Art" (first published in 1966). By invoking poems "like fists," "that wrestle," "cracking / steel knuckles," (*Black Magic* 116) Baraka insists that poems must become *tools* of social action that serve the function of revolution rather than merely convey feeling. In this poem, Baraka solidifies himself as the voice of the black community, with the collective consciousness of black struggle being mediated through his words. This building collective tension builds to a crescendo in the poem's final declaration:

> We want a black poem. And a
>
> Black World.
>
> Let the world be a Black Poem
>
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
>
> Silently
>
> or LOUD (*Black Magic* 117)

Here, Baraka intensifies the field poetic such that it is no longer enough for poems to reflect the world, but that the world itself must become a "Black Poem," a field of total experience. "Black Art" not only calls for a collective union in urban space, it also prophesies the radical transformative changes to come.

In *In Our Terribleness*, Baraka found the grounds of innovation and experimentation in form and content that he was seeking in a "Black Poem." The demonic *poethic* established in "Black Art" and later developed in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* evolved into an armed strategy of resistance, one where poems become a weaponized means of resisting and transforming existing spatial structures of control on the ground and in the streets of lived experience. *In Our Terribleness* adopts the experimental forms and energies of the field poetic and harnesses these methods for the transformation of black urban consciousness. It is a collaborative effort between Baraka and Fundi (Billy Abernathy), a Chicago Black Arts

photographer. Combining Baraka's poetry with Fundi's photographs of black residents of Newark into an "imagetext" (Crawford 24), the work experiments with the fusion of urban geography and the energies of language in poetry. *In Our Terribleness* falls in line with a tradition of collaborative "imagetexts" by black American artists, such as Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955). The work creates an interactive whole out of the combined aesthetics of poetry, prose, and photography. The images of "everyday" black people situated in the inner-city landscape—on subways, on stoops, in the streets—are responded to with stanzas of poetry, thereby articulating a dynamic picture of lived geography from the particular lens of urban blackness. In mirroring the embodied art and language of a local community (as also evidenced by the collection's silver shiny cover that acts as a mirror), the text both *says* and, coupled with further action on the ground, *creates* a nation of black individuals in postwar America working collectively and actively towards transformative sociopolitical change.

Baraka's actions and political involvement in the late 60s and into the early 70s further tests the boundaries of the open field poetic methodology by combining poetic experimentation with intervening physical action on the streets. As Jerry Watts notes, Baraka's level of political engagement in the years between 1967 and 1974 is unprecedented for a twentieth century American artist/intellectual (349). Watts qualifies this statement by saying that while many intellectuals of the time wrote political artistic works, they were rarely active beyond the page and into the streets. As he writes, "It was unheard of for an established poet/playwright of Baraka's stature to take the lead in formulating political actions (e.g. establishing picket lines, leading boycotts, disrupting school board meetings, organizing electoral candidates, trying to build needed public housing) while continuing to write" (349).[6] Accordingly, the projected urban space of self-governed community that Baraka heralded in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* ceases to remain only imagined and, by means of intervening political work, becomes a reality in post-riot Newark. The hellfire of the 1967 Newark rebellion fulfilled the prophecy of Baraka's earlier work by paving the way for a reterritorialization of the ghetto and a revitalization of the local community. Armed with the revolutionary rhetoric of his polemical poems, Baraka was ready to

put talk to action. As Baraka reflects on the Newark riots, "For me, the Rebellion was a cleansing fire" (*The Autobiography* 266). Indeed, the destruction of the riots led, ultimately, to the creation of new ground: Newark, the city that contained its black population in structures of poverty and disenfranchisement became known by Baraka and the arts community as "New Ark," the rehabilitated city space where grassroots community projects transformed the space for the people.

This rebirth of the city as New Ark recalls the biblical story of Noah's Ark.[7] As Werner Sollors argues, Baraka becomes a Noah figure for the Black Arts Movement and its post-rebellion reterritorialization of Newark: "Baraka offered himself as a new Noah, ready to lead his chosen people out of American bondage in his 'New Ark'" (50). Works such as *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness*, wherein Baraka practices place in postwar urban space, become the grounding for experimentations in actual space, for the establishment of self-managing communities. In an essay from 1970, Baraka baptizes the city as a site of resistance and renewal:

> Newark, New Ark, the nationalist sees as the creation of a base, as example, upon which one aspect of the entire Black nation can be built. …We will create agencies to teach community organizing, national and local politics, and send brothers all over the country to re-create the model. We will nationalize the city's institutions as if it were liberated territory in Zimbabwe or Angola. There are nations of less than 300,000 people. … We will build a 'city-state,' or make alliances throughout the area to develop regional power in the scatter of Black cities of northern New Jersey. (*Raise* 163)

The Newark riots lit the ground on fire, so to speak, and paved the way for a geographic "changing of hands" heralded by Baraka's earlier work.[8] As Watts correctly points out, "Baraka's understanding of urban political power was a fantasy" that presented an exclusionary and homogenous "value system" and essentialized blackness that "imagined black communities as uniform in character and ambitions" (363). While Watts's criticism is certainly important to point out—and is later validated by Baraka's own questioning of his staunch black nationalism of the time—it is almost too obvious to warrant further criticism at this juncture.[9] What most concerns my discussion here is

Baraka's testament to the continued power of the imagination coupled with direct action on the streets. In connecting the sociopolitical transformation of New Ark to the conditions in "Zimbabwe or Angola," Baraka suggests that the transformative consciousness on the ground in this new "nation" will spill over its local borders to become a wide-reaching geographic movement. New Ark, then, becomes a demonic ground from which the black nation can uprise and take control over its space and place. Signifying more than just a metaphor of "the ark" as a place of salvage and redemption, New Ark signals the ability for art to encompass and transform material actuality through everyday practices of living—what McKittrick might call "more humanly workable geographies" (xii)—that produce newly transformed place.

Indeed, Baraka directly refers to New Ark as a "city-state" (*Raise* 163); he sees the smaller scale of the local, coupled with a united vision for communal emancipation therein, to be the grounding site for reforming nations worldwide. This move to "nationalize" New Ark as a "liberated territory" by taking over the institutions of the city signals Baraka's reimagination of the nation. As he writes in *In Our Terribleness*, the goal is "the creation of the nation where we stand … master of [our] own space. Institutional space and territorial space … Picture ourselves as free rulers of all (our) space" (n.p.). Baraka saw the nation as an imagined construct that is alterable through language, art, and communal practice. Because it can be imagined, it can also be re-imagined, and through active community-building on the ground of the local, it can materialize into an interconnected, translocal reality—one that moves and expands with the people as they move and expand. In his short collection aptly entitled *It's Nation Time* (1970), Baraka calls upon such a reimagination of the nation:

> The nation is like our selves, together
>
> seen in our various scenes, sets where ever we are
>
> what ever we are doing, is what the nation
>
> is
>
> doing
>
> or
>
> not
>
> doing

is what the nation

is

being

or

not being. (7)

Here the nation is reimagined as a living collective organism where members exist in close proximity of spirit, whether they are close in distance or not. In this reimagined community of the nation, there is a sense of responsibility and cause; rather than being an abstract notion of comradeship, the very construct of the nation is here dependent on the direct actions of its members for its "doing" and "being."

As Tyner observes, spatial transformation—not simply imagining reterritorialized geographies, but living them through—is imperative to the project of black radicalism. As he argues, in line with McKittrick, "Black radicalism is about alternative geographies, of social and spatial transformations; black radicalism is about the remaking of spaces" (8). The process of remaking space in black radicalism is also an act of ideological revisionism that brings ideas, necessarily, into reality. "The epistemology of black radicalism," Tyner continues, "is thus predicated on a ground-level reality. Indeed, Black radical intellectual production oftentimes began with an engagement and dialogue with Western radical political ideas, and then moved on to a critique of these ideas as their incompleteness was revealed" (9). [10] Baraka's poetic trajectory is similar: he began, in Greenwich Village, by engaging with and practicing the radical political and aesthetic ideologies of his Black Mountain contemporaries; however, over the course of the decade, this engagement would expose the "incompleteness," for Baraka, in the tenets of open field poetics. As he writes in *In Our Terribleness*, conscious awareness must accompany responsive, material groundwork:

Not just idle screams (to work off the sensual connection with this

rotten chapter of world).

But programs. Systems. Things that move and will grow. Living

> strategems to free and build. Political projects. Communications
>
> Projects. Educational projects. And on. Go head. Do it, if you
>
> gonna talk it. You better do it. (n.p.)

As this work demonstrates, while the imagination is certainly a catalyst for social change, the transformation of geography on the ground begins with its transformation in collective consciousness; for Baraka, such material transformations begin with aesthetic (re) imaginings of place. The text experiments with articulating the black body—and the collective body of the whole—as it moves through urban space and resonates with its environment. The Black Mountain influence is palpable here in the text's concern for the body moving through a quantum field, with both body and landscape forming a dynamic interactive whole: "each of us is a vector / carrying meaning" (Baraka, *In Our Terribleness* n.p.). This meaning is a totality achieved through the contrapuntal rhythms of both image and text. The images dispersed throughout, as Baraka writes, are "conductors of energy. … all as vectors of the one Being. Us, we talking about" (n.p.) The people depicted in the images, together with the language and style of the text, create a moving, energetic whole: "So we are parts of a body. And this is what you see. The energy / revealed" (n.p.). With these lines, Baraka harnesses the energy of the field as a collective creative force, one that transforms the urban space into a dynamic aesthetic place of black art. In this way, the work fulfills his earlier declaration in "Black Art": "Let Black People understand / that they … Are poems and poets" (*Black Magic* 117).

While at first the term "terribleness" in the work's title seems counterintuitive as a descriptor for the particular beauty of blackness, Baraka is playing with the perceived misplacedness of the black body by the white gaze. Baraka resists this "knowing" and placing of black people by illuminating the urban black body as a demonic ground; by mirroring the projective soundings and movements of the black body in urban space, he makes unequivocal the "terrible" beauty and resonance of black people and black communities. As Baraka writes, "Terribleness is a definition. It / is a description. … But it is commoner than that. All /our terribleness is our total. Our hipness is in anything we touch" (n.p.). Critic and historian George Cotkin praises *In Our*

Terribleness as a "welcome relief from the hurricane of hate" that infused Baraka's poetry of the time, but he insists that the work remains "uncritical of black life and the problems of urban ghettoes" (267). Cotkin's assertion overlooks the ways in which Baraka and Fundi acutely engage with urban space as a meaningful site of connection that fosters a new consciousness of blackness in place. While Baraka does indeed romanticize the "terribleness" of blackness in urban space, he does so in order to articulate an alternative black urban experience other than the circumscribed narrative created by the white gaze. In the text, the lines, "They had us in a cage / To hold back our rage. Our eyes / smiled / anyway" (n.p.) respond to an image of young black youth looking out from behind the "caged" screen of a window in a building that resembles a housing project. Baraka uses aesthetic survival as a catalyst to mobilize the community, unhinge their landscape from structures of control, and transform reality both in art and on the streets.

In Our Terribleness and the Newark crisis, when considered together, elucidate Baraka's keen awareness of the fact that racial subjugation is an intentional strategy of spatial containment by governing structures of power. Further, they demonstrate the felt and then realized need for demonic spatial intervention by grafting aesthetic and imaginative reconceptions of space onto actual geographies in urban space.

Demonic grounds render geographies both fluid and disruptive; as the word "demonic" suggests, unpredictability is central to its effectiveness as an oppositional geographical mode. The roots of the term, as Wynter and McKittrick elucidate, is in mathematics, physics, and computer science. The demonic is defined by

> a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future. This schema, this way of producing or desiring an outcome, calls into question 'the always non-arbitrary, pre-prescribed' parameters of sequential and classificatory linearity. (McKittrick xxiv)

Here McKittrick quotes directly from Wynter (365), who uses the demonic to identify epistemological systems that cannot exist meaningfully within existing structures of knowledge and theory—whether by their exclusion or erasure. The non-linearity of the demonic, then, opens a pathway through dominant geographic narratives to

allow for black people to reimagine their position vis a vis structures of control. The efficacy of the demonic depends on its autonomous unfolding, on its ability to exist outside hegemonic codes of meaning and control and to create an alternative semantic economy. Through geographical experimentation, geographical transformation is possible, and New Ark serves as a shining example.

To further develop this argument, it is necessary to examine the particular context of Newark as a site of containment and control by the white governing class, as well as the specific sites of resistance established by Baraka and the black community. Newark is often cited as a case in point of what Komozi Woodard calls the "postwar ghetto crisis" ("Message" 80) that boiled over in 1967, leading to "the greatest wave of urban violence the nation had ever seen" (Zinn 132).[11] These urban neighborhoods (also in Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland, among many other cities) were severely underserviced by governmental services, leading to extreme poverty, unemployment, substandard housing conditions, and police brutality, and these conditions pushed the black residents to a breaking point. The urban crisis incensed the growing tensions in the community between black residents of the ghetto—in which an increasing Black Power sentiment was being fostered—and the wealthy white minority that largely controlled the political and economic reigns of Newark (Upchurch 36). One of many central organizations that Baraka helped to found was CFUN (Committee for a Unified New Ark). CFUN's mandate of self-government for the black community was fostered through a commitment to sociopolitical and cultural independence. As Woodard notes, CFUN's efforts were directly responsive to the containment culture of the governing white classes, which sought to keep the black community in place: "One important driving force in that process was the utter collapse of basic government and commercial services in the postwar ghetto" (Woodard, "Message" 92). The organization was instrumental in the establishment of independent social services, cooperative employment initiatives, and cultural centers in the post-Newark rebellion. Amina Baraka, Baraka's second wife, was also critical to the establishment of these creative demonic grounds: she was an active community-builder at Spirit House, and, along with the United Sisters of CFUN, she helped found the African Free School, which became a critical prototype for other independent black-centric schools nation-wide.[12]

Aside from political initiatives on the local and national scale, Baraka and his affiliated organizations under the general banner of the Black Power Movement (Black Community Development and Defense and The Modern Black Convention Movement, to name a few) also fostered cultural and artistic development within the black local community. Aside from establishing theatre centers such as Spirit House, Baraka was also central to the establishment of independent newspapers—*Black NewArk* and *Unity and Struggle*—that reached both local and national readership, respectively. Baraka continued to flourish as a literary producer and publisher; he established *Cricket*, a journal of jazz criticism, as well as Jihad Publications, an independent black publisher. A host of youth programs, schools, and radio programs were also established (Woodard, *A Nation* 2). That the imbrication of aesthetic and political energy was at the center of Baraka's engagements at the time is obvious; as he puts it plainly in his autobiography, "art and politics [are] not mutually exclusive" (*The Autobiography* 167). This creation of a demonic ground in the black city-state involves a responsive process of recognizing the mechanics of existing structures of control and responding to these with alternative, demonic practices of place. As Baraka recognizes in "Sermon for our Maturity,"

> We drift in space
>
> as circles of feeling
>
> All the presence of invisible influence
>
> Controls the paths we take
>
> Make the invisible visible
>
> within yr space
>
> See the things you need to see
>
> And know they exist
>
> The world shapes and is to be shaped (*It's Nation Time* 14)

Here, Baraka encourages the black community to take stock of their space—to understand how their movements through space are "shaped" by the "invisible influence" of external forces of control. Then, once the community gains this spatial knowledge and "sees the things it needs to see," they can proceed to shape the world by making

visible the living landscape of their story—its uprising demonic grounds, nations, and worlds.

To be sure, Baraka's efforts in New Ark, which led to permanent change in the community, were not without failures—or, figments of a spatial imaginary that failed to materialize. The latter definition is more fitting, since imagined geographies are political acts that are significant to the process of reterritorialization. Indeed, as McKittrick notes, just the very "sayability" (xxiii) of imagined or proposed geographies interrupts occupied centers of control. As she argues, "'saying,' imagining, and living geography locates the kinds of creative and material openings traditional geographic arrangements disclose and conceal" (144). Baraka's emphasis on the black community's projective sound and sayability in *In Our Terribleness* creates a counter-narrative of urban space. The invocation of "terrible" as a descriptor for blackness and black experience emphasizes its alterity, its "unknowability," and its creativity outside white systems of control and signification. Indeed, the "concealed" narratives of the demonic mode—the experimental, creative response between the body and its environment—form integrated, "living" geographies that resist spatial oppression.

On the ground in New Ark, there were many imagined and "sayable" geographies that were proposed by Baraka and his affiliated organizations. The most significant was the proposed collaborative project of Kawaida Towers, a housing complex proposed by CFUN in 1972 that was meant not only to provide housing but, like Spirit House before it, was to be a central site of creative freedom and exploration for the black community. [13] Despite the promising change that the towers represented, the plans failed to come to fruition due to a series of racially-motivated events and decisions. The fate of the Towers was sealed by a city council vote to reject the proposed tax exemption that was crucial to fund the building. As Woodard explains, the inciting incident of the project's failure was a challenge posed by a Rutgers professor who questioned the supposed cultural exclusivity of the towers. Since the towers were to be built in the North Ward of Newark, a predominantly white area, the professor asked why the project centered on African cultural traditions and excluded the area's Italian heritage. This challenge ignited the fumes of racial tension between whites and blacks in the community. Soon after, mostly white picketers protested against the building of the towers, eventually successfully halting the construction process at the site (Woodard, *A Nation* 231). Subsequently,

Kenneth Gibson, the black mayor who was helped into office by the efforts of Baraka and the black community in Newark, rallied against the project. The tax exemption previously granted to the community housing project was then overturned, and the project came to a permanent halt in 1974 (251-253).

Although some geographic interventions in Newark would remain imagined, the post-rebellion initiatives led by the black community are demonstrations of the ways in which the establishment of demonic grounds of resistance can alter existing oppressive codes of space and place. McKittrick argues that "the ungeographic is a colonial fiction" (5) wherein the enslavement, captivity, and dispersal of black bodies places them "outside" of geography and space in terms of agency, possession, and production. Along these lines, the ghettoized black spaces of Newark similarly attempt to render their inhabitants "ungeographic": with the black community having limited access to social services, housing, and opportunity, the boundaries that enclose the black wards of Newark from the white community keeps the black community "in place" according to racialized geographic codes. This process of urban geographic dispossession in the black community began to pick up steam in the 1950s, at a time when Newark saw much prosperity as businesses flourished and opportunities for the mostly white population were fruitful. In the same decade, a huge migration of "tens of thousands" of black migrants traveled up from the southern states in search of employment and opportunity in the city. The black population faced segregation and was met with hostility by the white community, including local residents, business owners, and city government (Wharton 11-12). This active displacement of black Newarkers by the white community and government led to a precarious claim to space for the black population; however, through grassroots uprisings and the establishment of allied institutions, the black community counteracted geographic dispossession with demonic grounds of geographic liberation and independence.

In their engagements with dominant geographic schemes, demonic grounds "identify a different way of knowing and writing the social world and … expand how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination" (McKittrick xiv). The establishment of alternative schools, social programs, housing, and community services as a grassroots effort by the community reterritorializes Newark as the demonic ground of New Ark. As Woodard confirms,

"The cultural nationalist strategy of African American militants was to develop parallel black institutions in that void left by the urban crisis" ("Message" 92).[14] Although the project of Baraka's black nationalism was certainly interested in overthrowing and eradicating the white power structures of control, it did not do so in an effort to displace or mimic these structures, but to establish parallel structures that serve the independent, self-governing black community that had been ignored by "benign neglect." Indeed, McKittrick is careful to suggest that the demonic does not operate as a displacement of dominant geographic schemas—it serves not to eradicate them, but to exist *alongside* them as alternative narratives. For, as she notes, the spatial knowledges possessed by black people are particular and specific in and of themselves, and the beauty with which Baraka illuminates the "terribleness" of blackness in *In Our Terribleness* is a testament to this. The tone of Baraka's *It's Nation Time* is similarly confirming of the beauty that exists in blackness as it resonates within space:

> Yr body is all space
>
> Yr feet is valley makers
>
> …
>
> Sing about your pure movement
>
> in space
>
> Grow (16)

The transformation of Newark into New Ark, then, exceeds the metaphor of its new namesake by representing the power of poetry in action to transform "geographies of domination" (McKittrick xi). Further to this point, the community-based activism transformed more than just the spatial codes and ordinances of Newark: it altered the ways in which the place resonates for the black community as a signifier of place. In *In Our Terribleness*, Baraka refers to the cities as alien spaces of white power and control; as such, cities appear to the speaker as "ugly" and as "examples / of white art. white feeling" along with "the laws, the rule (s), the ethos" (n.p.). However, Baraka's demonic *poethic*—his poetic work on the page coupled with his political work on the streets—engenders a transformation of urban space. The spatial awareness fostered by Baraka initiated a shift in communal consciousness that redefined the space of the postwar ghetto—a spatial tool of geographic limitation put on black bodies—as a space of

flourishing community. But in order for this transformation to occur, a revised consciousness of responsibility was crucial. As Baraka insists in the poem *AFRIKAN REVOLUTION* (1973):

> Be conscious
>
> meet once a week
>
> Meet once a week. Talk about how to get
>
> more money, how to get educated, how
>
> to have scientists for children rather than
>
> junkies. How to kill the roaches. How to
>
> stop the toilet from stinking. How to get a
>
> better job. Once a week. Start NOW.
>
> How to dress better. How to read.
>
> How to live longer. How to be respected.
>
> Meet once a week. Once a week.
>
> All over the world. We need to meet once a
>
> week. (5)

The practice of place that Baraka first imagines in "Black Art" and develops in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* comes full circle into a *practice of living* in New Ark. Having fully abandoned the notion of poetry as purely imaginative and ornamental, here Baraka uses poetry didactically to provide a guidebook of the new collective consciousness needed to transform the space of black oppression to one of self-determined liberation. As a manual of self-governance for the black community, here the poem walks the talk: Baraka offers practical means by which the community can uprise from its oppression and gain the self-knowledge needed to transform its space into meaningful place. To help accomplish this, Baraka establishes creative sites of resistance, both materialized and imagined—Spirit House, BARTS, Kawaida Towers, among many. These spaces transformed the limited geography of the community into a vibrant working collective.[15]

The effect was widely transformational: Baraka's established

demonic grounds became models for black nation-building in the United States. As Édouard Glissant writes, the "decisive act" of the writer "consists also of building a nation" and "assembl[ing] a common will by which *we* might be forged" (*Poetic Intention* 171; my emphasis). Hence Baraka's later rallying cry in the poem "It's Nation Time": "Time to get / together / time to be one strong fast black energy space / one pulsating positive magnetism, rising" (21). In calling for the establishment of a "fast black energy space," he continues to use the language of open field poetic composition, but towards the ends of actual spatial transformation on the ground of reality. Taking cue from the localized efforts in the New Ark reterritorialization, Baraka calls to the national community to come into a compounded awareness. As he writes in his *Autobiography*, "many of us feel since we are 'anti-establishment' that that makes us heroes. Nonsense. Most such anti-establishmentarianism is just petty bourgeois anarchism and failure to take up the responsibility intellectuals had better understand they have to actually help make life better for all of us" (237-238).

To "actually help make life better," Baraka's demonic *poethic* developed from the open field of his early Black Mountain peers into a radical, translocal nation wherein language and communal action coalesce into a "more humanly workable" geography. It is a nation wherein poems, as "steel knuckles," "teeth," and "lemons piled / on a step" become a means of not only imagining space but saying it into action. And so, in harnessing the energy of this "fast black energy space" to construct communal places of resistance to counter spatial oppression, Baraka's demonic *poethic*, while refusing to stay "in place," contributes to an ongoing reading and writing practice that can be used to uncover how place is constructed, and how uneven geographies may be engaged with, contested, and transformed in art and in social practice. His aesthetic and political experimentations both on the page and on the ground demonstrate how a community's resistant spatial imaginary may be grafted onto actual space, with the rebuilt New Ark signaling the transformation of boundary into *frontier*.

Notes

[1] "How You Sound??" is a short essay by Baraka on projective verse that was published in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *New American Poetry* alongside work from Baraka's Black Mountain, New York, and San Francisco contemporaries.

[2] An exemplary case of Baraka's adoption of projective verse in his first collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) is "From an Almanac" (3), the poem dedicated to Olson (or "C.O." as Baraka refers to him). Many other poems in this collection, such as "Hymn for Lanie Poo," and "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," are projective poems that employ the hallmarks of the form, such as innovative spacing in the field of the page and rapid successions of images mixed with social commentary.

[3] Although the scholarship on the political and poetical geographies of Baraka's work is scant, it is worth noting James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) and Michael Simanga's *Amiri Baraka and the Congress of African People: History and Memory* (2015), which both discuss the local initiatives and organizations, as well as the geographic reach of the Black Arts Movement.

[4] The term "demonic" appears in Wynter's essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" The work is an analysis of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, wherein she comments on the connection between reproduction and land reclamation. As she argues, the absence in the play of "Caliban's potential mate through whom the reproduction of his race might occur" (McKittrick xxv), prevents the island from being reclaimed by its native population.

[5] See Retallack's *The Poethical Wager*.

[6] Before the riots, for example, Baraka was instrumental in the election of the first black mayor of Newark, Kenneth Gibson. The event was historically monumental: never before had a black mayor been elected in a large American city (Watts 348).

[7] According to *The Book of Genesis*, after humankind broke the covenant with God and was punished with a flood, Noah was

spared by God in order to preserve life on earth. He was tasked with boarding his family as well as one male and one female of every species onto an ark to escape the flood waters.

[8] It lies outside the scope of this article to discuss at length, but it is worth noting that the nation-building efforts of the Newark riots likely inspired other rebellions and uprisings of black communities across the nation, with the Detroit riots happening only a couple weeks after those in Newark in 1967.

[9] Baraka came to denounce the tone of his earlier black nationalist phase as misdirected vitriol against whites. Whereas the black nationalists focused on the white population as the enemy of black people, Baraka later came to Marxism as a means of understanding capitalism as a system of oppression that not only fuels racist structures of power, but is the enemy that ensnares the whole of humanity. In his autobiography, he reflects on the tunnel vision of his early "reactionary" politics: "Earlier our own poems came from an enraptured patriotism that screamed against whites as the eternal enemies of Black people, as the sole cause of our disorder & oppression. The same subjective mystification led to mysticism, metaphysics, spookism, etc., rather than dealing with reality, as well as an ultimately reactionary nationalism that served no interests but our newly emerging Black bureaucratic elite and petty bourgeois, so they would have control over their Black market" (238). Indeed, it is Baraka's realization that it is capitalist America—not simply the racial tensions therein—that keeps black people in place that ushers in the Third World Marxist phase of his life and career in the mid-1970s.

[10] This section touches on just some of the many interventionist initiatives led by Baraka and his affiliated organizations on the ground in Newark. For an extended and excellent discussion of Baraka's political engagements in Newark, see Woodard's *A Nation Within A Nation* (1999) (Woodard was also a fellow CFUN member with Baraka).

[11] Although rumblings of the Newark rebellion had been growing for a long time, there were two inciting incidents of the actual riots: first was the decision by the city planning committee to confiscate and sell a 150-acre plot of land in the center of the black community to build

a medical school. The local black community was already suffering from lack of suitable housing, so losing the housing complex on this plot of land would further devastate living conditions. Second, a riot broke out after police arrested and severely beat a black cab driver after a routine traffic stop. Days of intense rioting broke out after the incident, leading to 23 deaths (21 of which were black, and two white) (Upchurch 38). It was during these days of rebellion that Baraka was arrested and severely beaten by the police.

[12] Given her background as an artist and dancer, Amina Baraka knew intimately the power of creative expression to build communities, and she did just that. In his autobiography, Baraka credits her "great innovative and creative influence" on CFUN and the other cultural spaces they established, and notes that "[i]t was she who actually designed in the most practical way such an impractical idea as communal living under capitalism" (*The Autobiography* 419).

[13] The plans for Kawaida Towers as a practical housing site but moreso as a site of creative opportunity are elucidated by Woodard: "Kawaida Towers apartment building was designed with a basement and first-floor plan providing for a 300-seat theater with lighting, projection, and dressing rooms; a lounge, woodshop, hobby shop, day care center, and public kitchen; and rooms for art display, reading, and arts and crafts" (*A Nation* 228).

[14] The urban crisis Woodard speaks of centers around the controversial policy of "benign neglect" in racial matters in America, as proposed in 1969 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan to President Nixon. As Moynihan writes in a memorandum to the president, "The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect'" (qtd. in Kotlowski 173).

[15] Baraka's efforts with CFUN also fostered solidarity efforts with Newark's Puerto Rican minority community (together, the black and Puerto Rican community constituted over 65 percent of the population), resulting in a "Community Choice" slate of political candidates for the 1970 election in Newark (Woodard, *A Nation* 114-115).

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The Song, For Real!

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the primacy of the song (both as content and form) in Amiri Baraka's poetics and limits its discussion to the collection entitled, *Funk Lore* (1996) and the album *Real Song* (1994) in dialogue with each other. In the context of the theories that value sound and music in terms of their cultural and historical rootedness, Baraka's "funk lore" means collective knowledge and behavior that incorporates body and kinetics. Baraka breaks the Western forms of reading and writing with his insistence on musicality, orality and performance, which are more than personal choices—the most distinctive of African American expressions. In his omniverse, the soundless ghosts represent the destructive force, whereas the ever-resisting creative spirit is represented by sound, voice, music and funk.

Keywords

Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore*, *Real Song*, African American Music, Cultural Sounds, Song and Resistance

Şarkının Ta Kendisi!

Öz

Bu makale Amiri Baraka'nın şiir anlayışında şarkıya (hem içerik hem de biçim anlamında) verilen önemi vurgulamaktadır. Makale, Baraka'nın şiir kitabı *Funk Lore* (1996) ile albüm olarak

kaydettiği *Real Song* (1994) üzerinde odaklanmaktadır. Ses ve müziği kültür ve tarihselliklerine göre değerlendiren kuramlar çerçevesinde incelendiğinde Baraka'nın "funk lore"/"funk bilgisi" kavramı, bedeni ve hareketi içeren toplumsal dağarcık ve davranış biçimleri anlamına gelmektedir. Şair müzikselliği, sözlü geleneği ve performansı şiire katarak Batı geleneğinin okuma ve yazma kalıplarını kırmaktadır. Bu özellikler kişisel olmanın ötesinde, en çarpıcı Afrikalı Amerikalı ifade biçimleridir. Baraka'nın şiir evreninde yıkıcı gücü sessiz hayaletler temsil ederken, buna sürekli direnen yaratıcı ruhu ise ses, müzik ve funk temsil etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore*, *Real Song*, Afrikalı Amerikalı Müziği, Ses-Kültür İlişkisi, Şarkı ve Direniş

It is Nature's voice in Cosmo-Sound

It is the everything and the subtle nothing

Of Omni-All

It is the ever quickening-presence of the Living Spirit

It is the Cosmo-bridge to the Dark Unknown Eternal.

—"The Outer Darkness," Sun Ra

Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political.

—"Listening," Jacques Attali

…starting from the idea of what type of sound I want to produce…

—"How to Truly Listen" Evelyn Glennie

This article attempts to explore Amiri Baraka's cosmology of "Funk Lore" as a broader signifier of Baraka's omniverse.[1] *Funk Lore* is the title of the collection of his poems published in 1996, but the term

seems to have a reference beyond that particular volume. Baraka's own primary research and scholarship of Black music, which later evolved into one of the early examples of jazz criticism, was preceded by W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in the chapter entitled, "The Sorrow Songs." Published in 1963, *Blues People*, which is academic scholarship by the token of its documentation and the use of formal language, was inspired by his professor Sterling Brown's approach to African American music as history, as Baraka tells on many occasions. Following *Blues People*, Baraka collected his commentaries, liner notes and essays on the music that he listened to in *Black Music* (1967). Baraka's insight is distinguishable in jazz/music criticism in that he is the earliest witness to see Black music as an evolving tradition, and articulate the unfolding of this musical continuity as it travelled from Africa to America, from the delta to the city, with many other nuances, conforming to the living conditions of the poor working-class people who made it. The underlying argument in *Blues People*, and later articulated in the essay entitled "The Changing Same," is that "The Negro's music changed as he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or (and this is equally important) *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*" (*Blues People* 153).

Since the 1970s, there has been a proliferation in self-conscious theorization of sound, reconsidering previous theoretical scholarship, and addressing cultural phenomena, ranging from Native American pow-wows to reggae from new perspectives.[2] In Murray Schafer's words, world's musical storehouse reveals the ways in which power operates: "History is a songbook for anyone who would listen to it… The world sings itself to death and back to life" (30). The term "soundscape" was introduced to mean a literal and/or metaphorical place defined by sounds. Such thinking about music and sound signify a general recognition and affirmation of sound as culturally and historically loaded and coded. The capacity of sound to produce metaphorical place and generate resources for resistance through an audience or an interpretive community is an issue to consider in the context where sounds are dislocated. As Christopher Winks states, "Black diasporic music communicates the wail of a specific historical experience: enslavement, struggle, and the arduous task of building pathways to a freedom to come" (191). Paul Gilroy points at the same collective memory that is animated by music, which "was cultural work that incorporated defensive and affirmative elements: working

over and working through the memories of slavery and colonialism, past sufferings and contemporary resistances so that they could provide resources for interpreting the present and imagining a better future…" (388).

Comparing sonic and visual senses, the sound artist Julian Henriques suggests that either sensory orientation implies an order, a regime that prioritizes certain forms of human experience. He observes that Western philosophical tradition has focused almost exclusively on the capacity of eyesight objectified in image and text, discarding other physiological senses.[3] Such privileging of mind over body, or mind/body dualism, he argues, has developed a regime, dictated our attention, understanding and experience: "The written—in space—tends to maintain the status quo, whereas the spoken—in time—often questions it" (466). The written, as the objectification of the visual sensory regime, is not open to change once it is recorded in a material form and, therefore, suitable for reproduction and commodification. On the other hand, the spoken/sound, which materializes in time, is changeable with each repetition, and more readily public, resisting commodification in the same sense (Henriques 460-463). There is also the possibility of scripting sound or music into "sheet music" which privileges one form of performance over another, especially in the world of classical music. Recording, likewise, confines the song in a single rendition. This way of commodification still belongs in the visual sensory regime.

Funk, as a special organization of sound that articulates the emotional and intellectual make-up of a community, is one of the later modes that African American musical continuum—in Baraka's terms, "changing same"—has evolved into. Tony Bolden digs into musicians' worlds and words to find out a funky pattern in accordance with Baraka's view of the "changing same," that it has other faces such as swing (as verb), beat (as verb), rhythm and groove triggered by feeling and kinetics (10-14). Considering musicians' explanations through the 1920s and 30s into the 40s and on, Bolden observes that Stevie Wonder turns inclusively back to the likes of Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald to connect swing to his own funky style: "while the two *styles* of music may differ as markedly as their respective historical periods, the emotional referents of 'swing' and 'funk' are as synonymous as the words 'red' and 'crimson'" (16). Due to its ever-present and ever-evolving characteristic in Black music,

Bolden explains funk as epistemology, a way of knowing and feeling, locating it under the skin, "a subcutaneous construct" (16).

In the context of these ideas on groove and sound in relation to cultural resistance, the funk element can be found in the codes of the earliest African American, even African music. Baraka terms it as "funk lore"; a body of funk-knowledge. Funk is more than "a songbook" (Shafer 30); it is a way of knowing through the body and kinetics, movements to the sound. Funk lore, in Baraka's omniverse, is the perspective whereby human history can be read. It finds its clearest expression in the collection entitled, *Funk Lore* (1996). Its poet, intending to be a "rhythm traveller,"[4] to come alive at different times and places with the sounds of his ways, leaves behind several recording albums. For the purposes of this article, the album entitled *Real Song* (1994), speaks best with the issues in relation to funk lore. The poet's mission, just like the African oral historian griot/djali, is to enlighten; to make the listeners recognize and understand the ways of the world and their own situations. Listeners should tune not only their ears but also their bodies to the song/poem to enter into their system, their thinking and consciousness. The "real song" takes on life only when people attend with their minds and bodies, "starting from the idea of what type of sound" the singer chooses (Glennie).

The Ghosts

The warring forces in Baraka's omniverse can be reduced into two as destructive and creative. Such categorization might sound too basic, but in the face of urgency such as when multitudes are faced with extinction or slavery, such a fundamental perspective functions as clarification. The destructive force tries to make Earth into Dirt ("Dig" 138), wiping off the sound, the spirit and *le souffle*, i.e. breath, and basically all the imperfect, and therefore traceable finger/footprint from all human accomplishments. The villains in Baraka's historical narrative have names but when they are not named, these large- and small-scale villains are indicated as ghosts. Ghosts lack voice, sound, substance, and content. They are disembodied, abstract and therefore signify non-existence, non-entity and death. They are devoid of the many elements that make up a people: spirit, song, sound, voice, gods, eyes, light, heat, beat, memory and history: "What is not funky is psychological, metaphysical / is the religion of squares, pretending no one / is anywhere" (Baraka *Funk Lore* 9). Ghosts fill their vacuum with

imperialist greed, keeping themselves busy "Enslaving // Humanity / in / Cannibal / Menus" (Baraka *Funk Lore* 42).

"Somebody Blew Up America" is a clear illustration of Baraka's identification of villains through the "who" question—resonant with Allen Ginsberg's anaphoric "who" clauses in *Howl*. William J. Harris and Aldon Nielsen historicize and contextualize the smear campaign against the poet caused by this poem, as does Piotr Gwiazda (477-484). Ironically, the terms of the polemic functioned self-reflexively to dramatize Baraka's life-long struggle against historical and institutional villains. The controversy that ended with the dissolving of the Poet Laureate position in New Jersey almost came to simulate the drama in the poem—the ghosts, whether they are the establishment critics or politicians, were seen in action. Both Gwiazda and John R. O. Gery evaluate the dark irony in Baraka's approach that incessantly moves from historical fact to conspiracy to the absurd, the comical and the tragic (Gwiazda 475-477; Gery 174), noting the literary and performative capacity of this significant response to 9/11, one of the major grotesque and terrifying blows against human life. The refrain "who" with its purely sound quality as "hoooo" is suggested to have links with white male dominance (Harris and Nielsen 185), and can also be evoking the "hoooo"ing of the ghosts.

The poem "Why It's Quiet in Some Churches" addresses the ideology of silence and ghosts. The epigraph, "*Just a Closeta Walk with Thee*" is the centuries-old African American gospel song, registering the stubbornness of the vernacular tongue "closeta" instead of the proper "closer." The gospel song with its accentuated beat, and the screams and shouts of its singer, stands as a contrast against the quiet church. The poem opens almost like the theatrical instructions of a stage where no sound is allowed. The speaker assuming to be the mouthpiece of Western mind, tells the story of how mother goddess, sexuality, life force, emotions, flesh, sound and motion are banished from the house of Western (and, almost synonymous with that) Christian Civilization:

> We changed the spelling of Prophet to Profit
>
> We changed Soul to Sole
>
> We covered spirit with a ghost
>
> We changed Sun to Son, and with the help of the right

> Farther and knowledge of What Goest? He cd get his rightful inheritance.
>
> No. we took the mother out. We burned broads from Salem to Troy. From Soweto to Philadelphia to transform the pyramid of life to a triangle of death. We took the head and nuts off the ankh and changed the life sign to a cemetery advertisement. Then had mfs wear death around the necks they would long for it so. We dis connected creativity and art. (*Funk Lore* 25)

The poem also comments on Western aesthetics with references to *Oedipus Rex* and modernism:

> We created tragedy by killing our fathers, fucking our mothers putting out our eyes, and wandering the world as an advertisement for "modernism"
>
> We separated thought from feeling. We thought feeling wd stop us thinking, or vice versa. But then I do want to bore you. And the cross roads we took recrossed, recrossed, and the cold north was not that any more, but we were anyway, and then to exist was only possible w/ the slandered smoke of tortured change… (*Funk Lore* 25-26)

Oedipus' tragedy is recognized as almost the writing degree zero of classic Western literature. Baraka rejects this privileged position of the Oedipal narrative and implies that this "first crazy Eddie, Eddie-puss" the clubfoot who blinded himself, actually contributes to "mediocrity" and weakness (Lecture 294). Such a characterization of Oedipus signifies a defected, mediocre and slow type of understanding. Traditional Greek classicism/classism is built on the Oedipus tragedy and Aristotelian patterns and relationships on which Western/European thoughts, forms and aesthetics expand. The metaphor of understanding in Oedipus operates in terms of sight, disregarding sound altogether. In the absence of the audio sensory regime, flesh is censored, sexuality loathed, dissent criminalized and slavery promoted by the hand of institutionalized religion. Interestingly, however, Baraka's anti-Western (i.e. non-European) challenge is Western, that is, grounded historically, geographically and culturally in the United States of America.

Ghosts should be avoided at all costs. In the persona of the Black comedian, Mantan Moreland, who inevitably became a part of the racist Hollywood industry, the poem "Masked Angel Costume" evokes ghosts disguised under masks and angel costumes. The uncanny feeling is even more immanent since the speaker may also be a ghost speaking from behind that masked angel costume, and the reader would better watch out. The warnings begin thus:

1 Never let a ghost
Ketch you
Never!
2 Avoid Death
Ghosts
Always
be
there!
3 Dead People
& Live People
Should not
Mix!
4 Ghosts think they
good lookin
Never stay to find out!
5 I am mentioned in the credits
but the ghost
got the
dough! (*Funk Lore* 11)

The cinematic spectacle is designed to deceive via visual signs of masks and costumes. But the poem's overarching reference is to John Coltrane's song, "Alabama," whereby the poem calls back the moment of civil rights struggle when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed as an evil backlash against the March in Washington

two weeks earlier. The poem ends with its allegiance to "the music / that moved / my feet" —these are not only the feet moving to Black music but also the feet of the marchers and the boycotters, and also the poetic feet (see also Nielsen "Alabama"). On a collision course with Hollywood's smiling face that disguises racism, the compass of Black music, here epitomized by the Coltrane song written for this specific horrifying occasion, has "never / failed" to strike the right chord in the poem's final movement. The sonic space of black music, in this sense, is revelatory, whereas the visual order is deceptive.

The Living Spirit

The importance of sound, voice, speech, and the spoken word means that poems are primarily to be experienced in real time, as they are performed. The self-conscious orality and performance of Baraka's works are rooted in African oral tradition of the griot and djali, in the Harlem Renaissance, and also in American avant-garde poetry. Baraka can be located in the tradition that Lorenzo Thomas traces in the article, "Neon Griot." Thomas historicizes the social and political functions of poetry readings and underlines the public and performative character of Black poetry specifically. He also chronicles the maturation of American poetic tradition through the innovations by the "New American Poetry" and Black Arts Movement, implementing jazz and performance into poetry (196-216). He concludes "All poetry is incomplete until it is read aloud" (218). Building on the legacy of these innovative poetic traditions, the contemporary poet, Thomas remarks, consciously designs the typology of the poem so that it functions like a score guiding the performance of the poem (211). Jerome Rothenberg's program for creative writing, which he compiled from his own practices in the 1960s, also pays attention to oral and performative aspects of poetry. The gist of Rothenberg's vision can be expressed as "questioning of preconceptions about writing and language," based on Western philosophical tradition and Indo-European language systems (Waldman and Wright 122).

In Baraka's omniverse, the creative force, the "Living Spirit" (Sun Ra 296), projects the Earth as an expression, a song of existence, sounding and breathing in the image of the Black musician, embodied as Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughan, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and other hero(in)es of the "changing same." It is the force of the people who "are struggling to make the Earth habitable for human beings,"

not just for a few but for all the people (Baraka Lecture 298). The poems, "Art Against Art Not" and "Funk Lore" clearly describe that funky essence and pulse that envelope past, present and future:

Whatever there *wasiswill*
Space encompasses, yet the
truth stares from it
invisible as most
of where we are

We are in the body of space
as space
in specific lives
& waves

Like foot prints breathing
you'd have to
Know
as you tune in with everything
possibility exists
alive (*Funk Lore* 53-54)

The space of body and the body of space carry the human print in the form of truth—or, one might say, evidence. One has to "know," to "tune in," to dig. In Audre Lorde's words, "poetry is not a luxury" but a way of knowing things past, present and future—"*wasiswill*" in multiple and spontaneous temporal dimensions. Although Lorde's immediate address is specifically to Black women to urge them to articulate their ideas and transfer them into revolutionary action, poetry's function for Lorde is complementary here: "I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight" (37). Real people and real song or poetry are antidotes to the "spookism," the ghost disease as described above.

Griot and djali are the ancient African counterparts for the town crier, or *tellal*, as it is called in these geographical parts. Griot and djali

function not only as the transmitter of collective memory of a people, but also as the commentator of life and events, as Baraka puts it—also echoing Lorde's terms as "revelatory distillation of experience" quoted above:

> …Djali's job was to light up the mind, to make the mind shine, to make the mind smile, to make the mind laugh, to make the mind laugh with what? Understanding. Recognition. *To understand history as a revelationary story*. So that the poet, or at least the poet, per, my own self, like I say, DOC-I-MEANT. Doesn't talk about what you might'a meant, doesn't talk about what I might've meant, which is why I say doc-I-meant. So the poet that I meant, that is Djali, has the first function to light up peoples' minds, to make them understand the world. (Lecture 297)

This view combines the weight of the message together with the significance of the medium, which is the djali's voice, instrument, and performance. The alchemy of music and consciousness, rhythm and message, or form and content make up the real song, which acts on and lights up people's minds. This lighting up is metaphorical, and given the advanced technology to scan the brain's electrical neuron activity, is literal, too.

The closing track in the album, *Real Song*, is entitled, "Real Song Is A Dangerous Number."[5] Although Baraka aims at a smiling and even laughing mode of funky gnosis, an understanding and recognizing smile, such a state of mind does come with its stakes. Jacques Attali's contextualization of the totalitarian state's interventions on sound is complementary to the song being "a dangerous number." State surveillance is not limited to the visual but also includes the auditory because subversive music "betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality" in conflict with the totalitarian "concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody… distrust of new languages, codes or instruments, [and] refusal of the abnormal…" (Attali 7). In Baraka's poem, the speaker claims himself to be Johnny Ace, Sam Cook, Otis Redding, Teddy Pendergrass, Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley, and John Lennon, as many voices of the same revolutionary music. Not only their revolutionary spirit but also their brutally interrupted short lives bring them together in the poet's "real song."

The stakes of refusing to make deals, and having their voice and image too strong, to paraphrase from the poem, are high. The speaker also claims to be the poets Larry Neal and Henry Dumas, and he implies that they died at the peak of their productivity *because* they sang the real song. This poem is an eerie reminder of the closeness of death for those who sing the real song including the poet himself, and it uncannily clashes with the fact that it is/was actually Baraka's birthday on the day of recording, as the cheers of the audience recorded live also indicate. Death's closeness casts a shadow on the real song, clarifies the stakes for the singer, affirming its collision with state sanctioned forms of exclusion, such as racism, colonialism, imperialism, chronic poverty and criminalization.

Such dark historical consciousness seems to be necessary for self-knowledge, if one takes a look at the history of colonialism and slavery opposed by democratic struggles and civic revolts, emblematically in Africa and America. Baraka's omniverse contains, in Aldon Nielsen's words, "the ancient African DNA" of Black music, the essence of Funk Lore, "mak[ing] it available for a recombinant 21st century lyric politics" ("Belief" 179). The kernel of this "lyric politics" is funk lore, is a form of "love supreme" which makes the people capable of creating and recreating themselves, as Baraka sings in "Funk Lore":

& now black again we are the
whole of night
with sparkling eyes staring
down
like jets
to push
evenings
ascension
that's why we are the blues
the train whistle
the rumble across
the invisible coming
drumming and screaming
that's why we are the

blues
& work & sing & leave
tales & is with spirit
that's why we are
the blues
black & alive
& so we show our motion
our breathing
we moon
reflected soul
that's why our spirit
make us
the blues
we is ourselves
the blues (*Funk Lore* 97)

Conclusion

Baraka understands the "real song" to be the marker of time as well as the modality in which the poem exists. Maintaining the independent and nonprofessional character of the town crier tradition, Baraka creates the sonic space where the universe is alive with traces, footprints and fingerprints. Listening to the vibrating evidence of a live universe is the lesson the listeners and readers are invited to take. Performance calls attention to itself as performance, in real time and as a physical event. The song is not private for the privileged ears of an Odysseus since the singer-poet-djali tells of what has happened, is happening and will happen, meant for all the people. The "doc-I-meant" materializes the context: "the train whistle / the rumble across / the invisible coming / drumming and screaming"—these are the sounds of the South that document its runaway slaves, people getting on trains northbound, carrying the music wherever they go. The poet chronicles and sings the song of a people to show them where they come from, where they go and how to belong to a place—a black and blue place where funk lore is rooted.

Notes

[1] *Omniverse* is the title for Sun Ra's 1979 album. I adapted Sun Ra's coinage, which is a play on the words universe and verse. The prefix omni- means all times, all places and all ways.

[2] See especially Michael Bull and Les Back's introduction, and articles by Paul Filmer, Murray Schafer and Julian Henriques in the same volume.

[3] This idea is related to "proprioception," which means the awareness of the stimuli produced and perceived in an organism, as connected to the bodily position and movement. The concept is also central to Charles Olson's poetics, as mentioned in the Introduction to this issue.

[4] See the short story, "Rhythm Travel."

[5] Unfortunately, I do not have access to *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka (1987), where this poem appears. Therefore, I cite the album, *Real Song* for the source of the poem.

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An Interview with Ammiel Alcalay

Q: How did you get to know Amiri Baraka and/or his work?

AA: I was a weird kid. I encountered *System of Dante's Hell*, *Tales*, and *Blues People* as a teenager, and I never stopped reading him. This would have been 1969, 1970, 1971, those years. I can't remember when I first actually saw him read or met him. I know I saw some plays in the 1970s and I believe I also heard him read somewhere in that period. But I was close to people who had been close to him: Gilbert Sorrentino, for example, who was a teacher of mine, and then a good friend. By hearing Gil talk about "Roi," I felt like I knew him before I got to know him, it felt legendary! I certainly got a feeling for his unparalleled sense of humor, which I got to know first-hand later.

I was out of the country for about 8 years in the late 70s and 80s but when I got back I was an adjunct teacher at Rutgers University, just at a time when Amiri was teaching there and, apparently, having some problems. I met him then and I also remember posting a little sign on the bulletin board that I can't imagine won me any popularity contests there—I wrote something like: "REMEMBER THIS: Amiri Baraka has forgotten more about poetry than most of the faculty here ever knew!" He used to play John Coltrane and Sun Ra in the hallways and I think that somehow upset the order of western civilization or something.

I then got to see him more, at readings, some visits to his house, and it was always a thrill and a pleasure. When he introduced me to his wife Amina, he said: "This is the brother that the Zionists are giving so much trouble to." Wow, that was really an honorable way to be introduced, I thought. I had the honor to introduce him on several public occasions, once at a huge festival celebrating the Black Arts Movement at Georgetown University, for his keynote lecture, and then again at the annual Olson Lecture in Gloucester, not that long before he died.

He was incredibly supportive of our work in *Lost & Found*, the publishing project that I am the founder and General Editor of. We did a lot of work on Ed Dorn and Amiri was very close to Ed and retained enormous respect for him and his work. One of our earliest projects was a selection of letters between him and Dorn, from the late 1950s to 1965, and that eventually became a book. He was very happy about that and made time for us. As always, in retrospect, one always wishes there had been more time, more occasions, but I feel very lucky to have gotten to know him at all.

Q: Would you cite him as one of the inspirations to write poetry?

AA: Absolutely, and I think that's still true. In Amiri's case, though, it wasn't just "writing poetry." It was more like Charles Olson in the sense that the intention of poetry was much wider, it had to do with finding things out, with activating knowledge, with being part of an ongoing nexus of activities. But as far as poetry goes, strictly speaking, I've been thinking about some of his poetry more and more recently. In the 1980s Ed Dorn wrote a series of poems called *Abhorrences* that a lot of people were horrified by: they were short, caustic commentaries on so-called public life. And they were a great influence on Amiri, who embarked on a series he called *Lo Coup* (definitely not Haiku) poems. Well, for the last few years, I've been writing such a series, in homage to Dorn, called *Imperial Abhorrences (& Other Abominations)*, so I've been thinking about and reading Amiri's poems.

He also had an extraordinary way of shifting registers, even within a sentence. There's a piece of his called "Something in the way of things" that I read at his memorial at the Poetry Project at St Mark's Church, and it moves from the most condensed vernacular to an almost Elizabethan elegance in a flash. I think he got a lot of that from listening to music, from concentrating on how these great geniuses, players of so-called Jazz, were able to transform the most banal tunes into great works of art. He talked about first doing a gig with Max Roach and a few other musicians and he showed up, you know, with a folder of poems, and notebooks, and they looked at him and said: "What's that?" And Amiri said, "My poems." They just laughed and said, "Nope, you have to play like us, no sheet music." So there was incredible agility and variation in his tone, I love that.

Q: What turning point(s) or phase(s) in his career strike you as the most important? Why?

AA: Ah, the proverbial $64,000 question. Of course, Amiri was like a whirling dervish in that sense, here one day and someplace very different the next. But there was a real logic to it, and he carried the load as he went from one station to another on the journey. In many ways, I think he exposed himself, maybe not all parts of himself, but many public parts of himself, in order that other people might feel permission to try something different. I think that's a big problem in how people think about him now: they have their favorite Baraka but not the whole person.

Certainly a big turn came on his trip to Cuba, something that made him fundamentally question a lot of the assumptions he had and a lot of what he was doing. There were many people, for instance in the Black Panther Party, who were deeply against his Black nationalist phase, and thought it very damaging, and ill-informed. At the same time, once he went back to Newark, he really dug his heels in, and became a real institution in and for the city. The result of that, for sure, is the fact that his son Ras is now Mayor of Newark, something that Amiri, unfortunately, didn't get to see before he passed on, even though I think he knew, in his heart of hearts, that Ras would win!

To me, all the phases are important: we have to remember that, early on, in editing *Yugen* with his then wife Hettie Jones, they really consolidated all the disparate, non-academic poets across the country, something no one before them had been able to accomplish. The publication of *Yugen* really makes possible Donald Allen's landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry*. I've found some of his less read, less popular periods—some of the more ideologically driven political work—incredibly helpful as a way to imagine ourselves out of various assumptions. Anything he wrote on music is of enormous value. His eulogies are legendary. I saw him give the eulogy for Larry Neal, it was absolutely breathtaking.

Q: Do you have any personal favorites among Baraka's work? Could you talk about one? Or any that you felt has grown in significance in time for you?

AA: That's a tough one—there are so many. His earliest story, "Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine," is something I reread all the time. It's an absolute masterpiece, and still haunting. I teach *Blues People* whenever I have the opportunity, and I teach it as part of a

group of texts that include things like Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs*, Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, Ed Dorn's *The Shoshoneans*, *The Family* by Ed Sanders, David Henderson's biography of Jimi Hendrix, and a number of others—these are what I call books of poetic knowledge, areas in which poets ventured across so-called "disciplines," particularly during the Cold War and aftermath, in order to explore something and treat it very differently than a standard academic or mainstream approach might. Interestingly, Baraka writes at the beginning of *Blues People* that it is a "theoretical" work. There is a lot involved in teaching students weaned on structuralism, post-structuralism, and every other imaginable kind of theory, to make them understand that, yes, actually, *Blues People* is ALSO a theoretical text. I love *Tales of the Out and Gone*, later fiction, especially some of the 9/11 related pieces. The piece I mentioned earlier, "Something in the way of things," is a text I have very deeply imprinted and ingrained in my head and heart.

Q: Could you comment on the politics-poetics relationship in the context of Baraka's work, which partially forms the way Baraka's work is received? Do you find that discussion fruitful?

AA: This is one of those US red herrings—there are those who like Baraka more before he became so-called "political" and those who don't like him at all before he became so-called "political." The most political poems published in the US may be those *New Yorker* poems about clams on Long Island, because they appear next to very expensive ads for luxury items, and pay more than a dollar-a-word. I think they actually pay by the column inch. But I guess they probably don't publish as many of those now since they can claim to be more *au courant*. But the ads remain, that is the context of those poems, no matter what the poems "say."

So unfortunately, the discussion is generally NOT fruitful, though it should be. But in order for it to be fruitful, most "educated" United Statesians, and I stress educated, would need to de-educate themselves of many assumptions about what politics consists of. Under the ideological reign of terror prevalent in the US, politics means "those things I don't agree with." This is the liberal middle ground of consensus through which sanctions got imposed on Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands of people. What, I ask, is the real difference between Heidegger maintaining a university post and being a member of the party during National Socialism and liberal American academics

voting for Clinton and his sanctions on Iraq? That things took place further away? So I think a fruitful discussion would have to start out with some common terms as to what is meant by the "political."

To get back to Baraka, this is very unfortunate because some of his most strident works are great instruments by which fruitful discussions might be had, but few people are willing to get past the surface of things, the assumptions behind those surfaces, and examine what intellectual work might look like from very different perspectives. The great example of this is the general reaction to his poem "Somebody Blew Up America." I find it absolutely astonishing that more people got angry about a poem, a poem, and not, let's say, a government order, a thing that actually has policy repercussions, that can bomb a country, impose sanctions, kill people, torture them, or put them in prison.

So there was more anger over the poem than over things that actually happened on 9/11 and how those things were reported: for example, was it possible for a single plane to topple a skyscraper like that? Many engineers say it wasn't. Why were all the remains of the buildings hauled off and not forensically examined? Why were claims made that fingerprints were found in areas where the temperature of the heat was high enough to vaporize aluminum and steel? Why were there gaps in the timeline of the air controllers, and a thousand other things that an informed public should have been outraged over, or at least questioned? Well, instead, people got angry about a poem.

Q: To what extent was Baraka internationally concerned with politics?

AA: I think Amiri got to a point where he was able to look to certain political situations, and writers and thinkers involved in or emerging from them, as a kind of litmus test on how to proceed from where he was. In other words, he was FROM HERE, but, of course, via Africa. So Newark, New Ark, a place that was home but never home and always home. A contradiction right off the bat. Pastoral poems out the window, not about flowers and clams like those silly old but very political *New Yorker* poems, but about what he saw out the window, in Newark: someone nodding out, a drug deal, a street walker, broken windows.

Toni Cade Bambara has this great thing where she writes: "And I understand that the world is big, that the actual and potential audience

for Black writings is wide. People in Cuba, Iran, Vietnam, Brazil, the Caribbean, New Hebrides, the Continent, all over are interested in knowing how we in the belly of the beast are faring, what we are doing, how we see things." This is a very important concept, and I think one that Amiri was acutely aware of. In other words: he drew a lot from other parts of the world, from other struggles, but he also understood that he was able to speak from, report from, a very unique position, one that could help inform the world as to things also of importance to them.

Q: Could you name poets/writers/thinkers whom you would align Amiri Baraka with? It could be across time & geography…

AA: I once did a useful thought experiment in a class in which we looked at work by writers who were all born in 1934, taking into account an interesting developmental timeline that Robert Duncan had once set up (i.e. crucial ages, nursing, standing, walking, talking etc.). So the 1934 generation would be generally walking and starting to talk by the time the Spanish Civil War starts. These include, just as the tip of the iceberg: Amiri, Ted Berrigan, Ray Bremser. Diane di Prima, Henry Dumas, George Economou, Anselm Hollo, Hettie Jones, Joanne Kyger, Audre Lorde, A.B. Spellman, and John Wieners. What was interesting about this was that, writers who at first glance might seem to have little or nothing to do with each other, might still, at some level, be addressing similar concerns.

In any case, although Amiri was a deep student of W.E.B. DuBois, and there is much to learn by looking at them in relation to each other, I think it's important to look at him in relation to Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, two people that remained very important for him. There is an extraordinary poem in *The Maximus Poems* about Amiri, whose father, like Olson's, also worked for the postal service, and it was Amiri who first published *Projective Verse* as a stand-alone pamphlet. The relationship to Dorn was more as a friend and contemporary but also someone whom Amiri trusted implicitly and through whom ideas were tested, even when they were out of touch.

And then I would say that Amiri's insight into the intellectual stance of musicians, into the positions that their music embodied, would provide an extraordinary source of cross-pollination. So that would mean looking deeply into the worlds and works of Thelonius

Monk, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and so many others, and trying to figure out how to translate their poetics into textual form.

Q: What is missing generally or understood properly in recent Baraka scholarship?

AA: In a piece that I wrote about Amiri, I quoted the great British scholar of the Indigenous Americas, Gordon Brotherston, someone whom Ed Dorn worked with closely. Brotherston wrote that "the prime function of classical texts is to construct political space and anchor historical continuity." This is an incredibly useful statement, and it would be hard to find a more classical US writer than Amiri—to begin with, he wrote in all the traditional genres: poetry, drama, and prose. And then he wrote scholarship, polemics, autobiography. One can hardly think of anyone else who did that, and had such an impact in each area. I don't think, for instance, that even such a basic concept as this is taken into account when looking at his work.

For quite a number of years, and more so as he got older, Amiri kept bringing up the value of writers he had been associated with earlier, insisting that without keeping them alive in some way, they too would get "disappeared." I'm afraid that there is some such disappearance underway with Amiri now, under the aegis of 'having gotten past all that,' the incredible "presentist" tyranny that subjugates the past to some supposed notion of progress. Unless I've missed something, this publication in Turkey would be the first such gesture, a special issue of a journal, since Amiri's passing, and it doesn't surprise me. So I think, just to begin with, that it's very important to keep exploring his archives: there is a tremendous amount of work that still needs to be published, correspondence, plays, poems, essays. We've just offered, through *Lost & Found*, a modest research stipend for a student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, to do archival work on Amiri. I truly hope something comes of it.

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