LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and the Limits of Open Form

Only ideas, and their opposites.
Like, he was really nowhere. ("A Poem for Speculative Hipsters," Transbluesency 110)

In a well-known passage from his autobiography, Amiri Baraka—then called LeRoi Jones—remembers a moment in which his own fascinations run headlong into the sort of ill-defined ideological wall with which culture can tend to divide us. Jones at this point is not yet a published poet, playwright, and critic, but rather a twenty-two-year-old college dropout stationed in Puerto Rico, a "weather gunner" in the U.S. Air Force. Just as feelings of class alienation at Howard University have led him to seek refuge in the Air Force, so now his alienation from the Air Force's bureaucratic tedium and structures of "class and caste" have led him to seek refuge in literature. A year or so before, a visit to a literary bookstore in Chicago had awakened in Jones a fascination for difficult poetry and prose, and in Puerto Rico he has been reading Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Melville, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, cummings, and Pound, among others. He has also begun keeping a journal, "writing poetry more regularly," and submitting poems to the literary magazines he has recently discovered: The New Yorker, Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly, and the "Partisan, Hudson, [and] Kenyon reviews" (Autobiography 103-04, 117).

Yet this passage from Baraka's autobiography isolates a new feeling of alienation, one that we are told penetrates his incipient literary consciousness as he wanders through San Juan with his New York Times and his New Yorker:

I'd stopped at a bench and sat down near a square. It was quiet and I could see a long way off toward the newer, more Americanized part of the city, the Condado Beach section, where I could only go if in uniform, so they would know I was an Americano and not a native. I had been reading one of the carefully put together exercises The New Yorker publishes constantly as high poetic art, and gradually I could feel my eyes fill up with tears, and my cheeks were wet and I was crying, quietly, softly but like it was the end of the world. I had been moved by the writer's words, but in another, very personal way... I was crying because I realized that I could never write like that writer. Not that I had any real desire to, but I knew even if I had had the desire I could not do it. I realized that there was something in me so out, so unconnected with what this writer was and what that magazine was that what was in me that wanted to come out as poetry would never come out like that and be my poetry. (118)

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Baraka wrote his autobiography during forty-eight weekends in 1979, a good five years after he began his turn to Third World Marxism and long after this mid-1950s moment in Puerto Rico. This passage is a careful reconstruction of a particular moment of revelation, one that is political in nature though not yet translated into the fully politicized terms the writer has access to in 1979. Thus, for instance, though the young LeRoi Jones of this passage understands that people of color can circulate freely in certain sections of San Juan only if they are American soldiers, he does not, at this point, articulate any sort of (even preliminary) postcolonial critique of such segregation. Nor does he attribute his alienation in the face of this “carefully put together exercise” to race or class, but instead to something within him “so out” that the verse he is reading somehow excludes him and to the fact that this particular verse form and magazine will never express what is “in” him.

Yet his social position in a U.S. context—he knows himself as a member of the African American lower middle class—becomes clearer as the passage continues:

The verse spoke of lawns and trees and dew and birds and some subtlety of feeling amidst the jingling rhymes that spoke of a world almost completely alien to me. Except in magazines or walking across some campus or in some house and neighborhood I hadn’t been in. What was so terrifying to me was that when I looked through the magazine, I liked the clothes, the objects, the general ambiance of the place, of the life being lived by the supposed readers and creators of the New Yorker world. But that verse threw me off, it had no feeling I could really use. I might carry the magazine as a tool of my own desired upward social mobility, such as I understood it. I might like some of the jokes, and absolutely dig the soft-curving button-down collars and well-tailored suits I saw . . . But the poem, the inside, of that life chilled me, repelled me, was impenetrable. And I hated myself because of it yet at the same time knew somehow that it was correct that I be

myself, whatever that meant. And myself could not deal with the real meanings of the life spelled out by those tidy words. (118)

As Baraka remembers it in 1979, The New Yorker’s poetry of the mid-1950s becomes a site of intense fascination and alienation. A cultural text with its own formal attributes and social and material associations, the poetry functions as a complex discursive and ideological space, one that seems at first to promise opportunities for movement across racial and class lines but then turns suddenly to guard and reinforce these divisions. Though LeRoi Jones has been interpelled as a subject by The New Yorker (as a reader of poems and a consumer of culture and style) this particular poem alienates him in a way that reminds him that he does not now have, nor should he expect in the future to have, full access to the kinds of comfort and cultural capital the magazine symbolizes. Together, the poem and magazine seem to encourage his desire for upward mobility and the pleasures of consumption while simultaneously reinforcing the very class distinctions used to limit his social and cultural pretensions. In other words, it is fine (perhaps even desirable) to have a young black man in the mid-1950s aspire to craft the poetry and sport the tailored suits of The New Yorker, as long as that same poetry makes him feel his difference from those who can expect to read and write such poetry more “naturally,” as a kind of social, racial, and economic birthright.

While this moment of alienation feels painful, there is something empowering here as well, a clear sense of resistance to an ideological process that, according to some accounts, would have LeRoi Jones accept his place as an obediently racialized lower-middle-class laborer. One finds in this passage a stubborn refusal to succumb to self-hatred or to accept fully the shame that grows from socially constructed desires to be something that one cannot (or will not be allowed to) become. Add to this refusal the simul-
taneous acknowledgment that it remains unclear exactly what it "means" to "be oneself": "I hated myself...yet at the same time knew somehow that it was correct that I be myself, whatever that meant" (my emphasis). To convey the experience of subjectivity made suddenly self-aware in a moment of shock, Baraka employs a paradoxical language of "inside" and "out" in this passage, a complex and metaphorical language that makes relationships among "interior" identity, "exterior" stimuli, and their articulation through poetry seem at once provisional and also somehow inevitable. This language allows him to communicate a powerful but unspecified sense of anticipation for future forms, a sense of striving to put inside the poem that thing inside himself that is so out it causes him to feel the pain of exclusion. Though the "what was in me that wanted to come out as poetry" will "never come out like that," this passage assures us, it will inevitably discover the form it needs to "come out" on its own complex and contradictory terms.

Keeping in mind this autobiographical representation of the literary politics, cultural desires, and peculiar sense of anticipation of the mid-1950s, I want to revisit Jones/Baraka's poetic and editorial activity during the late 1950s and early 1960s. I hope to renew critical interest in a set of texts in which politics and aesthetics intersect with exceptional force, often in spontaneous and experimental outbursts whose social meanings are manifold and unsettling. This essay provides illustrations of the aesthetic and theoretical maneuvers Jones/Baraka employs to strike out not only against the New Critics' normative vision of poetry (a vision invoked by the "jingling rhymes" and "tidy words" of those "well put together exercises The New Yorker publishes...as high...art") but also against liberal stances toward politics and identity, stances Jones perceives as ideologically inseparable from New Critical approaches to literature. As we consider Jones's co-production of The Floating Bear, a small literary newsletter he edited with Diane di Prima in 1961 and 1962, we are reminded again of the opposing political valences attached to the New Criticism and to the movement toward "open" form—two competing poetic, cultural, and ideological modes of the postwar moment.

However, while much of what I argue in this essay will confirm previous accounts of the conservative politics of New Critical institutions and poetics, my descriptions of Jones/Baraka's early work are also meant to trouble the easy opposition between New Critical conservatism and the radical freedom offered by an "open" aesthetic. As we think further about the conflict between the "closed" poetic forms favored by the New Criticism and the "open" forms championed by contributors to The Floating Bear, we should ask ourselves what shared assumptions structure this conflict from the outset, and we should remain sensitive to those cultural processes that tend to mitigate the potentially radical effects of an aesthetics of "openness" and "improvisation." While the movement toward "open" form undoubtedly allowed poets to articulate resistance to a range of discourses and practices meant to police identity and control behavior, this movement also reinforced many of the foundational assumptions—about the relationship between literature and society, for instance, or between form and politics—underlying New Critical reading practices.

Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that the poems in Jones/Baraka's first two books of poetry, Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note (1961) and The Dead Lecturer (1964), seem so ambivalent about both writing poetry and representing identity. A poem like "Hymn for Lanie Poo," to which I devote the final section of this essay, is radically ambiguous of voice and commitment, ambiguities that signify both LeRoi Jones's intense
dissatisfaction with existing modes of African American identity and his concomitant frustration with the assumptions structuring debates over poetic form in the early 1960s. Returning to the language of the San Juan passage, one could say that, while the movement toward open forms provided a crucial first opportunity for "what was in" Jones to "come out as poetry . . . and be [his] poetry," the movement in fact encouraged specific and specifically literary configurations of the self whose content poetry was called upon to express (configurations of self, I might add, that were finally no less "literary" than those favored by the New Critics). Writing at the limits of open form, Jones/Baraka pushes such configurations toward incoherence and searches for a fully empowered social or political self that he can never quite represent. In the process, he begins to invent a political style he will recur to throughout his career, a style characterized by performances of provisional yet active identities and by the repeated construction of literary forms veering impossibly toward praxis.6

Of the twenty-five issues of The Floating Bear Jones and di Prima co-edited in 1961 and 1962, I want to focus in this essay on issue #2, published in 1961. Though it's impossible today to recapture the full effect of the original typed and then mimeographed newsletter, which would have been mailed out to other artists and distributed through the Phoenix Bookstore (in whose West Village backroom the mimeographing took place), we can still appreciate the quick, stripped-down production of The Floating Bear. The newsletter's own material aesthetic is meant to mirror the sort of "open form" its contributors favored in poetry and prose. In this second issue, six poems by two different poets (Frank O'Hara and Steve Jonos) precede two pages of Robert Creeley-selected citations on poetry and poetics, citations framed by Creeley's own clipped comments and introductions. We then get Jones's unconventional, seemingly improvised response to a negative review of Donald Allen's The New American Poetry, followed finally by a request for monetary support and a quick advertisement for two new books of verse. All six poems in the issue are short on punctuation (Jonos's two poems contain no punctuation at all) and both Creeley's "Quick Graph" and Jones's "Revue" race along quickly, at times sloppily. There are no obvious advertisements for anything but more poetry here, and the issue offers itself to the reader free of charge, or for the price of paper and postage.7

In its layout, choice of poems, and editorial style, The Floating Bear reproduces an ideology of form and interaction with the world well articulated in statements on poetics by contributors like Creeley, Jones, and Charles Olson. Olson's "Projective Verse," first published in 1950, is the most famous of these poetic statements, though Jones's "How You Sound?!" written for Allen's anthology, is a more energetic, less pontifical restatement, and many of the principles set forth by Olson and Jones also appear in Creeley's "Quick Graph," from Floating Bear #2. In all three statements, poets are urged to free themselves from traditional forms and metrical patterns, from the "closed," coherent, and self-referential verbal icons favored by the New Critics. They are urged to rediscover

Frustrated by the limitations of the written word as a form of resistance to these processes, Baraka nonetheless seems to insist that language is the sine qua non of both individual and social transformation.

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both the “real” rhythms of speech and thought and the capacity for immediate perception of the surrounding world. Thus Olson conceives of a poem not according to any unifying metrical or symbolic pattern but as a “high energy construct” within which “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION,” transferring to the reader the energy generated by the very “process” of recording these shifts in perception (“Projective” 387-88). Jones, meanwhile, states in “How You Sound??” that

MY POETRY is whatever I think I am ... There cannot be anything I must fit the poem into. Everything must be made to fit into the poem. There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what the poem ought to be. “Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it’s that.” Says Charles Olson . . . & I follow with that. (324-35)

Like all statements of poetics, “How You Sound??” is about more than just form. From the streetwise title—the accent falls on “You,” challenging individual readers to find their own sound—to the bombastic and edgy “MY POETRY is whatever I think I am,” this text bristles with a general disdain for prescription and containment but stops short of social critique.

We should read such statements on “open” form and such mimeographed magazines as The Floating Bear as part of a more widespread attempt in postwar America to consolidate a position of alternative cultural authority, an attempt Daniel Belgrad has named “the culture of spontaneity” and defined broadly enough to include Black Mountain and Beat poets, bebop, Abstract Expressionism, gestalt therapy, and avant-garde dance and ceramics. For Belgrad, the texts and practices that made up this “culture of spontaneity” created a perspective from which to critique dominant cultural assumptions without engaging in direct political action or activism. To Belgrad, The Floating Bear’s slapdash aesthetic and implied avant-garde lifestyle constitute challenges to that “complementary combination of scientifically managed work [and] mass leisure and consumption” which defines “corporate liberalism,” the era’s reigning social and economic ideology (3). Likewise, we find evidence in Floating Bear #2 to confirm Belgrad’s suggestion that “‘open’ forms . . . challenged the social power of America’s dominant Anglo-American tradition” (16). In a general sense, artists considered “outsiders” in postwar America because of class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality gravitated toward a wide range of “open” aesthetics as a strategy for talking back to the culture as “insiders,” a dynamic one experiences as powerfully when reading O’Hara’s four casually gay love poems in The Floating Bear #2 as one does when listening to the difficult improvisations and inside jokes of bebop.

Of all the texts in the second issue of Floating Bear, Jones’s closing editorial, or “Revue,” demonstrates most plainly the strategy of speaking as “insider” to gain cultural leverage.8 Jones’s seemingly offhand reference to “Creeley” and quick digression via “Dawson” in the first paragraph situates this review within a kind of intimate discussion via little-known publications and actual conversations with other poets of “projective verse,” in this case Robert Creeley and Fee Dawson, both of whom contributed to The Floating Bear. Within this intimate yet published and thus public discussion, Jones can proceed to treat as out of step both Cecil Hemley, whose negative review of Donald Allen’s New American Poetry Jones is responding to, and The Hudson Review, where Hemley’s review had recently appeared.9 Feeling the obvious pleasure Jones takes in dismissing both reviewer and well-established magazine, it is difficult not to read this review as a gleeful expression of revenge for that mid-1950s’ experience of painful exclusion from The New Yorker. Here Jones speaks from

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In response to Hemley’s suggestion that Allen’s anthology of *New American Poetry* represents “a very eccentric version of what has been going on” (Hemley 626), Jones invokes Robert Williams, that “intrepid soul” whose controversial actions and statements in Monroe, North Carolina, made him the subject of heated debate during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As the NAACP branch manager in Monroe, Williams had responded militantly to threats of violence on the part of the Ku Klux Klan, who were unhappy with the local NAACP’s attempts to desegregate certain public facilities. Unfazed by the Klan’s strategy of intimidation through violence (or threat of violence), Williams organized an African American militia and commented publicly on the need to meet violence with violence, “lynching with lynching.” This early articulation of the militant strategy of armed self-defense led to Williams’s suspension from the NAACP but won the admiration of a number of black intellectuals, including Jones, as one can see from this review.  

Jones’s turn to Williams’s controversial statements and actions might seem a curious response to Hemley’s accusation that Allen’s anthology of *New American Poetry* represents a “private view” and shows the damage that can occur “when a private dictatorial taste attempts to assert itself as authoritative” (Hemley 626). Jones constructs this non sequitur, however, precisely for the purpose of dramatizing a complicity most readers of *The Floating Bear* would have taken for granted: between mainstream liberalism, on the one hand, and the New Criticism’s overwhelmingly “academic” influence on contemporary poetry, on the other. “The Liberal,” Jones writes, “cannot help but be academic” (Bear 15), a rhetorical conflation that immediately seems exaggerated, though perhaps less so when one considers that Jones has just called the NAACP “the NAACP of KKK.” Yet there is a logic to these conflations, a logic evident in the opening lines of the paragraph quoted above. “Liberals are disparaged by anyone attempting to demonstrate Taste or Feeling (sensibility) as separa-
rate from Situation,” Jones asserts. “Nothing shd present itself outside certain recognized conditions.” In the case of both Hemley’s reaction to Allen’s anthology and the liberal reaction (among both whites and blacks) to Williams’s militant stance in North Carolina, “abstract” and well-established descriptions of a “situation” are invoked in order to discredit immediate and keenly perceptive individual responses to actual historical realities. According to Jones’s logic, Allen’s anthology responds to an historical fact—a burst of avant-garde poetic activity throughout postwar America—that Hemley attempts to discredit through appeals to abstractions such as “historical [and] aesthetic coherence” (Hemley 630). Similarly, Williams’s militant stance responds to actual threats to black lives that liberals attempt to dismiss by appealing to ideals such as nonviolence and gradual progress.

Echoed in Jones’s description of these intersecting debates is the language of the New Critics, and more specifically of T. S. Eliot, the New Criticism’s great influence and abiding figure of authority and judgment. Jones’s use of terms such as sensibility and situation are meant to recall such Eliotic concepts as “dissociation of sensibility” and “objective correlatives,” both of which concern the relationship between emotion and experience and express a firm devotion to ideals such as unity and “exact equivalence” (Eliot 48, 64-65). Though such ideals are not inherently conservative or reactionary, in the cultural context of Jones’s editorial (and of “the culture of spontaneity” more generally), invocations of unity and proportionality have become a common conservative strategy, a rhetoric employed by those seeking to critique and discredit some of the most incisive aesthetic and political gestures of the postwar era. Just as Eliot uses the term objective correlatives to critique the emotion of Shakespeare’s Hamlet as “in excess of the facts as they appear” (48), Hemley critiques Allen and the NAACP critiques Williams for “private,” “eccentric” judgments or actions out of all proportion with the “facts as they appear” to those with institutional power.

By employing New Critical, Eliotic terms such as sensibility and situation to characterize the patterns of thought of American liberalism as they are applied to racial conflict and inequality, Jones implies a great deal about postwar relationships between aesthetics and politics. He makes an implicit and provocative claim about what John Guillory has called “the specificity of literature as an ideological form, namely, its capacity in concrete institutional contexts to produce ideological effects through form” (Cultural 136). According to this line of reasoning, New Criticism has established within the academy a dominant and influential mode of conceptualization (i.e., an ideological form) which expects all “ situations” to conform to ideals of “unity,” “coherence,” or “symmetry.” This influential interpretive process has now cast its net of influence beyond the academy, becoming a more widespread means of generating conservative political readings, in which “actual” information about, say, racial violence and inequality is made to conform to liberal ideals in the hope of shaping more moderate responses to this violence and inequality. It follows, then, that a movement intent on displacing the “closed” forms favored by the New Criticism also becomes a political movement, an effort to displace poetically an ideological form that has demonstrated significant political influence. Because “open” aesthetics are also potentially radical ideological forms, such an argument might conclude, their proliferation within the wider culture will lend support to the radical political engagements of intrepid souls like Robert Williams.

Even without the benefit of hindsight, which lets us see Jones/Baraka’s early work leading up to black cultural nationalism and finally to Marxism, there is evidence to suggest that Jones,
even in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was dissatisfied with the idea that the movement toward “open” form in poetry had serious political consequences. Such faith in poetic form leaves the debate on ground firmly established by the New Critics, who had chosen to sublimate explicitly political critiques of an incoherent modernity to the task of understanding the internal coherence of superior literary works. Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, all three of whom contributed essays to that famous collection of 1930, I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, were influential poets and New Critics by the time Jones improvised his “Revue.” They had long since transformed their reactionary nostalgia for the “stability” and “intelligence” of the South’s agrarian traditions into professions of faith in the complexity and organic stability of great poems. In Warren’s contribution to I’ll Take My Stand, “The Briar Patch,” he defends segregation, urging America on behalf of “the Southern white man” to “let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree” (264). But by 1960, the year Allen published his New American Poetry, Warren was better known as the co-author (with Cleanth Brooks) of Understanding Poetry, a book that introduced a popularized version of New Critical approaches to poetry to generations of high school and college students.

It is not insignificant, then, that Jones and his cultural allies revolted against the poetic statements, trashed the favorite poems, and attacked the institutional positions of the New Critics. The New Critics represented an institutionally entrenched “marginal elite” whose position of strength made it difficult for literary cultures with competing self-definitions to gain influence and attract attention. Their positions on literary questions, furthermore, simultaneously masked and provided analogies for a set of reactionary social and political stances. To do battle with New Critical notions of the ordered “historical sense” that makes a writer properly “traditional” (Eliot 38) was, in a real though limited sense, to do battle with the now sublimated social positions of Ransom, Warren, and Tate, erstwhile “agrarians” who had once asserted that the proper antidote to America’s excessive “newness” was the “European and historic order” represented by the old “Southern establishment” (Ransom 20-21). Left unexamined, however, in most of the critiques of “closed” form articulated by Floating Bear partisans is the assumption that formal representation is itself what is at issue, and that the substitution of one set of texts for another, or of one formal approach for another, would have significant social consequences.

If the sudden turn in Jones’s “Revue” to Rob Williams and the politics of black self-defense indicates a hostility toward Hemley’s review and the “closed” aesthetics and institutions that had always seemed to exclude Jones, this turn expresses something more as well. Jones strives here for a synthesis of the aesthetic and the political that he has yet, at this point, to fully conceptualize, much less realize in practice. His images of Williams constitute what Slavoj Žižek might call fantasy; instead of being dreamt up because Jones already knows what he wants, these images surface in the haste of composition to articulate a desire he was not sure he had when he sat down to respond to Hemley. I quote again his most fully charged and aggressively charging image of Williams:

But the minute some intrepid soul prints up, say, a manifesto, declaring exactly what, just he, himself, alone, uncontrolled by the NAACP or KKK or Fischer Baking Co, wants . . . . Then perhaps these “wants” will not be so common: and then perhaps, someone’s list might definitively have to do with homicide.

In the extended, chaotic syntax by which one moves from the “intrepid soul” who prints up “a manifesto” to the final suggestion of “homicide,” one
discovers a fantasy of the printed word becoming radical political act. "Revue" offers an early example of that "bar-rage of hostility" one finds everywhere in Jones/Baraka's work during the 1960s, hostility that Marlon Ross has cleverly seen as both outward- and inward-directed. Such hostility is directed at political and cultural ene-mies, from outright racists to white liberal-and black sell-outs. But it also betrays Jones/Baraka's frustration with himself, his fear that he too might be selling out, his suspicion about that "punk part of the self" that leads him to continue working as an artist instead of engaging, à la Rob Williams, in direct political action (Ross 295). At the moment in 1961 when Jones pens his "Revue," however, his need to distract himself and his audience from his own suspicions and frustrations does not seem so clear as it will in subsequent years. The repetition of "perhaps" sounds both threatening and specula-tive, and the "intrepid soul" printing up manifestos both is and is not LeRoi Jones. The image of a manifesto that morphs into murder emerges as an early image of Jones/Baraka's desire to make literary language reach beyond itself—into the realm of political con-frontation and social transformation—a desire Jones has yet to fully articulate for himself, dedicated though he may be to a poetry of immediate action and concrete effect.

Jones's fantasy of the word made act surfaces when he steps to the defense of an anthology whose goals are explicitly literary and thus implicitly opposed to this fantasy of radically political language. It is instructive to consider what happens to "open" form when it is anthologized in Don Allen's New American Poetry, and just how absent from this collection is the racial conflict and stridently political content Jones seems to ascribe to "open" form in his response to Hemley. Allen's anthology includes only one African American poet, and the poems he does choose from Jones are short on explicitly racial content. Instead of the radical promise of nonhierarchical, nonstatic production made by theorists of "open" form and embodied in The Floating Bear, whose willfully haphaz-ard production seems to promise an endless flow of improvised poetry and editorial statement, Allen's anthology is, of course, dedicated to selection. It finally represents not endless sponta-neity but rather the static and hierar-chical presentation of what Allen regarded as the best examples of America's new avant-garde poetry. Jones's turn in "Revue" toward violent imagery should certainly be interpret-ed as an expression of outrage toward Hemley and his pompous dismissal of Allen's anthology. But we might also read it as an expression of frustration that his own movement seems inca-pable of providing a sufficient means of attacking those discourses and institu-tions whose power he feels most keenly. This rhetoric of violence indicates his growing dissatisfaction not with one form or another—open or closed—but with the very ground of this debate over poetry and its relation-ship to the world.

In light of these mutually constitutive antagonisms, between "open" and "closed" forms, and between lan-guage and praxis, I want now to con-sider "Hymn for Lanie Poo," the longest and most radically "open" work in Jones/Baraka's first collection of poems, Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note. "Hymn for Lanie Poo" departs from deliberately lyrical abstrac-tions such as "Ostriches and Grandmothers" (from Preface) or "As a Possible Lover" (from The Dead Lecturer). It differs as well, though less dramatically, from "In Memory of Radio" and "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," two experi-ments from Preface in pop-cultural voicings. All of these poems fit fairly easily into accepted models of the New American Poetry, and in fact "Ostriches and Grandmothers" and "In
Memory of Radio” were included in Allen’s anthology, “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” on the other hand, though it includes lyrical moments and pop-cultural touches, demonstrates a different kind of fragmentation of voice, a newly dissonant fusion of poetic rhythms and nearly unassimilable shards of social content. The poem becomes more than just a Beat-inspired revolt against “closed” form or an attempt to fuse experimental poetic approaches with the rhythms or expressions of an American vernacular, although it is both of these things. Merging lyricism with social invective, moments of visionary and artistic belief with biting sarcasm, “Hymn for Lanie Poo” becomes one of Jones/Baraka’s first and perhaps still most fascinating expressions of uneasiness about both poetic representation and the confident performance of social identity.

“Hymn for Lanie Poo” carries its revolt against “closed” verse forms far enough that it begins drifting beyond “open” form as well, embracing structural disjunctions and absences that distinguish it from quintessential Beat or Black Mountain poems such as Ginsberg’s “Howl” or Olson’s “The Kingfishers,” both of which are featured prominently in Allen’s anthology. Though these two masterpieces of “open” form can boast of their own shifts in perspective, their own violations of the accepted range of poetic voices, they both accommodate central voices that are form-giving and, in their own way, authoritative. A reader’s experience of “Howl” is inevitably defined by her reaction to the deranged, angelic, nouveau-prophetic voice that chants on uninterrupted from Ginsberg’s first line to his last. Meanwhile, the famous opening lines from “The Kingfishers”—“What does not change / is the will to change” (2)—reveal the consistency of a poem that at times appears inconsistent. There is no such defining voice in “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” nor does it offer any godlike pronouncement of ultimate poetic order and philosophical stability. One might say (further destabilizing the distinction between New Critics and New American Poets) that not since Eliot’s Waste Land had an American fashioned such a successful poem out of so much social hostility, hostility that manifests itself formally as discomfort with any single and defining poetic voice or tempo.

Not unlike the nervous Eliot of The Waste Land, in “Hymn for Lanie Poo” Jones creates poetic disorder and instability of perspective by tearing material out of a range of everyday contexts and then reconstituting it as a series of poetic fragments: the cartoonish bohemian Africa of section 1, the cartoonish African bohemia of section 2, the satire of “firemasons” in section 3, the Whitmanesque voice of section 4, the gay parishioners of section 5, “die schwartze Bohemian” of section 6, and the attack on the black bourgeoisie in the final section. This disjointed collection of everyday ideologies performs in the poem as a shifting set of juxtapositions among competing voices, perspectives, tones, and contexts. Though it is tempting to ascribe a stable poetic perspective to one voice or another within this poem, I would argue that any such claim to authority is effectively undermined elsewhere in “Hymn for Lanie Poo.” Even the fourth section of the poem, which seems to celebrate the generative, transformative potential of the poetic imagination, and which Langston Hughes excerpted for inclusion in his 1964 anthology New Negro Poets, U.S.A, comes to seem ironic when contextualized within the larger poem, where the poet’s creative powers run smack dab into social contingencies like racism or making a living. The suggestion in this section that the poet’s imaginative capacities allow him to construct his own “cosmic genealogy” is undermined by the poem’s consistent skepticism about genealogical constructions, in particular the black bourgeois reverence for a “generation of fictitious / Ofays” (Transbluesency 13). Likewise, the poet’s adoption of his own queer voice
in section five, where he sashays toward a hypocritical preacher, "almost / throwing [his] hips out / of whack" (11), complicates the force of the epithet "faggot" in the poem's concluding section. What exactly these contradictory moments add up to is difficult to say, though it seems clear that the sum of these contradictions is less a ruling idea or perspective than a deeply critical (and self-critical) approach to accepted social identities and literary subjectivities.

If any voice or perspective predominates in "Hymn," it is the satirical voice that reappears throughout, launching attacks on one bourgeois or bohemian figure after another, and in particular on representatives of the black middle class. The poem begins with an anti-bourgeois epigraph from Rimbaud—"Vous êtes des faux Nègres"—and ends with an ugly and unambiguous attack on the poet's own "faux Nègres," the black middle class as embodied in the desires and behaviors of the poet's sister and her boyfriend. Indeed, the intensity of the inventive the poet directs at his sister in the final section leaves one with the impression that this is the moment the poem has been waiting for all along. "About my sister" (13), this final section begins, as if we all knew that the sister was the poem's ultimate object of critique. As with the hostility of "Revue," however, hostility throughout "Hymn for Lanie Poo" should be taken as inward- as well as outward-directed. Boundaries between the poet and his subjects become confused from the outset, and by the time we reach the angry conclusion of "Hymn for Lanie Poo" we are justified in wondering whether the poet's anger at his sister's desire for upward mobility and cultural capital is not also an expression of frustration about his own social position or political failings, or a self-critical gesture toward his own longings for the "soft-curving button-down collars and well-tailored suits" of The New Yorker. The more we read and reread the poem, the more difficult it becomes to determine where exactly the poem's recurring satirical voice speaks from, to identify the ideological perspective or point of representational stability on which this satire might be founded.

Long before it reaches its angry conclusion, "Hymn for Lanie Poo" begins with a calmer but no less interesting representational problem. The poem's initial strophe is careful, slow-moving, tonally sophisticated, and somewhat puzzling:

O,
these wild trees
will make charming wicker baskets,
the young woman
the young black woman
the young black beautiful woman
said.
These wild-assed trees
will make charming
wicker baskets.

(now, I'm putting words in her mouth
... tch) (6)

There are immediate representational difficulties in this first strophe, in which the poet seems incapable of offering us the voice of the "young black woman," a voice he begins to present for us but then undermines as soon as the presentation begins. He does not, in fact, know how he wants to designate her. Is she "the young woman," "the young black woman," or "the young black beautiful woman"? Nor does the poet know what he wants her to say. Will she speak of "wild trees" or "wild-assed trees"? Is the adjective "charming" her choice or his? The final parenthetical statement, complete with contemplative teeth-suck, only heightens our impression that this strophe is in large measure about some sort of representational crisis. The poet sticks his head out from behind the curtain to tell us something we already know: that the young woman is the poet's creation, and that he will choose what she says in his poem.

Why this strange parenthetical acknowledgment, as "Hymn for Lanie Poo" begins, that the poem will represent figures whose words are not

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entirely their own, but are rather manipulated by the author? One obvious answer is that this acknowledgment constitutes the poem’s initial proclamation that it intends to carry out violations of New Critical principles. It will eschew structural economies and refuse to adopt a unified voice or tone, much less any consistent meter or rhyme scheme, choosing instead to paint with a constantly shifting palate of lyrical, casual, and sarcastic tones. It will interrupt itself when it sees fit, refusing to let its own speakers construct seamless or consistent lyric identities. With “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” Jones has constructed a nonorganic response to the organic vision of the New Critical lyric, a contradictory and unstable collection of voices, perspectives, tones, images, and symbolic systems. While accurate on one level, however, such an explanation does not seem entirely to capture the edginess of “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” which, as I have already mentioned, resembles Eliot’s Waste Land as much as it resembles Olson, Ginsberg, or O’Hara, and which seems to both invoke and problematize binaries such as organic and inorganic, open and closed, carefully crafted and spontaneous. Instead of siding with the “wild-assed trees” over the “wicker basket,” or with the reverence for a natural African past over the reverence for a “generation of fictitious / Ofays,” the poem seems skeptical about all such investments.

We find further explanation for the poem’s performances of representational crisis, its almost schizophrenic insistence that its poetic voices interrupt one another continuously, if we consider the anxiety “Hymn for Lanie Poo” exhibits each time it confronts its own need to sort characters according to social categories. Through satire and irony in individual sections, and through the confusion these sections cause us when we try to read them as a unified statement, Jones generates a sense of profound anxiety around acts of both racial representation and poetic self-presentation. And while this anxiety concerns more than just form, or the need to revolt against “closed” forms, it finds expression not just in the explicit statements of the speakers of “Hymn for Lanie Poo” but in the poem’s form as well—in the structural effect whereby the statements or perspectives of one section are undermined elsewhere in the poem.

While we are right to revel, for instance, in the poem’s hilarious parody of black bohemians in section 6, we recognize as well the dissonance this parody creates when read back against the more self-conscious but still bohemian voice that narrates the poem’s opening sections. The bohemian narrator of section 2, for instance, strikes one as somewhat frivolous but fairly sympathetic in his struggle to create art and arrive at serious intellectual judgments. These struggles seem less sympathetic, however, when juxtaposed with the more extreme fatuousness of the bohemian voice in section 6. “It’s just that . . . / Man lookathatblonde / whewee!” this voice remarks. “I think they are not treating us like / Mr. Lincun said they should / or Mr. Gandhi / For that matter. By God” (12). This commentary on race relations is of course meant to sound ridiculous, less compelling to the bohemian speaker than the white woman wandering past, and such empty rhetoric might be said to infect (retroactively, as it were) the more serious intellectual endeavors of the speaker in section 2. From another perspective, however, these slightly ridiculous but straightforward statements about white lies and condescension (“Or the way this guy kept patronizing me— / like he was Bach or somebody”) appear more incisive than any critique offered by the artist/intellectual figure who addresses us in section 2. What’s more, section 6 swings: Jones creates both velocity and rhythmic drive here by playing on the tensions this hip vernacular sets up between freedom of movement and repetition—of “by God” for instance, or of other playful two-syllable exclamations.
whiteness and its pretensions to rising above the “colored” and “loud shades” of the black masses. On the one hand, this section undermines its own critique of one mode of social identity (that of the black middle class) by associating the full acceptance of bourgeois false consciousness with women and homosexuality. The speaker betrays himself by revealing that his attacks on ideas of racial/class hierarchy and division depend on equally divisive rhetorical strategies.14 On the other hand, as I have been arguing above, these moments of prejudice are themselves destabilized by other moments in the poem—the poet’s own campy performance in section 5, for instance—and they fail to disguise the fact that such outward hostility seems to constitute an act of inward self-criticism as well. Jones/Baraka, whose first two books of poetry make reference to Strindberg, Bosch, Baudelaire, and Malraux, among others, can hardly assassinate the character of a man “who digs Tchaikovsky” without putting himself at risk. Equally perilous for a poet who has pledged a literary allegiance to the likes of Pound and Olson is the criticism leveled at those blacks whose reverence for white precursors serves to distance them from the black masses. This is not to say that such contradictions nullify entirely the poem’s criticism of the black bourgeoisie, but rather that, even as he articulates his most vehement critique of racial/class ideology, the poet finds himself trapped, unable to construct a safe or stable perspective from which to launch his critique.

More than the content of any one individual section, the poem’s larger form—its fusion of antagonistic bursts of social content—expresses most forcefully Jones/Baraka’s skepticism about social categorization and imposed racial identity. “Hymn for Lanie Poo” satirizes specific configurations of African American identity within individual sections while also, on the level of the fragmented whole, attempting to subvert the expectation...
that individuals, groups, or poems will speak in the voice of some coherent, consistent identity. This is “vicious modernism” indeed, to borrow a phrase from a later Jones/Baraka poem (Transbluesency 140), a means of attacking New Critical assumptions about poetry while simultaneously fantasizing about the destabilization of post-war conceptions of racial/class identity. Like the fantasy of word made act captured in Jones’s “Revue,” this fantasy of fragmenting racial/class identities surfaces most clearly when Jones’s writing seems most malicious. His specific frustration with the attitudes of the black middle class becomes, within the larger poem, a more general frustration with those cultural and material pressures that compel one to embrace social performances explicitly and implicitly sanctioned by “benevolent step/mother America.” As it juxtaposes contradictory and often self-mocking or angrily satirical fragments of racial and class-based performance, “Hymn for Lanie Poo” expresses a more general skepticism about any social identity too consistently “smiling & glad,” and about the very affects and practices through which coherent visions of self or community can hail us, as they once hailed LeRoi Jones from the pages of The New Yorker.

Yet in carrying out these acts of social satire and identity subversion, “Hymn for Lanie Poo” also shows us the limits of a poetic approach that moves through, even beyond, “open” form. For within a poetic structure dedicated to fragmentation and suspicious of identity in general, part of the social statement the poem struggles to formulate—the affirmative, active political perspective it seems on the verge of imagining—finally cannot take shape. The poem’s refusal to imagine a stable and empowered racial identity constitutes both a radical stance toward identity and, as other critics have suggested, a nearly unjustifiable social and political deficiency at a moment when black Americans were desperate to empower themselves in the public sphere. This refusal is slightly different, furthermore, from the refusal one finds in many of the poems in The Dead Lecturer, in which, as Paul Vangelisti has argued, “the lyric is turned on itself, or rather on the privileged figure of the poet” (xv). The self-questioning of the poet/speaker in The Dead Lecturer’s “Balboa, the Entertainer” is indeed striking, and the intense self-hatred of “An Agony. As Now” can seem overwhelming. But such poems are still lyrics, even if turned on themselves, while “Hymn” has lost the central voice that defines the genre, a loss that occurs once the revolt against the conservative investments of “closed” verse forms begins to bump up against the very limits of poetic representation.

The question then arises whether, having traversed the “open” as a response to the “closed,” one is, in the words of my epigraph, “really nowhere.” Are we somewhere, Jones/Baraka seems to ask us in his “Poem for Speculative Hipsters,” if we insist upon the dangers of assuming any of the racial/class identities America offers its citizens, all of which, one might plausibly argue, are meant to divide and control us? Or, as Baraka himself decided in the years following the publication of “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” when increasingly he dedicated his poetry and prose to affirmations of blackness and an international working class, must oppressed populations strive to convert the very material and discursive valences of their oppression into active, collective identities? Baraka’s answers to such questions are never as simple as they seem. As indicated by both the paradoxical dance of “inside” and “out” in the San Juan passage and the contradictory fragments of “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” his answers often assume forms that themselves demand to be read as responses to questions of both social and aesthetic identity, formal responses that complicate the answers he initially articulates.

Though it is possible to read “Hymn for Lanie Poo” as a direct
expression of anger toward the black bourgeoisie, these expressions begin to signify differently when placed in the context both of the other moments of satire and social performance in the poem or of the possibility that the poet himself might "dig Tschaikovsky." In this larger context, the viciousness of these expressions, like the intensity of Jones/Baraka’s attack on liberals in “Revue,” seems to indicate more than just dissatisfaction with his putative target. This viciousness suggests something larger, something discovered “inside” Jones/Baraka because it reflects something that exists “outside” as well but that he has fully formulated only in his written texts, spaces of social and structural fantasy that always allow him to say more than just “what he is saying.” Finally, this viciousness adumbrates dissatisfaction not just with one specific identity configuration, but with the ideological and material processes through which identities are constructed and new collectivities undermined in postwar America. Frustrated by the limitations of the written word as a form of resistance to these processes, Baraka’s viciousness nonetheless seems to insist that language is the sine qua non of both individual and social transformation.

1. For other readings of these key passages from Jones/Baraka’s Autobiography, see Harris, Poetry and Poetics 4-5; Nielsen 73-75; and Olaniyan 72-73.

2. Most critics date Baraka’s Third World Marxist period from 1974 onward. They call the first period of Jones/Baraka’s career his “Beat” period (1957-1962), the second his “transitional” period (1963-1965), and the third his “black nationalist” period (1965-1974). During his “transitional” period, Jones/Baraka moves away from Beat/bohemian aesthetics toward an aesthetics and politics of black cultural nationalism. As a black nationalist, LeRoi Jones changes his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka and famously helps found the Black Arts Movement. See Harris’s Introduction; his Poetry and Poetics 1-12; and Sollors 3-9.

3. Althusser’s influential theory of interpellation in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” as many others have noted, fails to consider the unstable and contradictory effects of ideology, which can subvert as often as it reinforces dominant social structures. Likewise, Althusser’s theory avoids the difficulty of theorizing social construction not just in class terms but according to a much more complex algebra of social identity. For useful discussions of both the importance and the limitations of Althusser’s theory of ideology, see Hall and Hennessy 74-79.

4. For standard literary-historical accounts of the movement toward “open” form, see Breslin and Perkins 331-53 and 486-552.

5. In focusing in this essay on the early work of Jones/Baraka, I seek not to contradict the important arguments critics such as Harris, Nielsen, Olaniyan, and Sollors make about this work in relation to later developments but rather to amplify and extend their insights. See in particular Harris, Poetry and Poetics 67-90. I spend more time than have previous critics analyzing the “open” vs “closed” antagonism as it structures and destabilizes Jones/Baraka’s first published writings, underscoring the complexities and contradictions of a period too often considered experimental but not political.

6. The “style” I am describing is perhaps just another way to designate what Olaniyan has called Baraka’s “performative articulatory practice,” in which “identity is a process, in motion, perceptually becoming” (69) and through which Baraka continually challenges us to confront the distinction between art as object and art as practice. As LeRoi Jones becomes Amiri Baraka, and as his “open” forms begin to assume the shapes of a black nationalist and then a Marxist poetry of explicit political statement, he will continue to propel his art toward praxis and to ask his poetic forms to confront social content they can never quite accommodate. See Lott for an elegant and energetic argument about another cultural form that “attempted to resolve” social conflict “at the level of style” (246).

7. The Floating Bear continued under di Prima’s guidance (and with contributions from Jones/Baraka) until 1969. Though I initially gained access to all thirty-seven issues thanks to the University of Virginia’s Tatum Collection, my citations in this essay refer to Laurence McGlivery’s republication of these issues as The Floating Bear: A Newsletter: Numbers 1-37, 1961-1969. For more information about the inception, production, and distribution of The Floating Bear, see di Prima’s introduction (vi-xviii) to this edition.

8. See Fiatley for a discussion of “insideness” as a cultural tactic.

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Notes
9. To place Hemley's review and Jones's response within a larger debate over postwar anthologies, see Perloff and Rasula 223-47.
10. On Robert Williams, see Cruse 351-54. See also The Autobiography, 163-65, 169, and 171.
11. See Guillory's "Idea of Canon-Formation" for a perceptive reading of New Critical canon formation as an act which "aroused and expressed" the "interest" of a group we know as "literary culture, a marginal elite" (174). For a recent examination of intersections between New Critical, "canonical" literary values and racial discourses in the academy, see Barrett 131-82.
12. I take the phrase cosmic genealogy, along with a number of other insights, from Sollors's subtle and instructive reading of "Hymn" (43-48).
13. On organic and inorganic forms, see Bürger 55-82.
14. See Harper for a discussion, germane especially for this final section of "Hymn for Lanie Po, of the intraracial divisions implicit in the grammar of Black Arts poetry.

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