

“THIS STUFF IS FINISHED”: AMIRI BARAKA’S RENUNCIATION  
OF THE GHOSTS OF WHITE WOMEN  
AND HOMOSEXUALS PAST

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines auto/biographical, theoretical, critical, literary, and dramatic works by and about LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, primarily focusing on the eruption of “Hate Whitey” sentiment and rhetoric that characterized a decadelong cultural nationalist phase of the henceforth self-declaredly Black poet-playwright’s career. As a black militant, LeRoi Jones left his white wife and other white associates in Greenwich Village, moved to Harlem, changed his name to Amiri Baraka, converted to Islam, and started the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. This thesis contends that Baraka’s Black Arts Movement era plays emphasize negation of the value of white women and gay men, who had formed his most intimate prior cohorts, and use extreme imagery to malign, belittle, and abjure representatives of both groups as evil, ridiculous, and disgusting archetypes in an attempt to affirm the political stance of the author and preempt doubt about his level of commitment to his chosen cause during that period. Through these plays written from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, Baraka denies his own personal history and appears to protest too much the virtues of corrective Afrocentric relationships which his works fail to affirm as much as he condemns their alternatives. However, after the purgative effect of these revolutionary works, Baraka’s evolution arrived at a place where he could once again acknowledge and promote a diverse equality that included respect for the partners and peers he had abnegated. Conclusions of this research suggest connections between the personal implications of Baraka’s individual journey and prominent themes stressed in the broader field of identity politics.

To Clara Wilma Garrett (R.I.P.) and Veruca Pristine Lawrence

for showing the way

and

to RMLJ for Damascus

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

BAM Black Arts Movement

BART/S Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School

FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation

LGBT lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder

USPS United States Postal Service

## INTRODUCTION: THE VALIDITY OF IDENTITY

“Certainly if you are black, or a woman, or gay, or poor, it should be obvious that you have to struggle to simply be *who you are*. The civil rights movement, or the gay rights movement and the struggle against women’s oppression, or the anti-imperialist struggles, give open voice and paradigm to that.” – Amiri Baraka

Issues of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, and other factors of identity seem to have existed throughout history. Following an election year when most of the populace split between supporters of the first African American President of the United States and those seeking to remove him from office (many of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, challenging the Commander-in-Chief’s legal citizenship) questions of identity are as crucial as ever. Advances in the movement toward marriage equality and proposed changes in immigration laws, among other developments in current events, further contribute to the discussion.

The impulses and actions of individuals desperate to re-create themselves highlight defining aspects of identity often overlooked otherwise. Those who live within an identity without having the necessity, desire, or opportunity to question its essence rarely consider the nature of their identities. Disliking metacognition and the discomfort that can accompany the practice, too many people build entire villages in the land of denial—castle and keep, trench and moat filled with alligators ready to tear into the flesh of investigative attempts at enlightenment. The adventurous, questioning spirit must ask who decides the truth of identity. Is it something different according to each perception—those of others and self?

Anthropologist Adam Kuper describes the interaction between internal and external perspectives of identity, explaining how, from “a subjective point of view, identity is discovered



within oneself, and it implies identity with others. The inner self finds its home in the world by participating in the identity of a collectivity” (Kuper 235). He also brings up the critical multiculturalist objections to assumptions “that identity is primordial, inherited, even biologically given.” Perhaps, as he claims “both culture and identity are made up, invented, unstable discursive fabrications,” and “pursuit of identity is a desperate existential struggle to put together a life-style that can be sustained for at least a brief moment” (Kuper 239).

Pondering identity is a particular passion of mine as explained in a document I wrote earlier in my graduate school career, called “First Manifesto of the Theatre for Self-Declaration,” the introduction of which appears below:

As a bisexual, white woman, romantically involved with a black man for nearly half my life, I spend much of my time thinking about race, sexuality, and identity. The artistic works I most want to witness, support, and create, address these issues. I believe that many individuals of my generation share my concerns. We use terms like self-aware, self-determined, and self-actualized to describe the states of being we desire to achieve, living in this self-acknowledgedly postmodern, pluralistic society. We understand that such a fundamental goal as self-understanding can require a lifetime of pursuit.

As Peter du Preez explains in *The Politics of Identity: Ideology and the Human Image*, “Each person has to make something of the identity elements he finds in his community” (31). Provided with these elements, their creative use is a “personal achievement” (du Preez 32). Each individual consists of a unique combination of identity traits constructed from the blending of genetic make-up, family upbringing, societal influence, autonomous preferences, and other

factors. The presentation of authentic stories of our selves has the potential to provide unlimited original works of great variety. Consider the creative possibilities of points of view that challenge accepted norms. For example, “Gertrude Stein’s lesbian identity influenced her creation of landscape drama, in contrast to typical linear narratives” (Stone-Lawrence). Rather than conform to a plot structure that “mirrors a phallogentric sexual response cycle, leading to a single climax and resolution, not unlike riding a train down the track to its destination,” Stein’s theory promoted an “aerial view of a landscape” corresponding “to the female body with its numerous erogenous zones and capability for multiple orgasms” (Stone-Lawrence). Not only do those of us who noticeably differ (from the presumed norms promoted as traits of the majority in our culture) have alternative experiences to relate, but no one truly meets artificially homogenized standards (Stone-Lawrence).

Engaging such ideas as a result of working on my Theatre for Self-Declaration manifesto, I decided I wanted to write my master’s thesis about three significant theatre artists whom I had studied during that and the previous semester and the impact upon their work of the radical reconstructions of their personal identities. Alfred Willmore, a famous English child actor of the Edwardian era, converted to Catholicism, learned the Irish language, fictionalized an autobiography beginning with a birth in County Cork, and became Micheál Mac Liammóir, co-founder of the Gate Theatre in Dublin and a dominant presence on the Irish Republican stage for over fifty years. LeRoi Jones, a mid-twentieth century, New Jersey “Negro” living and working in Greenwich Village as a Beat poet and leftist playwright, responded to the assassination of Malcolm X by converting to Islam, leaving his white wife and biracial daughters, and moving to Harlem to start the Black Arts Movement under the name Amiri Baraka. Rachel Rosenthal, a

biological female who considers herself “a gay man in a woman’s body” (186), has played a prominent role in experimental theatre since 1955, and her eponymous company has produced more than twenty years of award-winning work dealing with gender issues as well as an entire range of human and animal rights themes.

With these three radically transformed, self-defined artists fresh on my mind, I felt like serendipity created my thesis statement for me. I planned to focus on the intersection of private and dramatic selves of these artists, studying in particular the way identity influences creative output and vice versa. Learning what led to each artist’s radical personal shift and how it altered his or her work, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of these individuals and myself. Unfortunately, the research process proved to be more arduous than expected.

Although I initially intended to survey the three as equally as possible, balancing the amount of time, pages, and sources I devoted to each, my nearly uncontrollable obsession with research (which disables my attempts to judiciously adhere to a stopping point) and the disproportionate levels of available texts resulted in something very different. Despite his understandable complaints about difficulty getting published, Baraka’s prolific output and the controversy surrounding his work and persona (combined with the demand for such content in academic libraries) resulted in my amassing a greater volume of research on him than the other two artists combined. Fortunately, I realized that dealing even-handedly with each artist was not only unnecessary but potentially crippling by artificially inhibiting the reach of my inquiry. I began comparing and contrasting the three artists’ identity quests in order to recognize shared trends, common themes, and points of departure.

Certainly, all men (even those residing in a woman's body) are created equal, and each biography involves issues of race, sexuality, nationality, politics, and self-determination in common. Professor of Art Education Charles R. Garoian's comment upon the postmodern performance art of Rachel Rosenthal as "problematiz[ing] the exclusionary practices of the modernists, combining . . . interdisciplinary practices with intercultural investigations in order to expose the hidden agendas of the cultural mainstream" with the aim of "decentralization of authority by aestheticizing ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, race, and class distinctions" is to some degree true of all of my three initial subjects (10). Each allowed his or her inner voice to overwhelm the power of birth, tradition, circumstance, societal pressures, or any other external sources. Considering the effect of self-perception upon perception in general, individual identity may be the ultimate creation from which all other art grows. Seeking proof of this argument, I intensely explored the biographies (and autobiographical writings) of each of my three artists and sought evidence of the influence of their personally crafted identities upon their creative works as well as common themes of the power of identity as a factor in their lives and works. As I studied these stories in depth, I saw how each identity quest serves a different function, the exploration of which illuminates a separate set of issues. All of this effort helped me understand the essence of each artist's transformation and its significance in terms of identity construction.

Through this process of analysis, I came to believe, at least in the case of these three individuals, that sexuality is the primary factor for identity, although nationality, race, and gender were the forms through which the artists' changes were most prominently demonstrated. The power of sexuality resembles a vector in the personal transformations and expressions of identity in the works of Mac Liammóir, Baraka, and Rosenthal. As a "force or influence,"

sexuality is the directionality that drives the individual. Applying the notion of sexuality as a vector in the sense of a trajectory, scholarship suggests Mac Liammóir moved towards his dream, Baraka executed a series of movements away from what he decided he did not want, and Rosenthal freed herself to circumvent limiting categories. Accordingly, the assembled parts of my planned thesis traced a map of these paths. However, in the process of drafting and re-drafting the various portions of *Proclamation! Choosing Nationality, Manifesting Race, and Revealing Gender through the Art of Self-Declaration: The Dramatic Lives and Works of Micheál Mac Liammóir, Amiri Baraka, and Rachel Rosenthal*, I came to the reckoning that I had sufficient content for an entire thesis on Baraka alone.

Baraka transitioned through a series of phases that, apart from a degree of interpolation, took the form of radical shifts from one extreme to another although aspects of each identity appeared in earlier and/or recurred in later periods of his life. Apparently, he, like many of his generation and predicament, required drastic steps in order to move at all. Eventually, through a course of fluctuating ambivalence, Baraka refined his definitions of friend and enemy and his categories for love and hate with the passage of time and increased understanding of himself and others. This transpired despite his initially succumbing to the common nationalist pitfall of requiring “purity at every level,” which often undermines the struggle for freedom and fails to register that, as political science professor and author Shane Phelan explains, “non-negotiable identities will enslave us whether they are imposed from within or without” (170). Later, conflict and tragedy in his family life brought him (in some cases back) to a more egalitarian ethos of greater understanding for all.

My originally intended Baraka chapters analyzed this almost Candidesque journey of experimentation and rejection of each form of identity picked up and put back down until he found one that suited him to maintain for decades. Later, through contemplation of the power of sexuality as a vector, I realized I could narrow my thesis to focusing specifically on Baraka's rejection of white women and homosexuality as reflected in his works during his cultural nationalist phase (from the mid-60's to the mid-70's) and in relation to his personal life and identity change. This approach still includes some discussion of his whole life as well as analysis of select works before 1965 and after 1974. But I mainly emphasize plays written and/or performed during his cultural nationalist phase, called "the Black Nationalist Period" per a consensus between Baraka and William J. Harris, editor of *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (xv). This separatist phase of Baraka's career followed "the Beat Period (1957-1962)" and "the Transitional Period (1963-1965)." It ended in 1974, "the year that Baraka pronounced himself a Marxist-Leninist," beginning "the Third World Marxist Period (1974- )" (Harris xv).

Presently, my revised first chapter, "The Blackification of a Former HalfWhite Negro," mainly consists of biographical narrative about Baraka. The second chapter, "Season of the Witch," details the poet and playwright's rejection of white women to embrace black women and the impact of this choice on his representation of females of both races. The third chapter, "True Bloods," deals with Baraka's cultural nationalist, macho chauvinist assertions of an unequivocal heterosexuality at odds with his associations and sympathies during his previous Bohemian phase. These illuminating contradictions highlight the irony that Baraka's emphasis on repudiation of the people and ideals he once embraced caused him to negatively focus his

thoughts and messages more strongly on what he chose to reject than what he sought to manifest. Until he succeeded in purging his revulsion, his growth for the sake of his declared values remained inhibited by his hostility. “But if this rage had *not* been expressed?” Baraka’s ex-wife, Hettie Jones, reflects in her autobiography that she has “come to see those times—and the psychological advances of the Black Power movement—as a necessary phase in African-American, and ultimately American, history” (237-38). Indubitably, Baraka’s mid-sixties to mid-seventies writings offer a number of insights into the volatile climate of those revolutionary times.

## THE BLACKIFICATION OF A FORMER HALFWHITE NEGRO

“Coal-black is better than another hue,  
In that it scorns to bear another hue;  
For all the water in the ocean  
Can never turn the swan’s black legs to white,  
Although she lave them hourly in the flood.”

Aaron the Moor

*Titus Andronicus*

Act IV, Scene ii

William Shakespeare

On the afternoon of February 21, 1965, African American poet and playwright LeRoi Jones and his white, Jewish wife Hettie Roberta (Cohen) Jones “were drinking champagne at the opening of the new Eighth Street Bookshop” in Greenwich Village (Jones 221). In her autobiography, Hettie Jones recounts that her husband was “on the paperback aisle, where Vashti, his new girlfriend, was waiting with two of his new friends. . . . young men, who called themselves poets and functioned as bodyguards, ran errands for Roi and sat with him in endless discussion” (222). News arrived of the assassination of Malcolm X, and Hettie Jones recalls that when “Roi heard of the killing he said ‘Here,’ handing me his half-full champagne glass, and the next minute, with his entourage, he was gone” (222).

After leaving his white wife and biracial daughters, LeRoi Jones relocated to Harlem and started the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. He quit drinking and smoking, converted to Sunni Islam, and changed his name to Ameer Barakat—given to him by the priest who buried



Malcolm X and meaning “the Blessed Prince” (Baraka, *Autobiography* 375-76). Later, under the influence of Maulana Karenga (the Black Power leader, Africana Studies professor, and creator of Kwanzaa) this appellation was altered into the more Bantu or Swahili form he has kept since: Amiri Baraka. Sylvia Robinson, the young African American woman who married Baraka in a Yoruba ceremony in 1967 and has remained with him to the present day, became Amina, meaning “faithful” after one of Muhammad’s wives. And Baraka felt he “was now literally being changed into a blacker being” (*Autobiography* 375-76).

Baraka’s ultimate inspiration for rejecting his Greenwich Village lifestyle, Malcolm X, in recounting his Hajj to Mecca for his autobiography, described how, despite his notoriously separatist stance, the most impressive experience of his pilgrimage was “The *brotherhood!* The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as *one!*” (388-89). Although in the past, he had “made sweeping indictments of *all* white people,” he vowed never to do that again because he realized “a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks” (X and Haley 416). Baraka mirrored Malcolm X by starting to work with white groups after his own return from a trip to Africa, but this delayed arrival at the same destination occurred a decade later. Evidently, Baraka had to strike out before finding balance, like a pendulum bouncing from one extreme to the other, breaking from the white world in order to eventually see the multicultural unity among his oppressed brothers and sisters of all races. In the 1970’s, Baraka’s plays and other statements began to embrace a unified multicultural effort to fight the forces of capitalist imperialism while continuing to provoke and demand confrontation of racist tendencies and blatant oppression in contemporary American society, but the mid-1960’s drastic enactment of his separatist ideology provided the

quintessential line of demarcation between what are frequently considered the first two of three major phases in his life's work.

Of course, not everything fits in a discrete category. Some works contain elements of a given philosophy, despite having been written before or after the predominance of that philosophy in a particular phase of his career. Others are capable of representing more than one period by the various issues they address or suggest. The term "history of fairly radical breaks" used by Baraka's contemporary, African American poet and critic A.B. Spellman, in the documentary film *In Motion: Amiri Baraka*, indicates sharply contrasting shifts although the transitions built more gradually, simmering below the surface before gushing forth, and certain themes remained constant throughout the majority of Baraka's artistic career. As he explains in his preface to *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, "The typology that lists my ideological changes and so forth as 'Beat-Black Nationalist-Communist' has brevity going for it, and there's something to be said for that, but . . . it doesn't show the complexity of real life. . . . We go from step 1 to step 2. . . . But there is real life between 1 and 2" (Baraka xi).

Viewed as a vector, the cultural nationalist phase of Baraka's career, during which he created the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, most resembles a movement away from white people, especially his wife, lovers, and other intimate associates. His plays of this period depict white females, as well as white males and assimilated blacks, as evil, ridiculous, or disgusting. This tendency first appears in pivotal work from the end of Baraka's Greenwich Village days, and vestiges of it remain discernible in plays written after his Marxist-Leninist evolution of the 1970s, but the BAM era writings contain the most extremely reactionary images and rhetoric intended to reaffirm Baraka's blackness, questioned by many of his fellow militants because of

his close personal affiliations with whites. Examination of Baraka's biography and creative output shows a progression through seemingly contradictory stances as his identity quest spiraled in a narrowing trajectory, ever closer to an integrated center self composed of the remaining traits associated with each of the divergent extremes through which his developing ideology passed over the course of his life.

Everett Leroy Jones—changed to LeRoi as a college student (Baraka, *Autobiography* 127)—was born in Newark, NJ on October 7, 1934. His family had a history of defying racism in the South before moving north. One of his namesakes, his maternal grandfather, Thomas Everett Russ, “lost a business to arson in Alabama before coming to Newark” (Jones 133). Another, his father, Coyt Leroy Jones, fled South Carolina to move in with his married sister in Newark “after he hit a white manager who tried to drag him out of his seat in a movie house for eating peanuts” (Jones 133). The young Leroy Jones grew up in a multicultural neighborhood but discovered limitations to the extent to which association with children of other races was allowed. He was subject to mistreatment by Italian bullies at the integrated high school he attended, and, through participation in cotillion, he learned about the troubling preference for “yellow” skin over brown within the African American community. The atmosphere of Howard University during his limited attendance further promoted emulation of Western European aesthetics and values (Baraka, *Autobiography*).

After leaving college at the age of nineteen, LeRoi Jones joined the Air Force, where, in defiance of the regimented order, he found comfort in books and the independent thought and self-expression they inspired. The incompatibility of mid-twentieth-century United States military service with Marxist ideology, particularly as expressed in the periodical publications to

which Jones subscribed and/or submitted his writing, led to his expulsion with an undesirable discharge after a few years and attainment of the rank of sergeant (Baraka, *Autobiography*).

Next, he immersed himself in the Greenwich Village Bohemian community of New York City, where he met Hettie Cohen and married her in a Buddhist ceremony in 1958.

The couple edited *Yugen*, their quarterly poetry magazine that published many Beat writers, and LeRoi became close with Allen Ginsberg, among others. Under the name Totem Press, the Joneses started publishing books, including *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, which LeRoi dedicated to Hettie. In this first volume of verse, LeRoi makes a point of differentiating himself as not African (Baraka, “Notes for a Speech” 47), and neither of the two poems that include Hettie’s name in their title mentions whiteness (Baraka, *Preface* 13-4). Apart from finding limited references, the uninformed reader might not clearly discern the author’s race based on the content of his poetry because LeRoi Jones infrequently refers to skin color in his work during this period.

When asked in a 1960 interview with David Ossman why his work does not give a sense of ethnic identity like that found in poems by Langston Hughes, he says:

It doesn’t lessen my feeling of being a Negro—it’s just that that’s not the way I write poetry. I’m fully conscious all the time that I am an American Negro because it’s part of my life. . . . I would deal with it when it has to do directly with the poem, and not as a kind of broad generalization that doesn’t have much to do with a lot of young writers today who are Negroes (although I don’t know that many). It’s always been a separate section of writing that wasn’t quite up to the level of the other writing. There were certain definite sociological reasons for it

before the Civil War or in the early part of the twentieth century, or even in the 30s, but it's a new generation now, and people are beset by other kinds of ideas that don't have much to do with sociology, per se. (6-7)

This statement is beyond shocking to anyone who knows about the career of Amiri Baraka. The dismissal of works by self-consciously African American writers as inferior to "other writing," presumably by white authors, absolutely contradicts the affirmation of Afrocentric black identities featured prominently (if not the primary theme) in his work for the overwhelming majority of his career. Furthermore, in retrospect, the implication that racial issues were no longer pertinent in the 1960's appears astonishing to a reader aware of both the overall political climate of that decade and the active revolutionary role the poet-playwright would play.

Decidedly, the not-as-yet Baraka would soon perform an ideological about-face.

Throughout his youth, he had found solace and inspiration in the works of mostly European authors and their descendants. At Howard, LeRoi had written poetry influenced by the Elizabethans (Baraka, *Autobiography* 120), and he lived the phenomenon about which he would later warn the intended audience of "Poem for HalfWhite College Students." In such a state of mind, an African American could find himself "gesturing like Steve McQueen" when attempting to "make some ultrasophisticated point" and might verge on "whistling [D]ixie" (221). In his autobiography, Baraka reflects that he "was 'open' to all schools within the circle of white poets of all faiths and flags" but had lost his connection to blackness (231). As evidence of how his "social focus had gotten much whiter" (231), Baraka notes that *Yugen* had started with the contributors split equally between blacks and whites, but, by the third issue, it did not publish a single black writer (223). Yet, at the time, he "could see the young white boys and girls in their

pronouncement of disillusion with and ‘removal’ from society as being related to the black experience,” qualifying them as “colleagues of the spirit” (230).

Baraka later judged that these associations prolonged his adolescence, but he did not want to become one of many “sham artists whose claim to being artists was a justification for their bohemian lifestyles” (*Autobiography* 454, 199). At the weekend-long parties Ginsberg called Jones’ “literary salon” and described as “the one place in New York where everybody met” (*In Motion*), Village literati primarily focused on their shared passion for poetry and literature, but drinking and adultery occurred, too (Baraka, *Autobiography* 227). In addition to other extramarital affairs, LeRoi had an extended relationship with the poet Diane DiPrima, who is the mother of Dominique, one of his biracial daughters, and with whom he started publishing and mailing *The Floating Bear* newsletter. Another project of theirs was co-founding the New York Poets Theatre together with several fellow artists.

LeRoi Jones had started utilizing dialogue in his poems and realized the dramatic form satisfied his urge to go “beyond” poetry into “action literature” (Baraka, *Autobiography* 274). After a 1962 student-directed Actors Studio staging of his play *The Toilet*, Lee Strasberg advised pursuit of an Off Broadway run (Jones 180). Two years later, a group established by Edward Albee showcased *Dutchman*, which gave voice to the inchoate rage of the playwright’s awakening disenchantment with the status of Blacks in White America. The play went on to have an extended run at the Cherry Lane Theatre and win the *Voice* Obie Award for Best Play of 1964 (Jones 207). It has also attained canonical status and is probably the most well-known and acclaimed work of Baraka’s career.

Following the success of *Dutchman*, LeRoi Jones spent a term in limbo, torn between worlds in his personal life. He belonged to a group of nationalists, most with white wives and lovers, who found themselves increasingly more conflicted about their need to free themselves from perceived hypocrisy and confirm their separatist identities. They disapproved of the involvement of white people on their committee while they “were all hooked up to white women” (Baraka, *Autobiography* 250). Baraka recalls, “We talked a black militance and took the stance that most of the shit happening downtown was white bullshit and most of the people were too. The fact that we, ourselves, were down there was a contradiction we were not quite ready to act upon, though we discussed it endlessly” (*Autobiography* 291).

A distance “that had never existed before” grew between LeRoi and Hettie, and he found himself subconsciously choosing black women for his liaisons (Baraka, *Autobiography* 281-82). Similarly, white male friends sensed his impending departure, which gave him pause because he still liked them but felt they could not follow where he was going (Baraka, *Autobiography* 283). Whereas he used to work or hang out with the Black Mountain crowd, now he primarily socialized with black friends (Baraka, *Autobiography* 258). This ambivalent transition continued even after the assassination of Malcolm X provided the definitive compulsion for LeRoi Jones to move; he fluctuated indecisively back and forth for a time, making mournfully guilty return visits to his wife and their two daughters. Gradually, concern for his identity as a black man and doubts about whether he could remain a revolutionary while married to the “enemy” won.

Amidst this awkward transition, *The Slave* developed alongside parallel occurrences in the playwright’s personal life. First presented at St. Mark’s Playhouse in December 1964, this drama focuses on “a black would-be revolutionary who splits from his white wife on the eve of a

race war,” and Baraka admits its basis in fact (*Autobiography* 288). In her autobiography, Hettie Jones writes about the play she terms “Roi’s nightmare” and recalls that the director used photos of the Jones children, Kellie and Lisa, in the set. The actress who played the lead female character sent Mrs. Jones “a marble black-and-white heart, with a card: ‘Thank you for Grace,’” and this “tall blond WASP” delivered a line actually uttered by Hettie in an argument with her husband: ‘I am not in your head’” (qtd. in Jones 138, 220).

The plot consists of a home invasion during which the black militant, Walker, holds his ex-wife and her new husband—a white college professor named Easley—hostage. The three characters confront each other on personal and demographic levels about a range of simmering resentments over the course of a prolonged ordeal. Walker expresses both open hostility and wounded vulnerability concerning his relationship with Grace. His dialogue ranges from the outright rage of the shouted line: “You’re mighty right I want to kill you. You’re mighty goddamn right. Believe me, self-righteous little bitch, I want to kill you” to his sorrowful disbelief that she did not understand that his “crying out against three hundred years of oppression” was not directed at her (Baraka, *The Slave* 126, 118). The playwright’s quasi-autobiographical representative shows obvious suspicion of the motives of even his most trusted of white women when he questions Grace about her use of the word “Nigger” by asking if she has held it within her for a long time. Nevertheless, aside from the emblematic significance of this interrogation of her, she is probably the most verisimilar and three-dimensional white female character of Baraka’s playwriting career. Prone to sentiment, weakness, fear, societal pressures and programming but a real person in conflict amidst a messed-up world, Grace is not an evil, ridiculous, or disgusting archetype like so many others.



Still, *The Slave* contains its share of irate material. The turmoil culminates with Walker killing Easley, and Grace dying in an explosion resulting from an attack on the neighborhood as part of the previously mentioned race war. Before she dies, Walker suggests to Grace that he has killed their two daughters, previously presumed asleep upstairs. The audience never sees the girls to know for sure what happens to them, and a child screams and cries as Walker leaves the house at the end of the play, adding to the doubt of the situation. Yet, at the very least, abandoning children in the middle of a war and disquieting the mind of their dying mother with thoughts of their murder are acts of cruelty, unless viewed from the perception of the father who thinks death is mercy compared to the fate of mixed race people in an increasingly divisive America. (Interestingly, Baraka dedicated the anthology containing *The Slave* to Dominique Di Prima and Kellie and Lisa Jones.)

Considering the inflammatory content of *The Slave*, a fellow writer friend of the playwright asked the play's white producer "if he didn't feel somewhat threatened by the play's implications" and received the response, "*Oh he's not serious. It's only a play*" (qtd. in Neal 27). However, in the context of the civil unrest and assassinations surrounding them in the 1960's and their focused determination to act upon heightened awareness of historic injustices, many adherents to Black Power ideologies, including Baraka, actually believed a real revolution was at hand. They "were trying to create an art that would be a weapon in the Black Liberation Movement" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 311). In fact, although later acquitted, the playwright was "found guilty of incitement on the basis of quotes from some of his plays read out in court" (Barrett 13).

Baraka's Introduction to *Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man* exemplifies his incendiary rhetoric of the mid-1960s with bold declarations of the sort he later described as "cloaked . . . in the starkest terms of cultural nationalism and Hate Whitey language" (Baraka, "Black Arts" 504). The passage signed with the name "Ameer Baraka" (although "LeRoi Jones" appears on the book's spine, copyright, and title page) warns, "Unless you killing white people, killing the shit they've built, don't read this shit, you wont like it, and it sure wont like you" (sic) and proudly declares, "we will change the world before your eyes" (Baraka, Introduction *Four Black* vii-viii). This 1969 essay serves its purpose in setting the tone for the collection of violent Expressionist and ritual dramas dating from 1964 to 1966.

Perhaps, Baraka heeded Clay's speech in *Dutchman* about murdering white people as the antidote to neurosis because his characters began to do so in a number of extremely gruesome ways (765). Among the eponymous four black revolutionary plays of the anthology, *Experimental Death Unit #1* provides one of the most unforgettable Barakan images of this category. After a group of black militants in the play kills two white men discovered brutally fighting over the attentions of a black whore, the "long-haired bearded Negro youths" decapitate the bodies to augment a dripping collection of white heads on pikes which they hold as standards at the front of marching ranks that wearily patrol the nighttime city streets (13, 15).

Not in this anthology but published the same year (1969), *Slave Ship* takes the beheading concept to another level. In this instance, a mob of Yorubas from the titular Middle Passage vessel targets New Tom, a deferential black preacher who speaks with a white voice and calls upon "white Jesus boss" (16-17). The one-act play ends with a riotously interactive dance number that erupts in conjunction with throwing New Tom's head into the audience (17).

Breaching the fourth wall with such intensively agit-prop chaos suits the generally very short Black Nationalist period works which have few characters—often with basic designations like “Black Man” instead of names—and plots built upon drastic deeds. The presence of the Black Panthers providing security for certain productions added an extra element of political statement delivered by the visual of “armed brothers flanking the stage in a symbolic gesture showing the links between black revolutionary art and political struggle” (Baraka, “Black Arts” 353).

In his 1966 essay, “The Revolutionary Theatre,” Baraka espouses a theatre implemented to “force change” in opposition to his perception of white liberal artists’ aesthetic demanding separation of art from politics (130, 132). Seeking to reverse the victimhood of the Western heroes in his own *Dutchman*, *The Toilet*, and *The Slave*, Baraka calls for anti-Western, “new kinds of heroes—not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what’s on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from under a thousand years of ‘high art’ and weak-faced dalliance” (“Revolutionary Theatre” 130, 132). Designed to hold oppressors accountable while uniting and empowering the oppressed, this philosophy supports the unambiguous, decisive and often permanent action and blunt messages communicated in Baraka’s cultural nationalist works.

## SEASON OF THE WITCH

“Brothers mine, take care! Take care!

The great white witch rides out to-night.

Trust not your prowess nor your strength,

Your only safety lies in flight. . . .”

James Weldon Johnson

“The White Witch”

The vilification of white women presented as archetypes became a feature of Baraka’s mid-sixties dramas, beginning with the apple-eating Bohemian temptress of *Dutchman*. Lula taunts a young black man named Clay, provoking him to break out of his bourgeois complacency and unleash the angry blues within him. After he finally does so at the climax of the play, Lula murders Clay, disposes of his body with the help of a conspiracy of black and white fellow subway passengers, writes something in her notebook, and turns her attention to a fresh “young Negro” who has just boarded the train. Obviously a mass-murdering, sinister operative for an evil force, Lula ultimately exemplifies what Baraka describes as “the seductive nature of America” and the deadly cost of succumbing to its wiles (qtd. in Reilly 257).

Several critics have identified a number of mythological, pop cultural, and literary references which embellish the presentation of Lula as an archetype of the destructive She-Devil. Charles D. Peavy notes that Lula “embodies certain characteristics of Lilith, the demon woman of the Talmudic tradition” (168). Anna Maria Chupa writes about Lula as a Destructive Bitch and Death Goddess (27). Werner Sollors explains Lula’s calling herself “Lena the Hyena” (Baraka, *Dutchman* 759), “the ugliest woman in a L’il Abner contest” incorporating “the

connotation of the animal that preys on carcasses” (129). He cites other allusions, such as “the West African goddess Erzulie,” whose lover, Damballah, the serpent god, appears in certain poems by Baraka, and “the white witch in Black America, of whom James Weldon Johnson warned his brothers” in his poem “The White Witch,” which is also the name of a ghost ship, like *The Flying Dutchman* (Sollors 129). Baraka acknowledges a degree of validity in many critical readings that suggest mythical origins for Lula, but he also admits that he drew inspiration for the character from three women in his life (Reilly 255).

One of these, Hettie, says in her autobiography that her ex-husband’s poetry “once referred to [her] as the biblical witch of Endor” (138). But Baraka’s autobiography says a woman he assigns the pseudonym “Dolly Weinberg” served as his primary template for Lula, whom he pegs as “only that crazy Dolly I’d dressed up and set in motion” (208, 277). Baraka describes the older white woman (mid-to-late thirties to his twenty-three)—a Communist, working class Bohemian who spent half her weekly check on a psychiatrist—as the first white woman with whom he ever slept. They met at a loft party, and he stayed with her a few weeks until he became involved with Hettie (208, 210, 212).

Although Baraka has indicated his ex-wife did not provide the main model for the character of Lula, when the role appears “reincarnated as Devil Lady” in *Madheart* (Peavy 169), Baraka uses her as a means of exorcising his interracial first marriage. In a 2002 interview with Joyce A. Joyce, he explains how the 1966 play that appears in the *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* anthology represents his break from white society and leaving his white wife as part of “trying to disconnect from the old kinds of ideas that Negroes have about themselves and about Black people” (139). To this end, Black Man, a resurrected and empowered Clay, takes his

revenge upon the new version of Lula. He resists the attempted seduction of Devil Lady, whose “pussy rules the world” (Baraka, *Madheart* 70), but, in an example of what Lisa Lindquist Dorr defines as endowing “the rape of white women with political meaning” (172), Black Man violently attacks the source of Devil Lady’s power by thrusting a spear and/or a bunch of arrows—choice offered by the stage directions—in her abdomen and genitals. After a ritual of gestures and the recitation of a curse, he continues in his effort at vanquishing his foe by driving a stake through her heart so deliberately that it nails her to the floor beneath her body (71).

As Devil Lady’s life force seems preternaturally immune to death, Black Man enlists the Afro-centrally beautiful Black Woman to assist in this practically interminable battle. Then, in an angry tirade, Baraka’s proxy urges Devil Lady to “Die, you bitch, and drag your mozarts into your nasty hole. Your mozarts stravinskys stupid white sculpture corny paintings deathfiddles, all your crawling jive, drag it in and down with you, your office-buildings blow up in your pussy. . .” (Baraka, *Madheart* 83-84). After, this litany of rejection of the European cultural dominance Baraka previously extolled during his collegiate and Bohemian years, Black Man finally succeeds in dispatching the cursed creature by stomping her in the face, dragging her over to the edge of the stage and dropping her off the side into exploding smoke and light (84).

More evil white women populate Baraka’s dramatic universe than just Devil Lady and her Bohemian precursor. The 1969 screenplay *Death of Malcolm X* begins with “[s]lick bohemian . . . or arty nice white girls” who, like Lula, seem programmed to support an insidious agenda. Apparently, they lure young black men into the Institute for Advanced Black Studies, where the audience witnesses as a “tall white girl bends to kiss one drugged black figure on a

stretcher, before he's wheeled away down the corridor to the operating room” for removal of his “mindsoul” and replacement of his black brain with a white one (2).

Despite the recurrence of the hip, Bohemian succubus, Baraka does not restrict his wicked white women to either this type or epic demonic figures infused with virtual immortality. The lecherous socialite posing as a philanthropist in 1975's *The Motion of History* represents supposedly respectable members of society. She even manages to carry the evil white She-Devil archetype across the border into the Third World Marxist Period determined by Baraka and the editor of *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* as starting in 1974 (Harris xv). In much the same way that Lula puts on quite a show of being down with the struggle, this white socialite ingratiates herself to a black household, claiming that only blue-collar rednecks hate blacks. She insists that all “well-mannered, Harvard-trained, articulate, Northern, rich, important, governmental, official white folks” love black people. Then, she takes one of the sons of the family off with her, presumably for sexual purposes (93).

Often, as in this case, Baraka chooses to undermine the presentation of white decency typically unquestioned in society and the media of mid-twentieth century America. His works explore the hidden urges whites outwardly denied while projecting them upon blacks. As Frantz Fanon explains in *Black Skin White Masks*, “The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest. . . . Projecting his own desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves ‘as if’ the Negro really had them” (165). Fanon goes on to claim that the black man, viewed as “the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions,” symbolizes “the sexual instinct (in its raw state).

..” (Fanon 177). Such sublimated desires support “the stereotype of the black male as a ‘black beast rapist’” (Apel 201), playing the lead role in “the fantasy of rape by a Negro” (Fanon 179).

Baraka parodies this interracial rape fantasy in what would have been a fifth play included in his *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* anthology if the publishers had not balked in fear of lawsuits because the plot presents an alternate interpretation of *The Jack Benny Show*. *J-E-L-L-O* focuses on a “long hair, postuncletom” Rochester who rebels against his subordinate role as chauffeur, servant, and pseudo friend; mugs Jack Benny; and demands what is “between them nasty thighs” of Mary, the female lead on the show, portrayed on TV by Benny’s wife (1, 25). In response to Rochester’s order, Mary vocally protests, but she “opens her arms and leans against Rochester immobile,” sighing when his hand ventures below her skirt. Once she realizes Rochester has escaped enthrallment by her mythic white womanhood—managing to steal her money bag without even touching her—she screams and becomes so flustered that she faints (25).

In much the same way that Baraka mocks Mary and her hysterical supposition, he depicts other white female characters who throw themselves at black men in search of the fabled sexual satisfaction purported to result from their mythologized, hypermasculine anatomy. Such white female characters appear as utterly foolish or completely revolting. Actually, an entire family gets in on the ludicrous jungle fever action in the 1967 play *Home on the Range*. When Black Criminal enters their home, he finds a comically incomprehensible Father, Mother, Daughter, and Son speaking a Germanic gibberish; they appear foreign, unintelligent, and immoral, characterized by some of the negative traits commonly used to malign black people (2). The arrival of a crowd of black friends of the burglar dismisses the family from their cares of



propriety. The daughter strips and frolics (7), the son crawls around on his hands and knees after a blond-haired black girl, and the father undresses beyond his heart-festooned underwear to bare himself in the nude for the dance party that ensues (13).

Highlighting such unconfessed white desires for licentiousness, Baraka also has fun giving demeaning, sexualized names to members of a chorus line of “Siren devils” in his 1971 play *Bloodrites*. “Trixie Lowlife,” “Rainbow Honeycunt,” and “Raquel Welch” attempt to impede Brother and Woman in their quest for purpose in life as the heroic black pair engage in a “death struggle” against goosestepping “Devils” who build walls and program blacks in the ways of the imperial culture (n. pag.). The juxtaposition of Eleanor Roosevelt and Jackie Kennedy among the previously named vixens steps toward reducing the first ladies to their seductive potential in a race reversal of traditional categorizations of black women as chiefly sexual beings, “stereotyped as loose and lascivious” (Apel 202).

Another method Baraka used to caricature white characters in his cultural nationalist plays was the employment of whiteface. BART/S actors implemented this technique to support their all-black aesthetic while portraying white characters (Baraka, *Autobiography* 309). Of course, in several of Baraka’s plays, assimilationist black characters cultivate Caucasian appearances, or absurd approximations of them, such as in the case of the red-haired and blond wigs respectively worn by *Madheart*’s Mother and Sister, who fawn over Devil Lady and call upon Tony Bennett, Beethoven, and Peter Gunn to save them from Black Man and Black Woman.

Whereas, at an earlier phase in his career, Baraka did not consider himself a black writer and chose not to focus on the difference in skin color between himself and his first wife, during

his Black Nationalist Period from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, race became his primary subject matter and identification of self. His works encouraged separatism as a cure for the sin of black self-denial, a dominant theme of *The Sidney Poet Heroical*. Longer and more involved than most of Baraka's angry young black man texts, its central focus is the consuming quest for a self-discovery that is all too easily thwarted when the seeker is a minority in a racist culture. Temptation, coercion, oppression, and more treacherous forces create a climate that fosters an identity crisis in all but the most blissfully delusional.

Not published until 1979, more than a decade after its writing in the late-sixties, this controversial play satirizes Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte as sell-outs (Baraka, *Autobiography* 382). Baraka's harsh criticism of Poitier, the precedent-setting crossover movie star, reveals another ironic contradiction between his adopted ideology of the 1960s and the opinions of Malcolm X, who admired Poitier for keeping his natural hair (X and Haley 65). Baraka apparently objected to Poitier's mainstream palatability—frequently assumed to result from popular perception of the actor's sexuality as non-threatening—and repeated performance of integrationist (often miscegenationist) ideals.

Early in the play, Sidney meets a black woman, Pearletta, “who holds a white mask in front of her face when she talks” (4). At this point, Sidney shows no interest in an available white woman, but he begins dating Pearletta and wearing a mask like hers (9). He also befriends Lairee Elephont, the character representing Belafonte, who asks Sidney if he wants “to be a famous nigger in the world and sleep with white women” (6). Eventually, Sidney does trade Pearletta for white women.

In Scene 16, Sidney wakes up in bed with one of these white lovers to find he has magically turned alabaster white (42). A nearly life-sized, animated version of his Oscar Award taunts him (43). As an additional example of whites debasing themselves for the sake of their fetish for exoticized blacks, the White Starlet, who stays through Sidney smacking her in her hysteria over the crudely talking Oscar, leaves when she recognizes Sidney is now white (49). Sidney learns he must constantly wear brown makeup to protect his public image, and Lairee disgusts him with the revelation that he considers his own need to wear skin-darkening makeup a small price to pay for success in the white world (62, 67).

Lairee's significant other, Juice, a grotesquely tawdry woman who insists she is not really a Caucasian (18), adds to Sidney's revulsion as she throws herself at him in a repulsive and desperate display, begging, "Kiss me Fuck me mutilate me eat me up shit me out" (71). Reveling in self-abasing horniness and shameless exhibitionism, Juice wears a micro skirt, but "sits in such a way as to show her drawerless self" (82). Her hideous display does not go unrivaled; a Chorus Girl groupie of Lairee's breaks from the line, falls to her knees, and begins to gnaw Sidney's leg (77).

This literal illustration of the commodification of black flesh by lustful whites marks the profundity of the devolution of white female characters from *Dutchman* to *Sidney Poet Heroical*. Archetypal but intelligent, self-possessed and manipulative Lula at least gives lip service to her awareness of the struggle and feeds the argument in an equal way. She shares a mutual chemistry with Clay that allows an interesting tension between the two characters to create compelling drama. Although broadly drawn in sharp relief as a foil for noble, Afrocentric exemplars, Devil Lady is sly, witty, taken seriously and respected as a threat even if reviled and ridiculed. Notably,

Juice and the Chorus Girl constitute debased, profane jokes, barely a step up from the drooling white beasts of *A Black Mass*.

Published in the *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* anthology, *A Black Mass* imagines the circumstances of the origins of white men and women as the creation of an African mad scientist. Derived from a myth told by Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad—who famously expelled Malcolm X from the organization, which makes this another curious choice for Baraka—the plot basically focuses on a wilful mishap that generates a feral, id-controlled white male beast. This loincloth clad, lizard-like creature gurgles, vomits, chews, spits, wheezes, scratches, laughs, snarls, and repeatedly exclaims the word “White!” (30-32). The Beast lunges toward three African women, “grabbing throats or trying to throw open their robes and stick his head in” (32). Tiila, played by Sylvia Jones before she changed her name to Amina Baraka, becomes infected as a result of the attack; her skin turns white, her words degrade into grunts, “and she moves like an animal robot” (33). She joins her partner monster to kill the rest of the characters in the play “with fangs and claws” before they turn on the audience, “drooling and making obscene gestures,” and leap off the stage to kiss and lick the theatre-goers (38-39).

In *Sidney Poet Heroical*, the white beast concept appears again in the shape of White Pongo, the spark that ignites Sidney's launch on his own trajectory away from the white-dominated milieu of the Hollywood film industry. In Scene 19, a Director offers SP the role of White Pongo, an ape whose hair has turned white due to radiation. Described as “intelligent” and “reasonable,” White Pongo learns to read and talk, “starts acting like a man,” and falls in love with a white woman. Sidney refuses the part (76). After this rejection, Lairee takes the part, much to the squealing delight of Juice. Rising to put on the mantle of Black Power hero, Sidney

holds a press conference about leaving the studio to make his own movies about “the history and rise of a people” (95). Then, he reunites with Pearletta, marries her in an Afro-centric ceremony, and they commit to love each other and, as Sidney puts it, “become ourselves as the vision of ourselves” (107).

This adoption of a corrective relationship with a black woman as a means of legitimating a black man as a true *blood*—a “man of the Afro-American nation” (Baraka, “Fearful Symmetry” 41)—recurs in a number of Baraka's plays, mirroring his autobiography. Conceding the ideological significance of his second marriage, Baraka reflects, “Part of the burning union of my marriage to Sylvia had been a yearning to be completely whole. To be able to struggle with my whole heart and soul, with my whole being, for what was deepest in me, which I took, then, as Blackness” (Introduction *Autobiography* xiv). The ideal couples Baraka presents in his nationalist and socialist plays consist of a black man, who is single-mindedly devoted to the struggle—the black or red cause, depending upon the period of the work—and a virtuous, Afro-centric black woman, who joins the fight as a helpmate. Amina Baraka has reflected on the political basis of her initial attraction to her husband and joked about how their mutual dedication to their cause kept them so busy that everyone wondered how they had time to conceive their five children (*In Motion*). In his autobiography, Baraka reflects that the rigorous schedules worked by couples in their movement limited their interaction with each other, which further reinforced the male chauvinism of the organization (422).

Acknowledging and lamenting this male chauvinism is a persistent focus of Baraka's 1996 introduction to the second edition of his autobiography. He admits that in the cultural nationalist movement “this male chauvinism was glorified as a form of African culture” (xiv),

and he praises the sisters in the militant organizations, who stood “shoulder to shoulder against black people’s enemies” and “also had to go toe to toe” with their men, “battling day after day against . . . insufferable male chauvinism” (*Autobiography* 387). Typically, the nationalist male role included inculcation of females in Afro-centric ways, as part of the indoctrination of fellow blacks viewed as necessary for the growth of the movement. Clashes with Amina over these issues forced Baraka to confront the macho values he had accepted as part of nationalist ethics. In his autobiography introduction, he clumsily expresses apologies, while as yet discernibly unable to let go of his anger and bitterness, despite his commendably honest soul searching.

In his 2002 interview with Joyce A. Joyce, Baraka admits his play *Madheart* “made some really kind of backward statements in terms of Black women-Black men relationships” (139). The scope of this comment surely includes a portion of the drama in which Black Man repeatedly slaps Black Woman, kisses her, and forces her down to “submit, for love” (81-82). This occurs amidst an exchange between the two about Black Man’s historic failure to protect Black Woman from rape and impregnation by white men and her long wait for him to “be a man” (82, 81). His assault upon Black Woman seems designed to symbolize Black Man’s finally claiming his presumptively rightful place as head of household, long denied by racist subjugation that deprived him of the power to support and defend his family. Afterwards, Black Man “sinks to his knees” to join Black Woman on the ground where they cry and laugh “wildly at everything and themselves” (82). This dynamic suggests a kind of familiarity, intimacy, mutual dependency, and bond in shared defiance of racial oppression that had to complicate any attempts to address the gender imbalances inherent in the Black Power movement.

Unavoidably, chauvinism was not a novel concept outside of the Black Power movement in the Sixties, nor is it extinct today. Baraka's literary partner, illicit lover and mother of one of his biracial daughters born during his East Village period, Diane Di Prima, puts this in context with her account of how other males among their fellow artists (in the supposedly progressive Bohemian atmosphere) excluded her from poetry events and publications. In her autobiography, *Recollections of My Life As a Woman: The New York Years: A Memoir*, Di Prima also describes Baraka's pre-conversion (to Islam and militancy) treatment of her and Hettie as second-class citizens. Yet, in retrospect, Baraka has questioned whether he showed "a kind of unconscious disregard for black women" when he allowed Sylvia to give birth to his child without marrying her until later, whereas he asked Hettie to marry him when he learned of her pregnancy (*Autobiography* 366). Nor would he have tried to justify polygamy as a cultural heritage to a white woman like he did in the early stages of the relationship with Sylvia when he adopted a black version of bohemianism as "a middle-class black intellectual deeply confused and legitimizing male chauvinism" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 313, 341-43).

Certainly, in a number of Baraka's plays, the white woman, treated as both object of desire and enemy, looms large. Because she is identified as the Other, she seems more independent and equal in status to the black man than is the black woman. Often, the black woman appears in Baraka's plays as an extension of the black man; a female version of his own foibles, corruption, fraudulence, delusions, or steadiness, conviction, righteousness, aspirations; a diminutive or lesser self, necessitating his guidance to overcome their shared enemy of whiteness. When she appears acting of her own will—aside from erring in need of his correction—she serves as a follower or cheering section of his leadership.

An exception to this trend appears in the 1976 play *S-I*. If Grace, as a stand-in for Hettie Jones in *The Slave*, qualifies as the most three-dimensional white female character among those collected in Baraka's readily available works, Lil Hall in *S-I* is her black female equivalent. *S-I*, a 26-scene Third World Marxist Period play, centers on a quasi-autobiographical, married, African American couple, Red and Lil Hall, who lead a communist organization struggling against the capitalist government's attempt to pass a bill that attacks the Bill of Rights by limiting the freedom of the press, allowing detention of protestors without charges, and establishing prison terms of fifteen years for belonging to communist organizations. Echoing Baraka's play-by-play of his own marital struggles confessed in the introduction to his autobiography, Lil and Red openly disagree about political matters (23). However, at the end of the play, as Red and his fellow prison inmates listen to Lil keeping hope alive on the radio, he kisses her photograph and calls her his "chief comrade in the struggle" (76).

This bit of dialogue seems to force the issue by insisting on the importance of the activist's wife's role as right-hand man. A reader might perceive the playwright as protesting too much about the suitability of his character's wife as his partner in the cause, which directly contrasts how Baraka felt his first wife, Hettie, fundamentally incapable of supporting his struggle. Ironically, Amina objected to what she viewed as preferential treatment given to Hettie in the autobiography (Baraka, Introduction *Autobiography* xxiii), which she perceived as neglecting her own importance as Baraka's partner in politics, art, and life.

Paradoxically, by focusing so much of his autobiographical writing on disputing the white wife and dismantling the incorrect impulses that he blames for his entering and staying as long as he did in his interracial marriage, and by devoting so much of his dramatic writing to



emphatically distancing himself from and abjuring white women, Baraka frequently neglects providing genuine affirmation of black love and camaraderie in his texts. The black friendships, partnerships, and romances often appear duty-bound without passion and under pressure to adhere to patriarchal structure and petit-bourgeois, cultural nationalist dogma. So serious and task-oriented, the characters rarely display any sense of joie de vivre.

In his essay “Black Literature and LeRoi Jones,” Cecil M. Brown notes that certain pivotal plays by Baraka lack “a single thread of relationship between Black and Black; rather it is Black confronting white” (32). Similarly, the majority of his texts that depict sexual or romantic relationships between men and women revolve around or feature negative renderings of interracial relationships employed as political statements: Clay and Lula, Walker and Grace, Black Man and Devil Lady, Sidney and Lairee with their white women, and even some white male/black female pairings like the mammy nostalgic white clients with the black prostitute who find themselves in the line of fire of the *Experimental Death Unit #1*. Baraka’s 1984 “Beckett-inspired” *Primitive World* seems to offer the rare exception to the absence of black-on-black sex in his plays from any period (Reilly xii).

In this apocalyptic musical, The Statesman declares white as right and will not allow the poor “black and red and brown and yellow ones” to live (7). The Money Gods, Sado and Maso enact a plan to “cancel the world” (32). However, a black Man and Woman meet, remember they know each other, reconnect, and make love (39). This frightens Sado and Maso, who realize “the niggers may reproduce” (39). Man and Woman then join a musician named Heart to gather a multicultural Life Orchestra, consisting of black, white, and Latino people, who defeat The Money Gods and Ham (The Statesman), leaving them vanquished like cockroaches on their

backs with their feet in the air (46-47). Despite this affirmation of consummated sexual attraction, the relationship between Man and Woman upholds the persistent Barakan notion of the idealized, duty-bound pair joined by a vital imperative more than an individual connection based on personal longings apart from the shared commitment to the advancement of the black race or the red cause.

The general lack of positive examples of sexual interactions between black characters in Baraka's plays may be explained by Cornel West's *Race Matters* lament about the "Catch-22 situation in which black sexuality either liberates black people from white control in order to imprison them in racist myths or confines blacks to white 'respectability' while they make their own sexuality a taboo subject" (127). West argues in favor of demythologizing black sexuality in an America obsessed with sex but afraid of black sexuality (122). He contends that the 1960's made black bodies "more accessible to white bodies on an equal basis (120), increasing opportunities for consensual interracial sex, but the myths still persisted.

As part of the role reversal that Baraka enacted concerning America's historic racist stereotypes, the sexuality depicted in most of his plays is limited to sordid images of psychologically damaged, ravenous whites humiliating themselves in their efforts to devour the black objects of their attraction. Given the history of subjugation of blacks as sexual commodities, it is understandable that Baraka would not want to perpetuate stereotyped images of black men and women, but something seems amiss about his near total omission of healthy sexual presentations of black couples. As African American feminist educator and activist Cheryl Clarke explains in an essay about the unfortunate heterosexism in works by Baraka and other nationalists, the pitfall of "trying to debunk the racist mythology which says [black]

sexuality is depraved” is that “many . . . have over-compensated and assimilated the Puritan value that sex is for procreation, occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage” (192).

Nationalist movements often ground themselves in “ideals of purity and respectability” (Tiff 316). In the case of the Black Power movement, macho was a supremely crucial trait added to the list of esteemed virtues. Baraka has expressed remorse that—fearing his leadership authority undermined by Amina’s public criticism of his policies and feeling his militant credentials compromised by the seven years spent with the white wife—he participated in sexist behavior and allowed a dangerously violent male chauvinist faction to persist in BART/S (Introduction *Autobiography* 305). After the unrelated 1984 murder of his sister, Kimako, he regretted not standing up for her more nor writing more quality black female parts for her to act and direct (Baraka, “Kimako Baraka” 50). A similar tragedy two decades later would force the playwright to reevaluate the parallel way he distanced himself from his homosexual sympathies, tendencies, and associations.

## TRUE BLOODS

“The best advice I ever got was from an old friend of mine, a Black friend, who said you have to go the way your blood beats.” - James Baldwin

In keeping with the macho emphasis of the Black Arts Movement era and its related expectation of unequivocal heterosexuality, Baraka manifested a heterosexist stance in most of his post-Bohemian plays. As with his impetus to distance himself from white women, apparently, the playwright viewed homophobic statements as necessary meditations, enabling him to uphold his resolve to separate his life from his formerly close (if not best) friends who were gay and to deny rumors suggesting his own “homosexual past” (Watts 336). As already discussed, during the Black Power era, Baraka’s commitment to his proclaimed values was called into question by his militant comrades because of his Village associations.

Additional aspersions were cast later when he broke from his cultural nationalist affiliations in favor of a return to the Marxist-Leninist leanings of his Beat Bohemian days, this time declared as an official stance (Baraka, Introduction *Autobiography* xv). Considering the tendency of mid-twentieth-century Red Scare phobias to politicize homosexuality as a partner with Communism, the duo seen as undermining “national health and security” (Eng 148), it is ironic that, as a Marxist, Baraka supported an anti-homosexual bias. But the stereotypical pairing of the two categories may have increased his paranoia about his own potential dismissal from relevance and respectability in the eyes of his recently preferred Afrocentric peers if they should make the connection. Upon his mid-1970s progression to multiculturalism instead of continued separatism and in his subsequent attempts to atone for the macho chauvinist attitudes of his cultural nationalist phase, his heterosexism persisted.

In *The System of Dante's Hell*, Baraka explains, "I put The Heretics in the deepest part of hell, though Dante had them spared, on higher ground. It is heresy, against one's own sources, running in terror, from one's deepest responses and insights . . . the denial of feeling . . . that I see as basest evil" (7). This statement seems to clarify the extreme migrations of his personal trajectories reflecting Baraka's inner conflict. As though afraid of appearing hypocritical, he became hyper-vigilant about avoiding association with what he denounced whenever he changed his alliances. Formerly sympathetic and friendly (and maybe more?) toward homosexuals in both works and interactions, Baraka began to depict homosexuals—and the concept of same sex attraction, whether suppressed subconscious desires or enacted in a consciously acknowledged practice as part of a personal identity—as evil, ridiculous, or disgusting, mirroring his presentation of white female characters analyzed in the previous chapter. An additional component of associating homosexuality with intellectualism throughout different stances expressed across the phases of Baraka's work complicates his shifting viewpoint depending upon his participation and identification with what and who he judges: gay men as misunderstood, sympathetic figures versus misguided, immoral race traitors.

"Radical groups like the Black Panthers made masculine sexuality a pivotal part of their ideology, placing sexual stereotypes at the heart of racialized political power" (Dorr 172). The proper front to present could not allow homosexual tendencies, affiliations, and sympathies. The ignorant perception of "male homosexuality as passivity, the willingness to be fucked" instead of being the one "fucking" deemed homosexuality "antithetical to the concept of black macho" (Clarke 197). Therefore, Baraka and other militants thought of homosexuality "as a symbol of a decadent establishment, as defectiveness, as weakness, as a strictly white male flaw" (Clarke

194). Charles D. Peavy interprets the “constant assertion of black masculine identity” in Baraka’s plays as occurring “usually at the expense of the white male” (168). Hence, the assimilated Sister in *Madheart* declares, “If I have to have a niggerman, give me a faggot anyday” (76), implying that such a lover would be the closest approximation available to suit her preference for Caucasians.

Further amalgamating thoughts of same-sex desire with the illness of racism, some Barakan works possibly construed as heterosexist impart an anti-lynching message; they lambast racist white males’ fetishistic fascination with the mythical power of the black penis and related desire to enact sexual violence upon the envied black male body as in lynching scenarios. Following the abolition of slavery, white dominance over black bodies continued in the form of lynching. Mobs lynched more than a thousand African Americans in the 1890’s, and the practice noticeably continued over the decades into the Civil Rights era. Castration popularly appeared in the lynching repertoire alongside tortures like whipping, cutting, and burning. In her book *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, Dora Apel calls castration “a violent and perverse homoerotic exchange” which converted the black penis into “the most highly prized lynching souvenir” (Apel 136).

Baraka mocks this fixation with the black penis in his play *Police* by presenting white policemen who react orgasmically to the suicide by “penis-pistol” of a black officer (10). The Cops ooh and aah, jumping up and down “in weird comey ecstasy” (10), and exclaim approvingly over the large size of the object of their desire (11). They carry on as if at a strip club and beg their fellow officer to insert his “penis-pistol” in his “ass” (11, 12). After Black Cop

shoots himself, the Cops fall upon his body, “slobbering” and “even eating chunks of flesh they tear off in their weird banquet” (12).

Frantz Fanon thought such fetishistic racist pathology went so far that “the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis” (170). Of course, Fanon has been accused of “linking racism with homosexuality rather than homophobia” (Eng 136), something Baraka seems to have done during certain periods of his life and career when he dismissed homosexuality as a racist pathology. However, in this case, the example does not necessarily condemn all homosexuals but more so illustrates the particular twisted, subjugating dynamic associated with lynching. In an analogous comparison, opposition to rape and sexual harassment does not dispute the good of consensual relations except in the statements of certain radical feminists who consider all sexual intercourse rape.

Other instances of heterosexism in Baraka’s plays do not necessarily indicate the playwright’s opinion as much as the expressions of the characters. For instance, in *Dutchman*, the use of the word “faggot” may merely demonstrate Lula’s crudity. The covetous she-devil who murders Clay scarcely represents a model of good behavior intended for imitation by the audience. Even so, the frequency with which such epithets occur in Baraka’s dramatic work suggests a mentality that accepts references to homosexuality as a go-to put-down. The Monkey in *Song* uses lesbianism and homosexuality as easy insults for The Postman’s family (17). In *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*, Black Voice and All call Uncle Sam “ol fag” (3). Rap, a revolutionary leader in *The Motion of History*, calls the FBI men who come to arrest him, “the Federal Bureau of Faggots” (93). Barbara, the adulterous black wife in *A Recent Killing*, verbally abuses her white lover as a “low motherless cracker faggot” (110).

Other plays unambiguously present gay men as objects of ridicule and examples of an inherent depravity endemic to white society. In *J-E-L-L-O*, Dennis Day—called a “stupid little queen” by the play’s version of Jack Benny—parallels Mary by falling prey to Rochester’s larceny then fainting with a comically protracted moan (20, 25). The “very light-skinned sissy type negro” who never lets go of his briefcase or Madison Avenue hat, even during the “wild nigger party” in *Home on the Range* is an example of the use of a negative homosexual stereotype to insult assimilated blacks (13). A gay character in the short story “The Alternative” advises his black lover to “stop being so conscious of being coloured” (152).

The conflation of homosexuality and whiteness or assimilation to whiteness are perhaps most pronounced in *The Sidney Poet Heroical*. As the title character’s career progresses, he goes “deeper into White America,” growing “faggier after each” role, and his “manner and actual complexion have whitened” (18). At a “Freaks of Hollywood” party, where Otto Preminger keeps a “Colored Girl” in leopard skin leotards on a chain, “Lairee is fingerfucking Tab Hunter,” and his now wife, Juice, “is being licked by a Young White Faggot with a gold cape.” Sidney is “joined together at the waist Siamese Twin fashion” with his *The Defiant Ones* co-star, Tony Curtis. “They do a little hop-skip dance of togetherness” (19). As the climax of the play approaches, the heterosexist epithets start flying all around. Lairee, Sidney, and a producer call the Director “fag” and “faggot” (81, 93).

In a related discourse qualifying non-procreative forms of sexual expression with women as akin to homosexual acts and significant of decreased masculinity, an angry Sidney accuses Lairee of losing his macho. He conjectures his former friend “probably done forgot really how to sock it true!” and calls him a “muff divin white ape” (80). This instance recalls a reported



salutation received by Baraka when newlywed to his white first wife: “Whatta you, eatin’ pussy now, Lee-Roy?” as a condescending reference to the popular myth that black men do not perform cunnilingus. (*Autobiography* 218).

Comparably graphic vulgarity at the expense of homosexuals perceived as effeminate appears in *A Recent Killing*. In this play, written in the summer of 1964 (Baraka, Introduction *Motion Plays* 12), Len, the quasi-autobiographical main character, is arrested for desertion because he realizes that he does not want to fight when his Caribbean air force base comes under attack. Sitting on a toilet in the stockade, among several other men also sitting on toilets, he meets Fag and Black Fag. The former, “a thin white boy, with blonde hair that seems to be dyed,” sits on an adjacent stool reading *Vogue*, prattling about fashion, occasionally “patting his hair down very daintily,” and “trying to look between Len's legs” (152). The latter, a “black boy with elaborately waved hair” and a towel “tied sarong fashion” with one leg enticingly protruding from its fold, prances about to the wolf whistles of the men in the bathroom (155).

In a sequence probably intended to inject an obscene style of comic relief while at the same time conjuring empathy for Len’s plight and commenting on the haphazard standards of military discipline, Fag announces about Black Fag: “You'd never think it to look at him now, but when this queer came into the service he could shit in a coke bottle. Now he needs a bath tub” (155). Shortly thereafter, the two fight over use of a toilet, Fag prophesying that he will “shit all over” Black Fag if unseated from his position and Black Fag threatening to rip out his friendly rival’s “cellophane hair” (156). Interestingly, despite the disparagement of these characters displayed through their distasteful dialogue, uncivilized actions, and the monikers applied to them by the script, the play contains unexpected layers within its unpleasant depiction

of these homosexuals, such as that discernible when the disgraced black sergeant, who has just called Fag and Black Fag “freaks,” declares the two “more men than most of them young officers” (157).

Indicative of Baraka’s conflicted psyche during a crucial point of the transitional phase between his Beat and Black Nationalist Periods, the play *A Recent Killing* displays an anomalous combination of sympathy and revulsion toward homosexuals. In addition to the unflattering presentation of homosexual men flirting in the military base stockade restroom, this play shows the suppressed homosexual urges of the quasi-autobiographical main character and the subjugating influence of homophobia upon him. A number of details Baraka recounts about his military experience in his autobiography match the habits and antics of Len—the “22 year old northern Negro with a few years of college. Sensitive, energetic, ‘newly’ intellectual” outlined in the character breakdown for the script of *A Recent Killing*—and his peers.

Like Len, the playwright spent most of his time on the base reading, kept books in his foot-locker, and caught grief for leaving books out and reading while on guard duty (*Autobiography* 173, 144, 166). Also, Act II, Scene iv, in which two airmen on leave have sex with a pair of prostitutes at the same time on the same bed, corresponds to an anecdote from Baraka’s true life history (*Autobiography* 173). This scenario could imply latent homosexual desire between the comrades using the whores as proxies.

Even more telling is the appearance of a famous gay literary character in Len’s fantasies. Sebastian Flyte, whom Baraka “thought . . . was marvelous” (*Autobiography* 168)—from *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh—appears in visions to Len that are strikingly similar to the spectral masturbatory aids resembling his ex-girlfriend that animate earlier scenes of the play.

Flyte taunts Len (61), clutching at his shoulders and neck (63), whispering to him in seductive purrs, and kissing him behind the ear and on the cheek (68), enticing him to admit that he is a poet and channel his thoughts into lyrical imagery and expression of his inner life. Flyte gropes Len and points at his crotch, bending down to suggestively examine it as though to prove an arousal his own words and actions have solicited from the young man (67, 121). “Slinking around Len in some kind of sexual overture,” Flyte dances and croons (121). When the siren goes off to warn of the invasion of the base, Flyte blows a kiss and leaves, his thought-provoking visit sparking the introspection that causes Len to refrain from fighting (122). Even if Flyte’s visits to Len exist solely to signify the importance of thinking for oneself and embracing the life of the mind and culture, as opposed to simply accepting stifling military rule and dependence upon authority, the scenes containing the vision of Flyte are eroticized and not framed negatively in any way. Len’s literate sensitivity struggles for supremacy over the conformist brutality of military drudgery. He defends his passion for poetry against the attacks of his peers. T. tells him he cannot be a poet because he is not a “fairy” or a “faggot” (81, 83), but Len feels a conviction to do the thing that he must, that he thinks “about doing all the time . . . to find out” his true identity (80).

Baraka would later dismiss *A Recent Killing*, his first completed full-length play, as “lyrical, searching, confused.” In his 1978 introduction to *The Motion of History and Other Plays*, he credits the work with revealing the “hidden and open horrors” of the military, “specifically the use made of people by forces that they cannot comprehend,” but he criticizes the play for approaching its liberating theme from the standpoint of “essentially petty bourgeois radicalism, even rebellion, but not clear and firm enough as to revolution.” This later perspective

berates the play's philosophical questioning of the comparative legitimacy of the word and the act. In much the same way as he promotes insurgency over contemplation in the 1966 essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," Baraka exclaims "the act is *more* legitimate, it is principal!" (Introduction *Motion Plays* 12).

This dialectic points to another of Baraka's stated purposes in writing *A Recent Killing*: "to sum up [his] burdensome trek to the 'intelligentsia'" (Introduction *Motion Plays* 12). When he left the Air Force, he went to Greenwich Village because he thought that "was where Art was being created, where there was a high level of intellectual seriousness" (*Autobiography* 185). But he eventually discovered the counterculture consisted largely of "middle-class kids getting their rocks off while they're on their way back to supporting the same grim decadent life of the U.S. rulers, just with psychedelic camouflage" (*Motion of History* 96). He decided the widely accepted presumption of Europe as "the source and site of the really serious intellectual pursuits" carried the resonance of colonialism (*Autobiography* 187). In his autobiography, Baraka lays out Fanon's theory of "how the pathological intellectuals will rush headlong, unknowing, into love of their oppressors, trying not to kill them but to be them. And discovering the trap . . . they rush again headlong, or heartlong now, into Africa of their mind" (457).

Likewise, LeRoi Jones "dashed out at full speed hurling denunciations at the place of [his] intellectual birth, ashamed of its European cast" and fled straight into Harlem—a decision his later, internationalist version of himself viewed as egotistical and naïve (*Autobiography* 326). At the time, he saw his "intellectualism" and "Western, white addictions" as "contradictions to revolution" (*Autobiography* 375). This opinion combined with what Baraka described in a 1970 interview with Theodore R. Hudson as the black community's association of homosexuality with

“a sort of avoidance of reality—a refusal to deal with reality” (76). According to Henry C. Lacey, the main character of the short story “The Alternative”—Ray from the play *The Toilet*—“epitomizes the black bourgeois malaise” and possesses an “attraction toward the homosexuals of the story . . . intended to reflect the degree to which he has been divested of self-knowledge by his ‘artsy’ and literary pursuits” (185). Disenchanted with his previous Village lifestyle, Baraka deemed the decadent Bohemian world as worthy of disparagement as the white standards inherent in the academia to which he had been exposed at the “HalfWhite” Howard University.

As part of his burgeoning separation from that environment, near the end of his transition into his Black Nationalist Period, the playwright wrote *The Slave*. In this drama, his miserable militant, Walker, disrespects his ex-wife’s husband, Easley, as a “faggot professor” (105). He also berates the white man with the emasculating names “Faggy” and “Professor No-Dick” (105, 109). Walker even merges the concepts of homosexuality and intellectualism in the same sentence when he calls Easley “that closet queen, respected, weak-as-water intellectual” (127). By this point of the transitional phase of Baraka’s career—his last play produced before his break from his Village associations, intellectualism had clearly joined the playwright’s list of targets for disparagement, but his association of intellectualism with homosexuality preceded his scorn of both.

With its more favorable portrayal of a gay man relative to a number of the other characters in Baraka’s plays, *The Baptism* (from earlier the same year as *The Slave*) features a character called Homosexual, described as a “soi-disant intellectual” (9). In this satire, Homosexual defends an adolescent boy—Jesus in disguise—against the sanctimonious judgments of a “generally ridiculous” perverted Minister and Old Woman church lady (9). Old

Woman and Minister try to take advantage of the Boy sexually, despite their stated concerns about the heresies of his blasphemy: masturbating while praying, which Boy says he does because contemplating “God always gives [him] a hard-on” (16-17). While stereotypically flamboyant, joking about being gay, and flirting with Boy or viewing him with desire, Homosexual is straight-forward about his attraction, unlike the self-righteous hypocrites condemning the boy’s natural desires. His self-sacrificing bravery earns Jesus’ appreciation, the opposite of the retributive ire the son of God visits upon the rest of the church full of sinners lacking charity (29). If *The Baptism* has a hero, he is a homosexual intellectual.

In another intertwining of intellectual and homosexual themes, the text of *The Eighth Ditch* seductively specifies the incremental stages of a homosexual interaction that eventually escalates into a gang rape in a military barracks. A dominant mentor figure concurrently schools his compliant protégé on various subjects ranging from philosophy to politics and cultural identity while introducing him to anal sex. When other soldiers who share the tent become jealous, violence ensues. The issue of *The Floating Bear* containing this play was intercepted by the authorities when delivered to a subscriber in prison. In 1961, the USPS and FBI arrested LeRoi Jones (still at the time) for “sending obscene materials through the mail,” but he successfully defended himself against the charges (*Autobiography* 251).

New York Poets Theatre, a group founded by LeRoi Jones, Diane Di Prima, and several other colleagues, including a gay couple, Alan Marlowe and Fred Herko (Di Prima 255), produced *The Eighth Ditch*, but the police closed it after a few performances (Baraka, *Autobiography* 275). Di Prima says, “LeRoi came to almost every rehearsal of his play.” She implies that through participation and observation of the process he grew substantially as a

playwright, such that he “began to write the plays he became so quickly well-known for: *The Dutchman*, *The Toilet*, and so on” (277).

Often considered “the most homoerotic play in a spate of other homoerotic or queerly valenced works by Jones/Baraka, such as *The Baptism*” (Muñoz 84), *The Toilet* shares aspects of the theme of *The Eighth Ditch*. Set in the private, all-male space of a high school boys’ bathroom, this is the tragedy of secret interracial gay lovers called out and forced to fight by their peers, in order to save face and uphold the perceived dignity of their manhood. The plot deals with what happens when a white boy named Karolis—described as “Very skinny and not essentially attractive except when he speaks” (Baraka, *Toilet* 35), in a way that somehow, despite the Caucasian part, seems reminiscent of the playwright—writes a letter to the black alpha-dog of the group. In this letter, Karolis calls Foots “beautiful” and expresses his desire “to blow him” (Baraka, *Toilet* 56). In a tables-turning revision of the lynching scenario, a group of black boys capture Karolis and drag him into the bathroom to force him to fight their leader, Foots. Loudly aggressive, Ora, second in dominance, vents violent, same-sex desires of his own, whispering “I gotta nice fat sausage here for you” into the ear of the immobile Karolis (Baraka, *Toilet* 50). Amusing himself, while awaiting the arrival of Foots, Ora suggests everyone get in line behind him to run a train on Karolis. Another boy, incongruously called Love, explains about the disgusting Ora to a shocked group member, “That’s what he does for his kicks...rub up against half-dead white boys” (Baraka, *Toilet* 50).

Once Foots arrives, feeling his status threatened by the rise of potential contenders for his throne, he cannot allow a challenge to his masculine image to go unpunished. Yet, since his posse has already rendered the white boy unconscious, he orders everyone to leave, declaring

“This stuff is finished” (Baraka, *Toilet* 56). However, Karolis gets up, determined to fight Foots, whom he repeatedly calls Ray. He says, “I’ll fight you. Right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray,” before screaming and choking a helpless Foots (59-60). Apparently, the violent attack upon their chief distracts the boys from perceiving this revelation of a homosexual affair between Foots and the white boy. They gang up on Karolis, who protests, “No, no, his name is Ray, not Foots . . . I love somebody you don’t even know,” as they beat him to the point where he can no longer move (Baraka, *Toilet* 60-61). The tragedy ends with Foots kneeling beside Karolis’ body, “weeping and cradling the head in his arms” (Baraka, *Toilet* 62).

*The Toilet* demonstrates that Baraka’s recognition of the potential for suppressed homosexual desires to explode into mob violence did not suddenly appear with 1968’s *Police*. However, unlike that satire of racist fetishism, *The Toilet* emphasizes the tragedy of the forbidden romance between two victims of violence. Such a perspective lends credence to claims about Baraka’s past identification with homosexuals. Closeted, sympathetic Ray (not so different in name from Roi), returns as main character and narrator of the short story “The Alternative,” which seems to further confirm the notion of Baraka’s empathy with the homosexual lovers in *The Toilet*.

He tells his story from a future point of view, regretting lies and denial of his identity, and wishing he could comfort the self in the story with a message of hope, essentially an “It gets better!” letter from the future to help him survive hard times and mistreatment (141). In a repetition of the phenomenon of masculinist group victimization of other males in such a way that belies desires heterosexuals would not allow themselves to express otherwise, Ray is knocked out by a dorm mate (155). He cannot prevent a group of fellow students from



lecherously peeping at and harassing a gay couple illicitly rendezvousing in their building. He laments that these bullies go on to become the distinguished political and business leaders of black America (154).

Baraka also laments the predominance of bullies and references characters from *The Toilet* in the *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* poem “Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today” when he asks: “Was James Karolis a great sage?? Why did I let Ora Matthews beat him up in the bathroom? Haven’t I learned my lesson” (15). Yet, in a 1978 interview for *Theatre Quarterly*, Baraka calls the ending of *The Toilet* “tacked on” (qtd. in Bigsby 131). He says he originally intended to end the play with the fight, but his integrationist lifestyle of the time inspired him to depict “that kind of friendship that existed across traditional social lines” (qtd. in Bigsby 131). It is notable that in his latter-day dismissal of the sentiment expressed in this drama, he conveniently bypasses any mention of the homosexual nature of the boys’ friendship.

Of course, in the same year as the production of *The Toilet*, LeRoi Jones denounced “the play’s set designer, Larry Rivers, the straight painter who was also Frank O’Hara’s art-boy, semi-rough-trade lover” (Muñoz 90). At the 1964 Village Vanguard symposium, he accused his friend of being “all over in these galleries, turning out work for these rich faggots” and attacked him as “part of the dying shit just like them!” (Baraka, *Autobiography* 279). Such “viciousness” dispelled the notion of “some intellectual and emotional connection” present between the interracial friends (Baraka, *Autobiography* 279). The rift created that day lasted twenty years, until Baraka accepted an invitation to an art exhibit of Rivers’ work (Apel 239).

Based on rumors, one might assume the hostility between LeRoi Jones and Larry Rivers resulted from jealousy. When originally produced in 1964, *The Toilet* appeared “on a double bill with a play by Frank O’Hara,” whose roommate Joe LeSueur outs Baraka in the 2002 autobiography *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara* (Muñoz 83, 85). LeSueur suggests Baraka had an affair with O’Hara, noting the two shared a bed. But LeSueur’s “bitter and vindictive” claim and admission of anger that Baraka’s autobiography referred to him as O’Hara’s boyfriend decrease the reliability of his statement (Muñoz 85). However, Diane Di Prima supports this interpretation of the friendship between Baraka and O’Hara in her *Recollections of My Life As a Woman: The New York Years: A Memoir*.

She recalls a conversation in bed when she “asked Roi to leave all this and run away. . . . He said, ‘You’re the second person who’s asked me to do that this month.’” The other was O’Hara (Di Prima 221). Di Prima also writes how, despite her acceptance of her place as only one of numerous women vying for Baraka’s affection, she feared losing him forever to a male lover, one of many she assumed he had during the two and a half years of their involvement (220, 224). Di Prima confesses that she and some of Baraka’s other female lovers had a going away party for “a wonderful (male) West Coast poet” they perceived as a greater threat to them than each other (220).

In her autobiography, Hettie Jones mentions her ex-husband’s “hidden need,” which “surfaced” when LeRoi prepared to take a trip with Allen Ginsberg and several other gay poets. He had confessed homosexual attractions and suffered anxiety about going out of town with these men, as though he were concerned about succumbing to the temptation to commit adultery with them (Jones 86). Ginsberg chided the newlyweds about their clinginess delaying departure

time, and Hettie reports, “That was at five in the evening. At five in the morning Roi called. ‘I was just thinking about you,’ he said, sounding very far away” (Jones 87).

Despite the fact that none of these suppositions conclusively proves a personal history of homosexual relationships, before he became Amiri Baraka, LeRoi Jones definitely valued a number of friendships with openly homosexual peers. His early works express an obvious sympathy and understanding of the plight of homosexuals. Other possible, veiled admissions of his own sexually ambiguous nature appear in *The System of Dante’s Hell*, in which the main character displays the full range of latent homosexuality from his youthful pastime of harassing gays, to being incited to perform sexually by a prostitute’s suggestion that he is gay, to staying with a man. Additionally, in a 1964 interview with Judy Stone, LeRoi Jones discusses his adolescent experimentation with cross-dressing in an effort to “find anything to do to satisfy myself. Neither sex, nor whiskey, nor drugs would do it” (10).

In this same interview, he praises Allen Ginsberg as the “one white man in New York I really trust. . . . I trust him and love him completely . . .” (11). The poem “One Night Stand” with its dedication “(For Allen)” has a title that seems suggestive, if a reader wants to interpret it as such, but nothing about it appears overtly sexual. That said, the line, “We have come a long way, & are uncertain which of the masks is cool” carries substantial meaning in the context of Baraka’s persistent identity quest (21). Later, reflecting upon the struggles of his transitional phase, Baraka recalls that Ginsberg, “because of his artistic model and graciousness as a teacher” was one of two white men foremost on his mind when considering which path to choose (*Autobiography* 282). Despite burnt bridges, when Baraka became a victim of near deadly police brutality during the 1967 Newark uprising, the supporters who united to mount his legal defense

included Ginsberg and James Baldwin (Woodard 67-68). Later in life, Ginsberg continued to show understanding of his friend, even while criticizing him. He called the Lyndon Larouche government propaganda naming Baraka as a CIA agent “a karmic result of Roi’s own blind anger” which Baraka may have opened himself up to because he “felt he had to be strong” (*In Motion*).

This recurring attempt to present the correct public image in keeping with his promoted political values extended to Baraka’s depiction of relationships between his characters. As previously discussed, his nationalist beliefs reinforced or directly caused his rejection of white women and an accompanying promulgation of virtuous, idealized black couples as dramatic characters. Similarly, his writing also endorsed a moderated version of the same-sex interracial friendships he once prized and sympathetically depicted in his earlier works. Written in 1975 and 1976, slightly before Baraka’s creation of the correspondingly noble Red and Lil Hall in *S-1, The Motion of History* features ostensibly platonic interracial friends.

Emerging from his Black Nationalist Period, Baraka gives these fictional young men the opportunity to redeem themselves from the purposeless hedonism of their hippie pursuits and lazy, narcotic indulgences. Once they wake up, Black Dude realizes he has been “sleeping” (probably not sexually suggestive) with White Dude, but, now that he is awake, he wants to understand the “something” that is “surging” inside him (Baraka 74). He talks about the existence of another half of himself that is not integrated (81). White Dude reveals that he is not merely white but a blend of ethnicities: Irish, Italian, Polish-Hungarian Jew, and he has a side of himself that hated, spat on, locked out, beat, and killed his other half. With “a whole bunch of motion to digest” Black Dude and White Dude agree to go home to make a difference and meet

up again a year later (112-13). These thirty-something hipsters return to their separate communities to promote a working-class revolution against the racist capitalism that they have witnessed ruling for centuries. Once reunited with their respective families, Black Dude and White Dude become Lenny Nichols and Richie Moriarty, respectively. After they each engage in labor struggles with their fellow workers, Lenny and Richie reconnect at a congress in the final scene of the play. Together, they both cheer a speaker promoting the socialist revolution (135). Written early in the Third World Marxist Period of Baraka's work, these characters are like the same-sex version of one of the many heterosexual couplings, upheld as examples of Afro-centric virtue but lacking sensuality, seen in most of Baraka's post-Bohemian plays besides *Primitive World*. As platonic brothers, these young men appear noble but lack the touchingly poignant affection witnessed between Ray and Karolis in *The Toilet*. They seem designed to reaffirm the possibilities of same-sex interracial friendships to prove themselves useful in political activism when those involved work hard, practice self-control, and remember they belong to separate communities.

Ultimately, whether or not he personally engaged in homosexual affairs, LeRoi Jones associated with and supported homosexuals before his mid-1960s to mid-1970s rejection of the related bohemian values he once embraced. Decades later, in 2003, Baraka's youngest child, Shani (his only daughter with Amina), and her lesbian lover were murdered by the estranged abusive husband of Amina's daughter from a previous marriage (Aronowitz). In the aftermath of this real life tragedy, the Barakas have expanded the scope of their political activism and "have both become ardent antiviolence activists speaking out directly on LGBT issues" (Muñoz 95). Considering Baraka's multiple works about main characters succumbing to bullies or being beat

down when they stand-up, it is a shame that it took him so long to get his fill of select fevered egos among his Black Arts Movement friends and to relinquish his own macho posturing in this regard.

Throughout the process of his personal growth, Baraka made several about-faces on his path from one extreme to another in search of his true self. This may have caused him to appear indecisive, and it has made him vulnerable to accusations of insufficient commitment to any of his chosen causes or even fraudulence. However, his Candidesque search seems to have required intermittent periods of suspension of previously fundamental values for the sake of exploring contradictory perspectives in an ongoing journey toward an elusive definition of his identity.

## **CONCLUSION: FINDING AND REFINING OUR SELVES**

“This way. The road is not there except when you move toward where it needs to be.”

- Amiri Baraka

“First Fire”

Many of us battle just to come to terms with who we are, to treat ourselves honestly, to express ourselves freely, and to enact our personhood on a daily basis. An abundance of attitudes and messages we encounter tell us some essential aspect of ourselves is a mistake; we came out wrong like the woeful inhabitants of “The Island of Misfit Toys.” We struggle to belong, our participation in society and achievements limited, unless we alter our perception and presentation of ourselves to force our appearance, speech, and behavior to conform to standards of acceptability requisite to attaining respectability. The greater the separation of one’s origins and natural state from those of the entitled set in a given circumstance, the greater the effort demanded to maintain the illusion.

Distracted by a myriad of purchasing decisions marketed as emblems of individuality, many ignore the oppressive forces seeking to deny our actual ability to define ourselves. Treated as though we are extravagant, disruptive, and egotistical just for “choosing” our identities (or choosing not to hide or maim what we consider our true beauty), we highlight our preference to look or behave in a way that comes more readily to us. Should we perpetuate harm to our psyches in order to comfort those with limited capacity to imagine or understand anything beyond their comfort zone of a world ordered to their familiar liking?

If we persist in our identity quests, after all of the effort to become (and attain a level of contentment and inner peace with) ourselves, we are refused any form of credit or recognition for

the work (or even validation that it is work), apart from the inevitable happiness we create for ourselves. According to those who make laws like a 2010 ban on ethnic studies in Arizona, the cultivation, discussion, and study of difference do not qualify as a legitimate form of productivity or as a justifiable field of scholarship. Yet, supposedly neutral standards have historically favored a majority culture presented as the norm while underrepresenting or completely neglecting the existence of minorities.

The lives and works of artists who dramatically alter their identities offer examples of the importance of identity creation. LeRoi Jones reached his greatest acclaim while transitioning from assimilation to revolution. His eloquent expressions of awakening rage then exploded into extreme reactions of outright defiance that radiated into one after another affiliation against a new enemy. Through this process, an Amiri Baraka emerged capable of harmonizing pride in his race with understanding of the shared struggle of a multicultural unity of oppressed people around the world. His journey exemplifies how thorough study of oneself is not merely narcissism but eventually leads to deeper connections with others through gaining enlightenment about oneself alone and in relation to others. Such efforts provide the foundation for art to thrive and may be the only way to ensure its authenticity.

However, sometimes the effort to separate oneself from influences, environments, and situations associated with abuse and oppression, results in angry outcries and even violent actions as part of a process through which victims become perpetrators themselves. Struggling, fighting, striving is often messy work. When they first set out, travelers do not always know where the journey will end or how they will arrive at their destination. Moving away from former associations, as Jones/Baraka did, can appear negative and hurtful. When inspired to act,



revolutionaries do not always consider the chance of unintended consequences. William Butler Yeats reckoned with this hard truth when he famously declared, “A terrible beauty is born,” in assessment of the Irish Revolution that his Celtic Twilight movement helped create (53-55).

Each individual on an identity quest must work out his or her path along the way. The best we can do is find out more about who we really are beneath everything and decide how we want to present ourselves and relate to the world. I understand about conflicted emotions that produce obstacles to following our chosen paths. My thesis process overlapped with a prolonged period of overwhelming personal adversity during which my heavy involvement in providing eldercare to my father triggered post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of unresolved family history. Through the associated turmoil, a number of my foundational beliefs were overturned. I learned I could not trust many ideas I had accepted as true for decades, if not my entire life. I began to doubt the value of my intellect because it had participated in the delusion that made me vulnerable to continued suffering. Although I may never completely recover to my former state, I know I am now stronger from facing ugly truths instead of persisting in a state of denial.

When I started working on my thesis about three artists who radically altered the presentation of their public personas in order to better communicate their inner truths, I naïvely foresaw a celebratory exploration of difference which would affirm the value of identity politics as a legitimate field of scholarship by showing evidence of the powerful influence of shifting self-perception on the evolution of creative works. I did not imagine the deep psychological ramifications of the coincidence of this proposed research with my ongoing family crises. As I struggled to sufficiently regain my mental faculties to remember, focus, and concentrate, I had to confront many unpleasant emotions from which my personally resonant subject matter would not

allow me to escape. While delving into my chosen artists' psyches, I have had to tangle with difficult questions for myself, too. How much of my rejection of heteronormativity is simply a refusal to emulate unsatisfactory role models? Do I only promote multiculturalism and racial equality because of my personal proclivities? Much like my assessment of Baraka's choices, is my own most significant long-term relationship primarily a reaction against negative past experiences? Which if any of the personal traits I view as intrinsic to my identity are essential to who I am since birth, and which if any could have easily taken an opposite form as a result of another past? I expect to continue pondering such conundrums as I devote my future to ongoing scholarship of racial and sexual themes which interface with my own life in such tangibly pertinent ways as this thesis has.

In addition to writing papers using some of the mass of research that did not make it into this final draft of my thesis, I have other projects planned. Inspired by my research into the legacy of lynching and my related interrogation of my own miscegenationist impulses, I am currently exploring themes within and around the film *Django Unchained*, the Paula Deen public relations debacle, and plantation-style tourist attractions such as remnants of the former Cypress Gardens kept alive in Legoland Florida and the Port Orleans Riverside resort of Walt Disney World (previously called Dixie Landings). I ask if the possibility exists of negotiating a non-racist nostalgia for the Old South and, if so, can it serve a purpose besides indulging dangerous fantasies and delusions supporting an unhealthy refusal to confront as yet unresolved damage from the nation's oppressive history of slavery.

Aside from such scholarship, another positive professional outcome of surviving my personal hell of recent years is the return of playwriting as a consuming passion of mine. Writing

about my PTSD nightmares and flashbacks when they distracted me from focusing on my work became a successful technique for increasing my productivity, as opposed to my previous efforts at suppressing my memories and escaping into obsession with the thesis which just led to an ever-increasing mess. Now, I have plenty of raw material I look forward to shaping into viable forms. Among these dramatic works in progress is a play which utilizes aspects of theatrical rituals by both Rosenthal and Baraka in an effort to exorcize my personal Devil Lady. Although I no longer seek to evade or deny my past and instead expect to allow it to continue to inform my future work, I want to arrive at a place where I can choose to use my memories to make meaningful contributions to discourse rather than let these situations control me. Another indispensable aspect of my chosen aesthetic as well as a constant research interest of mine is a notion I call “sublime blasphemy.” I based this concept upon the taboo topics and confrontational presentations of Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, which also stimulated the muses of Rosenthal and Baraka to incite purgative rituals of the sort I hope to enact.

Perhaps, I will directly participate in these staged presentations as well. As a result of facing private demons and secret shame the challenges of this thesis process would not allow me to deny, I no longer suffer from the extreme degrees of social anxiety and fear of scrutiny that inhibited my ability to effectively perform, present, and meet new people for the majority of my adult life. Unafraid of letting others discover truths I previously avoided accepting myself, I now own my experiences and seek opportunities to convert tragedy into triumph. As a result of this new freedom, I desire a return to acting, my first theatrical love.

Sometimes, I have thought I should have chosen a thesis topic I could keep at a distance from myself and accomplish without all of these emotional complications, but the artists I

studied have helped me value my own identity and respect the choices I have made for my own sake. Correspondingly, I can empathize with someone like Baraka who careened from rejecting the aspirations to bourgeois decency of his upbringing by embracing the counter-cultural hedonism of his bohemian associations before adopting his starkly militant cultural nationalist stance, itself later overturned. The powerful temptation to completely overhaul one's life in reaction to the sudden realization of the injustices it has fostered can be difficult to mitigate. Sometimes, in the effort to address and correct perceived wrongs, revolutionaries destroy more than their original targets, devastating parts of themselves and the good will of potential comrades.

Primarily selected for the purposes of this study based on the virtues of their extremity and hostility, offensive statements made by Baraka and negative attitudes promoted by him toward women and homosexuals during specific periods of his long career, when isolated, portray the poet and playwright as essentially bigoted and full of hate. Viewing these writings out of context (of the frequent assassinations and other politically motivated murders of civil rights leaders and activists during the 1960s and without regard to how the majority culture of those times supported sexist and heterosexist opinions) neglects the greater emphasis toward equality that predominates Baraka's works. This insight is not intended to condone or excuse any objectionable words and images but to balance their instances with the combined perspective of sympathy for the reasons Baraka felt the way he did, recognition of how he has changed since the decade in question, and awareness of the good he has done through the dedication of his life to activism.

Over the progression of time, Baraka synthesized aspects of his various phases into a lifestyle that he appears to have maintained for decades. Without as much writing readily available through polished forms of publication and critical attention, his scholars have less certainty about his mindset since the late-seventies than during the more heavily documented periods, but he seems to have achieved a degree of stability and contentment in his blended choices. Amidst the dissipation of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, he returned to his hometown of Newark where he has engaged in political activism through involvement in both election campaigns and artistic productions. He has taught in various universities although no longer “HalfWhite” Negro and remains committed to a multicultural movement against capitalism. Eventually, he defeated the majority of his sexist and heterosexist tendencies.

Richard Schechner declared Baraka “among the writers who have maintained a steady relationship with the avant-garde” (qtd. in Hudson 173). Cutting edge creates controversy, grows from it, and thrives on it. In its French origin, the term “avant-garde” refers to soldiers on the front lines: those brave, desperate, committed, or crazy enough to take the first steps into battle without the guidance or shield of others ahead of them to soften the impact of the inevitable triumph or destruction (depending upon which side prevails) caused by the clash of differing worlds. Baraka fought in many battles on different sides, deserting one for another or working as a double agent at various times. Aside from his skill with words, the insightful profundity of his thoughts, and the relentlessness of his soul searching, perhaps his greatest legacy is as a lightning rod. The man for whom even Spike Lee is an Uncle Tom (Baraka, “Black Arts” 503, 505), has reliably incited discourse for decades, fostering an intellectual climate of questioning the status quo rather than blithely accepting popular ideas as fact without consideration. Even when such

an environment includes frightening and disturbing manifestations it is more conducive to the freedom to pursue a genuine identity quest than would be a world consisting of only unchallenged, sanctioned representations. Bring it on!

## **APPENDIX: NOTE ABOUT NAMES**

I use a chronological approach to name choice in this document. Generally, I say LeRoi Jones when discussing the early decades of his life, when he went by that name, occasionally changing it up with “not-as-yet” or “soon-to-be” (or a similar qualifier) before the later name, Amiri Baraka. But when addressing the majority of his career, when he lived and worked under this chosen name, I refer to him as Baraka. However, for the sake of uniformity and avoiding confusion, I retroactively apply the name Baraka to all of his written works in citation through parenthetical reference. The name Jones in parenthetical citation only refers to Hettie Jones. Also, despite the usual convention of referring to people by just their last names after first presenting them by full name, during the portions when I discuss more than one member of the Jones family, I use first names instead or repeat full names for each instance.



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Baraka urged black artists to cease measuring themselves against the standards of the white middle class, which are bound to always end in a repression of their authentic voice and a sense of personal failure.Â May we never forget the power of the poetic as a vehicle for political change. The Academy of American Poets, while enormous in scope, legacy, and cultural significance, is a modest organization powered by a tiny, passionate team. Join me in supporting their tremendous work of poetic advocacy with a donation, which will help, among other things, digitize and make widely accessible their extraordinary analog archive. When a white woman asked him what whites could do to help blacks, he retorted, "You can help by dying. You are a cancer." In 1968, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, meaning "blessed spiritual leader."Â The reaction to Baraka in most of the black world has been very different from that in the white. In the black world Baraka is a famous artistâ€"; Whatever the reaction to Baraka, no one is left unaffected by his works.Â The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world.