Portrait of a Poet as a Black American

/ am what f think t am. You are what

I think you are.

("Audubon, Drafted" DL 56)

The Black poets, forced by a dominant culture which constantly negates them, question what it means to be human, to be American, to be black, continue a definitive quest for identity, through their culture and work. African - American poetry in that sense represents a blend of the public and the private in the journey toward voice arid freedom.

African - American poets before the civil war, Jupiter Hammond, George Moses Horton, George. Boxer Vashon, James Whitfield and others explored the questions of slavery and freedom, drawing from myth and stones. Their interest is unique to have been created under slavery, social isolation, education, deprivation, and poverty. The words of Dunbar represent a desire for a life beyond that which was prescribed for African - Americans. "I know why the caged bird sings at me. When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, when he beats his bars and he would be free. It is not a carol of joy or glee. But a prayer that he sends from his hearts deep core." (Dunbar: *Selected Poetry)* The Harlem Renaissance of the twentieth century symbolized a turning point in the tradition of Black poetry

at the time. Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Countee Culleen's works brought out parts of the everyday limes of African - Americans, which had seldom been dealt with. The African - American tradition of poetic verse from world war I onwards till the present day, has split into several different and at times opposing elements. Poets such as Jay Wright, Rita Dove and Michael S. Harper maintain themselves and relate to the past. Still a more involved and bonded politically relevant poetic practice came from nationalist writers such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Haki IVladhubuti and others.

The Black genre required a broader outline for internal satisfaction and conveyance. Because language plays such an essential role in the life of America, the Black poets have added complexity of expressing themselves so as to be understood. It is the void way of life that African Americans have been forced to live and hence they have a number of cultural tactics {most notable the Blues) to teach themselves by expression how to carry on and endure together with the Jazz age of the 1920s to the beat of the 1950s from the politically torn 1960s and 1970s to the turbulent youth culture of the turn of this century, America's mainstream turns to black culture to voice its heartache, hopes, and ambitions.

In a letter to down Beat in 1964, the avant-garde Jazz trumpeter and composer Bill Dixon Complained that Le Roi Jones's jazz writing "too obviously smacks of a kind of 'in group" superiority generally and rightly

associated with pseudo-intellectuals". Many years later in *The Autobiography of Le Roi Jones,* Baraka recounts the soul searching that went on during the period when he established his reputation as scribe of the 1960s avant-garde when Baraka goes on to describe Ayler's playing, you can feel him straining for a vernacular linguistic effect that matches the visceral physical power of the music "He had a sound, a tone unlike anyone else's. It tore through you broad jagged like something out of nature... It was a big massive sound and wail. The crying shouting moan of black spirituals and God music... Albert was mad. His playing was like some primordial frenzy that the world secretly used for energy."

By his time, Baraka had thrown himself headlong into the work of building networks and institutions in the black community that would, as Larry Neal described the purpose of the Black Arts Movement, "speak to the spiritual and cultural heads of black people." Now he was a people's intellectual, a revolutionary voice heralding a new expressive mode for a new black identity. As Baraka aligned himself with the community, oriented goals and methods of the Black Power Movement, drenched his writing and public performance in the rhythms and tonalities of the black urban vernacular, and hoisted himself up as an arbiter of black authenticity. His quest for what Werner Sollers has called a "populist modernism" involved a tricky effort to reconcile collective political imperatives with the individual aesthetic freedom he prized both as a poet and as a champion of the jazz avant-grade.

Interestingly while assessing Baraka's involvement in his poetic career, We start to realize that post-colonial and multicultural literatures are not always benign celebrations of racial and cultural diversity; frequently they are harsh and quite scathing in documents of the kinds of pernicious inequities that characterize the institutions and processes of slavery, apartheid, and colonization. We at times mistake the resentment expressed about our past and present oppressions as examples of "reverse racism." The desire of the 'blacks' often give way to something else: irritation, impatience. Hence a wish that "they'd just get over it." We tend to see the writer as "way too angry" often basing ourselves on a rather superficial and cursory reading of his creations and particularly a historical understanding of the complexities of the colonial equation and the ambivalences it produces in colonized and colonizing subjects. Ways of seeing and of being seen are determined by our cultural vantage point; our sense of /centrality and dominance in one context becomes our sense of meaninglessness and marginality in another. Seldom do we realize how the black authors have had to negotiate positions of power and marginality. The exercises fall under the rubric of "the Politics of Identity." Within the "matrix of identity", all identifying positions cohere in the wholeness of being human. Baraka's stance also helps us understand the simultaneous occupation of the positions of power and oppression. In other words, we all believe in Teresa de Lauretis's notion of multiple shifting, and frequently contradictory positions that are determined by the different contexts we inhabit, usually the difference from the majority population results in the

marginality within that population. "Difference" is most often perceived as deviance.

Baral<a must have felt the pangs while being reduced to a single aspect of his people's identity, that which marked them as different from the dominant' population. There Is also a virtual simultaneity of privilege and powerlessness for Baraka, who occupies the center and the margin because of his subjective pluralities. Interestingly along with the Beat Poets, who included such Injures as Allen Gingberg (1926-1997), Gregory Corso (1930-2001), Gary Synder, Baraka's poetry is distinctly raw. Reflecting sometimes in an extreme form, the more open, relaxed and searching society of the 1950s and 1960s the Beats pushed the boundaries of the American idiom in the direction of demotic speech perhaps former than any other group. The Beats and some of the Black Mountain poets are often considered to have been . responsible for the San Francisco Renaissance. The Beat poets recognized the political power behind their poetry, and they used words to shock audiences, critique government, institutions, and questioned traditional American values. Although he, later became a leader of the Black Arts movement, Baraka was connected to the early Beat movement. Like the Beats Baraka was interested in living on the fringes of the society, exploding conventional ways of thinking, and using poetry for political rebellion. By the mid 1950s however, Baraka had separated from the Beats to pursue 'racial' themes in his poetry, and his work became increasingly "militant. While the Beat poets considered

themselves outsiders, they did write poetry that appealed to the masses. Just as the Beat poets shocked their readers with similar breaches of tradition using obscenities, slang; and references to illegal drugs, Baraka shocked his readers with his dialect: obscenities and violence. Both Baraka and Ginsberg had lifestyles that matched their vibrant, radical and confrontational poetry, with Baraka's poetry reflecting a fascination for Africa and primitivism.

During his Beat period (1957 - 1962), when he was known as le Roi Jones, Baraka lived in New Yorks' Greenwich village and LowerEast side, where he published important little magazines such as Yugen and Floating Bear and Socialized with such bohemian figures as [Allen] Ginsberg, Franko Hara and Gilbert Sorrento. He was greatly influenced by the white avant-garde. Charles Olson, O'Hara, and Gins berg, in particular, shaped his conception of a poem as being exploratory and open in form. Donald Allen records in *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* Baraka's Beat period views on form, "there must not be any preconceived notion or design for what a poem ought to be. Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it's thar say Charles Olson.....and I follow closely with that. I'm not interested in writing sonnets sestinas or anything,... Only poems."

In the avant-garde, Baraka experienced a social/intellectual group whose ideas corresponded to his own, "I was drawn to them because they legitimized things I wanted to do and that 1 felt". This he noted in an

interview with D.H. Melhem.For instance, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) moved him "because it talked about a world I could identity with and relate to. His language and his rhythms were real to me. Unlike the cold edges and exclusiveness of the New Yorker poem that had made me cry Ginsberg talked of a different world one much closer to my own" (A. 150)." Allen. . . . . .Was talking about the nigger streets (sic) and junkies and all kinds of things that I could see and I could identity with, and I said, yeah, that's closer to what I want to do," (Harris) In essence the ayant-garde provided Baraka with his first intellectual and artistic models.

Baraka's first book, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* looks like a typical product of integrated bohemia: in fact, it ends: "You are/as any other sad man here// American." Yet there is a "blues feeling" throughout, that is, an infusion of black culture and reference. The reader can hear the "moaning....(of) Bessie Smith" in the books' lines, although blackness is not its principal focus. Baraka remarked in early 1960, "I'm fully conscious all the time that I am an American Negro, because it's part of my life. But I know also that if I want to say, 'I see a bus full of people, i don't have to say, '1 am a Negro seeing a bus full of people.' 1 would deal with it when it has to do directly with the poem, and not as a kind of broad generalization that doesn't have much to do with a lot of young writers today who are Negroes." (David Osman: Interview.) This view proved to be transitory. With the Civil Rights movements and with Martin Luther King at its height, and the black political upsurge of the late 1960s, Baraka's attitude toward

race and art changed. He found that being a Negro wasn't some abstract and generalized stance but was integral to his art. With the coming of ethnic consciousness came political consciousness and the slow and painful rejection of bohemia.

In July 1960 Baraka visited Castro's Cuba. *In The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka,* Baraka refers to this visit as "a turning point in my life". While in Cuba he met forceful and politically committed Third World artists and intellectuals who forced him to reconsider his art and his apolitical stance. They attacked htm for being an American: he tried to defend himself in "Cuba Libre," an essay reprinted in *Home: Social Essays,* by saying "Look, why jump on me?.....I'm in complete agreement with you. I'm a poet.... What can I do? I write, that's all. I'm not even interested in politics". The Mexican poet, Jaime Shelley, answered him*. "You want to cultivate your soul? In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, We've got millions of starving people to feed and that moves me enough to make poems out of Finally, the Cuban revolution impressed Baraka as an alternative to the unanchored rebellion of his bohemian friends at home. In Cuba the young intellectuals seemed to be doing something concrete to create a better and more humane world. Baraka felt that the Cuban government unlike that of the United States, was actually being run by young intellectuals and idealists. This trip was the beginning of Baraka's radical political art and his identification with the Third World artists.

The Dead Lecturer, Baraka's second book of poetry, is the work of a black man who wants to leave white music and the white world behind. It is a book written in a period that marked a time of changing allegiances, from bohemian to black. As civil rights activities intensified, Baraka became more and more disappointed with his white friends; in fact, the word "friends" becomes ironic in this second volurne. In "Black Dada Nihilismus," for example, he realizes that he must" Choke my friends/in their bedrooms" to escape their influence and vision.

He no longer wants to be the Dead lecturer; he demands violence in himself and his people to escape the white consciousness, he wants life. In this book of poetry, he attempts to reject the "quiet verse" of the Beat Generation and claims the black chant of political commitment.

This blackening and politicalization of Baraka's art is formal as well as thematic. The poetic line becomes longer as the verse imitates the chant. In the poem "Rhythm and Blues", Baraka reveals that he does not want to become a martyr for Western art. Richard Howard, writing in the *Nation,* finds the Baraka of *The Dead Lecturer* much surer of his own voice..;. . . ."These are the agonized poems of a man writing to save his skin, or at least to settle in it, and so urgent is their purpose that not one of them can trouble to be perfect." (Howard: *Nation).*

During this transitional period Baraka produced two fine works, his only serious efforts in fiction: The system *of Dante's Hell,* a novel and *Tales,* a collection of short stories. As Sollors points out, the sections of the novel parallel with the themes and even passages found in *Preface, Dead Lecturer,* and the early uncollected poems. Although the *System of Dante's* He//was to be published in 1965, it was mostly written in the early 1960s. Baraka commented on the book to Kimberly Benston in an interview published in *Boundary 2:* "I was really writing defensively. I was trying to get away from the influence of people like Greeley and Olson. I was living in New York then and the whole Greeley-OIson influence was beginning to beat me up. I was in a li/ery closed circle - that was about the time I went to Cuba - and I felt the need to break out of the type of form that I was using then. I guess this was not only because of the form itself but because of the. content which was not my politics." (Benston: *Ttie Renegrade and the Mask).*

Tales, published in 1967, treats the years 1963 through 1967, a time of radical change in Baraka's life, and reflects the themes of the poetry in *Black Magic,* which also appeared in 1987. Both works try to convey a sense of ethnic self away from the world of white culture. In *Tales* Baraka describes the posture and course he wishes to adopt: that of "The straight ahead people, who think when that is called for, who don't when they don't have to. Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit, to always be weighing and analysing, and reflecting."

Baraka wants action and the story *Screamers* casts action in musical terms. For Baraka dance and music are associated with vitality and political action. In this tale blacks riot in the streets because of the wild music of Lynn Hope, a jazz saxophonist: "We screamed at the clear image of ourselves as we should always be. Ecstatic, completed, involved In a secret communal expression. It would revolution to hucklebuck into the fallen capital and let the oppressors lindy hop out." In the 1960s, Baraka was the pioneer of black experimental fiction, probably the most important since Jean Toomer, who had written during the harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. In the 1970s and .1980s, a band of younger experimental black writers including Ishmail Reed, Clarence Major, Charles Johnson, Ntozake Shange and Xam Wilson Cartire joined Baraka.

During the early 1960s, Baraka composed his major socio- aesthetic study of black music in America, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America.* A history, it begins in slavery and ends in contemporary avant-garde jazz (John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Tayler). Baraka argues that since emancipation the blues have been an essential feature of black American music and that this form was born from the union of the American and the African experience. In his *Home* essay "The *Myth of Negro Literature"* he declares: "Only in music, and most notably in blues, jazz, and spirituals i.e. Negro Music, has there been a significantly profound contribution by American Negroes."

Although *The Blues People* is his sustained study in Afro-American music, Baraka has published two other collections containng important essays on music. *Black Music* is written from a cultural nationalist perspective, and *The Music; Reflections on Jazz and Blues,* on the other hand is written from a • Marxist one. In *The Kaleidoscopic Torch* Joe Weiximann states; Baraka's expertise as an interpreter of Afro- American music is, of course, wellknown, "Had he never done any belletristic writing or political organizing, he would be remembered as the author of Blues People. . . . . and Black Music."

The Idelogical and political transformation of Amiri Baraka into a miliant political activist in the 1960s, was as influential as that of Paul Robeson in the 1930s, "More than any other American writer, white or black" writes Werner Sollors, "Baraka is the commited artist- *par excellence."* (Sollors. *Amiri Baraka/leRoi Jones,)* Baraka's formative political influence are an interesting blend, ranging of Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong and of Julious Nyerere and Sekoutoure, While his ideological and literary ancestors are Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Harry Haywood, and Aime Cesaire, Baraka's own generation of miliant literary and intellectual influences include Askia Muhammed Toure, Jayne Cortez, Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, Ngugi Wa Thiong's and Sonia Sanchez.

During the Black power era, Amiri Baraka assumed "the stature of the people's hero and rebellios outlaw," becoming In Soilors' assessment, "the symbolic heir to Malcolm, the Malcolm X of literature. (Soilors, *Populist Modernism).* The increasing radicalization of the Black Revolt and rise of the Black Arts Movement pulled Le Roi Jones from relative political obscurity in the beat circles of Geenwich village and, swept him into the center of the Black Power Movement. Because of the power and popularity of his cultural and political activities, Imamu Baraka's trajectory to cultural nationalism became one of the most striking and influential models for self-transformation in the black power movement. Harold Cruse explains that "the young intellectuals artists, writers, poets, and musicians of the 1960s were actually coming of age into a great intellectual, political, creative and the theoretical vacuum. They would enter the arena of activity in search of leadership. One of the most outstanding of them, Le Roi Jones, learned in such a personal way as to epitomize within himself all the other things his generation learned either empirically or vicariously." (Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro intellectual,* 355)

Baraka's influence on the political dynamics of cultural nationalism was both immediate and fundamental. While the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s treasured the accomplishments of the black establishment and counseled racial moderation, the Black Arts Movement celebrated the folk culture of the blues people and preached the Black revolution. In contrast to the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement was aimed at the

Black America rather than white critics and audiences "In essence, Baraka and the Black Arts Movement have had a profound and lasting philosophical and aesthetic impact on all postintegrationtist Black art" explains William Harris, "they have turned black art from other - directed to ethnically centered. Thus the contemporary [African American] artist writes out of his or her own culture and, moreover, is self-consciously an [African American]" (Harris, *Jones/Baraka Reader,* xvii).

In the *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism,* John Hutchinson defines the cultural nationalist as one who sees the essence of a nation as its distinct civilization, generated by its unique history and culture. In a metaphoric sense, the cultural nationalist understands the nation as an organic entity, a natural solidarity expressing the spirit of a people. Such cultural nationalists as Malcolm X and Baraka emphasized the importance of winning some measures of self-determination in order to create the conditions for the flowering of the African personality. (Breitman, *By Any Means Necessary,* 63-64; Baraka, Raise) Furthermore, Hutchinson observes that " cultural nationalism is a movement of moral regeneration which seeks to reunite the different aspects of the nation- traditional and modern, agriculture and industry, science and religion by returning to the creative life-principle of the nation." (Hutchinson; *Cultural and Moral* regeneration, 122).- For Baraka's cultural nationalism, the black conventions represented the core of the nation becoming; those assemblies were the gatherings at which the nation took a definitive shape. Thus, the black

political assemblies were the centerpiece of Baraka's politics of cultural nationalism, that is the crux of the strategy of nationality formation.

In the beginning, the politics of cultural nationalism was confined to small circles of students, artists, and intellectuals; in terms of black, nationality formation, it remained a *head full* of radical ideas but was separated from the *body* of the black community. However, between 1965 and 1970, more than 500 urban uprisings galvanized a new generation in the struggle for black liberation. The massive tumult of the ghetto revolts set the stage for the fusion between the nationalism of small circles of radical artists and Intellectuals and the grassroots nationalism of the broad urban masses; out of that explosive mix came a new generation of militant Black Power organizations, demanding self-determination, self-respect, and self- defense. In the midst of the uprisings, the politics of black cultural nationalism and the Modern Black Convention Movement took form, unleashing the dynamics of nationality formation. During those turbulent years, Amiri Baraka's poetry raised the slogan" It's Nation Time."

Baraka's autobiography also provides a retropective explanation for this anti - white hostility: "We hated white people so publicly. For one reason, because we had been so publicly tied up with them before I guess, during this period, 1 got the reputation for being a snarling, white-hating madman. There was some truth in it. Because I was struggling to be born,

to break out from the shell I could instinctively sense surround [ing] my own dash for freedom"

This time marked a period of thorough disassociation from liberals, bohemians, and whites in general, he has written; to his perception of their inability and their refusal take the political action he saw as essential. "A Poem Some People Will Have To Understand" (published in the poetry collection *Black Magic* in 1969), reflects this renunciation, as it places political action and political art in direct opposition to bohemianism and art for art's sake, proclaiming "We want poems that kill". In the poem's final declaration, Baraka gave words to his feeling of urgency and impatience towards those he perceived of as standing in the way when he asked: "Will the machingunners please step fonward?"

In understanding *the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References,* Stephen Henderson observes, "[Baraka] is the central figure of the new black poetry awakening." In an essay collected in *Modern Black Poets,* Arthur P. Davis calls him " the high priest of this new Black Literacy renaissance and one who has done most to shape its course." Baraka dominated the Black Arts periods of the late 1960s both as a theorist and artist. He was the main artist intellectual responsible for shifting Ihe emphasis of contemporary black literature from an integrationist art conveying a raceless and classless vision to a literature rooted in the black experience. The Black Arts Era, both in terms of creative and

theoretical writing, is the most important one in black literature since the Harlem Renaissance. No post- Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply being a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art. Furthermore, Black Arts had its impact on other ethnic groups and primarily through the person of Baraka .The Native American author • Maurice Kenny writes of Baraka in *The Kaleidoscopic Torch:* "he opened tightly guarded doors for not only Black but poor whites as well and, of course. Native Americans, Latinos and Asian- Americans. We'd all still be. waiting the invitation from the *New Yorker* without him. He taught us all how to claim it and take it." In *The Kaleidoscopic Torch* Clyde Taylor say's of Baraka's poems of the Black Arts Period: "There are enough brilliant poems of such variety in *Black Magic* and *In Our Terribleriess* to establish the unique identity and claim for respect of several poets."

In 1974, dramatically reversing himself, Baraka rejected black nationalism as racist and became a Third World Socialist. He declared, in the *New York Times:* It Is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy Nationalism, so- called, when it says" all non- black are our enemies is sickness or criminality in fact, a form of fascism." Since 1974 he has produced a number of Marxist Poetry collection and plays, including *Hard Facts, Poetry for the advanced* and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of [Production?* He has also published a book of Marxist essays *Daggers and Javelins.* The goal qj'<^'s5^(t|st art is the

destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of socialist community. Baraka has stated:" I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those 1 had when I was a Nationalist. That might seem contradictory, but they were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon, and a weapon of revolution. It's just now that I define revolution in Marxist terms I once defined revolution in Nationalist terms. But I came to my Marxist view as a result of having struggled as a Nationalist and found certain dead ends theoretically and ideologically as far as Nationalism was concerned and had to reach out for a communist ideology." (Harris: *Baraka Reader)* His socialist art is addressed to the black community, which has, he believes, the greatest revolutionary potential in America.

In a piece on Miles Davis in The Music: *Reflections on jazz and Blues,* Baraka quotes the contemporary trombonist, Craig Harris: "Miles is gonna do what Miles wants to do. And everybody else can follow if they feel like it" (Harris: *Baraka Reader)* Like Davis, Baraka is going his own way: he is an original, and others can follow if they like. He is a black writer who has taken the techniques and nations of the white avant-garde and made them his own. Like the great pop musicians before him. he has united avant-garde art with the black voice, creating a singular expressive mode. Baraka has created a major body of art, not by trying to blend with the Western tradition, bijt by trying to be true to himself and to his culture. He speaks out of a web of personal and communal experience minimizing the so - called universal features he shared with the white world and

focusing instead on the black cultural difference - what has nnade the black experience unique in the West. From this experience, Baraka fashions his art, his style, and his distinctive vision of the world.