"In the Tradition": Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S.
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In the Tradition: Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S.

The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation’s legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people. (Frantz Fanon)

My thoughts here will follow three lines implied in a phrase from one of Baraka’s titles: “raze/race/raise.” What and who is to be razed and how? What and who is to be raised and how? At center are historic contradictions of the black liberation movement and the tension in avant-garde aesthetics between negation (Dada) and affirmation (Constructivism), between demolition and the work of building:

1/ raze: Dada. For Dada, the Adornian negation (blast) of bourgeois Western rationality. For Baraka, the Western demolition mission.

2/ raze: jazz: raise. Baraka once noted that one way to make white institutions “crumble and its apologizers break and run even faster than they are now would be to turn crazy, to bring out a little American Dada, Ornette Coleman style” (“Philistinism” 53). Like Coltrane shattering, splintering dead Western forms (e.g., Rodgers and Hammerstein tunes) into sheets of sound. But in later Baraka, jazz becomes a method for raising the race. In a jazz poetics, he finds an anti-Adornian, anti-bohemian affirmative—an avant-garde praxis connected to the culture of the black masses.

3/ raise: race: idiom. African American vernacular—its traditions are crucial to Baraka’s most advanced poetics. The long tradition of battling in words—signifyin(g)—has been fused with a jazz poetics.

1/ raze: Dada
If I cry out:
Ideal, ideal, ideal
Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge
Boomboom, boomboom, boomboom,
I have given a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality and all other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men have discussed in so many books, only to conclude that after all everyone dances to his own personal boomboom, and that the writer is entitled to his boomboom (Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto 1918”)

If you ever find yourself, some where
lost and surrounded

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by enemies
who won’t let you speak in your own language
who destroy your statues
& instruments, who ban
your omm bomm ba boom
then you are in trouble
deep trouble
they ban your
own boom ba boom
you in deep deep
trouble (Amiri Baraka, “Wise 1”)

Scholars of the Black Arts Movement
read the poem as the first definitive
sign of Baraka’s emerging black national-
alist aesthetic. Werner Sollors, for
example, has argued that, “in ‘BLACK
DADA NIHILISMUS,’ Baraka develops
the Black scream as the heart of his aes-
thetic; and the visions of vengeful
racial violence are a touchstone of the
distance Baraka has travelled since
Preface [to a Twenty-Volume Suicide
Note]” (90). Kimberly Benston has simi-
larly observed that “the poem . . . is, in
part, prophetic of the attitudes and val-
ues that shape his work in its later
phases. The violence, the contempt for
a dying West that must be abandoned,
the radical dichotomy between black
and white, the invocation and prophet-
ic tone, are all major elements of later
writings” (113).

But the poem itself contains con-
siderable obstacles to being read as a
point of origin in any linear develop-
ment toward a narrow, violent black
nationalism. The first obstacle is in
the title term itself: “nihilismus.” The suf-
fex –ismus typically carries a pejorative
or ironic tone (historismus, mysticis-
num, Sherlockismus, snobismus).

Baraka clearly could have chosen a
variant without this ironic underlay.
Indeed Baraka’s use of the term with-
out the suffix — nihil — elsewhere in the
poem suggests an alternative — say,
“Nihil Black Dada.” Of course, the
–ismus can be read as consistent with
the poem’s method of subversive
inversion. As noted by critics, these
inversions include:

• the inversion of Western rational-
ity by medieval alchemy
(Trimegistus) by the hermetic arts of
Egyptian astrology (“Hermes, the
blacker art”) and of voodoo (“lost
god Damballah,” a voodoo god);
• the inversions of a conventional
poem’s formal logic; the poem
begins with a period, ends with the
dedication; and
• the inversion of minstrels, coons,
Toms such as Sambo, Willie “Sleep n
Eat” Best, and Buckwheat into trick-
ster heroes (who commit secret mur-

The boomboom that is so vital in
the two Dadaist passages above is
a human vitality each poet sees under
threat. In the first, it is the vitality of
the Dada subject threatened by dead-
ening bourgeois subjectivity and soci-
ety. In the second it is the Afrikan sub-
ject threatened with enslavement into
gray Western subjectivity. Comparison
of these two poetics under the rubric of
Dada is not new. Baraka criticism has
consistently noted the continuities
between Baraka’s poetics and those of
the historical avant-gardes, Surrealism
and Dadaism (see especially Benston
and Sollors). Dada’s relentless word
play and disruption — radical punctua-
tion & spacing, non sequitur, idiosyncratic spellings, punning — was
aimed at destroying the degraded lan-
guage logic of bourgeois Western ratio-
nality. In Baraka’s work, Dada’s lin-
guistic method is appropriated into
black nationalist aesthetics and
deployed against the deathliness of all
Western/white language and culture.
Similarly, Surrealism’s destabilization
of bourgeois reality is redirected by
Baraka to attack not only bourgeois
lived reality (dead, reified) but the liv-
ing death — a constant theme — in all
White/Western society.

Baraka’s most self-conscious use of
Dada poetics occurs in “Black Dada
Nihilismus.”¹ One of Baraka’s most
anthologized poems, “Black Dada
Nihilismus” has a pivotal place in
Baraka criticism. Much in the way
Négritude was important to the
Surrealists, white avant-gardists value
the poem for its legitimizing linkage
(homage) to white avant-gardism.²

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The poem never recovers from this prosodic ambivalence. The scream which follows the incitement is similarly undermined. The enjambment of "un / earthly" comes across not so much as violent or macabre (as the word *uneearthly* might suggest) but again as hesitation. And this sense is only reinforced by the oddly diminuitive diction. The scream is "dull," an adjective which is deadened further by its assonance with the broken "un-" and which describes what is ultimately only "hollering" (a gerundized, petrified verb, unlike the "scream" and "chant" which function as both verbs and nouns). Again, consider the poem with these aspects reversed:

Black scream
and chant, scream,
and dull, un
*earthly*
**hollering. (Reader 72)**

But in their emphasis on semantics—this singular focus on the violent content—they fail to note the prosodic undermining of this "screaming incitement." First, the invocation of black Dada nihilismus to murder begins haltingly, marked off from the stanzaic body of the incitement contained within the prior stanza. Furthermore, that stanza break coincides with a disjunctive enjambment that disrupts the unity of the phrase "black Dada nihilismus." This phrase is enjambed only here—at the apparent apex of violence—and not in its other three appearances. "Come up, black Dada" would have been syntactically sufficient, yet the invocation stutters across the stanza gap to add "nihilismus." The gap here only readsmits the ironizing connotations of -ismsus, undermining the murderous impulse from the outset. Consider how the invocation would have sounded this way:

Come up, black Dada.
Rape the white girls. Rape . . .

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If we recognize the centrality of this inner conflict to the poem, then our interpretation not only becomes politically and biographically more accurate but also poetically richer. The confession to Black Dada suggests a preparation for the prayer for amnesty at the poem’s end: “may a lost god dangal-lah, rest or save us / against the murders we [I] intend / against his [my] lost white children.” Yet the cathexis of this conflict is not simple. The poet finds that the weight and guilt of his assimilation cannot be fully exorcized through black rage against whiteness. The poem’s initial declaration that “I would not / forgive or even call him / Black Dada nihilismus” suggests a condemnation of self: ‘I would not forgive [my self] or even call him black Dada nihilismus.’ The passage framing the incitement to violence also resonates with self-hatred. Here Baraka can be seen to ask himself (the whiteness within himself, identified with the “white Sartre,” the ambiguous referent of “you” in the passage cited below) why he does not go further—why indeed he remains in the Village and does not move to Harlem:

The razor. Our flail against them, why you carry knives? Or brutalized lumps of heart? Why you stay, where they can reach? Why you sit, or stand, or walk in this place, a window on a dark warehouse. Where the minds packed in straw. New homes, these towers, for those lacking money or art. (Reader 72)

The invocation, then, of Black Dada Nihilismus to arise and wreak terror and violence is the poet calling forth a force—a rage—within himself. But we can see the poet twisting in self-doubt, even fissuring himself into these fractured entities—these pronouns ambiguously pointing back to himself—as he struggles to find the will to purge himself (“our flail”) of something he cannot yet bring himself to give up. This screaming indictment has a self-conscious, hollow echo.

Finally, the poem’s selection of civilizations destroyed by the West—

given an entire stanza to describe and make real, rather than general, abstract:

Black Dada nihilismus, choke my friends
in their bedrooms with
their drinks spilling
and restless for tilting
hips or dark liver
lips sucking splinters
from the master’s thigh. (Reader 72)

If we examine the passages that precede and follow this “screaming incitement,” we can see that the entire poem can be read as a complex internal dialogue of conflict. What follows the incitement passage is, then, a personal confession to “Black Dada”:

Dada, bilious
what ugliness [I] learned
in the dome, colored holy
shit (i call them sinned
or lost / burned masters / of the lost / nihil
German killers / all our learned / art,
[I will] ‘member
what you said (Reader 72)

Why confess—in what has been assumed to be an externally directed, violent poem, why is there so much confession, prayer, asking of amnesty, forgiveness, even begging?

Without being too reductive, it’s important to bear in mind that Baraka at this point was still in a period of intense personal conflict and contradiction: “It was as if I had two distinct lives, one a politically oriented life, with a distinct set of people I knew and talked to, the other the artsy bohemian life of the village” (Autobiography 168). This division within his subjectivity (his old and emerging selves) was not only political/bohemian but was also coded black/white. Further, this division was central not only to his politics and his aesthetics but his intimate social circle (he was still unable to sever his close friendships with whites) and family (his white wife and mixed children, whom he was growing to identify with that assimilated dimension of himself which he was growing to despise).
Byzantium, Tenochtitlan, Comanch —complicates any simple model of racial or colonial oppression. 

Tenochtitlan, listed with Comanch and Byzantium to close the penultimate section of the poem, was the glorious capital of Aztec civilization, the capture of which was the pinnacle of Cortez’s colonizing mission and the symbolic end of Aztec civilization. But it was not simply “the West” that destroyed it. Baraka turns part of the critique of the West against himself in his reference to “Moctezuma”—a “mock” spelling of Montezuma, the Aztec ruler who believed Cortez to be a god, who marshaled his own people to support Cortez’s war, who provided Cortez with his infamous mistress and translator Malinche. Is this immanent self-critique?

Comanch and Byzantium also resist being read as simple victims of Western colonialism. Byzantium is typically understood to have been the critical linkage between Greek and Roman civilization and the European Renaissance, then emerging from the Dark Ages. Byzantium was a bulwark protecting Christian Europe from “barbarism,” and it fell—not to the West—but to the Ottoman Turks. Is Baraka somehow identifying with the intercultural role of Byzantium? The Comanches, in contrast, led one of the last important waves of Indian resistance against white settlers, conducting masterful guerilla warfare against numerically superior federal troops. The symbolic beginning of their destruction was a battle in which a band of Comanches, under Chief Peta Nocona, was defeated by a company of Texas Rangers, under Captain L. S. Ross. The Rangers killed Chief Nocona but captured his 33-year-old wife, Cynthia Ann Parker, a white woman whom the Comanches had captured when she was nine. Cynthia Parker died when removed from the Indian culture and society she had grown to consider home. Does she represent, against “Moctezuma,” an alternative figure for Baraka’s conflicted identity?

In this reading, I have wanted to suggest that the Baraka of “Black Dada Nihilismus” was never so narrowly or violently cultural nationalist as he’s been portrayed, but, rather, that he was much more self-critical in both his politics and his poetics. At what has been assumed to be the very nucleus of his “visions of vengeful violence” and his “contempt for a dying West,” Baraka can be seen engaged in a meaningful—difficult—struggle to transform himself and his work. It has been too easy to present Baraka’s development as discontinuous: a series of radical breaks, the unpredictable swings of a wild, impetuous temperament and ego. Since Baraka’s politics have always been extreme and inconstant, so the logic goes, it serves nothing to take them seriously; his Poetics, his Art are what are important. Such a view has only encouraged the misapprehension—to the point of trivialization—of the vital and developing relationship between his politics and his poetics.

2/ raze: jazz: raise

Nathaniel Mackey, in his essay “The Changing Same,” has noted that black music—blues, jazz—is the aesthetic center that does hold in the apparently wild “inconsistency” of Baraka’s politics. Mackey’s insightful arguments provide a useful framework against which to examine Baraka’s Third World Marxist poetry. According to Mackey, at the center of Baraka’s theory of black music is the concept of an historical racial/class spectrum within which the blackest working-class artists constantly attempt to sabotage and contest the equally constant “assimilationist aspirations of the [black] bourgeoisie” (26). At each phase of assimilation there arose an anti-assimilative black sound to combat the white mainstreaming trend. The important case to Baraka is hard bebop’s aggressive anti-assimila-
tive honking (Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane) against Western hegemonic musicality:

The point it seemed was to spend oneself with as much attention as possible, and also to make the instruments sound as unmusical, or as non-Western, as possible. It was almost as if blues people were reacting against the softness and "legitimacy" that had crept into black instrumental music with the advent of swing. (qtd. in Mackey 26)

One of Mackey's central and most perceptual arguments about Baraka's poetics concerns the poet's use of repetition. He makes his case by taking up the poems "The Clearing" from Preface and "An Agony. As Now" from Dead Lecturer. In the first case, he points out the poem's several repeating and unanswered questions (e.g., "What song is that?" "Were you singing?"). In the second, he points out the continuous repetition of small phrases throughout the text (e.g., "or pain," "the yes"), each phrase being "followed by a staccato burst of imaged evocation" (44). In these he perceives a stumbling or stuttering effect which is

a salient feature of the playing of those black musicians Baraka most admires. (Listen, for example, to Sonny Rollins's "Green Dolphin Street," Coltrane's "Amen," John Tchicai's "Everything Happens to Me.") In some [of Baraka's] poems, in fact, the use of repetition is almost purely musical, in that sound seems to take precedence over sense. (45)

Mackey, of course, is picking up on modern jazz's intensified practice of hard riffing. He then picks out something Baraka wrote in response to a Coltrane performance:

One night he played the head of "Confirmation" over and over again, about twenty times, and that was his solo. It was as if he wanted to take that melody apart and play out each of its chords as a separate improvisational challenge. And while it was a marvelous thing to hear and see, it was also more than a little frightening; like watching a grown man learning to speak... and I think that's just what was happening. (qtd. in Mackey 45)

Drawing on this observation, Mackey goes on to conclude that "Baraka too seems to have gone back to the beginning to be learning to speak or relearning to speak—unlearning modes of speech that impede the speech he is reaching toward" (45). It is this direction of Mackey's analysis that suggests its limitations.

From this point on, Mackey begins interpreting Baraka in ways that lead him to conclusions about Baraka's Third World Marxist work that are quite far off the mark, although the misinterpretations offer instructive examples of how postmarxist avant-garde formations tend to misrecognize mass-oriented left avant-garde poetics. The first manifestation is Mackey's embrace above of the anti-referential vector—in which "sound seems to take precedence over sense"—of Baraka's cultural nationalist poetics. This corresponds with an earlier argument he makes linking Baraka's poetics—which he sees in line with Charles Olson's—to Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism (32). Pollock, of course, was Greenberg's cause célèbre in his "radical" mission against subject matter, against reference, representation—toward pure form, abstraction. In Mackey's comparison, Baraka and Olson are seen in like terms to emphasize "process" and "composition by field" over the "artifactuality" or object-fetish of Western rationality—which clearly follows the Adornian assumption about the impossibility of any "outside" to reification (32-33).

Ironically, Mackey's comparison of early Baraka with Olson is accurate in one sense. According to this dichotomized Adornian logic, since Western Rationality is a monolith, its subversion can only be accomplished by either anti-rational negation, or a turn to its absolute negative; that is, the irrational embodied in spiritualism or mysticism. Olson's turn to Mayan spirituality and Baraka's early turn to ancient African spirituality come from their both being caught in the same
bourgeois binary trap. Baraka gives a good explanation in interview:

"bourgeois [black] nationalism is actually bourgeois ideology just turned inside out—black instead of white. The bourgeois nationalist would react against Greek mythology and praise Yoruba myth [or, for Olson, Mayan myth], for example, but if you analyze their economic bases you find they come out of the same thing: slave society and feudal society. What the bourgeois nationalist doesn't understand is that African slave society is not better than European slave society. The masses are slaves in both." ("Amiri" 114)

The common move within "oppositional" bourgeois poetics—whether Olson’s (white) or Baraka’s (black)—is the turn to myth, to pre-capitalist culture. Bourgeois artists do not try to imagine a way forward—say, into world socialism led by oppressed nations—because they perceive no horizon beyond themselves, their own social order, beyond capitalism and its total reifying logic.

Baraka’s pre-Marxist work, then, does fit Mackey’s analysis. But his more recent poetics of revolutionary nationalism is inevitably misrecognized in Mackey’s Adornian framework. Accordingly, in his conclusion Mackey can only resort to projecting his evaluative binary of explicit/oblique (the popular postmodernist version of which is “transparent/mediated” texts) onto Baraka’s Third World Marxist work. He faults its (vulgar, reductive) tendency toward “unambiguous sloganeering” and welcomes what he perceives to be the tempering moments when the poems return to a more sophisticated dialectic, with indcipherability, esotericism, and a certain surrealist “warp” (48).

I would argue that there is no less sophistication and edge to Baraka’s Third World Marxist poetics, which constitute an experimentalism based in a very different theory of art and politics. Baraka is fond of a Sartrean quip that is apt as a critique of the institutionally dominant view with which Mackey aligns:

As confused as Sartre is, he once said, “if you write that you don’t know who the villain is, they call it art. But if you say you do know who the villain is and you know how to get rid of him, that’s social protest.” (Autobiography 100)

The question remains as to what kind of an interpretive framework would do justice to Baraka’s Third World Marxist poetics—or, for that matter, any mass-oriented revolutionary avant-garde praxis? A valuable way to approach this question is actually to follow Mackey’s insight: the centrality of black music to Baraka’s poetics.

Baraka continues to admire Coltrane and to hold riff-repetition at the core of his poetics. But Baraka has developed a critique of Coltrane’s aesthetics that helps us understand how his own poetics have diverged from Coltrane’s. He presents it in a 1977 interview:

... there’s a big difference between, say, the Coltrane of “Giant Steps” and the post-“Love Supreme” Coltrane, when he starts going off into Eastern cosmology and other esoteric ideas, and actually loses a lot of the tough street sound—you know, the fast rhythm, and goes into a contemplative quietist form which loses the fire of actuality. . . . What basically goes on is bourgeois navel-watching, as if you’ve got all the time in the world just to lay and listen to that for hours and hours. It’s a kind of fascination with the worm of the art... ("Amiri" 112-14)

Baraka is observing in Coltrane the Adornian turn to theory-as-praxis—the endless, “open-ended,” “anti-aborptive” contemplation as the only viable form of political praxis—and its connection to a metaphysical or theosophic turn: not to African or Aztec spirituality, but to “Eastern cosmology.” The crucial insight in this critique, however, is the relation of the Adornian turn with a changed relationship to audience: Coltrane drifted from the “tough street sound,” the sound to which working-class blacks once related. Baraka describes the historical moment in which Trane and the black jazz
avant-garde were connected with revolutionary mass struggle:

We heard him blow then, long and strong, trying to find something, as Miles stood at the back of the stage and tugged his ear, trying to figure out what the fuck Trane was doing. We could feel what he was doing. . . . That Five Spot gig with Monk was Trane coming into his own. After Monk, he'd play chorus after chorus, taking the music apart before our ears, splintering the chords and sounding each note, resounding it, playing it backwards and upside down trying to get something else. And we heard our own search and travails, our own reaching for a new definition. Trane was our flag. . . . They [the new black jazz avant-garde] all could play, and the cry of "Freedom" was not only musical but reflected what was going on in the marches and confrontations, on the streets and in the restaurants and department stores of the South. (Autobiography 176)

The aesthetic process described here does not give primacy to "unlearning language" (referential, rational), as Mackey emphasizes: That razing would lead to "pure" form, "pure" process necessarily without goal (telos) or object—the Adornian negative—or else it leads back to the prelinguistic, the precapitalist, the mythic, the metaphysical. No, this unlearning is specifically "to find something else," something usable, that speaks with and to the black masses—the "affirmative" which Adorno can't admit, the Constructivist raising impulse to which Dada struggled to relate. The process is a form of Brechtian refocusing in which the relationship of artist (avant-garde) to mass audience (main army) remains vital.

When we consider Baraka's revolutionary nationalist avant-gardism in terms of its audience-to-artist relationship, the contrast with what is visible as Modernist or Avant-garde in the contemporary publishing or academic scene becomes quite stark. The poetics of the strong majority of critically and institutionally recognized American avant-gardes of the twentieth century share a common relationship to audience: elitism. In some cases (e.g., L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) this orientation is marked by bourgeois alienation or estrangement. That is, the avant-garde artist (usually alienated genius) necessarily stands apart from the masses, who cannot help but be vulgar or robotic since the monolithic system of capitalism absorbs everyone. In other instances, the artist-audience relation is practically feudal or worse. The poet becomes a Priest, Spiritual Leader—whether mythic (witness Baraka as Imamu, or Olson as Maximus), religious (Eliot and the Church), or occult (Yeats and Pound into their private systems, the Beats into Zen orientalism)—and the feudal culture comes with feudal social relations between artist and audience.

The conclusion to be derived from every case is that there is no possibility in the current historical moment for avant-garde art to relate to mass audiences as part of larger social movements toward political revolution. Because Baraka's Third World Marxist work is dedicated to this effort, the current hegemonic status of this conclusion represents one of the most significant obstacles to a full engagement with Baraka's contemporary poetics. Ironically, it is Baraka's recent work in particular that represents a deep and ongoing aesthetic struggle with the historic tensions at the heart of avant-gardism: the tension between and within aesthetic radicalism and political radicalism.

Historically, we know that there were revolutionary (socialist, anarchist, communist) and reactionry (anarchist, royalist, fascist-leaning) tendencies within almost every avant-garde formation. Futurism in one case led to

Baraka's recent work represents a deep and ongoing aesthetic struggle with the historic tensions at the heart of avant-gardism.
Bolshevism (Mayakovsky) and in another to Mussolini (Marinetti). Expressionism led to Hitler (Gottfried Benn) as well as to the German revolutionary left (Ernest Toller). The ambivalence at the core of avant-garde politics, however, does not result from any lack of commitment or political development. As an aesthetics of social transformation, avant-gardism has always been deeply informed by political theory and strategy.

In the seminal debates on the politics of avant-gardism, Lukacs, Brecht, Adorno, and Benjamin each premised his aesthetic position on the way he assessed and theorized the contemporary status of capitalism and the status and function of culture within it. Each advocated for a given aesthetic strategy (abstract art vs. agit-prop, realist vs. anti-realist) and a terrain of struggle (engaged with the masses and mass culture vs. positioned radically outside or beyond them) on the basis of its effectiveness at weakening the specific cultural logic of a specific historical moment of capitalism. Their different aesthetic positions reflected very different—competing—theories of the state of the world political economy, the state of the social actors (nations, classes) within it, and the relationship of culture to both. Adorno, for instance, saw a monolithic “administered capital” in which class struggle was defunct and mass culture was pervaded with its instrumental rationality, rendering hermetic abstract art the only aesthetic praxis that might escape cooptation and keep the distant hope for social transformation alive. Brecht disagreed fundamentally and posited the continuing importance of organized working-class struggle and, therefore, saw workers’ experimental theater as a crucial sphere of aesthetic praxis. Because avant-garde politics and aesthetics are self-consciously theorized and strategized as relational (and not intrinsic to each other), their aesthetic choices cannot be properly understood without also understand-

ing each artist’s political and strategic choices.

Turning to Baraka, there are two political questions that are fundamental to understanding his Third World Marxist aesthetics. The first concerns audience: Are the masses of people the leading force for revolution? Baraka clearly aligns with Brecht on this question:

BARAKA: ... to me the most important thing is reaching the working people the best way you can—which is propaganda distributed in factories. But revolutionary [avant-garde] culture has to play a role in that.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a temptation to a certain kind of condescension, when you have identified a group that you are writing for, which prevents you from having the kind of sophistication your art formerly had?

BARAKA: No, I don’t think so. Actually I need to develop a different kind of sophistication.... I think plays should be direct, poetry should be direct, what you say should be direct and not obscure. But I think the sophistication in trying to link up what is direct with what is advanced actually requires another kind of skill, which I still have to develop. Because I believe that even the most simple statement should contain the most advanced understanding, and the most advanced understanding should contain the simplest kind of statement. That you have to raise a dialectical relationship between making things popular and raising people’s standards. You don’t make things popular just because you want them to be simple, but because you want people to understand them. But when people understand things, then they demand more. And so I think the question is, how do you combine the advanced with the popular? (“The Theatre” 141-42)

In acknowledging his own shortcomings, Baraka clearly acknowledges the difficulty of achieving this “sophistication.” He understands that the relationship between avant-garde and popular audience is not stable or easy to negotiate. But he is committed to the process of experimentation and synthesis that will strengthen that relationship. In this concern he is resonant with Brecht:

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For a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight and so on. . . . If it splits off from the main body, we can determine why and by what means it can reunite with it. (72)

The comparison with Brecht suggests the second crucial question: Who is the main army? As is evident from any survey of his political prose, Baraka does not see himself addressing an army constituted by an undifferentiated assortment of people, as the word popular might suggest. Baraka’s self-identification as a Third World Marxist indicates a specific position within the Left that is informed by an internationalist theory of capitalism. Rather than arriving at the simple conclusion that “class” is now more important than “race,” Baraka understands contemporary capitalism to have moved into the stage of imperialism.

The emergence of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism (Lenin15) represents a sea change in the constitution and dynamics of capitalism that reconfigured the worldwide terrain of class struggle. As imperialism, capitalism had clearly emerged as a world system—with complex new relations between its supra-national, national, and intra-national parts and processes. In the epoch of imperialism, capitalism is based less on simple labor exploitation within autonomous countries and becomes increasingly based on the subjugation of whole nations by the small minority of the most powerful nations. National oppression—which operates not only through economic and political apparatuses but also cultural imperialism, chauvinism, and racism—allows these imperialist nations to extract what Lenin termed “super-profits” from the plundered land, raw materials, markets, and labor of oppressed nations. Since the rates of profit within the economies of the most advanced nations are constantly falling, these “super-profits” are crucial to the survival of capitalism. In this context, labor vs. capital (working class vs. bourgeoisie) is no longer the primary conflict at capitalism’s core. The central dynamic of capitalism becomes oppressor nation vs oppressed nations. Accordingly, anti-imperialist or anti-colonial national liberation movements (which are multi-class but led by the working class in conjunction with the most progressive sectors of the petit bourgeoisie, especially artists and intellectuals) become a crucial, autonomous vector of revolutionary struggle, related to, but distinct from the working-class labor movements inside advanced capitalist nations. In light of this, Baraka as a Third World Marxist does not turn away from black vernacular culture and black working-class audiences (Baraka’s most important audience would be the Black Radical Congress, not the AFL-CIO) but turns with renewed but altered attention and purpose toward them. His project is not to de-racialize or “universalize” his blues/jazz aesthetics but to experiment with it, retune its voice and expand its range and capacity for reaching and moving black liberation armies.

3/ raise: race: idiom

In his essay on Baraka, Mackey makes a particularly useful observation: Mid-century white avant-gardes almost universally (from the Beats to the Projectivists) “glowingly referred to bop improvisation as a technique from which poets could learn” (24). Instructively absent here is any awareness of the racial and class implications of this “new” technique on the artist’s relationship to audience. For there is a fundamental difference in the way whites and working-class blacks relate to jazz aesthetics. Put simply, the incorporation of “bebop improvisation” into white avant-garde poetics does not change the poets’ elite relationship to mass audiences—this technique must be learned, and is thus marked specialized, Aesthetic, High.16 But in work-
ing-class black communities that same
“bebop improvisation” is a tech-
tique—especially in language—that is
deply rooted in a living vernacular
tradition. Jazz aesthetics are grounded
in a non-specialized, non-alienated
popular “experimentalist” praxis that
pervades everyday street, religious,
and political culture. “Both in slavery
times and now, the black community
places high value on the spoken
word,” Geneva Smitherman explains;
“... aside from athletes and entertain-
ers, only those blacks who can perform
stunning feats of oral gymnastics
become culture heroes and leaders in
the community. Such feats are the basic
requirements of the trade among
preachers, politicians, disc jockeys,
hustlers, and lovers” (201-02). In the
space where these musical and linguist-
tical experimentalisms converge, Baraka
has fused various elements of black
oral tradition—the boast, signifyin(g)—
to his poetics of hard riffing to create a
jazz performance poetics that is capa-
bile of speaking to the black masses
while at the same time pushing at the
range and depth of their thought.
Baraka’s long poem “In the Tradition”
serves as an illuminating example. But
a dominant tendency in Baraka scholar-
ship must first be de-centered in
order to grasp the poem’s project fully.
The centrality of blues/jazz to
Baraka’s aesthetics is clear in his poetry
and prose. His jazz poetics have been
the subject of much study. But scholar-
ship has tended to focus on Baraka’s
cultural nationalist period. In doing so,
it has fixed consideration of Baraka’s
poetics into an increasingly narrow
approach through one particular
stream—“the aggressive strain” of bop
and hard bop. Most insightful theo-
rized in relation to Baraka’s poetics by
William Harris, this stream of jazz is
characterized by a “murderous
impulse”—a “unique indigenous
[black] parodic model that jazz makes
available” through its foundation in
the black signifyin(g) tradition, the
verbal art of insult (15-16). This aggressive
strain is clearest in Coltrane’s earlier
music:

Coltrane takes a weak Western form, a
popular song [“Nature Boy,” “My
Favorite Things”], and murders it; that
is, he mutilates and disembowels this
shallow but bouncy tune by using dis-
cordant and aggressive sounds to
attack and destroy the melody line.
The angry black music devours and
vomits up the fragments of the white
corpse. (14)

Drawing on Henry Louis Gates’s dis-
cussion of jazz-signifyin(g) and its
process of transformation “by repeat-
ing, and then inverting” (qtd. in Harris
15), Harris argues that

Baraka also wants to take weak
Western forms, rip them asunder, and
create something new out of the rub-
ble. He transposes Coltrane’s musical
ideas to poetry, using them to turn
white poetic forms backwards and
upside down. This murderous impulse
is behind all the forms of Baraka’s aes-
thetic and art. (15)

Subsequent Baraka criticism has
tended to assume that all jazz influ-
ences on Baraka’s poetry (especially
through Coltrane’s music) are
informed by this same “murderous
impulse,” and this assumption has
resulted in two significant errors. First,
it has limited critical recognition and
analysis of the full range of Baraka’s
bop-informed work in his black nation-
alist period. The much larger musical
ideas of bop and hard bop cannot be
reduced to one of their streams. Even
the most “aggressive” representatives
of these two traditions of jazz, Charlie
Parker and John Coltrane, did not base
their art solely in the demolition of
Western forms. As with the greatest
black musicians in every era of jazz,
each composed original tunes through-
out their careers, tunes in an array of
tones and moods which went on to
become the most important standards,
constantly reprinted and reinterpret-
ed—not murdered—by their peers and
by later generations. Interpretation of
Baraka’s jazz poetics through this sin-
gular focus on the demolitionist strain
of bop and hard bop obstructs critical
perception of the raising impulse ("It's Nation Time"), rather thanrazing impulse, that also drives the early development of his bop performance poetics. More importantly, this critical obstruction has been projected forward, blocking recognition of the most recent and significant developments in Baraka's synthesis of jazz and poetry.\textsuperscript{17} It seems to have escaped most critics that, given the advances in his recent work, Baraka's most important Coltrane poem—"In the Tradition"—may not in fact have been inspired by Coltrane but by Arthur Blythe.

The dedication of "In the Tradition," which Baraka first published in 1980, to alto saxophonist Arthur Blythe is not incidental to the poem. In the Tradition is the title of a 1979 Arthur Blythe album. The etymology of this title begins to suggest the aesthetic importance of Blythe and this album to Baraka. From the mid-'70s, "In the Tradition" began to be used by avant-garde musicians—who in "free" jazz had supposedly left all tradition behind—as a title for projects in which they played bebop and earlier jazz styles. When Arthur Blythe recorded his album In the Tradition in 1979, he stood as a key figure within what was then emerging as a coherent black counter-trend within the '70s jazz avant-garde scene. Stanley Crouch named the counter-movement "Freedom Swing" in 1978:

In New York today, one notices that there are individuals and groups of musicians who seem to be forming something of a movement within the very avant-garde broad camp that developed since the Atlantic recordings of Ornette Coleman. . . . More than anything else, it appears to repudiate some contemporary tendencies in the avant-garde. . . . Much of its thrust centers around a return to the more overt roots of jazz and its most fundamental traditions. Its purpose is not only to reach a much broader audience than just bohemians and professional exotics, but is a recognition of the fact that, with the death of major players . . . , the younger generation will either be the active and living conservatory of African-American musical tradition, or will symbolize the music's decline into esoteric intellectual entertainment for the disaffiliated . . . . (14)

Crouch is clear that this is not any simple revivalism. He notes how these players combine their mastery in free jazz style and technique with diverse elements of the black musical tradition—from Swing to African folk rhythms, from Southside fatback blues to gospel.\textsuperscript{18} He focuses on Blythe as one leader in this movement and names as peers no less than three of the four members of Blythe's In the Tradition quartet: Blythe himself, Steve McCall (drums), and Fred Hopkins (bass).

In this counter-movement's musical aesthetic, Baraka saw a new path forward in his own struggle to develop what "different kind of sophistication" in his poetry that can "combine the advanced and the popular." Baraka had seen how Coltrane's music had achieved this synthesis temporarily:

it reaches a point where it's very close, where it comes from the people, then goes into a form that is advanced but still drawn so much from the people that it comes together. . . . But then it goes off into something else, becomes metaphysical, he begins eastern religions, goes into OM . . . . (qtd. in Solors 256)

But in this "Freedom Swing" counter-movement he would find a way to carry Coltrane's synthesis into the present, through the musical ideas of Arthur Blythe.\textsuperscript{19}

If we take Blythe's In the Tradition as a musical model for Baraka's poem, the first thing to observe is that Baraka is using Blythe's title as a lick, and has made it the core riff or figure off of which he builds the solo that is the long poem. Tommy Turrentine's (trumpet) description of Charlie Parker's style illuminates Baraka's solo poetics:

[ Soloists] always have scraps [licks] that they can play when they improvise, but in the course of playing them, other things would come to them. A crip is like a crutch. It's like a bridge from one idea to another. Bird [Parker]
might rip off something real mean and
then play a crip. And after that, he’d
come out of the crip, and he’d rip off
something real mean again—melodically
or harmonically or rhythmically.
(qtd. in Berliner 217)

This compositional principle has been
characteristic of solo improvisation
from bop onward. Paul Berliner has
astutely captured the dynamic:

It is in dramatic movements from for-
merly mastered phrases to unre-
hearsed patterns, from commonly
transacted physical maneuvers to
those outside the body’s normal frame
of reference, and from familiar frames
of reference within compositional form
to uncalculated structural positions,
that improvisers typically push the
limits of their artistry. (217)

The figures that are woven as a con-
stant thread through solos are not all
“crips” or “licks”; the core figures can
be both traditional riffs or signature
figures of other major soloists (Trane
licks, Bird licks, Prez licks), but they
can also be original figures.

In Baraka’s case, the choice of “In
the Tradition” as a core lick is im-
portant. More than simply one of Arthur
Blythe’s signature phrases, the referent
for the lick is Blythe’s album In the
Tradition, which in itself refers not to
one style but to the entire musical heri-
tage of black music.20 As in the renew-
al aesthetics of “Freedom Swing,”
Baraka traces this heritage through
every period and style of African
American music but also into its roots
and fusions with the black diaspora
(Latin Tinge, Afro-Cuban, pygmy).
Furthermore, in the lists upon lists of
names and titles that make up the body
of the poem, Baraka names not only
key black musicians of every period
and black musical tradition, but he also
names artists, writers, orators, and
freedom fighters. His riffing on “the
tradition” establishes black music as
the dynamic source of all black cultural
and political expression. This is the
answer suggested by the pun in “What
is this tradition Basied on?”—the
“base” of the tradition is Count “Basie”

and the blues/jazz musical tradition he
represents.

While the almost overwhelming
range and scope of the lists may sug-
gest chaos, the composition of this
poem-as-solo is carefully built. As in
the soloing styles of Parker and
Coltrane that most influenced Baraka’s
poetics, Baraka’s sound is marked by a
speed, drive, and density that can tend
to obscure the intricate composition
involved. Referencing the common-
place in jazz history that Louis
Armstrong thought in quarter-notes,
Charlie Parker in eighth-notes, and
Coltrane in sixteenth-notes,21 Baraka
sets an even faster pace for his solo:

in the tradition
¼ notes
eighth notes
16th notes
32nds, 64ths, 128ths, silver blue (Reader 304)

Against this tendency for the poem’s
lists to blur into “silver blue,”22 the
body of the solo is structured into cho-
ruses, the contours of which are
marked by the “in the tradition” lick.

Much like Turrentine’s account of
Parker’s soloing above, Baraka plays
the riff, “then rips off something real
mean,” and then returns to the riff only
to bridge from that into the next run.
Consider the first and second choruses:

Tradition
of Douglass
of David Walker
Garnett
Turner
Tubman
of ragers yeh
of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes
of Satchelmouths & SunRa’s
of Bessies & Billies & Sassys
& Ma’s

Musical screaming
Niggers
yeh

tradition
of Brown Wells
& Brown Sterling
& Brown Clifford
of H Rap and H Box
Black Baltimore sister blues antislavery
singers
countless funky blind folks
& oneleg country beboppers

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bottleneck in the guitarneck dudes
whispering thrashing cakewalking
raging
ladies
& gents
getdown folks, elegant as skywriting
tradition (Reider 303)

Each of the choruses can be seen as divided into two chords. In the first chorus, the first chord is “Abolitionism” and the second is “Blues/Jazz Primogenitors.” As he plays through each chord, Baraka builds a melodic line that corresponds to each chord—interpreting it—then shifts across the chord change without interrupting its weave. In the “Abolitionism” bars, Baraka centers his rhythm on the trochaic pulse of the two-syllable names and the repeated “ragers” that closes the phrase in this chord: DOUG-lass, DAV-id, WALK-er, [gar-NETT], TUR-ner, TUB-man, RAG-ers, RAG-ers. The metrical inversion of the iambic “Gar-Nett” provides a powerful accent because of the way the strong /a/-assonance with “Walker” creates a trochaic pull. In addition to the rhythm, the coherence of the line through “Abolitionism,” is carried through an alliterative progression—almost like a scale—through /dl/, /l/, /l/, with the whole progression itself contoured by the /s/ of “Douglass,” which is then echoed in the final /s/’s of “ragers yeh / ragers.”

Moving into the second chord, Baraka releases the metrical tension created by “Gar-NETT” and shifts into the contrastive rhythm of iambics: “of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes.” The rhythm then slides into a dactylic-anapastic countertop that moves into a pair of lines/bars that generate a strong swing feeling by taking the already syncopated upward rhythm in “SunRa’s” and “Ma’s” and rhyming them in this surprising way. To close out his playing through this chord, Baraka returns to the “ragers,” but reformulates them as “Musical screaming / Niggers.” He repeats the syncopated “yeh,” but delays it this time until it falls almost outside the rhythmic boundary of this section. Propelled by the momentum from this delay, Baraka begins the second chorus playing the lick again but abbreviated (“trad-ition”). He then drops into a heavy 3-bar riff on “Brown” that carries the “Abolitionism” chord (William Wells Brown) through into resonances with early-twentieth-century literature (Sterling Brown) and mid-twentieth-century jazz (Clifford Brown). And he closes the phrase with the tag “of H Rap & H Box.” In the first bar of the next chord, Baraka sounds the “Abolitionism” chord again (“antislavery singers”) but goes on to weave phonetic fragments of /boks/ (“Box”) into the longer phrasings he uses throughout the body of this chord. In addition to the scattering of individual /b/’s, /k/’s, and /s/’s throughout, there are clearer shadings of /bo[k]/ in “bal-timore,” /bo[k]/ in “beboppers”, and /bok[s]/ in “blind folks” and “bottle-neck.” With the rhyme “raging / ladies;” the solo proceeds to echo the “ragers” riff of the previous chorus but also signals (“ladies / & gents”) a closural shift of tone toward the “elegant / skywriting / tradition” and the more plainly spoken tone of his playing through the next choruses (“why do you want to be / the president of all this / of the blues and the slow side-ways / horn”).

The main body of the poem can be seen to be composed in this “Freedom Swing” soloist poetics of repetition, transformation (rather than inversion), and fusion (rather than destruction): “in the tradition of all of us in the posi-tive aspect.” With each repetition of the “In the Tradition” riff, Baraka turns and rides out into different streams of this boundless black heritage that traverses time (“in the tradition, always clarifying, always new and centuries old”) and space (“a wide pan african / world”). In each run, he is constantly repeating and building on the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic patterns that his “improvising” uncovers amidst the vast achievement and possibili-ty, beauty (“sing”), and struggle (“fight”) that the tradition holds. In
gathering these “licks” and “riffs,” he is attempting in poetry a project he recognizes in Arthur Blythe’s music:

in the tradition thank you Arthur for playing & saying reminding us how deep how old how black how sweet how we is and bees (Reader 309)

But “In the Tradition” draws also on another tradition of “playing & saying”: the black oral tradition.23

After the first quarter of the solo section of the poem—ending at the riff on musical notes (“¼ notes / eighth notes . . .”)—the poem-solo immediately invokes call-and-response (“Tell us again . . .”) and then moves into a boast:

. . . our fingerprints are everywhere on you america, our fingerprints are everywhere, Cesaré told you that our family strayed around the world has made more parts of that world blue and funky, cooler, flashier, hotter afro-cuban james brownier (305)

Responding to the assumed “off-stage” retort of the figure of Eurocentric America (E.A.), Baraka opens up a signifying contest—“if it’s talk you want, we can say . . .”—that anticipates E.A.’s jabs (“hah, you rise a little I mention we also the tradition of amos and andy”) and rises in intensity as Baraka rips off an overpowering boast:

But just as you rise up to gloat I scream COLTRANE! STEVIE WONDER! MALCOLM XI ALBERT AYLÉR! THE BLACK ARTS!
Shit and whistling out of my Nkrumah, cabral, fanon, sweep—I cry Fletcher Henderson, Cane, What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue, the most perfect couplet in the language . . . (306)

With E.A. apparently rendered speechless, the “tradition” weave returns to addressing “all of us in the positive aspect.” It sets out riffing on black poets, jazz musicians, singers, sculptors, and painters, until Baraka turns back to signifying on E.A. (“southernagrarians / academic aryan”) to finish out the solo section of the poem. He moves through caps on E.A.’s servile cultural dependence on Europe (“come out of europe if you can”), and targets E.A.’s racist ignorance about the roots of American culture itself in the black tradition (“where’s yr american / music / Nigger music?”). By merging his solo playing with black vernacular practices of verbal artistry and gamesmanship, Baraka has woven yet another black performance genre into his gathering of the vast tradition of black music. But this fusion is also part of his broader attempt to make the advanced popular. The introductory and closing sections of the poem make this clear.

The solo section does not begin until Baraka signals the break by introducing the Blythe lick: “Arthur Blythe / Says / it! / in the tradition.” What precedes the solo in jazz is usually the playing of a few introductory choruses by the ensemble. The poem’s intro does suggest several ensembles, but they are all of the most oppressive kind. There is “bennygoodman headmaster” of the (in)famous Benny Goodman Quartet to remind us of the racist legacy of jazz popularization.24 “Headmaster” suggests the “slavemaster romes” and enslaved “women laid around.” There is the prime-time TV team of young, poor, and mostly black basketball players who can achieve glory only through the leadership of their white savior coach, the White Shadow.25 There is even the ensemble “trio,” comprised of the police duo, Starks & Hutch, plus their reliable pimp/hustler informant, Huggie Bear26—“Men become boys & slimy roosters crowing negros in love with dressed up pimp stupidity and death.” The models of collectivity presented here are seen to hold African Americans down, literally27:

[they] wanna outlaw the dunk, cannot deal with skyman darrell or double dippin hip doctors deadly in flight cannot deal with Magic or Kareem . . . . (303)

In the next several lines, Baraka begins his solo, following the irrepressible flight of these basketball players out of
the “denying and lying images” of black collectivity. By fusing jazz history with the television and sports culture of 1980, Baraka creates a point of popular access and interest into the almost intimidating range and detail of the pan-african history of art, literature, music, and political history that his solo will pursue. In doing so, he also sets up the tensions that will carry his mass audience through into his signifyin(g) battle. These are the same tensions against Eurocentrism, racism, and chauvinism that working-class black audiences encounter every day in the culture around them.

The closing section of the poem is marked by a strikingly different tone, signaled by the turn to collective memory (“how / we is and bees / when we remember”), and even to the tone and rhythms of prayer:

in the tradition
in the African American tradition
open us
yet bind us
let all that is positive
find
us

Even more striking in this section is the almost complete absence of names or titles. But this movement from the individual to the collective can be seen within the solo section itself, which begins with the names of leaders of historic movements (Douglass, Walker, Turner, Tubman) and ends with the names of the movements themselves in the present (“rma & app & appr & cap”) and with a nameless gathering riff of “african american black people / america”:

& assembly line, turpentine, mighty fine female
blacks, and cooks, truck drivers, coal miners,
small farmers, iron steel and hospital workers
in the tradition of us
in the tradition of us
the reality not us the narrow fantasy (309)

Here, the rhythm of the people is infused with the genius and virtuosity of its greatest leaders and artists. But the power of the people’s rhythm is in the long struggle, the dialectic of “life and dying” (306), of “passion and pain,” of “Sing! Fight!” — of one step, followed by the other, again and again. And it is this rhythm of walking—persisting through the fastest and highest runs of Baraka’s soloing—that sounds the polyrhythm of “In the Tradition.” From the “blues walk” that begins the poem to the “cakewalking” of “blues antislavery singers.” From its swinging “walker” stride in “For My People Margaret Walker & David Walker & Jr Walker & Walker Smith Sweet Ray Leonard Rockin in Rhythm w/ Musical Dukes” to “the most perfect couplet in the language,” to

Sing!
Fight!
Sing!
Fight!
Sing!
Fight! &c. &c. (310)

Kareem, Bird, Baraka — the stars and soloists soar, they inspire and lead by their flight. But the walking of the people—the team, the ensemble, the community, the nation—in their steadfast forward motion is the most powerful traditional of all of us.

And so we understand the final lines of the poem not as an expression of any “murderous impulse” but the collective will to survive! — and to remember and continue the singing fight. Baraka plays a figure from the final song of Arthur Blythe’s In the Tradition, a rendition of Coltrane’s “Naima”:

Booshee dooooo doo doooooo dee
doooo doooooo doooooo! (310)

It suggests an elegy and a taking of inspiration—taking in of spirus, breath, life—from those who died in struggle in Greensboro the same year Blythe recorded the tune, the same Greensboro of the first sit-ins, SNCC, and the first radical surges of the Civil Rights Movement:

Klansmen calmly walk to the trunks of the rear cars, open them, and take out and distribute rifles and handguns. A
shot rings out, and the demonstrators run for cover. Armed Klansmen walk about, carefully select victims, fire and reload . . . . They seem like casual participants at a skeet shoot. One of them methodically pumps bullets into the body of a fallen protester. (Wade 381)

Among the 100 women, men, and children gathered, nine were wounded that day. The five dead were young, militant union and community organizers. They were César Cauce, Michael Nathan, William Sampson, Sandra Smith, and James Waller. They were two textile union presidents, two doctors, and the former president of her class at Bennett College. 30 It was November 3, 1979, and their rallying call—Baraka's last line—was DEATH TO THE KLAN

1. In his essay on Césaire, Baraka links Césaire's blackening of Surrealism to his own attempt: “See my poem “Black Dada Nihilismus' for a parallel legitimization of the Dada-surreal utilization idea” (Reader 325).

2. Rothenberg and Joris's anthology Poems for the Millenium is a good example of this tendency, both for its treatment of Baraka and of Négritude.

3. This interpretation bears out Nielsen's insightful examination of Baraka's recording of the poem: “Baraka's poem calls for ‘Black scream / and chant,” but there is no screaming from the poet on this recording' (190). The recording, instead, is marked by Baraka's “quietest delivery” (192).

4. Also consider the inclusion of Tom Ross (Baraka's grandfather) in the list of black rebels.

5. In a famous interview, Baraka claimed that his blackness had nothing to do with his art: “I am fully conscious all the time that I am an American Negro because it's part of my life. But I also know that if I want to say, 'I see a bus full of people,' I don't have to say, 'I am a Negro seeing a bus full of people'” (“LeRoi” 7). Baraka would, of course, come to reverse this statement.

6. Indeed, as Baraka would later realize, he never gave up his bohemianism in becoming a nationalist. He only reclothed it in black: “It is my contention that much of the cultural nationalism young people fervently believe is critically important to the struggle is just a form of black bohemianism. Take away the attraction to Africa, and the ‘weird' clothes, and ‘communalism' can be found in any number of white hippie cultures. Some of the cultural nationalists we began to recognize when we started to read the history of the Communist Party (Bolshevik). These old Russian hippies and cultural nationalists were called Narodniki’” (Autobiography 424-25). Sollors also argues that, for most of his cultural nationalist phase, Baraka maintained an elitism and aestheticization of politics that was consistent with his white bohemian avant-gardism.

7. This suggests important analyses of the problematics of gender in Baraka's—and black cultural nationalism's—and politics and poetics on which Baraka has moved forward in his Third World Marxist period. Space limitations preclude my taking up these considerations here.

8. While these readings suggest the complexity of Baraka's engagement with the dynamics (internal and external) of colonialism and Eurocentrism, they do not diminish or blur in any way their historical brutality, chauvinism, and scale.

9. This lines up with Charles Bernstein's concept of the “anti-absorptive” as well as the ubiquitous postmarxist embrace of critically “open” vs. uncritically “closed” texts, a dichotomy based on the Barthian valuation of “writerly” over “readable” texts. Jameson offers a corrective to this poststructuralist tendency: “Today, traditional realism—the canon defended by Lukacs, but also old-fashioned political art of the socialist realist type—is often assimilated to classical ideologies of representation and to the practice of 'closed form'; while even bourgeois modernism (Kristeva's models are Lautréamont and Mallarmé) is said to be revolutionary precisely to the degree to which it calls older formal values and practices into question and produces itself as an open 'text' . . . [Breath's] attack on the formalism of Lukacs' literary analyses remains binding on the quite different attempts of the political modernists [of today] to make ideological judgements (revolutionary/bourgeois) on the basis of purely formal characteristics of closed or open forms, ‘naturality,' effacement of the traces of production in the work, and so forth” (206).

10. The only other alternative being Adolmian/Greenbergian pure form or the negative dialectic (theory as praxis).

11. In contemporary poetry, practiced most visibly by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E formation. In his article mapping L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, “Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy,” Steve McCaffery defines a radical poetics as one that resists “semantic production,” that produces

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not "poems," but "unreadable texts" that reject "the model of communication as a transmission-reception by two individual, reflexive consciousnesses" (156). Reference and representation are complicit with commodity fetishism. Thus poetry should pose to its readership "the challenge of developing capacities to experience the problematicity of the problem itself, to experience the unavoidable inability to decide and to regulate all pressures to rush immediately into solutionary strategies" (158).

12. Especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, Thatcher's neoliberal mantra "TINA" (There Is No Alternative) seems to have been assumed even in the postmodernist Left. But cracks are beginning to open up. See Zizek's recent critique of Butler and Laclaude.

13. In the discussion of the history and theory of avant-gardes that follows, I have drawn on Anderson; Lunn; and Wollen.

14. Woodard provides an extensive historical survey of the development of Baraka's politics through his leadership in the Black Power Movement.

15. This theory of imperialism stands in direct disagreement with those who define imperialism as simply the oppression of nations by other nations. In such definitions (following from Kautsky), national oppression tends to be regarded as the "foreign policies" of advanced capitalist nations, rather than as a more complex and constitutive mechanism of late capitalism.

16. It can also develop into a kind of passing fashion. See Feinstein's fourth chapter "From Obscurity to Fad: Jazz and Poetry in Performance."

17. Arguing that less "volatile" post-'60s' black poets—with Michael Harper's 1970 Dear John, Dear Coltrane representing the watershed moment—were able "to concentrate more on the rich legacy of jazz rather than the intensities of rage" (128), Feinstein, in his comprehensive Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present, nonetheless fails to interpret Baraka's 1979 "AM TRAK" as anything more than a '60s' poem.

18. Baraka does not use Crouch's term but has a similar analysis of this counter-movement in "Class Struggle in Music."

19. It is no surprise then that, when Baraka records an ensemble performance of "In the Tradition" (New Music—New Poetry)—only two years after Blythe's album—he does it with the same Steve McCall who had been on the drums for Blythe's In the Tradition, and David Murray (tenor sax), a direct peer of Blythe's also named in Crouch's article.

20. The standards Blythe chose for the album represent important periods, styles, and artists in the blue black/jazz tradition: Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz," Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood" and "Caravan," and John Coltrane's "Naima."

21. See Martin Williams's seminal writings on John Coltrane.

22. That 64ths and 128ths can even be perceived by the human ear is clearly debatable and indicates the vernacular technique of hyperbole.

23. See Brown for a survey of vernacular forms and genres in black poetry.

24. Baraka has written in several essays about the cycle of opposition (denigration), claiming, and cooperation through which black musical styles are assimilated into mainstream white culture. See "The Great Music Robbery."

25. The White Shadow played in CBS's 8:00-9:00 p.m. slot from 1978 through 1981.

26. Starsky and Hutch played for most of its run in ABC's 10:00-11:00 p.m. slot from 1975 until 1979, after which it lived a long second life in syndicated re-runs.

27. The history of racism in basketball has only recently been the subject of serious study and commentary. Fitzpatrick has written on the racial motivations behind the NCAA's 1967 banning of the dunk until 1976 (239-41). The no-dunk rule was popularly dubbed the "Lew Alcindor [Kareem Abdul-Jabbar] Rule." Caponi provides an excellent history of the development and racist repression of the black aesthetic in basketball.


29. "Naima" is one of Coltrane's most lyric originals, a ballad of intense beauty—and one of his most reprised classics. He penned it for his first wife, Naima, with whom he endured a painful separation and divorce. Baraka scats Blythe's reprisal of the figure, which adds, as Gary Giddins writes on the liner notes, "a mood of trembling beauty."

30. Two police officers, a police informant, three Klansmen, and two Nazis were eventually convicted. But not before they had been acquitted twice by all-white juries. For extensive information, see the Greensboro Justice Fund's website: http://www.gjf.org.

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Brecht, Bertholt. "On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism." Bloch 70-76.


