Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art

David L. Smith

Few American poets have been more controversial than Amiri Baraka. Indeed, one might fairly say that Baraka's career has been a persistent chronicle of controversies, most of them having been provoked by Baraka's own deliberately incendiary polemics. He has been especially notorious for his biting critiques of liberalism and of white Americans' sexuality, for his strident black nationalism, and over the past decade, for his equally uncompromising Marxist-Leninist views. He has shocked his admirers and detractors alike not only by shifting from bohemian aestheticism to New Left politics to black cultural nationalism to a brand of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thinking, but he has even changed his name as well, from LeRoi Jones to Ameer Barakat to Imamu Amiri Baraka to Amiri Baraka. Some observers have regarded him as confused and unstable, others have hailed him as the apostle of the Black Aesthetic or as the Father of Contemporary Black Poetry. In any case, my purpose in this paper will be to examine the manifestations of Baraka's political thinking in his poetry, with particular attention to how he has conceived the implications of a political aesthetic.

Furthermore, I will try to show the specific character of both strengths and weaknesses which characterize Baraka's work as a political artist. In particular, I will try to show that Baraka's most strident and polemical poems are often not his most successful works in
political terms. As political art, his poems are strongest when grounded in historical particulars—either personal or collective—and weakest or least satisfying when based on abstractions, generalized attacks, and broad exhortations. Obviously one cannot make such claims without a premise about political art. My premise is that a poet makes his most valuable contributions to the revolutionary process by expressing vividly the particularity of a given historical situation or by showing the relationship between individual consciousness and the collective historical experience. From this perspective some of Baraka’s early poems and a few of his very recent ones appear most admirable, while many of his famous black nationalist poems appear more polemical than poetic.2

The young LeRoi Jones was the product of a black middle-class family—a bohemian artist in revolt against middle-class values. Being black, however, gave this familiar bohemian pattern an added twist, for Jones compounded the typical bohemian attacks on middle class values with even more vociferous attacks upon the Negro middle-class. His avant-garde aesthetics made him part of a tiny elite, and being black left him even more marginal.3 If Baraka had remained merely an avant-garde writer—and aesthete—this marginality might have posed no problem, for he could have continued to cultivate his own idiosyncracies without qualms. However, Baraka became politicized, and this created the central crisis of his career, as he struggled to reconcile his actual commitments—personal, social, and aesthetic—with his sense of what a black writer’s commitments ought to be. This struggle to reconcile his actual practice with his sense of social responsibility has shaped and sometimes disfigured both his writing and his life over the past two decades. It remains the most striking and definitive characteristic of Baraka’s exceptionally eventful career.

Baraka was first politicized by his trip to Cuba shortly after the Revolution. There, he realized for he first time the possibilities of fundamental social change. Also, he was personally berated by several Latin American poets in Cuba for his claims of being apolitical. In “Cuba Libre” Baraka confesses that he was moved to tears by their assaults upon his being “a cowardly bourgeois individualist” (Home, 42-43). His recent autobiography reaffirms the centrality of his Cuba experience in achieving his political transformation (Autobiography, pp. 163-166). The example of Cuba also demonstrated to Baraka the distinction between true libration and the callow reformism of the Civil Rights Movement. Eventually, he fell under the influence of Malcolm X, whose spellbinding polemics sharpened Baraka’s sense of the contradiction between his life among white bohemians in Greenwich Village and his emerging sense of commitment to Black people.

Not surprisingly, the movement from bohemian marginality to serious political engagement entailed a number of severe disruptions for Baraka. On the personal level, it ultimately led to the destruction of his marriage, because his wife happened to be Jewish. As a writer, it led him to redefine the character of his work and in some respects to abandon his own identity as an artist. No poem expresses his anxiety
in this process more poignantly than his “I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer.” Yet memorable as it is as an expression of those anxieties, the poem is even more important for what it reveals about Baraka’s conception of the entailments and risks of a political art and for how it characterizes the choices he as a poet must make.

Like most of the poems in The Dead Lecturer, this one is very oblique. The poet describes his thoughts and conveys a powerful sense of his anxiety, but he never states what issue has precipitated this crisis. The entire volume, however, is a chronicle of Baraka’s effort to replace his earlier bohemian voice with a stronger, politicized ethnic voice. Within this larger context the specific concerns of the poem become clear. The poet feels that his friends have abandoned him because of his political transformation, but even as he expresses anguish over this, his thoughts turn to the sufferings of the poor, whose “minds/ turn open/ like sores.” Confronting this ugly reality of the world, the poet’s conscience will not allow him to remain in bohemia, cultivating his luxury. All he has to offer is his writing—his “simple muttering elegance.” Yet at this same time, he cannot offer even this without turning “against all/ thought, all music, all/ my soft loves.” Consequently, he conceives political engagement in terms of tremendous self-sacrifice. He faces, in his view, the risk

that the flame of my sickness
will burn off my face. And leave
the bones, my stewed black skull,
an empty cage of failure.

It is revealing that the poem concludes with this powerful expression of self-doubt. Indeed, the poet’s earlier claim that “The Lord has saved me/ to do this, the Lord/ has made me strong” sounds like the poet’s desperate and unsuccessful attempt to persuade himself.

Why Baraka should feel such profound misgivings is not apparent from the poem itself, but to understand those reasons is essential to an understanding of Baraka’s peculiar development as a political poet. Most importantly, Baraka’s efforts to ally himself with other black people estrange him from his white friends. Because the racial polarization of American society manifested itself in especially extreme form in Baraka’s own life, he very literally had to choose sides—or so he thought. The world of Baraka’s “soft loves” is the white world of Greenwich Village, where Baraka as poet, dramatist, editor and essayist was a leading figure. Furthermore, he had published Blues People, (1963) which remains even twenty years later the finest sociological analysis ever written of Afro-American music. Yet all this, Baraka felt, was irrelevant to the needs of “the poor.” But more fundamentally, Baraka clearly associated political activism (and political writing) with ugliness and violence—with essentially anti-aesthetic impulses. After all, had he not been living “the artist’s life” and producing the highest sort of literary art? To abandon the ethos of Greenwich Village was, in his mind, to abandon art. This is why the poem begins: “They have turned, and say

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that I am dying. That/ I have thrown/ my life/ away.” Ultimately, Baraka seems to agree with the judgment of his bohemian friends. He is driven along the “wan roads” away from the Village by his conscience and conceit, feeling that he has something to offer the poor but that they have nothing to offer him. This makes him a sort of martyr.

This poem is a remarkably honest and moving expression of a man’s struggle with himself. Yet it also reveals some of the profound limitations in Baraka’s political thinking. Most obviously, it reveals a kind of self-righteousness which could easily veer off into outright demagoguery—a plunge which Baraka has taken more than once. It establishes the poet in an assumption of superiority and orients the poet toward a didactic, declarative style. Indeed, Baraka even omitted “I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer” from his Selected Poetry (1979), probably because of embarrassment over the poem’s confession of weakness. This insistence on appearing strong, on avoiding expressions of indecision or self-doubt has characterized Baraka’s poetry since about 1966, and it has limited him as a poet, both by narrowing his range of concerns and by undermining the complexity of perception and association which distinguishes poetry from polemics. Finally, considering that Baraka was a serious student of Hegel⁶ one would expect more of an understanding of dialectical development than his stark either/or attitudes in this poem suggest. He clearly values the product of a developed political consciousness over the process of a developing one. Again, this reductive tendency leads Baraka toward an overly simplified, exclusive political aesthetic which focuses on narrow areas of experience rather than toward an inclusive aesthetic which captures the full complexity of actual experience. This eventually led to a crippling redundancy in Baraka’s writing.

Despite its ambivalence, however, I would argue that “I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer” has considerable value as a political poem—specifically, as a political lyric. It is valuable precisely for its honest rendering of the difficult process of Baraka’s movement toward political commitment. The fact that the poem contains no exhortations nor attacks does not diminish its actual political value, nor does its ambivalence undermine its potential to move others toward political commitment. When we regard this poem in the context of Baraka’s career, we can appreciate much more fully his personal courage and seriousness. While the poem does not pretend to have all the answers, it presents an example which can inspire others. We know, after all, that despite his doubts and anguish, Baraka did abandon bohemia. Yet at the same time, we can see certain ideological problems implicit in his thinking—problems which carry over into his subsequent work. And no poem better exemplifies both the strengths and the weaknesses of Baraka’s political poetry than “Black Art.”

“Black Art” was first published in January of 1966. One of Baraka’s most controversial poems, it rapidly became a central icon of the Black Arts Movement, and at the same time, it also became a favorite target of those critics who regarded the black aesthetic as an anti-aesthetic. Notorious for its violent language and racial polemics,
celebrated for its programmatic clarity and declarative force, “Black Art” remains one of Baraka's most compelling and troubling poems. For anyone concerned with Baraka's conception of a black political aesthetic, this poem is a crucial document. “Black Art” has been properly regarded as the definitive statement of a new direction in Baraka's poetry. Yet paradoxically, most critics have failed to note the degree to which the poem merely reiterates concepts which Baraka had developed many years earlier. Indeed, the poem even retains significant vestiges of the liberal faith which Baraka himself has always attacked with such devastating effectiveness. The presence of so many contradictions beneath the poem's clarion rhetoric makes “Black Art” a perfect symbol of Baraka's aesthetic during the late 1960s.

From the opening line, the poem endeavors to exemplify the aesthetic principles which it advocates. When it asserts that “Poems are bullshit unless they are teeth or trees or lemons piled/ on a step,” it tries to assume the object-like quality which it recommends and substitutes blunt, forthright language for euphemism or “bullshit.” Indeed, this poem attacks conventional poetic language not just for being polite but also for being metaphorical. That is, the undesirable option, “poems are bullshit,” is clearly a metaphor—in fact, a familiar and dead one. The alternative, on the other hand, is for poems not just to resemble but to become actual physical objects in an actual and commonplace physical setting: “teeth or trees or lemons piled/ on a step.” In one sense this is simply a restatement of the objectivist manifesto expressed in Archibald MacLeish's “Ars Poetica”: “A poem should not mean but be.” Baraka, however, takes this concept to its logical extreme, espousing a poetic which appears fundamentally anti-poetic. It also presents itself as an anti-rational, as we can see in the deliberate randomness of teeth, trees and lemons. So ultimately, “Black Art” seems to be a rejection of order in favor of disorder and of art—poetry—in favor of activism, effectiveness and physicality.

The poem expresses not just a desire for poems to become physical things but more specifically for poems literally to embody and enact forms of human activity. Hence, Baraka describes poems which “fuck” and “shudder”—poems not just about “the hip world live flesh&/ coursing blood” but poems which are made of these things. In short, these words are not merely lively—they are living and impassioned. This conception takes Baraka beyond conventional objectivist aesthetics. These aggressive poems attack, kill and strip naked the enemies of black people. In other words, they engage in actual political struggle rather than simple commenting on politics. Black art, for Baraka, means art which brings about changes to improve the situation of Afro-Americans.

But interestingly, five different categories of Afro-Americans come under attack. First, the poem targets “niggers in jocks”—presumably, those blacks with nothing on their minds except sports. They need, apparently, to be mobilized for THE CAUSE. The “girdlemamma mulatto bitches”—half-white women who aspire to be all-white—are reviled in even more violent language, perhaps because they repre-
sent an outright rejection of blackness. Even worse are the politicians who sell out the interests of black folks: the “slick halfwhite politicians” and “negroleaders.” The most loathsome of these is the “negroleader” whose idea of negotiating for black people is to fellate the enemy, whom Baraka calls the sheriff. Baraka attacks all of these figures because they stand in the way of true black liberation.

Other groups also suffer the poem’s rhetorical abuse. Irish policemen and drug-peddling Italians—Baraka clearly means the mafia—because of their well-known malevolent relationship to urban black communities, are marked for death. Liberals are dispatched by their own sickness rather than by external violence. Finally, the poem attacks Jews in three separate instances. The first category, “owner-jews,” refers to Jewish slumlords and store-owners in black urban communities. The second is more oblique, since it actually targets “the Liberal Spokesman for the jews” rather than the Jews themselves. Perhaps he means the wealthier Jewish supporters of the mainstream civil rights movement—those whose financial contributions allowed them to control the policies of civil rights organizations through their liberal spokesmen. However, one can only speculate on what Baraka meant by this reference. Last, Baraka speaks of “another bad poem cracking/steel knuckles in a jewlady’s mouth,” which is the poem’s only gratuitous image of violence. (I will explain its presence later.) Still, that so many critics regard “Black Art” as an anti-Jewish poem is surprising. Such a conclusion seems to me to ignore the dominant rhetorical design of the poem.⁹

Despite a couple of lapses, the poem is generally very specific about whom it abuses and why. No one has ever accused the poem of being anti-Afro-American just because so much of its fire is aimed at Afro-Americans. Obviously Baraka has singled out specific types of Afro-Americans who deserve criticism and does not imply that they represent the majority of black folk. Similarly, nothing in the poem suggests violence toward all Irish or Italians, nor does the poem imply that all Irish are cops or that all Italians sell drugs. However, he does not shy away from making his attack on guilty parties ethnically specific, where appropriate. Two of the three references to Jews have a specific political context. Indeed, these ethnic references exemplify one important aspect of Baraka’s effort to forge a black political art. Describing how a poet works in his essay “LeRoi Jones Talking” (1964), Baraka paraphrases Charles Olson’s remark that one must “find out what part of [his] being is most valuable, and then transfer that energy . . . from where he got it on over to any reader” (Home, p. 182). In this case, Baraka is attempting to take the ethnic animosities common in black urban communities, to give them sharp political focus, and to transfer this politically informed emotion to his readers.

This strategy entails an important insight. It recognizes the importance of grounding political art in the actual experiences of the common folk rather than in abstract theories. Yet unfortunately, the strategy backfires here because the power of racism overwhelms the attempt to appropriate and to redirect racial feelings. The primary animosity
intended in the term “owner-jews” is clearly focused on the “owner”: the slumlord and exploiter. The “jew” reference is needed to provide specific grounding in actual common experience. Jews, in fact, have frequently been owners and exploiters in black communities; but politically speaking, proprietorship, not Jewishness, is the focus of antagonism.

Yet language is not easily detachable from the social and cultural conventions which ordinarily govern it. Racism is far more powerful in our culture than anti-capitalist sentiment. We don’t even have a convenient word for the latter. Consequently, “dagger poems in the slimy bellies/ of the owner-jews” is naturally read as a racist attack on Jews. Indeed, even to suggest that Baraka really means to attack proprietors will strike some readers as an evasion. Perhaps it is. Baraka needs the word “Jews” because it carries emotional force—the force, unfortunately, of racist sentiment. The words “owner,” “proprietor,” “capitalist,” etc. are weak in comparison. Our culture provides us with an effective language of oppression but not with a comparable language of liberation. Baraka struggles with this limitation, which is the main challenge facing any progressive political artist. Not surprisingly, his racially-defined polemic finally collapses back upon itself.

Interestingly, this problem manifests itself even in the structure of the poem. The poem is divided, conceptually, into two sections: an attack on the enemies of black folk and a celebration of black folk and values. Though the poem aspires ultimately to be a celebration of blackness, it devotes forty-one of its fifty-five lines to attack rather than affirmation. The negative part of the poem is much longer and also, revealingly, contains by far the better writing. Lines such as “Let there be no love poems written/ until love can exist freely and /cleanly” or “Let the world be a black Poem” are pale and tepid alongside “Black poems to/ smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches/ whose brains are red jelly stuck/ between ‘lizabeth taylor’s toes.” The latter lines adhere to Baraka’s opening call for the physicality of strong images: “Hearts Brains/ Souls splintering fire.” The former, by contrast, are vague, abstract and embarrassingly close to what Baraka’s opening line labels “bullshit.”

In one sense the unbalance of the poem reflects Baraka’s somewhat careless attempt to combine two different concepts within the same metaphor. The poem plays on the notion of “art” as magic. Hence, “black art” suggests a vindictive magic: literally, the form of voodoo which is used against one’s enemies. In fact, the cover of Baraka’s book Black Magic Poetry shows a white clay doll, blond-haired and blue-eyed, skewered with hat pins. The first section of the poem, then, functions as a hex. Baraka does not extend the metaphor effectively, however, into the affirmative section of the poem. Though real voodoo in actuality has many applications as a healing art, Baraka does not draw upon those possibilities. What he describes is more like alchemy, the art of converting base materials into precious ones. Baraka wants to transform the ugly world into something beautiful: a Black
Poem. Still, healing and transformation are fundamentally different concepts; and needless to say, alchemy, unlike voodoo, is a white art.¹⁰

More importantly, the latter part of the poem collapses because it does not draw upon equally strong emotional and cultural sources as the first part. The first section of the poem uses the shock value of vulgar language to generate part of its emotional energy. A poem beginning “poems are bullshit” shocks virtually any reader with its audacious language and its attack on traditional poetic values. Baraka calculatingly uses words commonly excluded from polite discourse—“fuck,” “pissing,” “nigger,” “puke,” etc.—to maintain this linguistic assault on the reader’s sensibility. He also draws heavily upon images of physical violence to the same end. Only a very jaded reader could encounter such language—“slimy bellies,” “eye-balls melting,” etc.—without wincing. The latter part of the poem, by contrast, uses a very sanitized language and in no way shocks or offends.

Politically speaking, Baraka depends on the passion associated with racial attitudes. I have already noted how Baraka uses attitudes toward Jews. He also taps the very deep resource of emotions attached to color differences among Afro-Americans. “Girdlemamma mulatto bitches,” for example, refers to a type of woman whom black men have traditionally both desired and resented with great passion. (As a physical image, one might envision Lena Horne.) She is fair-skinned, straight-haired, and beautiful almost by definition. Her figure is sleek, and she wears a girdle to insure that her hips don’t protrude in too Negroid a fashion. She is very sexy, and though she loves to tease, she prefers white men to black men, just as black men prefer her to darker-skinned black women. This paradigm, while not universal, is very common in the Afro-American community, and therefore it carries great emotional force. Spurning such women, as Baraka does here, is a symbolic renunciation of white-struck consciousness. Similarly, the word “negro” in this poem is equivalent to “Uncle Tom.” Baraka exploits the powerful racially defined emotions of Afro-American people to illustrate what black consciousness must despise and reject. When he affirms blackness at the end of the poem, however, none of his language is grounded in a comparable source of emotional energy. Hence, the poem’s conclusion is comparatively hollow and ineffective, however much one admires its sentiments.

Obviously, this poem has notable strengths. It states in forceful terms an objectivist, activist aesthetic, and no poem renders a more memorable catalog of the negative participants in Afro-American life. Much of the poem is, indeed, a virtuoso performance. Nevertheless, its final affirmative section falls far short of the standard established in the first forty-one lines. Much of that failure seems to follow directly from Baraka’s use of racial identification. This creates problems in part because Baraka provides no clear definition of what he means by blackness. The term seems merely to distinguish right-thinking, self-loving Afro-Americans from those other Afro-Americans who adulate or consort with white people. Such a definition is vague at best. Even more significantly, the concept of race itself functions in our culture
as an instrument of oppression. Its implications are overwhelmingly negative. Race provides Baraka with an ample source of negative energy in the poem, but it offers no basis for affirmation. To provide such a foundation for his affirmative claims, Baraka would have to draw more effectively on the diverse resources of Afro-American culture than he succeeds in doing here.

Before I proceed further, let me explain my view of race. The concept of race as we commonly know it originated as a justification of chattel slavery, and after emancipation, it served to justify the continued exploitation and oppression of Afro-American people. It is, in other words, a strategy for relegating a segment of our population to permanent inferior status and super-exploitation. Race was invented to serve the interests of our ruling class, and only the continuing hegemony of our ruling class perpetuates the viability of this arbitrary and scientifically undefinable concept. In cultural terms, race functions to deny the importance of actual historical experience by positing instead a set of ahistorical, abstract, allegedly innate characteristics as racially definitive. Hence, the idea of “the Negro” takes precedence over the particularity of Afro-Americans, both individually and collectively. Because this unchanging “racial essence” supposedly distinguishes Afro-Americans from Euro-Americans—so-called white people—we are encouraged to regard the process of historical development as—to borrow a term of Baraka’s—“the changing same.” In other words, we think of Afro-Americans as “Negroes” or black people—embodiments of an abstraction—rather than as human beings in the context of history, constantly responding to the particularities of their situation in terms of their own perceptions. Consequently, it follows that there are correct black ideas, even a correct black art. Some black people are more truly black than others. Indeed, true black people, at the end of Baraka’s “Black Art” are told to speak in a single black voice: Baraka’s voice.

In essence, Baraka’s poem argues that to be black is to be anti-white. Ironically, this is also precisely the logic of the traditional ideology of race, which serves only the interests of our bourgeoisie. Baraka’s sole innovation is to assert that blackness, rather than whiteness, is more desirable. This argument, while attacking the oppressors and their pawns, actually perpetuates the mechanisms of oppression—which is the tendency of any naive nationalism. If blackness defines itself in contrast to whiteness, then blackness depends upon whiteness for its existence—a troubling paradox. Yet Baraka did not arrive at this position through any deficiency of intelligence. Rather, he was led to this impasse by the ideology which he espoused and by his narrow adherence to it. Indeed, the conceptual basis for a more broadly defined Afro-American revolutionary art continued to be developed in Baraka’s work. For a truly revolutionary art must be grounded in the actual historical experience of the common folk, not in the ideology of the ruling class. By examining some of Baraka’s other works, we can see both how he arrived at the narrow conception expressed in “Black Art” and how he moved beyond it. We can also see some of the contradic-
tions which have hampered his own development as a revolutionary artist.

According to Baraka's own account, his political awakening came in 1959 during his trip to Cuba. Baraka's splendid essay “Cuba Libre” (1960) chronicles both Baraka's experiences in Cuba and the impact of those experiences on his political consciousness. Prior to the trip, Baraka's politics had been little more than a glib bohemian contempt for “middle-class, middle-brow” values. Realizing, as a result of his Cuban experiences, that the bohemian stance constitutes an essentially infantile form of political rebellion, Baraka makes the following critique of his fellow bohemians:

... this is probably the biggest symptom of our moral disintegration (call it, as everyone else is wont, complacency), this so-called rebellion against what is most crass and ugly in our society, but without the slightest thought of, say, any kind of direction or purpose. ... To fight against one kind of dullness with an even more subtle dullness is, I suppose, the highwater mark of social degeneracy. Worse than mere lying. (Home, p. 20)

Baraka realizes here that the difference in political understanding between his bohemian friends and the middle Americans whom they revile is mostly a matter of expressive style, not of substance. And this biting criticism applies equally to himself.

This passage, in fact, reveals a great deal about the form of Baraka's post-bohemian political thought. Most conspicuously, it reflects his persistent concern with lying and his habit of harshly criticizing liberals and literary intellectuals. Both of these tendencies remain prominent in Baraka's later work. The latter frequently manifests itself as a desire to shock liberals and literary intellectuals—an intention which Baraka explicitly announces in his “Letter to Jules Feiffer” (1961): “I am in favor of no kind of Negro protest that does not distress the kind of ethical sterility your and Mr. Harrington's liberalism represents.” (Home, p. 66) The same idea informs Baraka's comment three years later on the function of the revolutionary theatre: “It should stagger through our universe correcting, preaching, spitting craziness—but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments” (p. 211). Baraka advocates, in other words, a literary art which attacks liberal complacency—an art which outrages by being outrageous.

Of course, Baraka's interest in craziness is not merely gratuitous. He argues, rather, that the true madness is in the dominant ideology of American society. In a society where madness and depravity are the norm, a sane and virtuous person must inevitably appear to be insane. Baraka expresses this idea strikingly in his essay “LeRoi Jones Talking” (1964):

... the denial of reality has been institutionalized in America ... and any honest man, especially the artist,
must suffer for it. . . . Something else I aspire to is the craziness of all honest men. (And as another aside: one way Negroes could force this institutionalized dishonesty to crumble and its apologizers to break and run even faster than they are now would be to turn crazy, to bring out a little American dada, Ornette Coleman style, . . . and just flip, go raving in the streets, screaming in verse an honest history of America, walk off their jobs . . . and watch the country grind to a halt, the owners cracking their knuckles as they got out their gold guns and got ready to blow out their own legendary brains. It is a good, and practical, idea. Why don’t you try it, Negroes?) That is, a craziness that will make a man keep talking even after everyone else says he shouldn’t. (Home, p. 183)

This passage is extremely important, for it describes, in essence, the trajectory of Baraka’s own literary praxis since 1965.

Furthermore, it reflects with exquisite clarity the extraordinary degree to which Baraka’s conception of revolutionary politics has focused on the power of rhetorical gestures: the power of language itself to transform social reality. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Baraka’s desire to reach the masses of black people, yet what could be more singularly a poet’s faith? And what could be more self-flattering? Though this notion has affinities to the Afro-American vernacular tradition, especially as it has developed in black churches, it has even stronger affinities to the European Romantic conception of the poet, particularly as exemplified in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s work. And like Shelley, Baraka immodestly conceives himself as a visionary, prophet, and giver of laws.

It follows from this view that language, in the hands of a poet, can become literally, a weapon. This, indeed, constitutes the conclusion to Home in Baraka’s short essay, “State/Meant” (1965):

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength, and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble, curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil. (Home, p. 251)

Language, of course, is aimed at consciousness rather than at actual social structures. Though the poet, conceived in this way, becomes a sort of magician with powerful potential for both healing and destruction, Baraka’s emphasis, as I have already argued, remains overwhelm-
In keeping with this impulse to mobilize language as a weapon, Baraka has consistently displayed a penchant for the rhetoric of violence. For example, he remarks in his essay on nonviolence: “... I advocate a violence, a literal murdering of the American socio-political stance, not only as it directly concerns American Negroes, but in terms of its stranglehold on most of the modern world.” (Home, p. 151) The most revealing phrase in this passage is “socio-political stance.” In essence, the violence which Baraka advocates is verbal rather than physical—a violence directed against forms of consciousness rather than against specific social structures. Even in “Black Art,” all the violence is enacted by a poem and therefore is by definition verbal. Frequently, the violence and vulgarity expressed in Baraka’s works seems to have no justification whatsoever beyond the intention to outrage. This trait, as Werner Sollors suggests, belongs to the ethos of bohemianism, which Baraka had explicitly rejected. In this respect, his fundamental orientation had changed much less than he thought.

Similarly, the concern with lying, which I noted a moment ago, provides another indication of Baraka’s ties to liberal discourse. This concern with moral integrity and truthfulness informs not only “Cuba Libre” but much of Baraka’s early poetry as well. For example, his most famous early poem, “In Memory of Radio,” explores the most fundamental of Christian dilemmas: the knowledge of good and evil. The poem even celebrates the Shadow as a patron Saint of bohemianism (worshipped by Jack Kerouac and the poet), because he knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The poem looks back longingly toward the innocence of childhood and a world free of ethical ambiguity. In a strangely similar fashion, “Black Art” looks forward to exactly the same thing: a world cleaned out for virtue and love. Beneath its strident rhetoric, “Black Art” posits a very conventional Christian liberal vision which deviates only in its substitution of blackness for Christ (or the Shadow) as the object of worship. The notion that a commitment to honesty provides the pathway to liberation brings to mind Christ’s remark to his disciples: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Nevertheless, despite the obvious political liabilities of liberal thought, the discourse of liberalism did provide Baraka with a firm cultural grounding for much of his writing during the mid-sixties—especially in the essays collected in Home. In those essays Baraka attacks incisively many aspects of American racial oppression, such as tokenism, nonviolence (as recommended for Afro-Americans) and attitudes about race and sexuality. Baraka’s rhetoric in these essays is effective because, while it attacks the attitudes of white Americans, it does so on the basis of the fundamental values of American liberal democracy. His most telling attacks are those which expose hypocrisy and affirm Afro-Americans’ right to share in the democratic privileges of equality, liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. In this Baraka follows the tradition of powerful Afro-American spokesmen going back...
to Frederick Douglass, who have criticized white Americans by holding them accountable to their own declared ideals. While this tradition is profound and inspiring, however, it is not uniquely black in its foundations. Hence, the question remains: what was to be uniquely Afro-American in Baraka’s version of the Black Aesthetic? Furthermore, how could this become the basis for a revolutionary politics?

I would argue that the authentic blackness of Baraka’s aesthetics—and here I use blackness not as some racial abstraction but rather as a synonym for historically grounded Afro-Americanness—derives not from strident declarations or from abstract theoretical systems such as Kawaida but rather form Baraka’s appropriation of Afro-American cultural forms. By this I do not mean merely the superficial mimicking of speech patterns, which would amount to little more than an update of conventional dialect writing. Rather, I am referring to his understanding of characteristically Afro-American perspectives and modes of expression and their implicit values and social functions, which he not merely transcribes but adapts to the purposes of his literary art. Baraka is most authentically an Afro-American artist, in other words, at those times when he develops his work most effectively in terms of Afro-American cultural traditions:

The true blackness of a black aesthetic lies not in some innate racial essence or in a subject matter or in a polemical stance but rather in perspectives and modes of expression derived from the collective historical experience of Afro-American people. But obviously, the movement toward liberation must entail more than a realization of blackness, and naive nationalists have all too often substituted cultural chauvinism for a culturally grounded revolutionary politics. Baraka sometimes made this error. Paradoxically, in his attempts to take a quintessentially black stance, Baraka has frequently seized upon aspects of Afro-American culture which narrowly limited rather than maximized the range of his poetic expression.

An example of Baraka’s effectively appropriating Afro-American cultural forms can be seen in the strategy which he uses in his essay, “American Sexual Reference: Black Male” (1965). That essay begins:

Most American white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their faces are weak and blank, left without the hurt that reality makes—anytime. That red flush, those silk blue faggot eyes. So white women become men-things, a weird combination, sucking the male juices to build a navel orange, which is themselves. (p. 216)

Anyone familiar with Afro-American vernacular speech can recognize this rhetorical form as derived from the dozens. The dozens is an Afro-American verbal game in which individuals—usually males—trade sexual insults, usually with reference to each other’s female parent. Though humorous in general effect, these games often veil only slightly real antagonisms—antagonisms which sometimes erupt into violence, if
one person loses his temper. Of course, the person who loses his temper or who exhausts his ability to respond loses the game. Naturally, the dozens is played in the presence of spectators, so that the triumph and defeat—as well as the brilliance of the contest—are publicly acknowledged. Being a skilled dozens player carries as much prestige as being an accomplished street-fighter or ladies’ man. It is, among adolescents, a badge of manhood.16

Baraka draws specifically upon the dozens’ essential character as celebrations of black male sexuality. In Afro-American vernacular culture, the ultimate insult to a man is to call him a sissy or “fag,” which means not specifically a homosexual but more broadly a person who is weak, effeminate and ineffectual. The opening of this essay not only assaults the sexuality of white men, but it implicitly exalts the blackness and virility of the speaker in the eyes of a specific public: other black people. A fundamental issue of Baraka’s early career was how to move from a Euro-American elitist aesthetic to an Afro-American populist aesthetic. The rhetorical strategy of this essay demonstrates one solution: by a total appropriation of uniquely Afro-American modes of expression. Baraka pursued this rhetorical strategy in much of his work after 1965. Obviously, one of Baraka’s objectives was to inspire black people and to do so from the perspective of fundamentally Afro-American cultural values. This, it seems to me, constitutes a major positive aspect of his aesthetic strategy. Nevertheless, this strategy involved no new insights. Lanston Hughes had been doing as much and more for forty years. Besides this, to assert one’s blackness does not automatically free one from society’s structures of domination. After all, blackness in our culture is inherently a category of the oppressed.

This weakness is compounded by the fact that so much of Baraka’s political writing is informed by a hidden personal agenda: namely, an obsession with self-vindication. Part of the stridency of Baraka’s pro-black, anti-white polemics clearly derives from his desire to persuade both other blacks and himself that the former bohemian has shed his white skin. For example, his line in “Black Art,” “Another bad poem cracking/ steel knuckles in a jewlady’s mouth,” makes sense to me only as a veiled reference to his former wife. This ugly symbolic action asserts the poet’s rejection of his past love for whiteness and presumably reassures his black audience that the poet has repented. Yet his symbolic gesture is a dishonest as it is distasteful, for in the context of “Black Art” it suggest that this so-called “jewlady” is an enemy comparable to the other enemies whom the poem attacks. This certainly is not the case, yet Baraka presents his gesture of self-vindication as if it were actually relevant to the struggle for Afro-American liberation. Indeed, the rhetoric of blackness serves here as a kind of smoke-screen, allowing Baraka to disguise the exorcism of his personal demons as an act of revolutionary violence.17

Similarly, the macho rhetoric which Baraka often uses serves to divert attention away from sexual anxieties which he had expressed earlier in his career. Baraka refers in The Toilet, The System of Dante’s Hell, and “Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today” to his own
adolescent homosexual experiences. Baraka's use of the dozens grounds him in Afro-American vernacular culture, but it also allows him to avert any questioning of his own sexuality by attacking other peoples' first. There is no reason why political poems should not serve personal interests, but in Baraka's case, the blurring of personal and collective interests in works which purport to be impersonal is problematic, if not flatly dishonest.

In particular, the form of Baraka's rhetoric can easily mislead people. His tendency to indulge in a rhetoric of violence is deeply grounded in factors specific to his own personal history: especially in his commitment to shock white liberals. Furthermore, his rhetoric is frequently self-referential and his violence aimed inward at things which he wishes to exorcise from his own consciousness. But if the character of his political utterances is based at least as much on his own psychological needs as on a sober assessment of collective social needs, then what is the relationship between the rhetoric of his poems and actual social praxis? This problem was greatly exacerbated by Baraka's insistence upon promoting his own rhetorical utterances and offering himself to the public as a political spokesman and leader.

The most explicit example of this problem is Baraka's poem "Black People!" written in 1966 and published in 1967. "Black People!" presents itself as an exhortation to black folks to riot and loot, saying "you cant steal nothin from a white man, he already stole it he owes/you anything you want, even his life." Even more ominously, he writes: "We must make our own/ World, man, our own world, and we cannot do this unless the white man/ is dead. Let's get together and kill him my man." The argument of this poem makes explicit notions which were implicit in "Black Art." When Baraka was arrested on a firearms charge during the Newark riots of 1968, the judge read this poem to justify giving Baraka the maximum sentence. Baraka's conviction was overturned after an outcry from various writers and civil liberties groups. But anyone else caught following Baraka's advice would not have gotten off so easily. Viewed as a symbolic statement of defiance, the poem is mildly interesting and effective; but viewed as an exhortation, it is exceedingly dangerous and irresponsible. Baraka himself eventually came to deplore such poems as pointlessly provocative. Nevertheless, with a few notable exceptions, most of Baraka's political poems have been either attacks on whites and Uncle Toms or exhortations for black people to rise up and create a better world—or a combination of the two. Though many of these poems from his nationalist phase are powerful compositions, Baraka did not, in my opinion, create at that time a political art commensurate with his talent.

Much of Baraka's narrowness as a political poet, I would argue, resulted directly from two factors: the legacy of his bohemian phase and the intrinsic limitations of the naive nationalism which he espoused in the late 1960s. Both of these influences had the same negative effect: they discouraged Baraka from making serious use of the rich and diverse tradition of political art in our century. Earlier in his career, Baraka's dogmatic adherence to a modernist aesthetic led him to
dismiss virtually all previous Afro-American writing as “the imitation of the useless ugly inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind” (Home, p. 115). During his nationalist phase, Baraka further dismissed virtually all white writers. Consequently, he cut himself off from precursors such as Lanston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht, Cesar Vallejo, and other political poets whose work could have provided him with useful models. He ended up trying to create a political aesthetic virtually ex nihilo.

Another peculiarity of Baraka’s earlier political poetry is that it virtually never addresses specific issues or struggles. It lacks particularity, except when he decides to attack an individual such as Nixon, Kenneth Gibson, or Nikki Giovanni. Paradoxically, this lack of specific address made Baraka’s political poetry somewhat redundant, as it expounded again and again upon a few general themes. In fact, despite his celebrations of Afro-American music and vernacular culture, Baraka’s political poems have rarely even acknowledged our long tradition of struggle. Rather, the poems exhort black people to begin struggling. But this, it seems to me, reveals a certain condescension, an inadequate understanding of Afro-American history, and a detachment—mental if not physical—from the actual day-to-day lives of Afro-American people. Even conservative black poets, such as Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks, showed greater concern in their poems with Afro-American history than Baraka; and June Jordan, among others, wrote poems much more deeply rooted in the common experiences of black folk. One sometimes senses that Baraka tried to be a leader of the people without fully immersing himself in the lives of the people.

Baraka’s turn to Marxism did not remedy all of these problems, but Marxism provided Baraka the impetus he needed to develop his talents more broadly. Baraka began reading Mao in 1973 and in 1974 he announced his rejection of black nationalism in favor of what he called “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung Thought.” He appears to have been especially influenced by Mao’s Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature, and certainly the following observation by Mao cannot have been lost on Baraka: “our artists and writers should work in their own field, which is art and literature, but their duty first and foremost is to understand and know the people well.”20 And this, by extension, includes knowing the people’s history. Baraka’s writings since 1974 show clearly that he has remedied the ahistorical dogmatism of his nationalist period. His play The Motion of History (1975) is a lengthy pageant, tracing the history of black and multi-racial struggles against oppression in the United States. The play S-1 (1976) treats the struggle against the current reactionary movement of our government. Similarly, essays such as “The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature” (1978) and “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle” (1980) show that he has been reading extensively the works of black writers. Baraka now claims Langston Hughes—not Charles Olson or Melville—as his most important influence.22

Actually, the influence of Langston Hughes is not discernible in Baraka’s recent poems. Many of them have been crudely didactic and
heavily laden with Marxist jargon—poems with titles like “All Reaction Is Doomed!!” “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” and “The ‘Race Line’ Is a Product of Capitalism.” Some of these poems make one feel that Baraka has merely traded dogmatic nationalism for dogmatic Marxism and that perhaps he has abandoned the idea of being a poet. On the other hand, “Soundings,” written for an occasion called “Poetry Against the End of the World” in May, 1982, is one of the most powerful and moving poems Baraka has ever written.23 Furthermore, his poem “In the Tradition,” which was recorded with musical accompaniment by the jazz musicians David Murray and Steve McCall, is Baraka’s most successful attempt to date at integrating culture and politics, the past and the present, and celebration and struggle.24 For that reason, I would like to conclude with a few remarks on that poem.

Even the opening lines suggest the richness and complexity of this poem’s achievement:

Blues walk weeps ragtime
Painting slavery
Women laid around
working feverishly for slave master romenos
as if in ragtime they spill
their origins like chillers (lost chillen
in the streets to be
telephoned to by Huggie
Bear from Channel 7, for the White Shadow
gives advice on how to hold our homes
together . . .

Baraka links slavery to the contemporary mass media and the rape of black women to the destruction of black families by using blues, jazz (the word “walk” refers to a style of jazz bass playing), and ragtime to suggest the continuity of Afro-American experience. The good liberal White Shadow is ironically compared to the slave master Romeos (rapists, in actuality) to suggest how much the forms of oppression have changed without changing the fact of oppression. The tears of line one become the paints of line two, and the transparent pun on “laid” sets up the implied pun on “working feverishly,” which comments on what labor means for slave women. Blues, jazz and ragtime all tell this same story, the poet implies. Baraka has never written lines of greater poetic density.

More importantly, however, this poem encompasses some new political perceptions, which are expressed by the following lines:

. . . Tradition of For My People Margaret Walker & David Walker & Jr. Walker & Walker Smith Sweet Ray Leonard Rockin in Rhythm w/Musical Dukes What is this tradition Basied on, we blue Black Wards strugglin against a Big White Fog, Africa people, our fingerprints are everywhere on you america.

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He links the poet, political activist and musician via their common name: Walker. The rhythm of an Ellington tune links the boxer Ray Leonard to the Duke himself. Count Basie becomes the bass line of the tradition, and the struggle against oppression links the playwright Douglas Turner Ward (himself named for two great revolutionaries) to his predecessor Theodore Ward, author of The Big White Fog. The theme of Afro-American history, the poem's closing lines say, is “Sing! Fight! Sing! Fight!” And as the lines above indicate, the struggle has not been futile. Black fingerprints cover America. American music is “nigger music.” This vision of continual struggle and partial triumph is quite different from the usual view of Baraka's earlier poems. Furthermore, the poet himself becomes reintegrated into history rather than remaining a detached commentator. He becomes a participant in that struggle rather than a guru goading others on. Finally, the poem views revolution as a process long in the making, not as some future event.

“In the Tradition” represents a synthesis of Baraka's efforts to become a historically grounded, revolutionary Afro-American poet. It combines the use of Afro-American music and American popular culture, which characterized much of his early work; the use of Afro-American vernacular speech motifs from his nationalist phase; and the emphasis on struggle and historical consciousness from his Marxist phase. Whether Baraka will continue developing in this positive direction or not remains to be seen. It seems, however, that in Marxism he has finally discovered a conceptual framework which can help him to resolve his old contradictions. In becoming less dogmatically and exclusively “black,” he has escaped the mystifications and self-aggrandizing postures of his nationalist phase and has found the means to become an Afro-American revolutionary poet in the broadest sense. Yet to become dogmatically Marxist instead is no panacea. The obvious challenge for him now will be to develop beyond the rather crude, Stalinist version of Marxism which sometimes disfigures his work. “In the Tradition” demonstrates that when Baraka espouses a vision worthy of his intelligence, he still can write poetry worthy of his exceptional talent.

Williams College

NOTES

of biographical information, especially in contrast to Baraka's highly fictionalized autobiography. See p. 61. Don N. Menchise, "Leroy Jones and a Case of Shifting Identities," "College Language Association Journal," 20 (December, 1976) is one example of the sort of reaction which Baraka's name-changing provoked.


3 For an especially acute discussion of this theme, see Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest.

4 Baraka's account of this relationship in the autobiography is especially unsatisfactory (pp. 188-200). He never even correctly identifies Hettie Cohen, calling her, instead, Neille Kohn. Actually, his play The Slave gives a much more plausible—though still fictionalized—expression of the personal traumas which this dilemma entailed. Hudson's interview with Hettie, (Hudson, p. 237-38) is especially revealing. The poem was published in Baraka, The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp. 59-60.


7 Betty J. Collier and Louis N. Williams, "Black Revolutionary Literature of the Sixties: The Eurocentric World View Recycled" "Minority Voices 2" (1978), 57-66, comments on this tendency among black writers generally, but the authors do not focus on Baraka or on "Black Art."

8 Oddly, despite its notoriety, critics have given little close attention to "Black Art." Many, such as Larry Neal, simply cite it as an important revolutionary manifesto. Kimberly Bentson, who provides insightful readings of so many of Baraka's poems, mentions "Black Art" only in passing. Sollors calls attention to its Anti-Semitic overtones, but while his analysis of the poem is very astute, he devotes only two paragraphs to it. (Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest, pp. 198-99.)

9 Indeed, the label of Anti-Semite continues to dog Baraka an entire decade after he renounced the racist polemics of his black nationalist phase. See, for example, Amiri Baraka, "Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite," "The Village Voice" 25, (December 17-23, 1980), 1.

10 Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilism" also blends these forms of magic. See Baraka, The Dead Lecturer, pp. 61-64.

11 Interestingly, the issue of color-coded consciousness is a central theme in Baraka's autobiography. He uses the color framework of white-yellow-brown-black as a device to indicate both fixed forms of consciousness and the movement of his now consciousness. The story of his life, hence, becomes a quest for authentic blackness.

12 On this question, I agree substantially with analyses presented in Ashley Montague, Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White

Partly in response to this problem, Baraka espoused the Kawaida doctrine—an allegedly African value system—articulated by Maulana Karenga. See Raise Race, pp. 133-46. This, however, was hopelessly romantic—just another theory with no grounding in reality. Baraka eventually abandoned Kawaida. See Autobiography, pp. 248-56.

See Bentson, Baraka: The Renegade, xviii.

I am in agreement here with the argument which Stephen Henderson presents in the introduction to his Understanding the Black Poetry, (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

Revealingly, Baraka devoted a good deal of attention to the dozens in his autobiography. See Baraka, The Autobiography, the first chapter, especially pp. 13 and 23.

Judging from his mean and insulting comments about “Nellie Kohn” in the autobiography, it would appear that some of Baraka’s demons still haunt him. His description of her as “a little fat white wife, cute as a kewpie doll full of popcorn” (p. 317) is cruel and unnecessary by any standard.

His poem “Black Dada Nihilismus” in Baraka, The Dead Lecturer illustrates this tendency.


See the introduction to Baraka, Hard Facts in Selected Poetry, p. 238.


Baraka’s interview with D. H. Melhem, “Revolution: The Constancy of Change,” Black American Literature Forum (Fall, 1982), provides a revealing and concise reassessment of Baraka’s career. Indeed, it is in many ways a more useful document than his autobiography.
