

AMIRI BARAKA: A BLACK MODERN POET: A STUDY IN THEME & IMAGERY

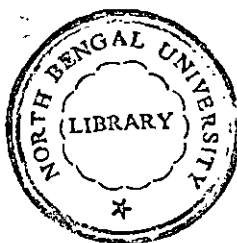
**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL
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CERTIFICATION

Certified that this is a bona fide work.

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Date: 17.1.07

Prof. B. K. Banerjee

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This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of such martyrs
as fought and died for the cause of their rights and freedom.



AMIRI BARAKA

(Born October 7, 1934)

I have a dream that one day little black children and little white children will walk together and play together, I have a dream that one day my children will be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skins, I have a dream ...

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Preface

It was in the 1990s, I attended a Seminar at the American cultural centre, Kolkata. It was here that I heard for the first time about Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jenes). An American scholar presented an excellent paper which introduced me to Baraka and his poetry against the Canvas of the Black Americans' movement for both political, social and cultural freedom. It was Baraka's time that nurtured his poetic sensibility. Baraka's upbringing as a creative artist owes everything to that epoch in which he was born. A Black as he was, he could feel the pangs of the Blacks. From such pangs grew his poetry:

Who

You, to concern

The write that stomachs

Of maidens, inside houses

Dying. Black.

My color

Is not theirs. Lighter, white man

Talk (Baraka "Notes for a speech")

I was so enthralled by the paper that soon after the seminar, I collected Baraka's poetical works from the American Library. I began to read. The more I read Baraka, the more I was in love with his poetry.

Now came the period when I was thinking to do my research work. Whether Baraka's poetry would be a fitting subject for my research was the question. I discussed my idea with my supervisor Prof. Benoy Kr. Banerjee. He Okayed my decision. In this way, my exact academic pursuits of Baraka's poetry began.

It was in the 1970s that Baraka drew much attention from the critics. And over the years, there have been continual discussions of this prolific and influential writer. As such, quite a substantial critical literature is produced about Baraka. Such prominent Baraka critics as Kimberly Benston, Leloyd Brown, Theodore Hudson, William Harris, Hudson Henry Lace, Wernor Sollars all looked for "Baraka's restless search for the artistic and political forms appropriate for his vision of African – American life". (Hankins- Dad, 56). Few critics have found a kind of tension in Baraka's Poetry. Since both art and music were Baraka's taste, interesting readings have been made about Baraka's aestheticism for which Baraka owes much to music.

Baraka's political ideology, social philosophy and cultural vision went in the making of Baraka, the literary artist. There are critics who have studied Baraka's poetry against the historical, socio-cultural backdrop. When almost everything is said about Baraka, something still remains that way unsung. As the poet's "Spiritus mundi" is replete with varied themes which are wedded to myriad images, I decided that I would be exploring in

my thesis the poetical oeuvre of Baraka, where the readers come across varied themes and plethora of images. This area has not been till now adequately studied.

Modern criticism has little to do with the biographical reading of a writer. Since a writer is the production of his time, a historical perspective of the writer's age should be studied with much care. For we need to situate him against the cross-currents of his time.

Accordingly, in my first chapter, I have shown how in the formative period of Baraka's poetical career, his time played a significant role to mould him. I have specially titled this chapter as Portrait of a Poet as a Black American.

As W.B. Yeats poetry is a journey from the celtic twilight period to the tragic and ironic last phase, Baraka's poetry similarly is a journey amidst so many vicissitudes of life. Accordingly, his poetry is studied under three distinctive phases. Each phase is equally important to know about the artist both as man and his poetry.

Acknowledgement

I feel privileged to write this acknowledgement as a way of expressing my gratitude to those whose care, love and encouragement have gone a long way in shaping my Ph. D dissertation.

To my supervisor, Prof. Benoy Kr. Benerjee of the Dept. of English, University of North Bengal, I owe a lot. He instilled in me in my postgraduate classes my love for literature. Afterwards, as supervisor of this thesis, he has shown, how one can write one's Ph. D thesis with sincerity, honesty and perseverance.

My teachers in the Department of English, University of North Bengal, have come forward to help me whenever I have approached them for their advice in matters of my research studies. I remember all of them with a sense of gratitude.

My family members which include my mother, my in-laws, my sister, and her husband, my own husband and two children, have been my constant inspiration behind my work. To say a 'Thank you' to all of them, does not look nice especially in their cases since they are so close to my heart. For books and journals, I owe to different libraries and the staff for their ready help in my need. My university library, American Centre Library, Kolkata, Indo-American Centre for international studies, Hyderabad, St. Joseph's College Library, Darjeeling and my own College Library have been of much help to me.

I am indeed grateful to all such institutions and their staff for their sincere cooperation.

Last but not the least, the printers Shri Satyen Ghosh and his team who came forward to do the last rites of the thesis before its submission, deserve special mention. Four copies of the thesis were printed by them. Then they did the bindings. All these thankless tasks they performed with a smile.

INTRODUCTION

*"Who is this man, why are we here,
will we survive?"*

--Norman Mailer

In this thesis I have divided the poet's life and art into three phases. These are chronologically known as "The Beat Period" (1957-1962), "The Black Nationalist Period" (1965-1974) and the third may be called "The Third Word Marxist Period (1974----).

During his Beat period when he was known as LeRoi Jones, Baraka lived in new York's Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, where he published important little magazines such as "Yugen and Floating Bear" and was socialized with such bohemian figures as Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Ted Wileantz and Ginsberg, 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... & I follow closely with that. I'm not interested in writing sonnets sestinas or anything only poems". (Harris, Intro).

Baraka's political protest is the transitional period (1963-1965) when he wrote *"The Dead Lecturer,"* his second book of poetry, which is a work

of a black man who wants to leave behind his white music and the white world. It is a book written in a period that marked a time of changing allegiances, from bohemian to black. As the civil right activities intensified, Baraka became more and more disappointed with his white friends. In 1965, following the assassination of the black Muslim leader Malcolm X, Baraka left Greenwich Village and the bohemian world and moved uptown to Harlem. Herein he began a new life as a cultural nationalist. He propagated in "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of Black Nation," (collected in *Home*) that "Black people are a race, culture, a Nation." Turning his back on the white world, he established the Black Arts Repértoire Theater School in Harlem, an influential model that inspired black theaters throughout the country. In 1967, he published his Black Nationalist collection of poetry *Black Magic*, which traces his painful exit from the white world and his entry into blackness. In "A Poem Some People Will Have To Understand", (published in the poetry collection *Black Magic* in 1969) he says, "We want poems that kill". He writes, "Assassin poems, poems that shoot/guns...../we want a black poem. And a Black world." The two fold idea of destroying and rebuilding runs through most of his 'hate poetry'. Through "Art" as an instrument and a weapon, we "kill" the old and build a new Black Jerusalem. (Harris, Intro).

After a year in Harlem, he returned to his birthplace, Newark, New Jersey, where he continued his cultural nationalist activities. In 1967 he changed his name from LeRoy Jones to Imamu ("spiritual leader") Later

he dropped Ameer (later Amiri, "Prince") Baraka ("blessed"), as a confirmation of his pride in his blackness.

In 1947, 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 in the enemy Nationalism, so-called, when it says 'all non-blacks are our enemies', sickness or criminality, in fact, a form of fascism." (Harris: Baraka Reader). Since 1974 he has produced an number of Marxist poetry collections and plays, including *Hard Facts Poetry of the Advanced*, and *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger and the Means of Production?* He has also published a book of Marxist essays, *Daggers and Javelins*. The goal of his socialist art is the destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of a socialist community. Baraka has stated: "I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those I had when I was a Nationalist. That might seem contradictory, but they were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon of revolution. It's just that I define revolution in Marxist terms. 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 a communist ideology." (Harris: *Baraka Reader*, Intro) His socialist art is addressed to the black community, which has, he believes, the greatest revolutionary potential in America.

In *Hard Facts* he says that in order to "raise the level of the people", the artist first must learn, not just from one ethnic group, but from the people, these "dynamic working masses". Poetry since 1974 reflects this new shift. The poem in *Hard Facts* are same as those of Langston Hughes's socialist poems collected in *Good Morning, Revolution* and "When we'll Worship Jesus" can be compared to Langston Hughes' "Goodbye, Christ".

*We'll worship Jesus when
He gets bad enough to at least scare
Somebody-cops not afraid
Of Jesus
Pushers not afraid
Of Jesus, capitalists racists
Imperialists not afraid
Of Jesus shit they making money
Of Jesus. (HF 6)*

In this thesis, I would like to point out that there are certain attitudes and insights in Baraka's poems evincing his originality as poet. He is like one of those mavericks, who, like Allan Ginsberg and Norman Mailer, has produced large volumes of work that are extremely critical about American civilization. In fact Baraka may be the most difficult American poet to evaluate dispassionately like the modernist poet Ezra Pound, whose works still evoke volatile critical response. Like Pound, Baraka has dared to bring radical politics into literature and to deliver his explosive ideas in an inflammatory style.

About his writing, let Baraka speak for himself, "My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of languages, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what". (Baraka Reader, *Preface*)

The present study is basically analytical in nature and hence collection and analyses of books both primary and secondary, have been the major source of findings. For the purpose of arriving at a particular conclusion, reliance is placed on documents, books, statements and resolution relating to the theme and imagery used in the poems of Amiri Baraka. In the process of analyses, some reflections of authors and critics of Amiri Baraka – Le Roi Jones are consulted with a view to supporting the contention. References are made to secondary sources, articles, papers published in leading journals, national and international, regional and local dailies and weeklies. Data is also collected on the Internet both primary and secondary.

Since no thesis is complete without a bibliography, I have prepared the same following the instructions as laid down in the MLA Handbook.

Portrait of a Poet as a Black American

I am what I think I 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 and 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 stories. 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 Madhubuti 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.

Baraka 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 York's Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, where he published important little magazines such as *Yugen* and *Floating Bear* and socialized with such bohemian figures as [Allen] Ginsberg, Franko Harris and Gilbert Sorrento. He was greatly influenced by the white avant-garde. Charles Olson, O'Hara, and Ginsberg, 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 that 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 I 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 avant-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, 'I am a Negro seeing a bus full of people.' I would deal with it when it has to do directly with the poem, and not as a kind of broad generalization that doesn't have much to do with a lot of young writers today who are Negroes." (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 him 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 volume. 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 Hell* 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 Creeley and Olson. I was living in New York then and the whole Creeley-Olson influence was beginning to beat me up. I was in a very 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: *The Renegade 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 1967. 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 containing 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 Weixlmann 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 ideological and political transformation of Amiri Baraka into a militant 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 committed 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 Julius 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 militant 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 rebellious outlaw," becoming in Sollors' assessment, "the symbolic heir to Malcolm, the Malcolm X of literature. (Sollors, *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 Greenwich 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 postintegrationist 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 retrospective 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, I 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 forward?"

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 the 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

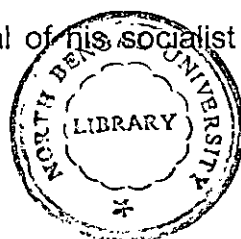
theoretical writing, is the most important one in black literature since the Harlem Renaissance. No post- Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply being a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art. Furthermore, Black Arts had its impact 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 Terribleness* 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 of his socialist art is the

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destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of socialist community. Baraka has stated: " I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those I 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, but 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 made the black experience unique in the West. From this experience, Baraka fashions his art, his style, and his distinctive vision of the world.

Early Poetry: Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note

*I have the feeling people
think I'm depraved. A man looked
me in the eye in the subway and he sd.
Bohemian.
--"Consider This" (UP 17)*

Art may be long, life is short, and a poet who stands in need of all that explanation, has only himself to blame if he waits all eternity for readers. Amiri Baraka's poetry is sometimes like music. Musical instruments with the same vibrations are, capable of responding to one another: a note sounded on one will call forth a spontaneous response from another tuned to the same pitch. The poetry of Baraka is analogous. The reader must be in tune: in tune to some extent with Baraka to understand the progression of his thought, the depiction of his symbol and images. The reader of Baraka 's poetry must be imaginatively awake, intellectually keen and frankly whole hearted. It is useless to read his poetry critically. We must not expect to find the music of his poetry on any kind of annotated programme. We must listen, intently and patiently and not be too readily discouraged by inharmonious sounds, but wait until we hear a phrase that deeply pleases us. We must continue to be patient, susceptible, responsive, for Baraka's poetry is a hormone to be enjoyed and understood

according to the measure in which the reader is himself harmonious with the thought process of Baraka. Baraka's early poetry seems to present a definite point of view, that is the poet's keen awareness of the self, and in most of the poems, an omnipresent "I/eye" remains in the center of consciousness. Often the poet probes into the realms of autobiography and identity, high art and avant-gardist artists, Black magic, American popular culture, and the heroes and anti-heroes of the Western world. The intensity of personal suffering compels Baraka to invent a series of personae to dramatize his experience, Duke Mantee, the hanged man, or Wolfman or Babalu – through them the poet appears to be projecting himself. As a result, his poetry, even while presenting the struggle in himself, transcends in terms of attaining objectivity. This personal problem of a split in the self as experienced throughout this period is tragically realistic as it mirrors the fall of man in modern times resulting in a state of alienating both from his self and from the society around him. The poems as a whole, present the psychic condition of modern man – the reality of an interaction between his own self and men, and objects around him. In *Preface To a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, "The ground opens up" and he totally gets psychologically "enveloped" – this is the poet's eternal quest to remain above the thin borderline between the reality and the inner passages of his consciousness, his art and the way he looks at the world. This obviously results in a state of intense self-consciousness, that is the poet observing himself both as subject and object at the same time. Thus, self as subject

and object marks the essential duality of the poetic self of Baraka during this phase of his development as a poet.

The reader finds in his poetry Baraka a modern day Hamlet who is looking for a platform – oscillating, “each time I go out to walk the dog is imagery where the reader gets an image of a hero-a Greek legendary hero who is doing a menial job. Then again “the silly music the wind makes” gives an image of a modern man who is whizzing past but nature remains static. Nature no longer inspires man and modern man has taken a complete turn from nature.

“Things have come to that” signifies that man is totally frustrated. “I count the stars” is an image of a naturalist who wonders at the vastness of the universe. In the last stanza of the first poem in the *Preface* the poet says that when he enters his daughter’s room he finds her talking to herself which signifies a generation of compartmentalized existence. The world is engulfed into “Her own clasped hands” and she is praying may be for humanity to the “old man sitting some where” is no one but God. “No body sings anymore” the lyricism in life has come to an end and it reminds the reader of Joyce’s *Dublin* - “the ashpit and the offal”, humanity has lost its faculty of imagination – Baraka paints a picture of total imaginative impotency, an imagery of Dumb choir, all very disciplined but no emotions to sprout the fountain of music.

The poems of Baraka in the early phase give a picture of a community which is compartmentalised and there is a total lack of communication, human beings are living under masks.

In the poem "Hymn for Lanie Poo", the title itself suggests that it is a prayer, a hymn sung in praise. Nature comes as a back drop and Baraka glorifies the colour Black which is the symbol of his own identity and existence and the vitality of his art. The colour Black is portrayed as a source of energy, fountain head of vitality and progression – Black according to Baraka is the inherent "Urge" in every man. "Beware the evil sun" – the sun over here is portrayed as the symbol of colonisation, the disburse of extreme power which ultimately corrupts the human mind and stains the human soul. Baraka sparsely used animal imagery but some time the readers get the feel of it – "crawl your eye balls" – is a pure animal imagery which is beetle like a parasite gnawing at the crux of human existence.

Religion to Baraka is nothing but the "chains" and he portrays the epitome of institutionalised as he says "Silly little church" where religion is a narcotic which can no longer hold the mind in a stable pattern. The ultimate nail hit in the coffin of religion comes out when the poet writes religion found in "coffee shop" an image of the all open American system where for every thing there is a price tag, a sarcastic statement to define the epitome of capitalism.

The Black nationalist sentiment reaches its height in Baraka's writing when his imagery gives vent to his repressed feelings and he writes "White Anglo Sun" which symbolises mother America who has a step motherly attitude towards her Black sons. The sarcasm and the irony comes out in Baraka's voice when he writes America is "benevolent step mother" which clearly shows the poet that the connection which the Blacks have with the rest of America is not based on the connection of the umbilical cord but by a forced and synthetic bonding.

In the poem "In Memory of Radio" the poet brings out a series of images which portray man as an impotent object which is not living but somehow existing, the dramatic and the austere language used, in order to wake the readers out of the complacency, the artificial comport of the capitalist world. The imagery shows the total lack of love in the generation, the poet stressed on the word "love" which can actually bring about a revolution in America, the love for the Black people will bring in a revolution of the American psyche.

Baraka is a modern Black American poet, and T.S. Eliot represented, for Baraka, an objective art of structural containment and tight aesthetic control. It is therefore not surprising that Baraka referred to his "earlier" "Eliot period" as a "shell" (UI 1) which he had to break out of, since Eliotic " rhetoric can be so lovely, for a time but only remains so for the rhetorician" (UN 6, P. 425). Allusions to Eliot, whom Baraka later calls "the

I am what I think I am. You are what

I think you are. ("Audubon, Drafted" DL 56)

"Reality" is an extension of the "I": there are no "standards." So conceived, the "I" is not only the omnipresent speaker, but also the truest subject for poetry. Only rarely does Baraka create another consciousness, from whose point of view the poem develops; and when he does, as in "Duke Mantee" (p. 35) the "other" is really part of the self. Having absorbed "Duke Mantee" poetically, Baraka can use the name as a *nom de plume* in a later essay (Un 23).

The narcissistic poet may question himself as love and see love-making as a form of masturbation with somebody who probably never "really remembered my name" ("Love Poem" UP 37). Or he may scrutinize his roles as a husband ("For Hettie in Her Fifth Month" p.14), as a not yet "suicided" father ("Preface ..." 5), and, again and again, as a tormented poet ("Vice" p. 27) who is locked in with "dull memories and self hate, and the terrible disorder/ of a young man" ("The Turncoat" P. 26).

There are many moments of lightness, of irony, and humor, especially as the poet plays with the ambiguities of his alienation or with the process or verbal creation. "In Memory of Radio" inverts the word "love".

Missouri lad who wishes himself into a Saville (sic) Row funeral" (R21), the American who buttons himself up in an English suit, and thus chooses and English death, are plentiful throughout Baraka's writings, and especially striking in *Preface*, as the following examples may illustrate:

<i>the evening</i>	<i>the evening is spread</i>
<i>spread against the windows</i>	<i>out against the sky</i>
<i>("Duke Mantee" P35)</i>	<i>("Prufrock")</i>
<i>Respect the season</i>	<i>But at my back in cold</i>
<i>and dance to the rattle</i>	<i>blast I hear</i>
<i>of its bones</i>	<i>The rattle of the bones</i>
<i>Winter rattles</i>	<i>I do not find</i>
<i>like the throat</i>	<i>The Hanged Man</i>
<i>of the hanged man.</i>	<i>The Hanged Man</i>
<i>("From an Almanac 2" P 43-44)</i>	<i>("Waste Land")</i>

In 1959, in the poem "The Plumed Serpent" (a D.H. Lawrence title), Baraka apparently offers an account of his relationship with Eliot. In a World of "old Anglos dying" the poet demands "a glass of water for the speaker who is English. "Later in the poem, Baraka invokes Olson and accepts the necessity for "the destruction of the old temple." If this temple refers to the shell of Eliot's rhetoric, the strategy of overcoming Eliot is expressed in Eliotic terms, in a phrasing close to Eliot's "The Hippopotamus". "On this church I build my rock" ("The Plumed Serpent" UP

16). Baraka constructs his poetry on, and out of, the ruins of his Eliot shell and moves beyond.

2. GENEALOGY AND IDENTITY

The "difficult" character of much of Baraka's poetry originates in the anti-Eliotic stance. Many poems are informed by Baraka's tenet that the creative "climax" can never be the reader's. In "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," the poet asks cryptically.

Was James Karolisa a great sage?

Why did I let Ora Matthews beat him up

In a bathroom? Haven't I learned my lesson. (P. 15)

The references are only understandable in the light of Baraka's later publications: they are school friends whose names recur throughout his works (e.g., SD 28, 31, 37, 44, 54, and 65ff) and whose story is finally told in *The Toilet*.

This example illustrates how expressive poetry may lead Baraka toward his pressing themes, regardless of their impact on, or even their intelligibility to contemporary readers. The freedom of "How You Sound?" is the freedom of the creator who may poetically explore street language and bathroom settings and who has no responsibility to convey "reality" to audiences. Thus, Baraka states quite "correctly" in a later poem:

& Love is an evil word.

Turn it backwards/see, see what I mean?

An evil word. & besides

Who understands it? (P 12)

Baraka's first published poem, "Slice of Life" (UP 1), is set in the "railroad station of segregated hartsville, South Carolina, the home town of Baraka's grandparents. There the angel-poet encounters three toilets, "one marked MEN, one/Marked WOMEN, and the third marked OTHERS." Metaphorically identifying racial discrimination and secret sexual otherness, the humorous poem concludes: "I wonder, could they have known?" (UP1). In "The Gift of the Unicorn" (UP 5), published later in 1958, Baraka links the angel metaphor with that of another spiritual outsider, the "unicorn," a Yeatsian image of the writer "Caught up in his own corny fictions." "Central Park in Winter" (UP 6) uses the antagonism of a poetic "I" against "white and irrational" signs that read "No parking," "No littering," and "No picnicking," and likens the alienated self to "exiled statues" in the park. The Beat poet perceives the "square" New York skyline as a "herd of symmetrical gangsters" and is beset with "those fears all spies must feel." "The Last Roundup" (UP 7) develops the theme of alienation out of a confrontation between the sensitive poet and the object of his rejected love, a "blonde" fellow student and fighter. The poet admits to "inhaling" the blonde one's "sensual eyes" although the visionary is rejected and treated as a "traitor."

The poet's early tendency to explore the theme of alienation, takes the form of an identification with spiritual and visionary outsiders (angels, unicorns, "spies") against a square, white or blonde opponent. The symbolic association of whiteness and evil is a literacy strategy which subtly reflects both Baraka's sense of racial alienation and his literary debt to Melville. In his 1959 short story, "The man who sold pictures of god" (UF3), Baraka alludes to the *Moby-Dick* chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale." A canvas salesman is apparently mistaken for an avant-gardist nihilist who sells paintings with "absolutely nothing on them". "The whiteness of the canvas was purely symbolic."

Baraka maintains an ironically alienated relationship to himself as a Black man and a Bohemian in one of the best *Preface* poems, "Hymn for Lanie Poo". In the fourth part of this poem, reprinted separately in Langston Hughes's anthology *New Negro Poets, U.S.A.*, Baraka immerses himself into his specific *New York* local in order to create a Whitmanesque cosmic genealogy for himself. Like Langston Hughes, Baraka speaks of rivers; and when the author or "Lanie Poo" stares at the Hudson, he, too, imagines more than his prosaic "place of origin," his "step mother" city Newark on the other side. The rising horizon, the sun itself, becomes a father image for the alienated poet who is thus elevated to a son of sun.

*Each morning
I go down
to Gansevoort St.
and stand on the docks.
I stare out
at the horizon
until it gets up
and comes to embrace
me. I
make believe
it is my father.
This is known
as genealogy. (P 9)*

This poet's elevated cosmic origin is a source of strength, but it is a social liability in America, where racist folklore assigns a quality of "evil" to the sun: "Beware the evil sunTurn you black" (p 6). In a parallel passage in *Blues People*, Baraka explains this correlation of sun and blackness:

"You are blackwhich means you lived too close to the sun. Black is evil." "You are white which means you lived too far from the sun. You have no color...no soul." (BP 10). These are equally logical arguments.

The relationship toward the sun becomes a central metaphor for the attitudes of Black Americans toward their own blackness and their African

heritage. This sun, which can "turn your hair/crawl your eyeball/rot your teeth" (P. 6), is using this country as a "commode" (P. 9). The square "firemasons," the staunch civic, and more conservative civil rights organizations of the Black middle class, organize parades which have no recognizable connection with Black identity; they wear hats with brims and "beware the sun" – just as Baraka's sister Sandra Elaine (whose childhood nickname, "Lanie Poo," appears prominently in the title of the poem) evades her Blackness: she "doesn't like to teach in Newark/because there are too many colored/in her classes" (P 11).

O, generation of fictitious

Ofays

I revere you...

You are all so beautiful (P 11)

Baraka ridicules the attitude of the Black bourgeoisie because its self-evaluation is based essentially on a self-hating reverence for "ofays" (which, translated back from pig Latin is really the plural of "a foe") and a desire to become this enemy, by turning white. These "faux Negres," having lost their own group identity, are characterless,

smiling & glad / in

the huge & loveless

white-anglo sun / of

benevolent step

mother America. (p. 12)

"Lanie Poo" sounds the familiar theme of aesthetic opposition to the Black bourgeois past; and it is therefore not surprising to hear Baraka's recorded introduction to the poem on the Library of Congress tape of 1959.

"It's about what E. Franklin Frazier called the *Black Bourgeoisie*, it tries to equate modern life, modern Negro life in America, with the life... in some unknown African tribe."

Against the middle-class fear of the "evil" sun, Baraka posits his "genealogy" as a conscious negation of the Black middle class self-denial. He evokes scenes of a wild, Bohemian, imaginary Afro-America. Physical pleasures, wild hunting scenes and feasts dominate his exotic countervisions, as he enjoys the "uncivilized" and the obscene, everything the "freemasons" would reject.

Baraka's exoticism remained recognizably indebted to the Bohemian cult to the exotic primitive, of "Crow-Jimism," of "The White Negro."

All afternoon

we sit around

near the edge of the city

hacking open

crocodile skulls

sharpening our teeth. (p 6)

Baraka's poetic montage ironically contrasts images of urban America and Tarzanlike, exotic notions of an "Africa" in the Bohemian mind and he says,

*I wobble out to
the edge of the water
give my horny yell
& 24 elephants
stomp out of the subway
with consecrated hardons.
.....
she had her coming out party
with 3000 guests
from all parts of the country.
Queens, Richmond, Togoland, The Cameroons .. (p 7)*

Reminiscent of Eliot's lists of cities, this latter passage creates a fantasy setting combining New York boroughs with West African nations from which many Afro-Americans originally came, and a New York subway (one of Baraka's obsessive literary settings) with identifiably male elephants stomping about the cities. Among the party guests are Hulan Jack, Tarzan, and John Coltrane. During the feast, the poet yokes Eliot's "Phoenician" in "The Burial of the Dead" with the American ritual of The burger cookout and yells cannibalistically:

"Throw on another goddamned Phoenecian."

*We got so drunk (Hulan Jack
brought his bottle of Thunderbird).
nobody went hunting
the next morning. (p. 7)*

After this communion with cheap wine, the poet spends a week in a fantasy land of genesis, reminiscent of popular accounts of the seven days of the creation of the earth. The activities range from gulping down monkey foreskins to trying to get some sculpting done, from watching television to catching a 600-pound ape. Baraka alludes to William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* with the lines,

*Read Garmanda's book, "14 Tribes of
Ambiguity," didn't like it. (P 8)*

The creative vision, intended to negate Black middle class attitudes, reaches its zenith with the figure of a "wild assed" (p 6) ~~Black goddess~~ Black goddess, who is seen through the filter of a Bohemian imagination of Black wildness:

*The god I pray to
Got black boobies
Got steatopygia.*

It is this filter which again and again reconstitutes the imaginary character of the world created, and which ultimately leaves the poem

resigned and unresolved. The poet regrets that Africans and Afro-Americans are "civilized;" they are "wild assed trees" (p 6) who have been transformed, under the spell of the Western world, into "chamling/wicker baskets" (p 6). Baraka's Bohemian fantasy negates this metamorphosis and envisions Black self-liberation through inversion and re-creation:

We all know

These wicker baskets

Would make wild-assed trees. (P. 8)

The poem thus plays "wrong" way of being Black against each other and utilizes as he criticizes the ambivalence of white prejudices without arriving at a suggestion for a "correct" Black consciousness. Baraka sides with his unrepressed Black goddess and with a masturbatory self-affirmation against the ridiculous Black Christians in the "silly little church" who allow a preacher with "conning eyes" to trick them into some supposedly "real" happiness (P. 9-10). But there is also self-criticism of what Baraka calls, in German/Yiddish, "die schwartze Bohemian" (P. 10). Black Bohemians are not depicted as a pioneer group on the road to a true Black identity; they lack any kind of meaningful connection with people and with Black communities, e.g. Harlem, "uptown" (P. 11). The Black Bohemian may have a secret Black goddess with Black breasts and a big bottom, but is taken breathless by any white woman who passes the coffee shop. Despite his belief that "white cats can't swing" (P. 11), the Black

Bohemian interrupts his conversation to exclaim "Man Lookatthatblonde/wheweel" (P. 10). He talks about Zen, Gandhi and "Mr. Lincon" and retains so little of his own cultural identity as a Black man that even his French coffee seems symbolic of his Bohemian integrationism, "Café Olay." The memory of white Bohemians who became racists in their later careers adds seriousness, and the section ends on a sad note with the Black Bohemian's rationalization:

It just that it's such a drag to go

Way uptown for Bar B Cue,

By God ...

How Much? (P 11)

In "Lanie Poo," Baraka reflected upon his own alienation and questioned Bohemian self-definitions, however, he did not transcend an ironic criticism of various possibilities of "false" blackness. The poem's motto, "vous etes des Negress," taken from Arthur Rimbaud's "Une Saison en Enfer" (1873), is appropriate, Rimbaud was one of the cultural heroes of the Beat Generation, and Baraka first published Kerouac's famous "Rimbaud" poem in *Yugen*. In Rimbaud's "Saison," the white-Black value scale is inverted so that whites can be criticized as "false negroes." The decisive Rimbaud passage was translated by Edmund Wilson in *Axell's Castle*.

"I have never been a Christian; I am of the race who sang in torture; I do not understand the law; I haven't the moral sense, I am a brute; you are doing wrong. Yes, my; eyes are closed to your light. I am a nigger, a beast. But I may be saved. You yourselves are false niggers, savage and grasping madmen. Tradesman, you are a nigger; magistrate, you are a nigger; general, you are a nigger; emperor, old itching palm, you are a nigger; you have drunk of a contraband liquor from Satan's distillery." (P27)

This comes close to the ambivalent concept of the noble savage who can criticize bourgeois, Western civilization (merchants, bureaucrats, generals, emperors) for being *truly* savage in the pursuit of hypocrisy, war, profit, and Christian order. Similarly, Rimbaud wrote to his family about "negres blanc does pays dits civilises." "Lanie Poo" shares Rimbaud's Bohemianism and is a comprehensive literary formulation of Baraka's own contradictions. The poem also explores a specifically Barakian imagery which recurs in many other works.

The image of the sun as a Black father and as a touchstone for a Black identity is crucial in Baraka's poetry. "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean" (UP 21) invokes a Hudson- "Landschaft" after sunrise "and though you're uptown, still your black hair does reflect it." "One Night Stand" (P 21-22) can be read as a poem about the migration of Southern Blacks to the cities of the North, adding a historical dimension to the poet's insecure sense of identity.

*We are foreign seeming persons. Hats flopped so the sun
can't scold beards; odd shoes, bags of books & chicken
We have come a long way, & are uncertain which of the
masks is cool. (P 22)*

In "For Hettie in Her Fifth Month," the expectation of a "multto" child is fictionalized by the image of the Black poet's white:

*in a chair by the window
one finger holding the blink back
so that what sun's left
washed into your womb. (P 14)*

"Scenario VI" moves from an initial minstrel act in which the poet balances his cane "tilting the hat to avoid the sun" (p 22) through a stream of images to a final sequence which returns to the tone of "Lanie Poo" in a post-Thoreauvian Week on the Summer and Indus rivers:

*Sylvia has come out her smashing oranges & jewelry ...
.... We make it in great swirls out to the terrace,
which overlooks Sumer ... & the Indus river, where next
weeks probably all kinds of white trash will ride in
on stolen animals we will be amazed by. (P 23)*

"Ostriches and Grandmothers" (P 20-21) employs the sun imagery to urge a stronger expression of a black identity beyond all masks and stances:

*all meet with us, finally: the
uptown, way-west, den of inconstant
moralities.*

Faces up : all

My faces turned up

To the sun. (P 20)

The connection between bourgeois and Bohemian masks remains a source of tension, which is only occasionally and temporarily resolved in poetic adaptations of Blackness through Black music:

*The bridge will be behind you, that music you know, that place,
you feel when you look up to say, it is me, & I have forgotten,
all the things, you told me to love, to try to understand, the
bridge will stand, high up in the clouds & the light, & you,
(when you have let the song run out) will be sliding through
unmentionable black. (P 26)*

Baraka keeps approaching his Black identity through genealogy. His short story, "Suppose Sorrow Was A Time Machine" (UP 1), first published in 1958, pursues Baraka's real genealogy, not an imaginary one as "son of sun". This story follows the northern migration of his maternal

grandparents, from Dothan, Alabama, to Beaver falls, Pennsylvania, and to Newark, New Jersey. "Slice of Life" approaches its subject metaphorically, using the angel as a symbol of the outsider situation; "Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine," however, ventures into family history as part of ethnic history..

In Dothan, Alabama, at the turn of the century, Baraka's Grandparents, Thomas Everett and Anna Cherry Brock Russ, owned a general stores, which was burned down twice by "unholy bastrads" white racists – and which the grandparents-to-be rebuilt into "the biggest funeral parlor in the country" (UF 1, p. 10): "so fancy, the niggers killing each other so that they can get all excuse to go to it." But the funeral parlor was also burned down, and by 1917, the Russes had moved to Beaver Fall to "sell eggs, produce. Best liquor in the country" (UF 1, p.10) and, eight years later, to Newark to "Russ Super General Store" which closed its doors during the depression. Possibly, Tom Russ was hit "in the head with a street lamp" and died in "Greystone Sanatorium, 1943" (UF 1, p.11), when his grandson, the narrator of the story, was nine years old.

The story has the potential for a Black *Buddenbrooks*, yet, although Baraka was so deeply affected by his family history that he incorporated it in *Blues People* (96), included Tom Russ in the gallery of black heroes in the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" (DL 64), and dedicated *Dutchman and The slave* to his grandparents, he never narrated the story in the epic

dimensions it would require. Instead, he used H.G. Wells's time machine to reach out for his grandfather's spiritual "vibrations," and wrote an experimental story, an address by the still unborn author to his grandfather:

"Say that you are Tom Russ, It is Dothan, Alabama, U.S.A. 1898. You are a Negro who has felt the ground vibrate I know you Tom, You are my" grandfather. I am not born yet but I have felt the ground vibrate too. (UF1 p.9).

The unborn narrator feels that his grandfather's fate imposes an obligation on him:

"I hear they finally hit you in the head with a street lamp, Tom. Is that so? Gave you a cane and a wheelchair, and made you sit by the wood stove nodding and spitting, trying desperately to remember exactly when and where it was the ground vibrated. But do you realize that your unborn grandson has finally got here? Or is it that he's still unborn and only the body managed to make it right now". (UF I, p. 11).

At the end of the story, the young author claims his inherited sorrows; he seems to be summoning his grandfather's spirit in that ritual of invocation of the dead, which frequently precedes a call for revenge:

"Tom, are you listening? Don't stare like that. Tom, Tom, O my god".

(UF 1, p. 11)

The early short story is exceptional in its treatment of the author's real past; more characteristic is the 1959 poem "Parthenos" (UP 10), in which the past is remembered in a Ferlinghetti allusion, merely as

another street, with more trees ...

an insipid suburbia of the mind. (UP 10, P 23)

In "Parthenos," Baraka purchases an invented maternal genealogy and traces "a straight line ... backwards till it stops/infinity? (the white sleek things of a woman)" and "beyond the straight line/catching the sun in her eyes/the moon in her thigh. / very early / when night was a pickaninny on a pony." The poem then turns into what is characterized as "(chantnow)" and playfully explores the poet's multiethnic American mothers:

My chinese mother

is full of compassion

my japanese mother

dances all day

I have a white mother

pale as a bone, with

red moons smeared in

her cheeks, who thinks

nothing of vanishing

trailing leis of orange flame. (UP 10, P 24)

And continuing the metaphor of an exotic, multiracial, imagined maternal lineage, "Parthenous" proceeds:

*My Black mother
was a witch doctor
a crazy woman with a red cape
 hucklebucking beneath the pyramids.
 before beyond the night.
at the end of the straight line. (UP 10, p.24)*

This Oedipal pursuit of a man's heritage into his fictional mother's womb culminates in the laconic remark "Only the mothers survive " (UP 10, p. 26). Taken together, "Lanie Poo" and "Parthenos" replace a "real" ancestry (UF 1) with a complete, fictional, cosmic genealogy of the Bohemian visionary, who was, perhaps, created by a sun-ray hitting a virginal lunar womb" (UP 10, p. 26). But "Parthenos" also expresses the remembrance of yet another womb like home for the young poet-to-be: the world of American popular culture.

when I was young
I'd take the radio
under the covers
and let it play
all night
and when morning came
toss it across the room
Staring at it disdainfully (UP 10, P25)

The radio as a tossed-away lever god is emblematic of Baraka's love hate relationship with popular culture.

3. POPULAR CULTURE:

The central theme of "Look For You Yesterday, Here You Come Today" is the poet's "maudlin nostalgia" (p 17) for the popular culture of his youth: "When will world war two be over?" (p 16). Baraka's interest in America's modern mythology amounts to an obsession with comic-book heroes and code words, with radio programs and Hollywood movies, since "what's best in popular culture is really what's strongest in this society" (UI20).

It has been suggested that Baraka's use of popular culture is limited to an early "clearing" period, at the end of which (approximately at the time of "Look For You Yesterday") the "heroes" were discarded, or that his use of popular culture essentially demonstrates the struggle of the Black poet with the American myth of innocence, against which the concept of "soul" is pitted. But these interpretations do not go far enough in explaining Baraka's pervasive use of popular mythology, both in his early poetry and in his literature of Black nationalism and Maoism.

This mythology possibly constitutes the largest single literary influence on the writer, who, in the short story, "The Screamers," called pulp cowboy magazines "the truest legacy of my spirit" (T 74). Not

surprisingly, Baraka's first attempts at writing were a comic strip, "The Crime Wave, " and science fiction short stories for his high school paper.

"Look For You Yesterday" is, in Baraka's own words on the Library of Congress tape, "about my vision of my childhood, some of the things that have stayed with me and how I used these things to show that I am gradually getting older." The process of aging, the "cobblestone clock" that commands the author each morning to rise "& rot a little more" (p 16), the "terrible thoughts about death" (p 17) are contrasted with a nostalgic attempt to reach out for his lost childhood:

*All the lovely things I've known have disappeared.
I have all my pubic hair & am lonely.
There is probably no such place such place as Battle Creek, Michigan!
Tom Mix dead in a Boston Nightclub
before I realize what happened.
People laugh when I tell them about Dickie Dare!
What is one to do in an alien planet
where the people breath New ports?
Where is my space helmet, I sent for it
3 lives ago ... when there were box tops.
What has happened to box tops?
O, God... I must have a belt that glows green
in the dark. Where is my Captain Midnight decoder?
I can't understand what Superman is saying!
There Must Be A Lone Ranger! (P. 16-17)*

The function of popular culture in "Look for You Yesterday" is similar to that of a time machine. Baraka's popular heroes help the poet in search of lost past and take him back to his childhood. But the author's loneliness, the fact that people laugh at his nostalgia, and the doubtful tone of his questions indicate that the popular culture of the poet's youth has been consumed and forgotten by the people, and that he is now one of the few witnesses who remember that it ever existed. What was once culture for the millions has now, in an ironically elitist turn, become a secret password, a code understood only by those few visionaries who are "dumb" enough "to be sentimental about anything" (P 17).

The radio is a medium in which God reveals himself through magic and miracles, through hypnotic gestures, coded messages, and transformations, and this epiphany is the legacy for the poet, whose imaginative power of pretending can lead to sudden shocks of awareness, called "satori" in zen, of the inverted connection between love and evil. In this sense, the initiate to the radio cult has become a "sage": although lacking the "real" power of a German dictator or the governor of California to order executions, he has the power of knowledge, the capacity to understand and use the magic of words:

Am I a sage or something?

Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week?

(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of Oral Roberts ...

I cannot, like F.J. Sheen, tell you how to get saved & rich'.

I cannot even order you to gaschamber satori like Hilter or Goody Knight

Saturday mornings we listened to Red lantern & his undersea folk

At 11, Let's pretend/& we did & I, the poet, still do, Thank God!

What was it he used to say (after the transformation when he was safe

& invisible & the unbelievers couldn't throw stones?)" Heh, heh, heh,

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."

O, yes he does

O, yes he does. (P 12-13)

The sacral magic of popular culture is similarly invoked in "Metaphysical Ode to Birth" (UP 19), which celebrates the old radio programs and, "after a hard day turning on the radio," achieves a moment of surprise with the announcement "Ladies and gents, a short talk by God." "The Making of a Poem from a Paint Can" (UP 20), and occasional poem from the year 1959, echoes "In memory of Radio" and ascribes to "Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week" the power of metamorphosis, of "changing Lothar into a Hershey bar." These uses of popular culture correspond to Baraka's anti-bourgeois and anti-objective strategy; breaking the Eliot shell with the help of narcissism and street language is paralleled by elevating popular art to the level of divine inspiration.

Now white victims and clowns, puppets and villains are central to American popular mythology, and Baraka increasingly identifies himself with this ethnic dimension. In the early works, this strategy is just beginning

to emerge. "Where is Mu?" (UP 13), a "satirical poem dedicated to Kenneth Koch," resembles the spirit of "Look for you ..." in the poet's lament for his "seven years of hired education washed away by the cold breath of art," and in his nostalgic invocation of Mu as a "childhood vision of an adventurer" and as a savior. "Save me, MU. Collect me in your outrageous bosom" is the desperate invocation of Mu, the poet's "gentle boy-god" and "illegal celestial connection." The figure of Mu, however, is also the son of Ra in Egyptian mythology, which fascinated Baraka, who is introduced as an Egyptian, Pre Western point of refuge from "this idle posturing." This Bohemian Gypsy-Egyptian opposition to the west is strengthened by Baraka's uses of Black music and by his strategy of inverting the stereotypical roles assigned to non-whites in American popular culture. It is thus significant to note that the poem with the blues title "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today" ends when the Lone Ranger's silver bullets are gone:

& Tonto way off in the hills

moaning like Bessie Smith. (P 18)

The spirit of Mu may well be seen looming behind Baraka's concern for popular culture and opposing the mood of pure nostalgia. The persistence of ethnic victims as buffoons poses the question of whether or not mass culture is contradictory to a true people's culture. Lorca,

represents a point of departure for a political and ethnic popular art in one of Baraka's earliest poems.

Significantly, "Lines to Garcia Lorca" (UP 2) begins with a Negro Spiritual song which serves as a motto and which is linked, in the end, to Lorca's voice, "laughing, Laughing/Like a Spanish guitar." "Lines" ascribes a religious importance to music in oppressive situation. The violent death of the Spanish poet at the hands of Franco's fascists, is reenacted by the reader of Lorca's poem, and similarly, we are to assume, Black music can actualize in the listener the memory of Black suffering. The laughter is the laughter of a surviving art, collected by Buddhist, "orange-robed monks." Poetry is thus seen as a people's strength against political oppression.

"April 13" (UP 9) brings Lorca's Spanish theme home to a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York which is contrasted with the Andrews Sisters at Radio City Music Hall. The poem uses elements of outsider imagery, e.g., the opposition to "blondes" or "snow," in order to raise the larger question of the role of oppressed minorities at home and of cultural imperialism abroad; this is done, however, with the help of the self-consciously trite cliché of cats and mice.

Out the window:

HIJO DE PUTA!

HIJO DE PUTA!

*This is probably a job
for a social worker.
One with blonde stringy hair
& lipstick stains on her mustache.
Last night it snowed ...
today, some old dirty cat
is crouched on the black fence
thinking about the various kinds
of mice.*

*There was a time
when Radio City Music Hall
was really a great place.
Hot summer, 1942: Everybody sang
"working for the yonkee dollahhh"
& something about Caca-cola.*

*HIJO DE PUTA
MARDICON, PINDEO, CHOLITO etc.
Things are happening slowly.*

Among Baraka's early poems, "Lines to Garcial Lorca" and "April 13" are exceptional in their statements on cultural politics. The dominant concern in this period is less for social action than for an immersion into a self which is tormented, and often suicidal.

4. SUICIDE AND BEYOND

The poem "The Death of Nick Charles" (p31-34), Dashiell Hammett's detective novel, *The Thin Man*, develops the suicidal theme.

*Sad
long
motion of hair
pushing in my face. Lies.
Weakness, hatred
Of myself. Of you
For not understanding
This. Or not
Despising me
For the right causes ... (P 32)*

After pessimistic considerations of love and loneliness, the poem ends with oblique reference to darkness and blackness and suicidal sleep, from which there is no satori awakening. The "Glorious death in battle" (p31) of the beloved popular heroes seems to have been taken literally:

*Boats & old men
Move through the darkness ...
Sea birds
Scalding the blackness ...
I merely sit
& grow weary, not even watching
the sky lighten with morning
& now
I am sleeping
& you will not be able
to wake me. (P 34)*

These suicidal lines correspond to the serious meaning of the bizarre title of the collection (possibly influenced by Langston Hughes's short poem, "Suicide's Note" whereas the title poem, "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" (p 5) – dated March 1957 but dedicated to Kellie Jones, born 16 May 1959 – corresponds to its ironically contradictory form.. as William Fischer says:

To bring so much heavy apparatus to bear preface and volumes-on a mere not, is to mock the ostensible value to the poems themselves.
(Fischer: p270).

The title poem elaborates the contrast between the poet's nihilistic ways and his young daughter's unsheltered religious faith. For this modern Hamlet "Things have come to that": and "the broad edged silly music the wind/Makes when I run for a bus ..." has replaced the songs of his childhood: "Nobody signs any more". The difference in the perspectives of father and daughter is most clearly articulated in their relationship to god, who is very real for the praying daughter, but only an absence, a "no one." for the poet:

*And then last night, I tiptoed up
To my; daughter's room and heard her
Talking to someone, and when I opened
The door, there was no one there...
Only she on her knees, peeking into
Her own clasped hands. (P 5)*

The recurrence of Baraka's themes and motifs unifies the early poetry; but the playfulness and the nostalgia increasingly give way to a sense of suicidal despair. Baraka's suicidal and agonistic poetry reflects the death of the "Anglo shell," which at times appears like the death of the poet himself. The writer who is almost "Suicided" by the cultural dead weight of "objective" art, often doubts whether he can extricate himself from the decline of the West. In "Consider This" (UP 17), Baraka ironically accepts a European tradition, as seen by Henry James, when he says:

*And those lovely cathedrals at Chartres
your way of saying it
I must... love them
I have no other voice left.*

But the poet does have an inner voice which survives the suicidal temptations to die with the shell. This voice ultimately transforms agonism into antagonism as it is raised to the scream of "Black Dada Nihilism's." The confrontation of inside and outside, of life and death, sharpens. The *Preface* poems occasionally envision a "new turn." "Theory of art" (P 40-41) vaguely anticipates "a dark singular consciousness" and the terror that will be caused by "the animal sleeping", when he wakes, "The New Sheriff" (p42) alludes to Baraka's childhood heroes of the Lone Ranger type and subtly elaborates a contrasting imagery of cruelty/virginity, color/whiteness,

and inside/outside that foretells, in Eliotic terms, more radical changes to come:

*There is something
in me so cruel, so
silent. It hesitates
to sit on the grass
with the young white
virgins (P 42)*

The turning toward "new" things is critically reflected in the last poem of the volume, which departs from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* in its more communicative title, "Notes for a Speech." Instead of the valedictory and suicidal soliloquizing of some earlier poems, there is, in this poem, the strengthening of the gesture of "speech," of finding oneself and others in the verbal process. The theme of the speech, however, is an assessment of the isolation of the Black Bohemian from other Black people, his alienation from Africa and the Black American community. While implying dissatisfaction with this alienation, the poet cannot resolve the fact that "African blues/does not know me" (p 47), a lyrical reminder of Counter Cullen's famous question "What is Africa to me," and ends, instead, on a resigned note:

*My color
is not theirs, Lighter, White man
talk. They shy away. My own*

*dead souls, my, so called
people. Africa
is a foreign place. You are
as any other sad man here
American. (P 47)*

A possible reason for this return to resignation may be that the poem was written as the intended end to *Preface*; but it may also be that the poet, who achieved the strongest anticipatory thoughts in his most expressive and most personal poems, assumed a more formal and almost essayistic role in his "Notes for a Speech," the conclusion of which, significantly, resembles the last paragraphs of "Cuba Libre." "Notes for a Speech" contains very little that is cryptic, no obscure personal references, no "names" and almost no Beat peculiarities except in the line arrangement. At the end of *Preface* Baraka sees his alienation as a symbol of the estranged situation of "any other sad man" in America.

The library Congress recordings of Baraka's early poetry reinforce the impression of an alienated poet who talks to himself. His voice is rarely raised beyond the occasionally ironic emphasis of point ("There Must Be A Lone Ranger!!!); and usually, the raised voice is combined with a tone of ironically undercut frustration, as in sending "lewd poems" to Uncle Don's radio program for children and emphasizing: "IF ONLY HE WOULD READ THESE ON THE AIR" (p 19). The poet has fears of being inaudible, or of not being able to communicate an ironic sadness, since the Beat aesthetic

frowned upon communication as something secondary to art. Indeed, the most striking "oral" effects are the frequently ironic reference to silence, the antithesis of speech-art.

On the printed page, Baraka could develop his poetic voice without the inhibiting interference of editors; unlike most earlier Afro-American writers, he started his literary career as a writer and an editor and could, like Whitman, approach the literary market from a position of relative strength. A writer with "his own offset press in the back room," Baraka was an active editor involved not only in several crucial journals of the New York Beat coterie (*Yugen*, *The Floating Bear*, & *Kulchur*), but also in the Totem Press and Corinth Books publication of such important writers as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

Despite Baraka's active participation in the literary life of New York's "New Bohemia," the works of his first period of creativity increasingly show signs of a desire to transcend their own limitations and to take the freedom of his aesthetics at face value. The Bohemian's relationship to himself, his art, his subject, and his audience is challenged, and the questions of ethnic identity and the social function of art remain unanswered. After hardly more than two years with the Beat Generation, Baraka began to tire of his literary milieu, a fatigue expressed implicitly and explicitly in his early works and letters. Thus, he wrote to Loewinsohn on November 30, 1959:

I am so goddamned thoroughly tired of this beatnick shit I'm screaming.

This dissatisfaction with the media exploitation of all things beat was so total as to include everything except his writing. He had defined his *ennui* in a previous letter to Loewinshon in the following striking manner:

I want to get the fuck out of all of it. This fucking city, the goddamn editor publisher shit every fucking thing that's keeping me from writing, from thinking, from even taking a leisurely shit in peace. I can't do all this much longer & I DAMN SURE WONT.

... Love roi

(James Weldon, Johnson, Collection Rare Books and Manuscript)

Baraka was, of course, not the only Beat writer who wanted to "get out"; by 1950, discontent was spreading among those whom America labeled "beatniks." An article by John Fles in the *Village Voice*, written upon the suicide of a close friend, is indicative of the mood:

... the revolution which started with "Howl" in 1956 and "On the Road" in 1957 is ending The old idols-insanity (Artaud), junk (Burroughs) questioning seriously. But the old social-consciousness routine, as Ginsberg et al. Have shown us, is dangerous to literature the desert of the 30s and absurd as commitment. The commitment still essentially has to remain romantic, i.e., to ourselves, to our art and to what values we can make ... may be the reality we think we see is different than it seems; maybe it calls for the different involvements than the reality of the late 40s

and early 50s when the Beat Generation, as a literary fact, came into being. Maybe there is a middle ground between the opportunistic and philistine Pollyannaism of Henry Luce and, oppositely, suicide: and that this is the role of the committed artist.

Bohemian artists still defined themselves within the intellectual framework of aesthetic protest ("romantic commitment"), but struggled for new roles. The era of "pure" Bohemianism was coming to end, and Baraka was soon on the barricades "against hipness as such" (UN 17).

Poetry of the 1950s to 1960s and The Dead Lecture

Its
small dull fires. Its
sun, like a greyness
smeared on the dark. (DL 37)

The clash between the 1950s and the 1960s is dramatically apparent in Cuba Libre Baraka's account of his trip to Cuba in July 1960. He travelled with a group of Black writers and intellectuals. In Cuba, Baraka met Fidel Castro and other representatives of the new government, as well as Latin American intellectuals. His descriptions of these meetings make "Cuba Libre" one of his best essays and a touchstone for his growing disaffiliation with the American system and with aesthetic protest.

Challenged to explain his politics, Baraka portrays himself as defensive of his aesthetic position.

"Look why jump upon me? ...I'm a poet. ...what can I do? I write, that's all. I'm not even interested in politics." [H 42]

The Cuban experience is of central importance to many contemporary Afro-American radicals; was one cause (and in the view of

some critics, the cause) of Baraka's transformation from aesthetic to political protests from a belief in the end of ideology to a new politicized awareness. Baraka's development since 1960 may be interpreted as a search for "direction" and "purpose", a real "alternative" to " America" but he perceived these new ideas -as well as much of the Cuban trip -within the older framework of aesthetic protest rather than in the context of a political theory or an ethnic ideology. He sees the limitations of the Bohemian approach, but still shares its central assumptions. Baraka's dissatisfaction with "*What I Brought to the Revolution*," the title of the first part of "*Cuba Libre*," is clear, but "*What I Brought Back Here*," part two of the essay, is merely the beginning of a vague of rethinking:

"The new ideas that were being shoved at me, some of which I knew would be painful when I eventually got to New York" (H-61). The negative evaluation of the 'pre-Cuban ' past is unequivocal: "The revels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics (H-61)."

But the anticipation of the 'post-Cuban ' future is pessimistic and demonstrates the pervasiveness of aesthetic protest even in the act of criticism; the essay ends not with the prospect of a real' alternative' but with the nihilistic statement that there is none.

"We are an old people already. Even the vitality of our art is like bright flowers growing up through a rotting carcass. But the Cubans, the other new peoples (in Asia, Africa, South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way." (H-62).

"Newness," the goal of all modernism, is limited to other, 'younger' nations, and Baraka does not question his American ness in the Cuban confrontation. He sees no possibility for an identification of Black Americans with those 'young' peoples or the Third World and considers himself a member of an 'old' society; (the pronoun 'we' in 'Cuba Libre' never stands for Afro-Americans.) Baraka sees the contrast between the "radical humanism" of Fidel C-o (H-53) and the world of "the Eisenhower's, the Nixon's, the DuPonts" (H-42) a conflict between youth and old age. Perhaps, the attractiveness of the Cuban experience lay less in its revolutionary egalitarian philosophy than in the youthful vitality of the country and its leaders.

The central difficulty Baraka faced with the Cuban inspiration was how to translate a vaguely political impulse into a new aesthetic that would be meaningful for an "old" country. Harold Cruse showed that Baraka, because of his literary avant-gardism, could not possibly work on a common basis with communist Afro-American writers. Baraka's rejection of their protest literature was even more explicit than Cruse implies. Thus, "Cuba Libre" is full of polemical, cutting remarks about the old-fashioned

communists in the travel group who ask "embarrassing" questions about "integration and want to see pictures of Negroes in Cuban school books."

Baraka's "Bright flowers," the first poems written during and after the Cuban visit, are as ambiguous as his essay. In "Betancourt" (p 36-40), the poem that introduces the theme of Cuba and a new sense of people and movements, Baraka relates to the new challenge not in political, but in aesthetic-erotic terms. Dated 30 July 1960 Havana, the poem asks the important question "What are influences?" (p 36) When Baraka uses the term "El hombre" (p 39), he perhaps refers to Fidel Castro and alludes to William Carlos Williams. The poem "Betancourt" pictures Cuba as a revolutionary pastoral setting.

Not
In the gardens
Of Spain, but some
New greenness (P 37)

Another "Cuban" poem "The Disguise" (UP 33), is apparently addressed to Sra. Betancourt and shows the poet's turn from "self" to "outside world". In the pre-Cuban poem "Consider This" (1959), Baraka articulated the difficulties of looking at the "street", since the poet's own mirror image in the window pane is always superimposed upon the world.

You cannot look out the window at the street

There is nothing there but your own weaving (UP 17, sectional)

In 1961, in the post-Cuban *"The Disguise,"* Baraka attempts to "open" this window.

He begins the poem with what may be the most cogent image for his Bohemian mask and for his desire to move away from an expressive and narcissistic aesthetic.

When you spoke to me, I turned. I thought.

away from the grey glass, in to the world. (UP 33)

The "grey glass" implies both the mirror-windows into the poet's self. And his "white," or, in Black English "grey" identity. Once the window to the world is open, the "blinds" cannot keep the sun and red air out for long

Bed air pushed on the blinds made them clatter,

but nothing happened. (UP 33)

In a state of unresolved yearning for change, the poet tries to recall the setting of his conversation with Sra. Betancourt, but cannot proceed beyond a repetition of the beginning of the poem:

*nothing moves..... (when you spoke to me,
I thought I'd turned gotten to it,
but a truck moved by
must have obliterated the rest of
your that.)*

Baraka cannot formulate a solution to the confusion in his own head, he cannot decode the "Indian knots behind my eyes" which have affected his vision. Aware of his old disguises, the poet has not reached a new sense of self or reality.

*(I thought
I'd turned)
The window hung open, red air
blew in (UP33),*

Baraka could now see his own social role as that of a poet-"mediator" between the black and the white. On the one hand, he organized an interracial "On Guard For Freedom Committee" in Harlem where he maintained that it was not "necessary to restrict whites from participation..... More than that, he said he could not understand why Harlem Negroes should hate whites. On the other hand, he translated the attitude of the young nationalist Harlemites to white liberal audiences". (Sollars: *Populist Modernism*).

One of the crucial developments in Baraka's artistic self-definition after 1960 is his expansion of the formula given in *"How You Sound?"*, "I must be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem" so that the last three words lose their confining meaning. After Cuba, Baraka is eager to extend the freedom of spontaneous art to include political freedom. In a conscious analogy to the supposed "progress in the arts" (H 77), Baraka states in "Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents" that "It is not 'progress' that the majority of Negroes want, but Freedom" (H 70). Making "freedom" a political just as much as an aesthetic demand means asking writers to be socially committed. In his "Brief Reflections on Two hot Shots," Baraka maintains that, unlike James Baldwin, a writer "must have a point of view, or he cannot be a good writer. He must be standing somewhere in the world, or else he is not one of us, and his commentary then is of little value. (H 118)."

In other essays from 1961 to 1963, Baraka's ambivalence in describing himself both as a Negro who sees a bus full of people and as an anti academic writer in the "modern tradition" becomes more and more obvious. While increasingly critical of his fellow Bohemians, he still identifies his art as part of the modern movement. The 1961 essay "Milneburg Joys (or, Against 'Hipness As Such)" (UN 17) begins with an elusive discussion of the opposing worlds of "uptown" (Black New York) and "downtown" (the place of Bohemia):

Someone (if you work "uptown") will tell you yours is the bird world
"Mine is real." (UN 7, p.41).

Baraka's aesthetic and political writings of the early 1960s is full of contradictory impulses. Yet at the time of his greatest theoretical confusion he wrote many of his best poems, plays, and fictions. More than that, the very contradictions within his increasingly divided self are an important source of his creativity.

In many ways, Baraka's second poetry collection. *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) appears strikingly similar to *Preface*. There are in this new volume, many "Pure" Beat poems. Concerned with love (DL 9,17,36) or the function of poetry (DI 10).

In "The invention of comics" the poet explores his heritage, as he did in "Lanie Poo," again, there are strong echoes of Eliot.

*I am soul in the world: in
the world of my soul the chirled
light form the day
the sacken land of my father. (DL 37)*

Sometimes the poet gives a new slant to old images, as in "Suns" (DL 47), Sometimes he openly rejects previous poetic practices, as in

"without preface" (DL 10), and occasionally, he forms new lyric entitles that were altogether unthinkable in *Preface*, as in "Black Dada Nihilismus" (DL61-64). Significantly the transformation of Baraka's poetry from the 1950s to the 1960s can be measured by the way in which the imagery of death is developed.

When a poet's first volume is entitled *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and ends with "Notes for a Speech," the title of his second collection is *The Dead Lecturer*, we may assume that the poet's preoccupation with his own agony has reached its terminal point and that the "*Dead Lecturer*" of the title is none other than the poet himself. Yet there is a living and increasingly affirmative voice in Baraka's poems of the first half of the 1960s, a voice which often alludes to, and sometimes distances itself from the earlier "suicide note".

"Footnote to a Pretentious Book" (DL 42) is harshly critical of *Preface* and its portrait of the artist as a suicided man".

*You could say of me,
That I was truly
Simpleminded. (DL 453)*

There is, then a dead lecturer who once composed that quiet suicide 'note, and a new poet of politics, war, rhythm and blues.

"An Agony. As Now" (DL 15-16) continues just this struggle within the poet as a creative but early lethal confrontation between lively, suffering inside and metallic, deadly outside which affects the very eye of poetic vision.

*I am inside someone
Who hates me. I look
Out from his eyes, smell
What fouled tunes come in
To his breath. Love his
Wretched women. (DL 15)*

The "enclosure" of "white hot metal" is the composite image of artistic reification and alienation, political confinement, and ethnic masquerade.

Abandoning the "quiet verse" of *Preface*, Baraka lets "the thing inside" scream, as it is being scorched black by the white hot metal. This image is emblematic of the art of *The Dead Lecturer*, wrested from the unbearable pressures and frictions of iron body masks. It is the scream of pain and feeling, flesh and soul, of ethnic and political suffering and it is the dada scream which annihilates the "withered yellow flowers" of "Western poetry" from Joyce Kilmer's trees to Eliot's hollow men and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*.

At this point, Baraka experiments with the methods of destroying and rebuilding language. He ventures into the communicative extremes of "silence" and "screaming" and he makes the "bad words of Newark" part of his poetry. Silence was prominent in much of the low-keyed "quite verse" of *Preface*, and is still prevalent in *Lecturer*. It is now, however, a much more aggressive version of silence, as "Short Speech To My Friends" suggests.

A compromise

Would be silence. To shut up, even such risk

as the proper placement

of verbs and nouns. To free the spit

In mid air, as it aims itself

At some valiant intellectual's face. (DL 30)

In "Black Dada Nihilismus" (DL 61-64) Baraka develops the Black scream as the heart of his aesthetic —, and the visions of racial violence are a touchstone of the distance Baraka traveled since *Preface*. The first part of the poem forcefully rejects the culture of the powerful: its life-sucking deadness, its Christian façade; its assimilation and genocidal minority politics. Against the murderous hypocrisy of the oppressors, however, Baraka posits no working class conscious vision of liberation, but only the lumpenproletarian gesture of sanctified and self gratifying violence.

*Murder, the cleansed
purpose, frail, against
God, if they bring him
bleeding, I would not
Forgive, or even call him
Black dada nihilismus. (DL 61)*

Baraka refers to Jewish assimilation in the harsh and puzzling image of the,

*ugly silent deaths of Jews under
The surgeon's knife. (To awake on
69th street with money and a hip
nose. (DL 61-62)*

Plastic surgery is seen as a self-deceptive acceptance of the beauty-ideal of the oppressive culture and a middle-class gesture of ethnic betrayal. At his point, Baraka sees other ethnic groups, and especially Jews, as a metaphoric extension of Blacks.

Part two of "Black Dada Nihilismus" carries this identification of "black art" as an alchemistic concept and as a vehicle for ethnic upheaval to its frightening end as a irrational counter image to the bourgeoisie, Black and White. Baraka embraces Egyptian astrology and medieval alchemy,

not to find gold, but to initiate the victims of the West. At the end of the poem it's the scream.

Come up, black dada

Nihilismus. Rape the white girls, Rape

Their fathers, cut their mothers throats throats. (DL 63).

The poem ends with a prayer to a "Kind" Affrican god. Damballah:

May a lost god damballah, rest or save us

Against the murders we intend

Against his lost white children

Black dada nihilism's. (DL 64)

Baraka's poetry of the 1960s reflects the transportation of the struggle between "literature" and "life" from the "inside" of the poet's consciousness to the "outside" of American political and ethnic reality. In this process, the expressive elements of aesthetic protest confront the demands of political and ethnic protest.

Black Cultural Nationalism

*My intentions are colors. I'm filled with
color, every tint you think of lends to mine
my mind is full of color, hard muscle streaks,
or soft glow round exactness registration. All earth
heaven things, hell things, in colors circulate
a wild blood train, turn litmus like a bible coat, ...*

("Western Front")

The social and political events of 1964-65; the Black urban rebellions, the murder of the Black children in the church bombing in Birmingham and especially the assassination of Malcolm – X on Feb., 21, 1965 made Baraka leave Greenwich Village and the Bohemian world and move uptown to Harlem and lead a new life as a cultural nationalist.

The new Black ethnicity after which Baraka increasingly aspired, threatened his relationship to literacy prototyped like moderns and white audiences. Baraka's contemporary critics focused their attention on his obvious contradictions. Baraka was especially vulnerable to criticism because of his theoretical advocacy of black violence, and on the other hand for his integration into the white cultural scene of New York by marriage, residence and fame. While supporting the Black

lumpenproletariat violence in panel discussions, Baraka also taught a class at the New School about modern poetry, and edited anthologies of contemporary prose. But the most blatant contradiction was seen in Baraka's private life, how could he write lines "Rape the white girls..... Cut the mothers' throats" and remain married to a white woman? When he is given his pistol and his signal, will he do his self-declared duty and begin the slaughter with his wife and children?

Baraka was forced to make decisions. Was he a bohemian or a Black spokesman, a political writer or a "priest of the unconscious?" By 1965, he had taken the first step in the direction of an answer: he exaggerated his attacks on the white "liberals" to such a degree as to finally convince himself that the whites in general were not worth attacking that he should address himself exclusively to the Black people. But first, Baraka pursued his strategy of "white-baiting in notorious speak-outs" in Greenwich Village, and he became synonymous with his emotional anti-white tirades. This prompted critics to hold up Baraka's private life against his public views; in fact several of the quoted references to Baraka's contradictions were responses to Baraka's own diatribes. By telling his predominantly white and overwhelmingly liberal village audiences that "our enemies" include "most of you who are listening," Baraka was posturing in order to exorcise his own association with devil whiteness; increasingly he felt that "I should not be speaking here. ...I should be speaking to Black people." The next years showed that Baraka meant this literally: in the phase of

Black cultural nationalism, he tried to escape what he felt was neutralization and absorption process by speaking to the Black people.

The central element of any Black nationalism is the concept of a Black nation, in which the oppression of the Blacks as a minority would come to an end. The first, most obvious strategy toward such a goal would be a literal, physical escape from the oppressive political structure "back to Africa". With Marcus Garvey's "Universal Negro Improvement Association" as its most famous representative, this concept of a remigration to Africa has been espoused by many Blacks; at present, three and a half centuries after the first slaves were deported from Africa to North America, the realization of a back-to Africa may easily come to mean suppression of Africans by Afro- Americans, whereas "Africa-to-the-Africans" give the Black struggle in America an international dimension. The second strategy of Black Nationalism aims at a Black nation in America. Depending on the assessment of the all-important land question, three variants of this concept have been advocated in recent years. The "Republic of New Africa" demands a separate Black nation in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. The "Nation of Islam," popularly referred to as the "Black Muslims" (a religious organization with a vast membership, center around the recently deceased prophet Elijah Muhammad), wants separation of the Blacks from the whites but is ambivalent as to whether this move requires a literal nationhood, or whether a separation within the American nation is sufficient; upon different

occasions. Elijah Muhammad advocated the establishment of a Black nation in America or in Africa, or was content to demand separatism within the United States. The third variant, a Black cultural nationalism as defined by Maulana Ron Karenga, advocates values which would govern the lives of Black Americans as a symbolically separate group within the united states; thus, "nationhood" becomes a metaphor for spiritual and cultural separation.

All variations of nationalism are ultimately based on an analysis which ascribes the roots of Black oppression to "whites in general," and not to economics or class; nationalist strategies are therefore based on racial, pre-political tenets and require further definitions of "white" or "Black" qualities. Thus Black nationalists may be advocates of capitalism and may agree to preserve the economic structure of America in the Black nation, in Africa or in America. Or they may reject labor union as a "white" conception. The definition of what is positive and what is negative about a black and a white social reality is crucial for assessing any form of Black Nationalism.

The program of the Black panther party, in many ways a secularized version of the platform of the Nation of Islam, attempts to politicize the Black nationalist impulse by defining the "enemy" not simply as the white man, but as the capitalist system. Correspondingly the party's strategy, called "Black revolutionary nationalism," aims at a revolution which would

overthrow the economic rulers of America and lead to a liberation of all Americans, Black and white. In this liberation policy, nationalism has been transcended.

Baraka's form of Black cultural nationalism hovered over the religious and the metaphorical, and was soon in sharp contradiction to the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther party. Baraka's response to the oppression of Black was primarily cultural and his precepts toward overcoming the statusquo were directed at the cultural level. Social change was to come about through Black consciousness, new images and the minds of the people. As a first step toward active Black Nationalism, Baraka rejected white participation in the civil rights struggle. At the village Vanguard speak-out, Baraka and Archie Sheep attacked fellow panelists and the audience for being white, and therefore guilty, whether they were committed to social change or not "All whites are equally guilty – All of the unforgivable crime of attempting to destroy my humanity." Baraka tried to translate the impulse of Black political radicalism in the 1960s into a cultural form; and this process continued Baraka's Bohemianism, which equated revolutions in art and consciousness with those in political history.

The first important influence Baraka's Malcolm X adaptation was his contact with the Black power movement, although the term "Black power" is of an older origin and had been used by Richard Wright as the title of a book about 'Africa', Stokely Carmichael popularized the term when he used

it during the Meredith march of 1966 as a slogan which was meant to express a variety of Black political, economic, social and cultural demands. One reason for the strength and attractiveness of the term "Black power" may have been its vagueness, which appealed to many different political tendencies, organizations and individuals, who came together in order to discuss what, in their various opinions, the term should mean.

A National Planning Committee grew out of the 1966 Labor Day weekend planning session and prepared a National Conference of Black power. For over 400 delegates from all over the United States and Baraka attended the conference, which took place in Newark on July 20-30, 1967 just after the Newark ghetto rebellion. A great variety of resolutions were passed which reflected many conflicting stances among the delegates, who did not share a common political program. Five distinct interpretations of Black Power emerged,

1. Black Capitalism:

Black-controlled financial institutions-banks, insurance companies savings and loan association-to provide for credit unions, housing, loans, etc.

2. More Black Politicians,

Election of 12 Black congressmen,

3. Group Integration (Ethnic Politics):

Selective buying to force job upgrading, and a nationwide "buy Black" move, Boycott of magazines that carry ads for hair straighteners and skin bleachers.

4. Black Control of Black Communities:

A school for Black political organizers.

5. Black Liberation Within the Context of a U.S. Revolution:

Paramilitary training for Black youths.

Baraka's interpretation of Black power oscillated among several of these alternatives. For him, the most decisive element of any Black movement had to be its cultural unity. Baraka thus sympathized with the Nation of Islam, but for a while also with the Black Panthers, and met even with Dr. Martin Luther king in order to discuss possibilities of a Black united front.

The most important influence of Baraka's cultural nationalism was exerted by Maulana Ron Karenga, who participated in the Black power conference. Baraka had already met with, and was fascinated by, Karenga and tried to integrate Karenga's precepts in to his works. In 1967, Karenga collected his aphorisms in a small volume, entitled the Quotable Karanga. Baraka read this manifesto and, quoted from it frequently, and attempted to apply the maxims to his private and public activities.

Baraka adopted Karenga's demagogic eclecticism, and wrote poems, plays and essays on the basis of *The Quotable Karenga*, which was also distributed through Jihad productions: The most interesting document which reflects Baraka's immersion into Karenga's world is the schooling material for the use by Congress of African people cadres edited by Baraka, 10 phases of the Kawaïda Doctrine of Maulana Karenga. This inventory of points to be made in order to convert Black people to Kawaïda is thoroughly based on Karenga. The sections of the different phases are entitled, e.g., "3 Functions of a value system;" and in the last phase, the neophyte learns among the "7 things A Good Advocate should Do":

We must first move reconvert ourselves to the acceptance and practice in accordance with the ideology. Then we must move to help others to be converted. ("The Quotable Karenga")

Under Karenga's influence, Baraka discarded his traditional advocacy of anarchist violence, and dedicated his political essays to the task of cultural "nation-building," to the transformation of Black consciousness through positive self-images. By accepting this priority, he also arrived at the conclusion that it was the "ballot, not the bullet" which would free Black people; he became an active organizer in the area of electoral politics, instrumental in getting Kenneth Gibson elected as the first Black mayor of Newark in 1970. At the same time, Baraka's agitation against the Black middle class reached its lowest point, since he believed that only a unified Black group could achieve any political gains in America.

At the Black congress in Gary in 1972. Baraka attempted to practice Karenga's concept of "operational unity" and appeared in the role of conciliator who tried to keep conservatives and revolutionaries together. Like Karenga, he believed that the lack of Black unity was due to a lack of Black values and that the Black intellectual had to provide "direction" and "purpose" (Baraka's Key Words since "Cuba Libre") through the intensive propagation of "A Black value system" among all strata of the Black community. The practical moral, religious system of Kawaïda was to serve just that function. Baraka's "7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & the Need for a Black Value system" is therefore the most important essay of the period of Black Nationalism.

Baraka's move toward an all-Black unity ultimately included Africa as well as the United States; Baraka expanded his narrower concept of Black cultural nationalism into a new Black internationalism, "Pan-Afrikaans". This change in perspective, as well as disappointing experiences with the bourgeois politics of Black elected officials provided the basis for Baraka's recent shift to socialist concept, with which he was confronted through the writings of African socialists such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Amilcar Cabral. Until that turning point, Baraka's writings remained a "Tragedy Study" (B 45, UP 53) of a white devil enemy image, whose emanations often bore little semblance to capitalism or to the Duponts, Rockefellers, Nixons and Eisenhower's against whom Baraka had defined himself in "Cuba Libre." Baraka's devil is white, and

carries in his whiteness fewer emblems of the American ruling class than stigmata of groups discriminated against by "white society".

Baraka's Black cultural nationalist essays and poems incorporated the prejudices of the society at large and directed much of their aggression against traditional outcasts of bourgeois society; in Baraka's works, the image of the devil enemy appears in the shape of bums, policemen, immigrants, homosexuals, Jews, and women. Whereas white Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs are underrepresented. This observation reveals the Bohemian character of Baraka's Black Cultural Nationalism, which even in the process of negation retains middle class traits and prejudices.

It is this Bohemianism which makes Baraka's expression of nationalism dubious as a counterstrategy that could mobilize effective solidarity among the oppressed. As both Baraka and Karenga would criticize themselves in later years, their fiercely pursued Black cultural nationalism was an exaggerated exoticism brought about by their tendency to take revolution from the partial perception of culture, instead of from lessons learned from global history and struggle. While it is, perhaps, important as a phase of negation which every nonwhite intellectual had to go through in order to "decolorize" himself, Black cultural nationalism does not provide a strategy to "unite the many to defeat the few." (Karenga: *Unity & Struggle*)

In the Poetry during the Black Nationalist Period, 'Invisibility' is a suggestive line of the total annihilation of identity. The dominant structures of power operate by rendering marginalised 'Invisible,' a total erasure of the existence of the marginalised. When the powerful gaze of 'authority' 'sees' a group "invisible" the dominant need for the "invisible" is to transcend their invisibility and take a tangible and "corporeal" form, no matter how strongly the structures of power insist on their intangibility and incorporeality to relegate them into a state of perceptual invisibility.

One first step, for the invisible, incorporeal to be corporeal and visible, is to develop a consciousness of their invisibility and incorporeality. Developing such consciousness involves understanding and analyzing the operation of power structures, which render them invisible. The next logical step seems to "corporate" their in corporeality to assert their tangibility, reality. The excursion from awareness to assertion, from consciousness to corporealisation, always fraught with fractures and relentless resistance, thereby giving birth to two forms of 'resistance's'-- the resistance of assertion of the invisible and the resistance of negation of the dominant group. The conflictual relationship tops assertion and negation and becomes the matrix of identity politics. The degree of assertion by the negated group can range from mild petition of the subservient to the overwhelmingly militant demand of activist militia.

Le Roi Jones being born into a dominant white society with its own history of brutality and sublime record of suppression, remained invisible to himself and to the world at large for a long period. The dominant culture of the visible, the dominant religion of the tangibles (reflected in his Christian name), the dominant socio-politico-ideological structure of the "fair" corporeals the totaling, overarching universalizing metanarratives both its essential essentialising tendency with its "Le Roi Jonesising" homogenisation seemed completely to obliterate the earlier life of a would be Baraka. When LeRoi Jones visualizes his invisibility, touches his intangibility, experiences his incorporeality, it becomes imperative for him to assassinate himself to assassinate LeRoi Jones so that the tangible, a visible, a corporeal Baraka can come into being – a politically assertive race-conscious Baraka who gazes at the world with "Dull unwashed windows of eyes" and dissects, analyses and evaluates the epic invisibility of the black people in the Poem " A Poem Some People will have to understand".

*What industry do I practic? A slick
cloured boy, 12 miles form his
home. I practice no industry.
I am no longer a cradity
to my race.*

To the "omni potently" oppressed even nature seems to align herself with the oppressive mechanism. The "Slow spring after noon's the dry

charcoal winters" only help to bring into motion "the wheels, and the wheels" of oppression and invisibility. Invisibility cannot be annihilated. Hence the rhetorical quest of the writer for annihilation, for erasure remains unfulfilled

Will the machineguns please step forward?

The Black identity like the "water color ego" remains insubstantial a 'fantasy' like the

..... coming of a natural
phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable
workers of the land.

Hence the personal pessimism of the poetic persona assumes a sinister, macabre cosmic proportioned in the next poem – "Citizen Cane" with the images of death, incarceration, and brutal self-annihilation,

the courage to kill myself or drink myself
denunciation"

"not even
to death. Just
be herded off like a common Jew and
roasted in my teary

The poet and his race seem to have some alternative; the alternative of insubstantiality; annihilation the alternative to conform to the dominant race; the alternative to be not like one of them but to be "them", the alternative to

..... *Work out your problems*

like your friends on some nice guy's couch

.....

.....

Get up

throw that ball. Move your hips, cut, like the

white boys,

for ten more yards

The process of moving " your hips" and cutting "like the white boys" is the process of uniform universal "white washing" the potential black consciousness.

The intangibility of the black identity is also reflected in the poem, "Leadbelly gives an Autograph", Nat Turner an image of the black identity in this poem exists to execute the command of a mighty resonant voice

Pat your foot

and turn the corner Nat Turner.

Or may be Nat Turner exists in order to rhyme with "corner": An irony of a shadow that is Nat Turner facing an existential crisis in the realm of "Lead belly" and his powerful "autograph."

In a world characterized by the binary opposition of the substance and the shadow, the dominant and the marginalised, the oppressor and the oppressed, language has the potential to become a tool for the oppressed to express their oppression. Yet the language, instead of expressing our "vacant lot" had become "the twisted myth of speech". The images of "the boards brown falling away," the metal banisters cheap and ratty" remind us of the cityscope with its heightened techno-culture capable of taking sinister forms for those who "practice no industry".

The language fails the failed and does not come to them easily and naturally and they have to pay a heavy price for their logocentric inaptitude,

Need.

Motive

The delay of language.

A strength to be handled by giants.

The possibilities of statement. I am saying now.

What my father could not remember to say.

What my grand father

Was killed

For believing

The failure of verbalization leads to intangibility of non-existence, the success of verbalization leads to intangibility of death. No wonder, "The City's is Rise!"

looks like a jungle

where the history of the oppression of the intangibles has been erased from the collective memory – complete with the assassination of history itself-

(And what is history, then?

And old deaf lady)

burned to death

in south Carolina.

Baraka is extremely critically aware not only of the assassination of the history of marginalisation but also of the historical logocentric linguistic dilemma of the Black people. The use, abuse and misuse of language by the tangibles have placed the intangible at a complex relation to language. The use as well as non-use of language by the intangibles becomes a political question leading inevitably to insubstantiality of intangibility or the insubstantiality of death.

Baraka going beyond such historical logocentric marginalization, uses language to shock and appeal; to subvert the very structure of

gentility which characterized the poetic language and is dominantly controlled by the dominants.

The poetics and politics of intangibility reach their logical conclusion when Baraka acknowledges the collective invisibility of the Black people and the identity critics generated by such intangibility. In "Numbers, Letters", he says,

*I can't say who I am
unless you agree I am real*

The poet presses hard for the acceptance of his visibility, his reality, his tangibility,

*I am real, and I can't say who I am. Ask me if I know, I'll say yes, I might say no.
Still ask.*

The dialogicity involved in the entire trajectory of questioning implicitly carries a political intention. The intangibles do not have any defined, refined identity. Hence he "cant say who I am". Yet he presses hard to be questioned. The very trajectory of question means an acknowledgement – the acknowledgement of the existence of the shadow, the invisible, the intangibles. Hence,

Still ask.

Poetry of Black cultural nationalism Black magic & other poems

In the poetry after *The Dead Lecturer*, many of his themes and techniques are the same, his new poem, *The Scholar* (Uncollected , Poetry 59) which is about his grandparents and (*Black Magic* 217) about his mother are poems with the theme of love. There are other poems on love eg "The World is Full of Remarkable Things" (*Black Magic* 193) and alienation eg "Citizen Cain" (*Black Magic* 8) and many poems on American popular cultural (*Black Magic* 44,76,81,89,90,207-208). Yet the poetic voice is new and different. In the poems of this period there is a struggle for self-liberation and an expression of the new ethnic polarization:

Listen to the somber deepness of black singing soul the emptiness and silence of absolute stillness.manifest the emptiness and stillness in the middle of the wrapped around flailing.

The expanding inner identity or self-liberation is found in many poems as "screams" or free expression of everything that was once repressed from political anger to violent anti-Semitism and the poetry tended to be formless. The poem "Vowels 2". (*Black Magic* 189-19) celebrates the explosion of the inner self in original sounds:

Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

EEE EEE EEE

EEE EEE EEE

EEE EEE EEE

EEE EEE EEE

Freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

BURST (B 189)

The scream was there in Baraka's poetry but it moves to the foreground of the poems. Another poem "Trespass into Spirit "(*Black Magic* 151-52) is even more abstract than the shouting of free! And burst! In "Vowels 2".

aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahahaha

neeeeneeaahaaahneeeahhh

dehhhhhdehhhhdadadadadehhhhheheheheheheh

dededededededededededededaaaaaaaaaaaaa

A Chant to risewith! with all

With all rising thru and let the scope

diry jsolekks eoo fjoel fjkk ei oo

dkkle;pspeks"melds;;a;;sl

a;; ome. The rpse. Asmd;;e; rwodespimd;;s kek/112w 1/21/2

k;;;a ;;dkp

The machines head is gone

(*Black magic Black Poetry* – 151, 52)

The poem is full of scream but trying to portray the difficulty of modern writers who are trying to break away from form and intelligibility into arbitrariness. And Baraka tries to give an answer in *Black Magic* by

assigning aesthetic arbitrariness, a supportive position in a Black revolution and by making spontaneity a specifically Black quality which moves such poems out of the realms of white society.

One of Baraka's most typical nationalist poems, "Black Art" (*Black magic* 1961) is an expression of his Black Aesthetic but it is striking for its language and rhetorical violence. The poem characteristically casts the "Liberal", the "Jew Lady" or "the Jewewners" as the enemies. The arbitrary sounds "rrrrrrr" and "tuh tuhare volly shot & of poem that kill", their enemies. The poem itself is to commit the violence that Baraka considers the prerequisite for the establishment of a Black world. Perhaps the most extreme example of Baraka's "pragmatic" and functional poetry of this period is "Black people"

What about that bad short you saw last week

On Frelinghuysen, or those stoves and refrigerators, record players,

Shotguns,

In Sear, Bambergers, Klein's, Hahnes, Chase, and the smaller joosh enterprises?

What about that bad jewelry, on Washington Street, and

those couple of shops on Springfield. You know how to get it, you

Can

Get it, no money down, no money never, money don't grow on trees

No

Way, only whitey's got it, makes it with a machine, to control you

.....

The poem juxtaposes the sacred and the profane, the Biblical and the street language, in order to launch its attack on the old Newark and to prophesy in Black utopia rather a Holy war against the whites and again specifically against the Jews. This poem was printed in innumerable newspapers and journals; not, however in the poetry sections, but on front pages, as part of the reporting of Baraka's Newark trial. Baraka first read the poem on October 3, 1966 at the Village Theater in New York. In the newspaper reports, the poem was interpreted as a direct, agitational "lecture" which exhorted Blacks to smash the "Jelly white faces". When Baraka became involved with the Newark ghetto rebellion of 1976, the poem was used as an evidence of his evil intentions.

On July 14, 1967 during the Newark "riots", Baraka was injured and arrested by the police for alleged illegal possession of firearms. In the course of the trial, Judge Leon Kapp read the entire text of the "Black People. "

This striking use of literature was widely reported under bold headlines such as "poetic Justice," "The Magic Word was Prison," or "curtains for LeRoi". A wave of protest followed the unusually harsh sentence of two and a half to three years of imprisonment and a fine of \$1,000. A group of writers argued that Baraka was a conspicuous American artist imprisoned for his poetry during a crisis of authoritarianism in these states. P.E.N. and A.C.L.U. criticized the violation of the principle

of freedom speech. And the Black intellectuals as well as the civil right leaders saw the sentence as proof that any Black man that expressed the anger of an oppressed people is going to be treated as a political prisoner. The sentence was later reversed and Baraka was acquitted by a higher court.

In poems such as "Black people," Baraka established his position as a poet agitator-leader. After 1967, however, he came to deplore the political effects of this art. He felt that the rhetoric of violence appealed to the lumpenproletariat, but did not lead the way to meaningful change for most Black people. The poems were primarily destructive and nihilistic not yet part of the nation building process.

Baraka's poetry attempts to incorporate the Black street English, folk forms such as "the dozens" and "signifying" the oratory tradition of the Black sermon, religious and secular and other Black rhetorical devices. The poem. "It's Nation Time" appears, on the printed page, as an unpretentious sermon to Black readers to "get together" and "nationally." Before reading this poem at the "First modern Pan African Congress" in 1970, Baraka explained its background:

In Newark when we greet each other on the street we say. 'What time is it'? We always say, 'It's Nation time' (African Congress 101). The

poem illustrates the process of "raising". In the concrete sense of getting up
and in the sense of Black nation-building,

time to get up and

be

come

be

come, time to

be come

time to

get up be come

it's nation time eye ime

it's nation it eye ime

chant with bells and drum

it's nation time

(It's nation time 21,24

Towards a New Shift

We ain't got the Blues

We got the Reds

---Baraka in performance. 1977

As a Black cultured nationalist Baraka became prominent as a political figure but he did not follow a consistent revolutionary line. During this phase of Black Nationalism Baraka was not only attacked by the government agencies but also by the critics and by other groups who consider themselves the revolutionaries.

The Black Panther paper and *Ramparts* attacked Baraka for his cultural chauvinism, calling it "bourgeois" or "pork chop" nationalism. They felt that Baraka consciously misled the Black masses.

In "1973, the National Caucus of Labor Committee published a thirty page pamphlet on *Papa Doc Baraka: Fascism in Newark*, which is a compendium of all political charges levied against Baraka from the Left, in their most acerbic form. The authors denounce Baraka as a fascist, anti-Semitic *Fuhrer*, whose socialism is that of a Mussolini -impressionistic, schematic, devoid of any context beyond today's "gut radicalism". (Costas

Axios and Nikos Suvriotis, *Papa Doc Baraka: Fascism in Newark*, National Caucus of Labor Committees, 1973- Page 9).

Baraka felt compelled to publish a rebuttal in the cultural nationalist paper accusing the National Caucus of Labor Committees of an "anti-black, anti-Third World, Rightist tone," which makes them "paternalist reactionaries, supported by the oppressive elements of the society". ("Message from the Chairman", *Fundisha 1, No.5 of Black News 2*, October 22, 1973).

One year later i.e. 1974 Baraka renounced cultural nationalism and became a socialist. As Karenga's influence began to wane, Baraka began to search for a new connection with Mao Tse Tung whom he once called the most respected poet in China. It is very difficult to account for Baraka's sudden shift from cultural nationalism to Maoism with any degree of precision. If we consider Kreuzer's paradigm we know that any form of "liberal" reform politics is, of course, a "bourgeois" anathema to Bohemians; and that the whole political spectrum- except the extreme right and the extreme left is usually shunned by avant-gardists. That is why Baraka's latest development was at its extreme i.e. from reactionary aspect of nationalism to the most left wing movement i.e. Maoism. Maoism has allowed Baraka to continue creating in an apocalyptic revolutionary mode to see himself as an advanced leader (Chairman instead of Imamu) whose task has been to raise the consciousness of the people and prepare them

for the violent cataclysm he sees ahead. Changing his ideology also allowed him to extricate himself from a new reification process and to come out violently against Black politicians and businessmen, writers and teachers, who had often accepted some tenets of Baraka's Black nationalist message, but were in Baraka's view, still far from making life any better for the majority of Black Americans.

Baraka's shift took place within one single year: in the course of 1974 he became a communist looking at a bus full of people. The essays indicate that Baraka transcended cultural nationalism in two ways: on the one hand the African socialist theory of Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Amilcar Cabral, made him acutely aware of the contradictions inherent in US Black cultural nationalism; on the other the experience with Black elected officials, and especially with the Black mayor of Newark, he realized the impact of bourgeois politics on oppressed Blacks, whether the policies were carried out by "white-oriented" or by "Black-conscious" middleclass representatives. Two external events precipitated the change: Baraka's participation in the Sixth Pan-African Congress In Dar es Salaam, and the campaign for Gibson's reelection in Newark.

In "Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Ujamaa, Their Future in America," written in late 1973 or early 1974, Baraka still argues essentially in Karenga's framework, although he emphasizes the socialist aspect of the Black Value System - Ujamaa, cooperative economies. Leftists still appear

to Baraka as "the most intensely racist group of whites," since they "denounce all black leadership except their own footmen and insist that Blacks must make the leap from slaves to international socialists without passing through a stage frankly most whites are still in. ..nationalism" (UN 89, Page-4). "Capitalist vs Proletariat is a secondary contradiction in America. Whether you lefties like it or not, any serious analysis will show you that. Black vs White influences all other contradictions in America. Rich vs Poor. Educated vs Uneducated. Men vs Women. Polluters vs Ecologists. Homosexuals vs Heterosexuals. Old People vs Young People. Jews vs Gentiles, & c., Black vs White is the most influential, it influences all the others, defines their terminologies, shapes their rhetoric, must be dealt with even after left communists denounce nationalists as reactionaries and talk wildly about the coming hegemony of the proletariat (in spotless university dining rooms) it is still Black vs White, throughout, over and above, under-cutting all other talk or movement in America." (UN 89, page-4).

In his CAP paper, "Revolutionary Party: Revolutionary Ideology," presented on March 31, 1974, Baraka already sounds different, as he establishes a "historical perspective," points out that primitive accumulation of capital was "based directly on the slave trade," and admonishes his audience that Black nationalist opposition to "industrialization, and computerization or scientific progress" may be the result of "petty bourgeois elitism" which "objectively" aids imperialism.

We must struggle to defeat priest craft and meta- physical accommodations with racism and monopoly capitalism as overtly as is tactically sound! (UN 93, Page No.3)

He now denied that one can be revolutionary "merely by dressing in African clothes and speaking Swahili and cultivating superior diet" (UN 93, Page-4) Baraka's syncretism is obvious in the series of demands made on the ideology of the revolutionary party he envisions:

It will be a Black Liberation Party.....

It must be a Marxist influenced Party.....

It must be a Leninist influenced party.....

It must be a Maoist party.....

It must be a Nkrumahist party.....

It must be a Nyerere influenced party.....

It must be a Cabral inspired party.....

It must be a Maulana Karenga influenced party

(UN 93, Page-5-6)

When "Partially Evaluating the Legacy of the '60's" (UN 107), Baraka hopes for a synthesis of Black Panthers and Black value system, beyond cultural nationalism and "gun- cultism," yet in "Black people and Imperialism" (UN 100), he considers the breakdown of strict segregation as negative legacy. At this transitory stage, Baraka sets himself the task of

fusing these heterogeneous elements, of "Creating a unified Consciousness" (the title of another CAP ideological paper).

The essay "Toward Ideological Clarity," dated May 24, 1974, opens with a quotation from Lenin instead of Karenga; and in the course of the argument, which is concerned with Afro-American history, Baraka comes to define racism merely as "one aspect of the ideology produced by the slave trade." As racism becomes understandable to Baraka not as an ontological quality, but as a byproduct of capitalism, cultural nationalism appears increasingly "chauvinist." Baraka now sides with Cabral's Marxist definition that "culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production" (UN 101, Page-7), and attacks the mistake made "by so called cultural nationalists" (including himself): they take "the concept of culture as a static concept" (UN 101, Page-10) instead of understanding it historically.

In his speech at the 6th Pan-African Congress in Dares Salaam, June 19-27, 1974, Baraka argues that it is the Black revolutionary writer's task to "transform his culture from an exploited culture to a militant fighting culture" (UN 104, Page-16). In this transformatory process, nationalism is only one step; and "if nationalism is not merely a form of preparation for true national liberation struggle which should in any progressive guise lead directly to socialist construction or socialist revolution, then nationalism,

black or yellow, becomes as reactionary as the European variety " (UN 104, pp. 6-7)

These abstractions go back to Baraka's concrete observations on Black bourgeois politics. Baraka sees the possibility that

"The pseudo-powerful American Black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie could, objectively, be the new agents of yet another scramble for Africa. By saying Black is beautiful or we are an African people, yet representing the values and designs of U. S. imperialism:" (UN 104 p-7)

Baraka kept on criticizing Newark's Black mayor Kenneth Gibson. Baraka also changed the name of his paper from *Black New Ark to Unity and Struggle*, and its motto from "Black people must unify" to *Unite the many to oppose the few*, and then again to *Unite the many to defeat the few*. While Gibson was certainly part of the "Unity" envisioned in the motto of Black New Ark, Baraka now would place him closer to the "few" than the "many" of the new motto. In 1970, Baraka had actively campaigned for a Black mayor in Newark. In 1973 he called Gibson a "puppet" of the Prudential Insurance Company, using one of his favorite popular culture images: "It is a Charlie McCarthy- Edgar Bergen relationship with the Negro's mouth flapping but white racist words coming out." Baraka is disillusioned by what happened to the concept of Black Power in practical politics.

"Instead of black power, we have seen black faces animated by white desires. We have seen obscure blacks become influential Negroes, risen to prominence on the backs of the black community only to become apologists for racism and capitalism" (UN 106, p-10).

He opposes the policies of Newark's Black administration as he says "A four year old rent strike, people crowded into public dungeons, and what is done, some petty bourgeois Negro or negress is appointed to the housing commission. What does it mean? Another salary. Another paycheck. Another party. Another handshake. Another grin ... Nothing to make real change" (UN 106, p-13),

Though he criticizes the Black bourgeois, he did support the reelection of the Black Mayor in 1974. He wants to oppose imperialism and in doing that it cannot be all Black. The only way to that end is his conversion to Mao Tse Tung thought. Baraka's Bohemian search for the absolute opposition to bourgeois liberalism seems to have come to what he considers a scientific stage. After different forms of antibourgeois negation, he now embraces the frame work of scientific socialism as the ultimate, unbourgeois certainty. In "Revolutionary Nationalism = Scientific Socialism" he explains:

"Scientific Socialism is the opposite of Bourgeois ideology, yes, and only a reactionary so called nationalism that is in actuality part of bourgeois

ideology (like talking Black but trying to get into the system) could seem to be the opposite or opposed to Socialism" (UN121, p-12).

As controversial a writer as ever, Baraka describes reactions to his new politics in the poem "At the National Black Assembly" (HF 26-27).

EEK

a nigger

communist, the lady democrat

nigrita squeaked (HF p26)

Interestingly, Baraka still casts his opponent, here a Black woman politician, in his traditional imagery of "Black bourgeoisie," from gold fetishism to hypocrisy.

Going to the airport

Interviewed by WLIE

She smiled powdering her

Conversation

& caught a plane

to

petit bourgeois

Negro

Heaven. (HF 27)

In the introduction to the poems of *Hard Facts* Baraka demands that "we need a poetry that directly describes the situation of the people and tells us how we can change it". Baraka's previous emphasis on white racism as "the sole cause of our disorder + oppression" (*Hard Facts*) as the "motivating rationale behind the continual suppression of non Europeans by Europeans" ("Blue print for Black Criticism, First World 1, 1977) is now rejected by Baraka as part of an irrational outlook on life as a "subjective mystification" which leads to "mysticism, metaphysics, spookism, rather than dealing with reality". In *Hard Facts*, Baraka maintains that nationalism becomes reactionary and merely the "newly emerging Black bureaucratic elite" when it focuses on "white people as the cause of our oppression rather than the system of monopoly capitalism". (*Hard Facts*) May be Baraka became Marxist to raise the consciousness of the people and prepare them for the violent revolution. Baraka is against the Black bourgeoisie and Black businessmen who he felt were far from making life any better for the majority of the Black Americans. In *Hard Facts* he says that in order to "raise the level of the people", the artist must learn, not just from one ethnic group, but from the people, these "dynamic working masses". His poetry and drama since 1974 reflects this new shift. The poems in *Hard Facts* are same as those of Langstone Hughes's socialist poems collected in *Good Morning Revolution* and "When we'll Worship Jesus" reminds us of Langstone Hughes's "Goodbye Christ".

We'll worship Jesus when

he get bad enough to at least scare

somebody -cops not afraid

of Jesus

pushers not afraid

of Jesus, capitalists racists

imperialists not afraid

of Jesus shit they making money

off Jesus. (HF 6)

Again like Hughes, Baraka proclaims a socialist revolution as the apocalyptic alternative to "Jesus worship". Since religion is viewed as "opiate of the people", Baraka uses Christianity as only one example of a system of superstitions which misdirect social energies, and Islam is no longer a better alternative:

Jesus aint did nothing for us

But kept us turned toward the

Sky (him and his boy allah

Too, need to be checked

Out! (HF 7)

Baraka perceives the new Black politicians as a "class of exploiters/in black face, collaborators", at best as "black militants in residence." In their fascination with bourgeois nationalism they do not see the "real enemy," and, indeed, become a part of

Oppression

babbling about

eternal racism, and divine white supremacy

a hundred thousand dollar a year oppression

and now the intellectualization, the militant

resource of the new class, its historical

valorization. Between them, John Johnson

and Elijah, David Rockefeller rests his

smiling head. (HF p12)

"If you are a modern artist, who is not some kind of cultural nationalist, you understand that you can learn from anything and any body, see that the whole world culture is at your disposal, because no one people has created the monuments of art and culture in the world, its been collective....." (Baraka in an radio interview 27th July 1984.)

From the above mentioned lines the readers find a different man in Baraka – a mind which has gone through a metamorphosis – a total hundred and eighty degree turn from an angry man in the beat period – to a transitional Black man who tried to glorify the colour Black like Du-Bois the "colour of valour and of triumph". The third phase or the Marxist phase in Baraka's life brings out in him a primitive man a, 'nobel savage' who thinks that the nature in its bountiful is equal to all – and all that has been created or discovered on earth is an act of collective consciousness – all hands put together to create a piece of art. The reader sees in Baraka a beautiful

piece of mind which is at peace with itself – a mind where the 'I' the individualistic syndrome has given way to a moderate and a open man who is ready to accept that "American culture is multinational. Its not just white, Its not just European" (Baraka a radio interview 27th July 1985). And this sense of realization is reflected in his poetry. The images that Baraka produced to express his thoughts and feelings also elucidate the way he thinks about social and political changes.

Baraka unfolds himself as a great humanist, a priest who worships and glorifies the human mind.

we worship the strength in us

we worship the life in us...

but we aint gonna worship no Jesus...

The glorification of the inner soul is complete, the transformation of man over the ages and the complete turn around of the poet's mind is complete. The poet equalises Jesus the supreme soul with the human mind and Jesus is equivalent to the powers of the human mind. Baraka professes to worship the light in 'us' – the light which is not Jesus as the almighty but the realisation and the supreme value of the human mind. Jesus exist because it is the human mind which makes it exist, Jesus is only a figment of imagination of the poet. We worship the light which is a force or current which has enormous amount of energy, a farce which has the vitality and

energy to take a man beyond the boundaries of reality to a different plain of transcendental reality.

Baraka dreams of a world based on "reality and vision", he actually points at the reality of the human mind. The reality which ultimately moves over to the super reality that is 'Jesus' and ultimately the transcendental reality where every thing becomes one according to Indian philosophy "Aanandam" the ultimate joy of being one with the universe.

"Jesus" is portrayed as an agent of change and how it transformed it self through a period of time, it is the phoenix image of Jesus that is predominant in his poetry and Baraka's universal outlook of thesis – antithesis and synthesis, is identical with Marx's theory where ultimately the state withers away and every thing lives on a particular plain. It is universal imagery where the teeming millions join hands to become one. In "A New Reality is Better than A New Movie" there is a continuous change in the poets psyche.

How will it go, crumbling earthquake, towering inferno, juggernaut, volcano, smashup.

Here Baraka portrays a chaotic life, a mundane nature of existence. The degradation of the capitalist rule is clearly and very forcefully portrayed by Baraka "the feverish fantasy of the capitalist flunky film hacks" , where the

word "feverish" immediately brings into the readers mind the "Hollow man" of T.S. Eliot and the jaundiced existence of the modern man living under the heavy burden of the fopperies of the modern day capitalist age. The real conflict between the 'haves and the have nots' has been clearly portrayed by Baraka when he writes – "to survive with no money in the money world" and of "making the Boss 100,000 for every 200 dollars", which portrays the exploitation of the proletariat who does not have the means to meet the end.

In the second stanza of the poem Baraka tries to shake the proletariat from his drunken stupor – "what yo gonna do about it" and this is where Baraka gains an image of universal preacher, an iconoclast, a revolutionary. The poet wants to breakdown the monotonous complacency, the eternal hibernation of the masses, to rise up – and there come the real block buster which is much more dangerous and volatile than a Hollywood movie: "The real terror of nature is humanity enraged, the true techni color spectacle". The poet wants a new reality which will be a super reality where men and women will demand a society where every one is equal--where the means of production is divided amongst all. The Marxist theory of exploitation, revolution and classless society is clearly portrayed by Baraka, and he attains the image of high priest, an universal poet when he says "we want it all... the whole world".

"The Dictatorship of the proletariat" is a pulpit poem where Baraka goes on to preach the readers about the basics of communism, and poetry becomes a vehicle for change and is a medium to shake off the complacency of the masses. In this poem Baraka preaches the down trodden and the suffering masses to rise up and to rule and to break away from the eternal bondage of the society. The poet portrays the capitalists as "blood suckers" a dominant animal image of bats, lice, and leech. In the end of the poem the poet glorifies the rule of the proletariat where the mechanism of the state no longer exists and the commune system of Mao, Lenin and Marx exist.

The poem "Class Struggle" is a narrative poem of a meeting Baraka had with Malcolm X and the Tanzanian Marxist Babu, who was later arrested and jailed:

Malcolm was murdered a month after the three of us met.

And for a generation we slept, so many of us, what that really meant. We disappeared into Islam and Kawaida, into sections of truth that

Each

Veered away toward fantasy.

(HF p 34)

In the unpublished poem "Malcolm Remembered" (dated February, 1977, 12 years after the assassination), Baraka addresses Malcolm as

Comrade Worker, Comrade

Leader, Friend and visionary.

Even in Baraka's drama after the 1970s is beset with similar ideas. Posters announcing his new plays include the phrase "*Poor whites are welcome*". These radical changes reflect Baraka's new theatrical policy that:

White working class culture is closer to and more influenced by Black and third world cultures, all of which are opposed to and separate from the bourgeois (or white) culture. (UN 121 page-12)

Imagination and Reality

You're much too sensitive for a place like this. (T 24)

But my

country. My people. These dead souls. I call my people.

Flesh of my flesh. (T 22)

An image can be conjured up by a single word, a rush of phrase, in a line or in successive lines. Some times an entire poem might convey an image. Every image we come across, is placed in its exact position, by a conscious poet by particular choice of words.

Imagery is the content of thought where attention is directed to sensory qualities – that is mental images, figures of speech and embodiments of non discursive truth. The world is in a constant flux, it is chaotic, partial and unstable and yet the world that is delivered to our minds is a stable, constant and ordered universe. This creating order out of the disorder is the work of imagination, "Art creates an idea of order where, to the inartistic or unphilosophical observer, life is only a whirl of action and a chaos of emotion". (John Gassner 1954 XII). The poets and seers expressed their imagination through images.

Imagery in poetry can be very various. Psychologists identify seven kinds of mental images – those of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, bodily awareness and muscular tension, all are available to poets and all are used by poets. Though not to the same extent. Browning uses tactile imagery while Shelley's imagery emphasises movement, Blake and Coleridge placed the poet in a special situation treating imagination as divine. The romantic transcendentalism, when the world reappeared as the garment of God, and the abstract and general resided in the concrete and particular, poetry came to embody the sacred and images to be symbols of an indwelling deity. In modernism and post modernism the interest is focused on the images themselves, which are an inescapable part of language, and therefore an integral part of a poem's thematic base.

A poet cannot present the colour to the eyes as does the visual artist or the music to the ears as does the musician. He has to employ words to call up images of the which he wills to represent and an appropriate metre to convey music, but in Amiri Baraka's case to give vent to his angst, the repressed emotions, and his search for identity.

In Baraka's psyche, there has always been a battle between the imagination and the real world. Baraka was attracted to the world of the imagination because there he could be anyone and have anything he wanted. In his Beat days (the late 1950s and early 1960s), the propensity for fantasy displaced history and ethnicity from his work; feeling kinship

with the other Beats, he could say that he was "as any other sad man here/American" (*P*; p. 47). In "In Memory of Radio," a typical beat poem, he celebrates the imagination:

Am I a sage or Something?

Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week?

(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of

Oral Roberts...

I cannot, like F.J. Sheen, tell you how to get saved

and rich

I cannot even order you to gaschamber satori like Hitler

o- Coody Kinght

.....

*Saturday mornings we listened to Red Lantern & his under-
sea folk.*

At 11, Let's Pretend/& and we/and I, the poet still do.

Thank God!

p12

In this poem Baraka not only valorizes "pretending," he also rejects the role of poet as an active agent in world. At that time Baraka felt that the poet's function was not to save the real world but to create alternative ones that did not need saving. This is a tendency of the Beat artists. For example, in his 1959 apology for his poetry, Ginsberg chides those who want to bring political reality into poetry:

*A word on the Politicians: my poetry is Angelica Ravings, and
has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries about
who should shoot who the secret of individual imagination.
which are transconceptual & non-verbal-I mean unconditional
Spirit-are not for sale to this consciousness, are no use to this
world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap & listen to the
music of the Spheres.(C p20)*

Baraka's uncollected 1958 poem, "Axle's Castle," probably referring to both Edmund Wilson's study of French Symbolism and Vipers de L Isle-Aden's poetic drama, projects one main feint of the Beat aesthetic: that the imagination is more important than reality. The hero of the poem lives in an Arthurian castle in the heart of Greenwich Village:

*A huge rusty thing
with a roaring moat
and red flags stream-
ing from its towers.*

*Each evening, after selling his fruit
the man dashes out the back door giggling
obscenely, and leaps on his white horse
rushing across the countryside: across
bleecker St. to McDougal, down McDougal
till the castle can be seen outlined
against the water, stuttering in some
effusive glow like an illuminated trunk. (UW p 35)*

The castle is the dream world, providing a fortress against the mundane. For the Beats like Ginsberg and Baraka, the poem could be a fortress against reality. He illustrates this inclination when he discusses another avant-garde poet, Gregory Corso, who also rejected the mundane: "rare goonish knowledge with reality—hip piss on reality also—he prefers his dreams. Why not? His Heaven is Poetry.... What a solitary dignity! He's got the angelic power of making autonomous poems, like god making brooks." (Ginsberg: 1958) Thus Ginsberg boldly declares that the poet no longer has the responsibility to reflect reality in the mirror of art; his only responsibility is to create delightful dreams. Such Beat attitudes nullified the notion that traditional art was the mirror of nature. But unlike other Beat poets even when Baraka lived in Axel's Castle, his disassociation from reality was not total. Despite living in a fairy tale castle the protagonist of Baraka's poem knows that the world outside has not disappeared:

After the meals, the man tells the wife of the big world.

The cool world. The hard and different world of the outside.

The world of inflationary prices and rotting fruit ("UW" p.35)

Baraka's middle-class protagonist is not totally separated from reality because economics binds him to it. Similarly, economics also helped draw Baraka out of the world of imagination- a difficult feat because of his commitment to fantasy. But unlike Gatsby, the self-creating hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a book Baraka admired, this avant-

garde poet wanted to break out of the solipsism of his imagination. He proclaimed,

And reality was the feeling I wanted, and escaped to from a fantasy world (T. p 93)

The major reason Baraka sought to leave his commitment to imaginary world, was that during the early 1960s, he was forced to come to terms with the reality of contemporary black protest. In a recent interview he reflected " But I know a lot of what had moved me to make political statements were things in the real world, including poetry that I read, but obviously the Civil rights movement upsurge, the whole struggle in the South, Doctor King, SNCC, the Cuban Revolution---all those things had a great deal of influence on me in the late 50s and early 60s" (HI P-24). The historical struggle of black people forced Baraka out of his imaginative refuge and forced him into the realm of economics, politics, and race. In the *Dead Lecturer* Baraka declares:

The poor have become our creators

The black. The thoroughly

ignorant.

(p 27)

In this poem, Baraka describes how the struggle of the black masses compelled him to re-create himself as a politically engaged artist

who had to renounce his apolitical bohemian self. Guilt about the black masses made him rethink his ideas about poetry and the world:

*My own mode of conscience, And guilt always the obvious
connection.*

*They (the whites) spread you in the sun, and
leave you there one of a kind, who
has no son to call this to. (DL p 47)*

As an avant-grade artist Baraka felt he was a freak, a Black who had cut himself off from the black tradition. Moreover, he felt guilty because he had always been a moral being.

Like other American writers, Baraka perceived that the condition of black people in America calls for the black man to preach for justice. Ralph. Ellison even suggested that this is the black man's duty. In the epilogue to *Invisible Man* (1952), the protagonist thinking over his grandfather's last words, wonders if the old man had meant that "We had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence?" (*Invisible Man* p56).

During the early sixties, Baraka, acknowledging his connection with the black masses, assumed the preacher's role, realizing as he did that he could not live in a world of art for art's sake any longer. It seemed to him that he had to exorcise the avant-garde poetics and world view and find one more consonant with his new imperatives. Metaphorically, he had to move out of Axel's Castle. During the 1960s, Baraka searched for a new black art based on black life. In "Rhythm & Blues", from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), he portrays the avant-garde poetics and world view as inadequate for the Black artist.

*Such act as would give us legend, This is the man
who saved us
Spared us from the disappearance of the sixteenth note, the
Destruction
of the scale. This is the man who against the black pits of
despa'ring genius
cried "save the Popular Song." (DL p47)*

As this poem declares, Baraka does not want to be remembered as the black man who saved the west. Here, the sixteenth note and the scale symbolize Western arts metaphorically. Baraka wants to create a new black music rather than save the old white one. In "Rhythm & Blues," he declares: "I am deaf and blind." These lines describe a time of spiritual crisis when Baraka felt that he had lost his mooring in the white world.

Finding white poetry, totally inadequate for his poetic needs, he desperately sought new forms:

*The
Shake and chant, bulled electric motion, figure of what
There will be
As it sits beside me waiting to live past my own meekness
My own light skin. (DL 47)*

For Baraka to sign again, he would have to take on black forms as much as the "shake and chant", which would require him to be brave, to live past his meekness into a new artistic role that declared and affirmed his ethnicity. The poem continues, seeking mighty and vital black creations:

*Bull of yellow perfection, imperfectly made, imperfectly
understood, except as it rises against the
mountains, like sun
but brighter, like flame but hotter. There will be
those
Who will tell you it will be beautiful. (DL 47)*

The rising bull of this passage is a recurring symbol for the black, the ethnic self. The bull suggests the spirit of the new black art, an art that black people would find beautiful because it would be and ethnic art, a post white form.

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political poet, Baraka used objectivist techniques to signal the need to destroy the white world:

We want "poems that kill"

Assassin poems, poems that shoot

Guns.

Baraka's 1960 trip to Cuba provided him with an alternative both to the avant-garde and to liberal politics. This trip was one of the transforming experiences of his life. Surely the Cuban revolution provided him with an alternative he could not find in America, when he returned from Cuba he had shifted from being a Beatnik. While in Cuba, he was attacked for his "bourgeois individualist" stance and defended himself 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". (H p12)

Stuck by this third-world attack on his North America poetics, Baraka began to reevaluate his poetic values. Although it took the political upheavals and struggles of the 1960s in America to make him a full-scale political poet, this period gave birth to the idea of incorporating radical politics into his poetry. It also gave birth to his disillusionment with postmodernist politics and poetics. The Cuban revolution in its early stages was also inspiring to Baraka because it was an ideal for his emerging revolutionary ideas. Unlike their jaded counterparts in America who

disdainfully stood apart from the American political and social process, Baraka found that the young and energetic intellectuals in Cuba were actually engaged in government and were involved in the process of transforming their country into a more humane place. Soon after his trip he asserted, "Bankrupt utopia see tell me no utopias. I will not listen". (BMP p38). Baraka's trip to Cuba did not provide the model for his new political poetry; however, it did provide the new consciousness to become a third word artist. Being tired of the western tradition, Baraka struggled to tear himself from a love that he felt paralysed him. In fact paralysis is a major theme of many of his pre-black nationalist poetry. To escape it he had to: "Let the combination of morality and in humanity begin" (DL p29).

He wishes to achieve a higher goal of black liberation. He had to harden himself to the white avant-garde to become a black revolutionary artist. That this was not an easy task is attested to in much of the poetry in the volumes between *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) and *Black Art* (1966); these are the poems of struggle and pain that exhibit the self dehumanization demanded of one who seeks to destroy an old order of which he or she is a part. It is increasingly clear that all groups who have been oppressed by the society in which they have found themselves must go through some kind of self-brutalizing process before they can find a voice of their own.

Being tired of the western tradition, Baraka struggled to tear himself from a love that he felt paralyzed him. In fact paralysis is a major theme of many of his pre *Black Nationalist* poetry. To escape it he had to act:

*Let the combination of morality
and inhumanity
begin.*

(DL p 29)

For Baraka to escape his own guilt, he had to find another mode of art which would be appropriate for the black masses. In the poetry of this period (1961-1965), we see Baraka's desperate attempt to exorcise the white world from himself.

*I don't love you. Who is to say what that will mean
I don't
love you, expressed the train, moves, and uptown, day
later
we look up and breathe much easier
I don't love you (BMP p55)*

Here Baraka tries the magic spell of "I don't love you" to tear himself from his friends downtown. The subway expresses movement. It is the movement away from his psychic paralysis, uptown to his active, revolutionary black self.

In "Citizen Cain" Baraka explores the need to escape his old life and find a new one:

Roi, finish this poem, someone's about to need you, Roi

Dial the mystic number, ask for holy beads.....

.....

work out your problems

like your friends on some nice guy's couch. Get up and hit

someone like you useta. Don't sit here trembling under the

hammer. Fate like a season of abstract reference. Like an

abstract executions where only ideas are shotfull of notes.

Don't sit there drowned in your own bad writing, get up and

throw that ball. Move your lips, cut, like the white boys,

for ten more vards.....

.....

Ask the white man

For your passport and qui it, little Jesus. Your time is up

In this particular feeling. In thi particualr throb of meaning

Roi, baby, you blew the whole thing.

(BMP p8)

The poem presents Baraka's realization that if he is going to be a black revolutionary artist, he cannot be like his white friends. Unlike them, he cannot work out his problems on a psychaitrist's chair because his problems are not personal, they are political and, therefore, communal. Strongly feeling this, he can no longer escape the world by writing bad poetry – that is, poetry defined by his evolving black standards, subjective

poetry not committed to political action. Like a football player he must move to action and out of the world of mere abstract ideas, the bohemians' world, "Where only ideas are shot full of holes." In the closing lines of the poem Baraka prepares to leave the white world and its vision of reality. By this time Baraka wanted poem to act directly on the mind of the people.

In "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand," Baraka explains:

*We have awaited the coming of a natural
Phenomenon. Mystics and romantic, knowledgeable
Workers
Of the land
But none has come.
But none has come.
Will the machine gunners please step forward?*

(BMP p6)

In this poem the "people who would have to understand", are the white libeals, Baraka's old "friends", they would have to understand that violence would occur because the usual liberal channels had not brought about any change in the condition of black people. In fact, the liberals are ironically labeled mystics and romantics to empaphasize their ineffectualness in the social realm. Finally, it is clear, the only avenue left for Baraka was violence, "Let the dada machine gunner step forward!"

Cuba changed Baraka's political consciousness, as he formulates third world necessities here, they differ so radically from America's political consciousness, as he formulates third world necessities here, they differ so radically from America's necessities that solutions proposed by white Americans are irrelevant. But, even though Cuba changed Baraka from a rebel (someone who is disconnected with his society but does not try to overthrow it) to a third-world revolutionary (someone who is trying to overthrow his society and its vision of reality), he did not immediately identify himself with the West in the midst of his new sympathies:

We are an old people already. Even the vitality of our art is like bright flowers growing up through a rotting carcass. But the Cubans, and the other new peoples (in Asia, Africa, South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way. (H p 62)

Baraka did not find his new vitality, (cease being the *dead lecturer*), until he became a third-world poet who, was vigorously alive in his new black skin, and could say,

We wear the Life sign, the ankh.

(R p19).

In "Philistinism and the Negro Writer" (1966), Baraka argued for ethnic diversity:

I found myself publishing that writing which I thought was the most valuable. Not the writing that reflected those tired white lives again, but necessarily those people white and black people who were taking about a side of America that was more valuable because it hadn't been talked about Allen Ginsberg, who gives the Jewish memory of dissent in this culture; since this culture asks and has asked all immigrants to strip themselves of the very things that would make their own culture valuable, so that the Italian who comes to America becomes an American and the Italian thing is lost. The Jew who gets into America is and American and the Jewishness is lost, and so now they want to break, your back, too, Negro, so that when you go into that place, there will be no dissent, there will be no dissent at all, so that you will be faceless, too, and your literature will reflect some kind of tired thirst for, perhaps, luxury and comfortable ignorance.

(AB p 61)

Baraka did not want to lose his ethnicity. Like the black musician, Baraka wanted to keep the funk, the reality to keep his art crude and real. So "Baraka inverts uncongenial bourgeois form and ideas, making them black by turning them into their opposites." (Harris, *Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*. (p 91).

Among the first of the 'uncongenial' bourgeois forms, Baraka recognized and attacked, were white bourgeois images and stereotypes of blacks. Believing that popular culture shapes black reality as well as reflecting white middle – class reality, Baraka most often inverts bourgeois forms taken from the world of popular culture. Contemplating images of blacks created by the white imagination, has become a way for him to penetrate black reality because he can articulate the way black people

have responded in the roles whites have imposed on them. For instance in "A poem for Willi Best" from *The Dead Lecture* (1964), Baraka takes the image of Wille Best (1916-1962) who as sleep 'n' Eat, black buffoon, was featured in a number of Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s. Sleep 'n' Eat is a black stereo type created by the white mind. He is

Lazy

Frightened

Thieving

Very potent sexually

Scars

Generally inferior

(but natural)

rhythms. (p26)

Notwithstanding the degrading stereotype, for Baraka "This is literature, of symbols. And it is his "Willie Best's Gift" (DL, P.20). Here the poet presents the actor as a rebel against his role. Best is more than a figment of white image who has extended his role beyond its white creator's intentions. The black actor, the man, has sized the symbol and reinterpreted it, and the poet both articulates Best's interpretations and further the actor's task through reinterpretation of his own. Baraka glosses over the poem:

Willie Best present the black as the minstrel the black the bizarre funny person, the black as the victim, and this black minstrel victim having to come to grips with that – with this victimhood, with his minstrelsy in order to change that. (HI p25).

In large part, the inversions of Baraka's art from *The Dead Lecturer* onwards are aimed at awakening the potential killer, the revolutionary Bigger Thomas, in the submissive black. Exposing or inverting popular image of the Blacks is important to Baraka because he believes, these images exercise tremendous power over the behaviour of the Blacks by providing negative role models. Like Whitman, he thinks, one function of art is to supply appropriate role models or (to use Whitman's term) archetypes. Therefore, it is imperative to him that images of heroic Blacks, of Uncle Toms, be replaced by images of heroic blacks, of Malcolm Xs, because heroic images will inspire heroic behaviour. In "A Poem for Black Hearts" Baraka demands, "Black man quit stuttering and shuffling and act life Malcolm, Black and strong in his image" (BMP, p12)

In addition to images from popular culture, Baraka also inverts other white images in his search for new black ones. Asserting that the whites (rather than blacks) are the animals, he commands his black reader to "*leave the beast/in its snowy den*" (BMP, p167) and asserts, "*To turn their ('Whites') evil backwards to live*". (BMP p192) Taking the common white stereotype of blacks wielding ranges he forms a new image by adding a significant adjective to indicate that these heroes are defending their people

against the oppressor: *"Thin heroic blade the razor. Our flail against them"* (SP p11) In *Black Magic* written during the cultural nationalist period when reversal of black/white relationships was a major goal, he repeatedly restructured common images of the blacks by referring to the blacks as the "heroes" playing with the images of the Africans projected in Tarzan movies. He raises them to significance:

*remembering dances for Tarzan
until the jungle pots
boil darkness and the hot
sun fashions it into
black heroes*

Certainly, one clue to Baraka's inversions, lies in the poem that concludes "State/Meant" the last essay in *Home*. In this poem his penchant for punning and his quest for new black images come together in a complex word play:

*we are unfair and unfair
we are black magicians, black art
s we make in black labs of the heart
The fair are
fair and death
ly white
the day will
and we own
the night*

Here, puns on the meaning of "fair" (both "light-skinned" and "even-handed"), the suggestion of the supernatural black powers pitted against white impotence, and, most significantly, the transmutation of Langston Hughes's imagery of day and night in "Dream Variations" "*(To fling my arms wide/In some place of the sun,/To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done./Then rest at cool evening / Beneath a tall tree/ While night comes on gently/Dark like me*". (Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*). "From the lighthearted to the ominous, show Baraka's militantly inverting black/white relationships in his creation of images that will at once give blacks new confidence and inspire them to become revolutionaries." (Harris, *The Poetry & Poetics of Amiri Baraka* p 98)

By inverting this white form this symbol of the degraded black, Baraka presents the black minstrel as a Christ figure:

*A Cross, The gesture, symbol, line
arms held stiff, nailed stiff, with
no sign, of what gave them strength.
The point, become a line, a cross, or
The man, and his material driven in*

(DL p 19)

Although the title *Hard Facts* applies to only one book, it suggests the direction of all his poetry after *Preface*. He wanted an art of hard facts that would expose that ends of money power and luxury and would drive

the black sane that is into political action that would aid in the destruction of America.

It is clear that Baraka wants to change the public image the white man has fashioned to characterize the Black Men (because there are references black men identify with in the West) since that is what is run on them each day by white magic like the radio television movies and so on – the Mass Media the Daily News does it with flicks and adjectives. (H, p 247) In *Black Magic* 1969 art is used to counter the white magic of the mass media, the image makers. And in *Home*, (his 1966 collection of essays) Baraka states *"The Black artist ... is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting, Black feeling, Black mind Black judgment"* (p.248). *This is a succinct expression of cultural nationalism that the artist's function is to change the cultural imagery with which his people identify.*

*the ground, if the head rolls back
and the mouth opens, screamed into
existence, there will be perhaps
only the slightest hint of movement
no swear, no help will come, no one
will turn to that state on again.*

Baraka has shown degraded Blacks as Christ symbols who seek revenge for wrongs done to them. In the poem the troubled actor comes out. *'I' am tired/ of losing /I got to cat cha' (DL p.25).*

CONCLUSION

*The African Singer-Poet-Historians who carried word from bird,
mouth to ear, and who are the root of our own African-American
Oral Tradition.*

(Baraka Amiri Wise 1 intro)

Baraka's genius is amazing having so many accomplishments as poet, essayist, jazz critic, social critic, dramatist, orator, fiction writer and above all an activist writer. We can conclude that Baraka's poetry represents the evolution of a mind that has gone through radical changes in ideological influences, but even in these changes, there has been a consistent linear development of discovery and rebellion. It is this development that makes Baraka the person, poet and activist that he is. This is what he himself acknowledges when he very correctly says....

My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is always a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain why I was saying both how and for what. (Harris; Baraka Reader, Preface)

Baraka acknowledges the role of imagery in his poetry. The unconventional images that he uses, make his poetry appear complex and obscure. The tone of his poetry is sometimes colloquial and conversational.

But the words he chooses are apparently easy sometimes vague and difficult to understand, but very often beautiful and interesting. He creates a subjective expression of contemporary life in its individual meanings, a vital flow constantly reshaping the realities of the world into human, aesthetic dimensions. Though he is evolving separate patterns in his career of writing and his forms and themes are constantly modified but it is never entirely changed or lost. Its continuity, when it seems to be broken, is but smouldering. As the image of God in the first phase as well as in the Marxian phase.

In the title poem of *Preface*, Baraka opens by stating he had "become accustomed" to the quotidian: walking the dog, the hearing the song of the wind, counting the same stars in the night sky and even counting their absence. In the last stanza, he focuses on the images of his daughter in prayer "talking to someone" and yet to no one. Through "her own clasped hands" (Baraka, *Preface*, 5) Baraka saw in the daughter's action, the mundane and repetitiveness of human life that no longer holds meaning for him. Though he had heard her "talking to someone" outside her bedroom, when he entered "there was no one there." The world no longer holds meaning for the speaker and without a sense of purpose or meaning, there can be no faith or hope. The contrast between the innocence of childhood imagination and the indifference of adult reality fuses together a future of hopelessness for the apathy of the Western

world. Later in the Marxian phase in the poem "when we'll worship Jesus" he says,

Jesus

aint did nothing for us

But kept us turned toward the

Sky (hem and his boy allah

Too, need to be checked Out!)

Baraka perceives the new Black politicians as a class of exploiters, in black face, collaborators, at best as black militants in residence. In this phase Baraka uses Christianity as only one example of a system of suppressions which misdirect social energies, and Islam is no longer a better alternative.

In the introduction to the poems of *Hard Facts* Baraka demands that "we need a poetry that directly describes the situation of the people and tells us how we can change it,"

As has always been the case throughout Baraka's career, the act of performance remains central to his art. His recent poetry springs to life during oral performance, which underscores its dazzling verbal effects. Nevertheless, at this point of his career Baraka has clearly put politics in command of his art and continues the struggle to merge the realms of art

and life, literature and politics the struggle that has been so central to his work.

Not only the uniqueness of Baraka works, but also his ability to make use of his heritage, is the mark of his originality. We shall find, writes Eliot, 'that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his works may be those in which the dead poets his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.' (Eliot: *Selected Essays*, Harcourt, Brace and New York, 1950, p 4).

As it has been already mentioned in the earlier chapters, of this dissertation the allusions to Eliot, are plentiful throughout. One can read Baraka's "Duke Mantee" and Eliot's "Prufrock" paralleley:

<i>the evening</i>	<i>the evening is spread</i>
<i>spread against the windows</i>	<i>out against the sky</i>
(<i>"Duke Mantee" P35</i>)	(<i>"Prufrock"</i>)
<i>Respect the season</i>	<i>But at my back in cold</i>
<i>and dance to the rattle</i>	<i>blast I hear</i>
<i>of its bones</i>	<i>The rattle of the bones</i>
<i>Winter rattles</i>	<i>I do not find</i>
<i>like the throat</i>	<i>The Hanged Man</i>
<i>of the hanged man.</i>	<i>The Hanged Man</i>
(<i>"From an Almanac 2" p 43-44</i>)	(<i>"Waste Land"</i>)

Baraka's life and work resist easy classification or simplistic judgements, yet, beneath the often violent shifts and turns of his artistic and political views, it is possible to view his work in distinct stages as an evolving spiritual autobiography shaped by the imperatives of an intensely self-conscious sensibility. In the various chapters I have made an attempt to show that there is one single pre-occupation which runs through Baraka's work, it is the theme of change itself, the endless quest for appropriate vehicles of expression and action in a world which is in it self constantly changing. Nevertheless, there are significant and sometimes subtle lines of continuity between phases of his career. Baraka's work changes and develops. But his fidelity to some vital concerns, some friendly truths, gives that work continuity, marking it with the seal of an original temper. In Baraka's early, middle as well as in later phase writing the imagery of the self, the different colours used, the sun image, the sound pattern which shows a kind of existentialism which by its emphasis on the individual consciousness, personalized values and subjective ethics can claim to offer modern man a modern form of salvation. This is evinced by its emotively loaded, quasi-religious vocabulary e.g. despair, crisis, dread, choice, commitment, freedom, transcendence, authenticity and so on.

The thematic continuity between *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) is suggested by the titles themselves, hinting that the narrator still has not resolved his fundamental predicament. He still has not formulated the new identity he seeks.

Nevertheless, a significant development has occurred. *The Dead Lecturer* lacks the playfulness and spontaneous humor of *Preface*; the tone of the poem is sharper, more urgent, and the narrator/poet is less – preoccupied, more prepared to explore the outside world than the narrator of the *Preface*. While the poems of *Preface* moved toward a mood of new life. At one level, this struggle is expressed in terms of the narrator's attempt to free himself of language and poetic forms which no longer have any use for him, as in "Rhythm and Blues."

*I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again
sing your quiet
verse. I have lost
even the act of poetry.....*

on the other hand, his struggle for rebirth is revealed in terms of a life-and-death battle raging within the narrator's consciousness, a struggle between two sharply defined and opposing selves, as in "An Agony. As Now."

*I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes. Smell
what fouled tunes come in
to his breath. Love his
wretched women.*

Following Malcolm X's assassination in 1965, Baraka moved uptown to Harlem where he became a Black Nationalist committed to the black community and political reform. Having left the "White world" of Greenwich Village which included family and friends, Baraka organized and directed the Black Arts Reparatory Theater in Harlem and published the autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell*. The following two years resulted in the overturn of that conviction and the publication of his definitively Black Nationalist book of poetry *Black Magic* in 1969.

In the poem "Western Front" (from *Black Magic*), Baraka metaphorically kills his poetic father and trusted friend, Allen Ginsberg:

Poems are made by fools like Allen Ginsberg

One of the remarkable things that Baraka accomplished in *Black Magic* was the inversion of negative symbols and stereotypes of African-Americans so that they could no longer be used against them as a subordinate class. During the 1960s, African-Americans were fighting for their civil rights and being bombarded by stereotypes and negative symbols as well as bullets and bri-a-brac in the process. By defusing these internal weapons, Baraka helped to unify and strengthen the black community. In doing this, Baraka was also redefining the African-American past that was being denied to them by the whitewash of American society:

*we are beautiful people/with African imaginations
full of masks and dance and swelling chants
with African eyes, and noses, and arms.....
we need magic/now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create ("Ka'Ba," Baraka Reader, p 222)*

In 1974, Baraka dropped the title *Imamu*, signaling another shift in his cultural and political views. Abandoning his emphasis on black cultural nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Baraka proclaimed himself an adherent of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought.

Third World Marxism gave Baraka the ideology to reestablish the ties he had severed as a young adult without the guilt that he would be betraying his art or heritage in doing so.

*I see art as a weapon, and a weapon of revolution.
It's just now that I define revolution in Marxist
terms..... as a result of having struggled as a
nationalist and found certain dead ends theoretically
and ideologically (Baraka Reader, p 224).*

Baraka published *Hard Facts* in 1975, his first Marxist collection of poetry. The poems in this collection was different not merely for their redefined Marxist ideology, but for their diction and form. Some poems

have lines skirting across the page with random indention and certain lines are the representation of sounds, not words.

In the poem "When We'll Worship Jesus" (from *Hard Facts*), Baraka attacks capitalist America's tradition of Christianity. The religion with which the "beasts" of Africa had been domesticated into slaves who would endure their suffering as a race (using the suffering of Jesus as a model) for the existential good of their souls, Baraka takes the proverbial quote by Karl Marx that "Religion... is the opium of the people." And puts it in historical context for African-Americans:

*we aint gonna worship jesus cause jesus don't exist
except in song and story except in ritual and dance, except in slum
stained
tears or trillion dollar opulence stretching back in history.....
stop moanin about jesus, stop sweating and crying and stompin
and dyin for jesus (Baraka Reader, p 253-254).*

Baraka published the epic poem-in-progress "Why's / Wise" in 1990. It is an ongoing poem in several parts following the history of African-Americans and written in the tradition of the Griots:

*Griots were the African Singer-poet-Historians who
Carried word from bird, mouth to ear, and who are
The root of our own African-American oral tradition
(Baraka Reader, p 493).*

As African-Americans rediscover their history and develop a faith in themselves, credit should go to those who fought in the struggle. Credit should go to those who are still fighting – and writing for themselves and their people. Among those, Amiri Baraka.

A study of a living author cannot, properly speaking, have an ending. The process remains ongoing, the "same" keeps "changing." An understanding of Baraka is also part of this process of continuous change.

LEROI JONES

*The Myth of a
"Negro Literature",*

An address given at the American Society for African Culture, March 14, 1962.

The mediocrity of that has been called "Negro Literature" is one of the most loosely held secrets of American Culture. From Phillis Wheatley to Charles Chestnut, to the present generation of American Negro writers, the only recognizable accretion of tradition readily.

Attributable to the black producer of a formal literature in this country, with a few notable exceptions, has been of an almost agonizing mediocrity. In most other fields of "high art" in America, with the same few notable exceptions, the Negro contribution has been, when one existed at all, one of impressive mediocrity. 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.

There are a great many reasons for the spectacular vapidness of the American Negro's accomplishment in other formal, serious art forms-social, economic, political, etc-but one of the most persistent and aggravating reasons for the absence of achievement among serious Negro artists, except in Negro music, is that in most cases the Negroes who found

themselves in a position to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class, a group that has always gone out of its way to cultivate any mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, i.e., Negroes. Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class. Blues and jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of "Negritude" in formal American culture simply because the bearers of its tradition maintained their essential identities as Negroes; in no other art (and I will persist in calling Negro music, Art) has this been possible. Phillis Wheatley and her pleasant imitations of 18th century English poetry are far and, finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their-hollers, *chants*, *arwhoolies*, and *ballits*. The embarrassing and inverted paternalism of Charles Chesnutt and his "refined Afro-American" heroes are far cries from the richness and profundity of the blues. And it is impossible to mention the achievements of the Negro in any area of artistic endeavor with as much significance as in spirituals, blues and jazz. There has never been an equivalent to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong in Negro writing, and even the best of contemporary literature written by Negroes cannot yet be compared to the fantastic beauty of the music of Charlie Parker.

American Negro music from its inception moved logically and powerfully out of a fusion between African musical tradition and the American experience. It was, and continues to be, a natural, yet highly stylized and personal version of the Negro's life in America. It is, indeed, a chronicler of the Negro's movement, from African slave to American slave, from Freedman to Citizen. And the literature of the blues is a much more profound contribution to Western culture than any other literary contribution made by American Negroes. Moreover, it is only recently that formal literature written by American Negroes has begun to approach the literary standards of its model, i.e., the literature of the white middle class. And only Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have managed to bring off examples of writing, in this genre, that could succeed in passing themselves off as "serious" writing, in the sense that, say, the work of Somerset Maugham is "serious" writing. That is, serious, if one has never read Herman Melville or James Joyce. And it is part of the tragic naïveté of the middle class (brown) writer that he has not.

Literature, for the Negro writer, was always an example of "culture." Not in the sense of the more impressive philosophical characteristics of a particular social group, but in the narrow sense of "cultivation" or "sophistication" by an individual within that group. The Negro artist, because of his middle-class background, carried the artificial social burden as the "best and most intelligent" of Negroes, and usually entered into the "serious" arts to exhibit his familiarity with the social graces, i.e., as a

method or means of displaying his participation in the "serious" aspects of American culture. To be a writer was to be "cultivated," in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was also to be a "quality" black man. It had nothing to do with the investigation of the human soul. It was, and is, a social preoccupation rather than an aesthetic one. A rather daring way of status seeking. The cultivated Negro leaving those ineffectual philanthropies, Negro colleges, looked at literature merely as another way of gaining prestige in the white world for the Negro middle class. And the literary and artistic models were always those that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class, which automatically limited them to the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available. Negro music, to the middle class, black and white, was never socially acceptable. It was shunned by blacks ambitious of "waking up white", as low and degrading. It was shunned by their white models simply because it was produced by blacks. As one of my professors at Howard University protested one day, "It's amazing how much bad taste the blues display." Suffice it to say, it is in part exactly this "bad taste" that has continued to keep Negro music as vital as it is. The abandonment of one's local (i.e., place or group) emotional attachments in favor of the abstract emotional response of what is called "the general public" (which is notoriously white and middle class) has always been the great diluter of any Negro culture. "You're acting like a nigger," was the standard disparagement. I remember being chastised severely for daring to eat a piece of watermelon on the Howard campus. "Do you realize you're sitting near the highway?" is what

the man said, "This is the capstone of Negro education." And it is too, in the sense that it teaches the Negro how to make out in the white society, using the agonizing overcompensation of pretending he's also white. James Baldwin's play, *The Amen Corner*, when it appeared at the Howard Players theatre, "set the speech department back ten years," an English professor groaned to me. The play depicted the lives of poor Negroes running a store-front church. Any reference to the Negro-ness of the American Negro has always been frowned upon by the black middle class in their frenzied dash toward the precipice of the American mainstream.

High art, first of all, must reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man, as he exists, in the defined world of his being. It must be produced from the legitimate emotional resources of the soul in the world. It can never be produced by evading these resources or pretending that they do not exist. It can never be produced by appropriating the withered emotional responses of some strictly social idea of humanity. High art, and by this I mean any art that would attempt to describe or characterize some portion of the profound meaningfulness of human life with any finality or truth, cannot be based on the superficialities of human existence. It must issue from real categories of human activity, truthful accounts of human life, and not fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege by some willingly preposterous apologists for one social "order" or another. Most of the formal literature produced by Negroes in America has never fulfilled these conditions. And aside from Negro music,

it is only in the "popular traditions" of the so-called lower class Negro that these conditions are fulfilled as a basis for human life. And it is because of this "separation " between Negro life (as an emotional experience) and Negro art, that, say, Jack Johnson or Ray Robinson is a larger cultural hero than any Negro writer. It is because of this separation, even evasion, of the emotional experience of Negro life, that Jack Johnson is a more modern political symbol than most Negro writers. Johnson's life, as proposed, certainly, by his career, reflects much more accurately the symbolic yearnings for singular values among the great masses of Negroes than any black novelist has yet managed to convey. Where is the Negro-ness of a literature written in imitation of the meanest of social intelligences to be found in American culture, i.e., the white middle class? How can it even begin to express the emotional predicament of black Western man? Such a literature, even if its "characters" are black, takes on the emotional barrenness of its model, and the blackness of the characters is like black checkers instead of white. They are still checkers.

The development of the Negro's music was, as I said, direct and instinctive. It was the one vector out of African culture impossible to eradicate completely. The appearance of blues as a Native *American* music signified in many ways the appearance of American Negroes where once there were African Negroes. The emotional fabric of the music was colored by the emergence of an American Negro culture. It signified that culture's strength and vitality. In the evolution of form in Negro music it is

possible to see not only the evolution of the Negro as a cultural and social element of American culture, but also the evolution of that culture itself. The "Coon Shout" proposed one version of the American Negro-and of America; Ornate Coleman proposes another. But the point is that both these versions are accurate and informed with a legitimacy of emotional concern nowhere available in what is called "Negro Literature," and certainly not in the middlebrow literature of the white American. The artifacts of African art and sculpture were consciously eradicated by slavery. Any African art that based its validity on the production of an artifact, i.e., some material manifestation such as a wooden statue or a woven cloth, had little chance of survival. It was only the more "abstract" aspects of African culture that could continue to exist in slave America. Africanisms still persist in the music, religion, and popular cultural traditions of American Negroes. However, it is not an African art American Negroes are responsible for, but an American one. The traditions of Africa must be utilized within the culture of the American Negro where they actually exist, and not because of a defensive rationalization about the worth of one's ancestors or an attempt to capitalize on the recent eminence of the "new" African nations. Africanisms do exist in Negro culture, but they have been so translated and transmuted by the American experience that they have become integral parts of that experience.

The American Negro has a definable and legitimate historical tradition, no matter how painful, in America, but it is the only place such a

tradition exists, simply because America is the only place the American Negro exists. He is, as William Carlos Williams said, "A pure product of America." The paradox of the Negro experience in America is that it is a separate experience, but inseparable from the complete fabric of American life. The history of Western culture begins for the Negro with the importation of the slaves. It is almost as if all Western history before that must be strictly a learned concept. It is "only the American experience that can be a persistent cultural catalyst for the Negro. In a sense, history for the Negro, before America, must remain an emotional abstraction. The cultural memory of Africa informs the Negro's life in America, but it is impossible to separate it from its American transformation. Thus, the Negro writer if he wanted to tap his legitimate cultural tradition should have done it by utilizing the entire spectrum of the American experience from the point of view of the emotional history of the black man in this country: as its victim and its chronicler. The soul of such a man, as it exists outside the boundaries of commercial diversion or artificial social pretense. But without a deep commitment to cultural relevance and intellectual purity this was impossible. The Negro as a writer, was always a social object, whether glorifying the concept of white superiority, as a great many early Negro writers did, or in crying out against it, as exemplified by the stock "protest" literature of the thirties. He never moved into the position where he could propose his own symbols, erect his own personal myths, as any great literature must. Negro writing was always "after the fact," i.e., based on known social concepts within the structure of bourgeois idealistic

projections of "their America," and an emotional climate that never really existed.

The most successful fiction of most Negro writing is in its emotional content. The Negro protest novelist postures, and invents a protest quite amenable with the tradition of bourgeois American life. He never reaches the central core of the America, which can cause such protest. The intellectual traditions of the white middle class prevent such exposure of reality, and the black imitators reflect this. The Negro writer on Negro life in America postures, and invents a Negro life, and an America to contain it. And even most of those who tried to rebel against that invented America were trapped because they had lost all touch with the reality of their experience within the real America, either because of the hidden emotional allegiance to the white middle class, or because they did not realize where the reality of their experience lay. When the serious Negro writer disdained the "middlebrow" model, as is the case with a few contemporary black American writers, he usually rushed headlong into the groves of the Academy, perhaps the most insidious and clever dispenser of middlebrow standards of excellence under the guise of "recognizable tradition." That such recognizable tradition is necessary goes without saying, but even from the great philosophies of Europe a contemporary usage must be established. No poetry has come out of England of major importance for forty years, yet there are would be Negro poets who reject the gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry in favor of disemboweled

academic models of second-rate English poetry, with the notion that somehow it is the only way poetry should be written. It would be better if such a poet listened to Bessie Smith sing *Gimme a Pigfoot*, or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe. And again, it is this striving for respectability that has it so. For an American, black or white, to say that some hideous imitation of Alexander Pope means more to him, emotionally, than the blues of Ray Charles or Lightning' Hopkins, it would be required for him to have completely disappeared into the American Academy's vision of a Europeanized and colonial American culture, or to be lying. In the end, the same emotional sterility results. It is somehow much more tragic for the black man.

A Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America, must get at that experience in exactly the terms America has proposed for it, in its most ruthless identity. Negro reaction to America is as deep a part of America as the root causes of that reaction, and it is impossible to accurately describe that reaction in terms of the American middle class; because for them, the Negro has never really existed, never been glimpsed in anything even approaching the complete reality of his humanity. The 'Negro writer has to go from where he actually is, completely outside of that conscious white myopia. That the Negro does exist is the point, and as an element of American culture he is completely misunderstood by Americans. The middlebrow, commercial Negro writer

assures the white American that, in fact, he doesn't exist, and that if he does, he does so within the perfectly predictable finger painting of white bourgeois sentiment and understanding. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Creoles of New Orleans resisted "Negro" music for a time as raw and raucous, because they thought they had found a place within the white society which would preclude their being Negroes. But they were unsuccessful in their attempts to "disappear" because the whites themselves reminded them that they were still, for all their assimilation, "just coons." And this seems to me an extremely important idea, since it is precisely this bitter insistence that has kept what can be called "Negro Culture" a brilliant amalgam of diverse influences. There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excess of cultural or spiritual reference. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man's culture, yet he came to understand that culture as well as the white man. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, sub-cultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no-man's-land that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America-from that no-man's-land outside the mainstream. A no-man's-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray. Were there really a Negro literature, now it could flower. At this point when the whole of

Western society might go up in names, the Negro remains an integral part of that society, but continually outside it, a figure like Melville's Bartleby. He is an American, capable of identifying emotionally with the fantastic cultural ingredients of this society, but he is also, forever, outside that culture, an invisible strength within it, an observer. If there is ever a Negro literature, it must disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America. But as long as the Negro writer contents himself with the imitation of the useless ugly inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind, academic or popular, and refuses to look around him and "tell it like it is"-preferring the false prestige of the black bourgeois or the deceitful "acceptance" of *buy and sell* America, something never included in the legitimate cultural tradition of "his people" he will be a *failuré*, and what is worse, not even a significant failure. Just another dead American.

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