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Jazz as Literary Theory: Amiri Baraka's "Slave Ship"

In his 1962 essay "The Myth of a Negro Literature," Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) argues that African-American literature has been severely hindered by authors' reliance upon European models of artistic style and value. Baraka dismisses the entire body of African-American writing as "mediocre," "vapid," and "imitative" (his words), making exceptions only for a handful of works by Toomer, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, who he characterizes as successful imitators (Baraka 1966: 105-107).

This essay can be seen as the founding gesture for what became the Black Arts movement. Although many Black Arts writers, particularly Larry Neal, re-evaluated their relationship to the tradition and Baraka himself softened his line, most, such as Neal, Hoyt Fuller, and Don L. Lee, echo the prescription for a new African-American literature offered in "The Myth of a Negro Literature" (Neal 1989: 20-22; Fuller 339-340; Lee 222).

Baraka insists that African-American music must be the model for all forms of African-American creativity. Black authors and artists are compromised by coming largely from the grasping middle class (a consistent nemesis of Baraka's since he studied under E. Franklin Frazier at Howard (Sollors 3)). Only music has belonged to the masses. He writes:

> 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. (1966: 106)

In this essay, I will explore in more detail the central function of jazz and other African-American musical forms in the Black Arts movement, using several poems from Baraka's collection Black Magic Poetry and his 1967 play "Slave Ship," as well as essays from Home. In these works, Black music not only provides subject matter and models of rhythm, it also functions as a literary theory in the most abstract and philosophical sense, as an ontology of the text.

The key chapter of Blues People, Baraka's history of African-American music, is entitled "Swing: From Verb to Noun." In it, he describes the process of appropriation and commodification of the music as this movement from process to product. The words used to describe the music, such as "swing," "rock," and "jazz," all began as verbs for the act of inspired artistic production and became nouns denoting musical styles, regardless of the merits of the performance. While Baraka is far from pleased by the popularization of big band music by white artists such as Benny Goodman and Glen Miller, at the time he writes Blues People he is more disturbed by the removal of the verb force, the improvisational spontaneity of performance, in the recording and mass production of the musical work than by the race of those responsible (1963: 148-154).

In his 1964 essay "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," this analysis is extended to literature. Here, as William Harris observes, Baraka

is drawing primarily on the ideas of process-oriented white poets, Charles Olson in particular (Harris 35, 38, 101-102). Olson and his school were interested in the poem as a recording of process, as an encoding of the experience of composition. Baraka echoes these ideas but, although music is only mentioned in passing in this essay, it is inseparable from an understanding of how Baraka revises Olson and appropriates him for a specifically African-American poetics.

The poem as a recording of process remains a fixed object, a dead artifact. Baraka writes:

> [The artwork] is not a be-ing, but a Being, the simple noun. It is not the verb, but its product. Worship the verb, if you need something. Then even God is after the fact, since He is the leavings of God-ing. The verb-God, is where it is, the container of all possibility. (1966: 175)

An analogy to jazz is instructive. The process poem is a recording, not a performance. While a Charlie Parker record is an impressive object, it is not Charlie Parker's art, which was spontaneous performance. The hours of documentation available are only examples of Parker's work; they are not the work itself.

The literary theory of "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall" is also influenced by the philosophy of Heidegger. As perverse as this sounds, Baraka took courses in German and philosophy as an undergraduate and name-checks Heidegger in an uncollected 1962 essay "Names & Bodies" (Sollors 81). Baraka's language of "be-ing" as verb opposed to "Being" as noun

is very close to Heidegger's Becoming and Being. "Names & Bodies" advances the same theory as "Hunting . . ." but uses the word "art-ing" instead.

Baraka sees the text as object as useless because it is a substitution of matter for energy. The fixed words on the page are incapable of conveying the act of creation and become fetishized, available for New Critical formal analysis. The text, artwork, or recording is the byproduct of creativity, not the goal. The artist must be the agent of Becoming and the artwork a Becoming, not a representation or repetition of something that already is. Jazz provides the best model for this, since every performance is the coming into being of a new spontaneous work due to the fundamental role of improvisation.

By reading Olson and Heidegger through Black music, specifically improvisation, Baraka takes extremely abstract and difficult theories to popular and folk forms. Through Baraka's career, from his Beat period through his affiliation with various forms of Black Nationalism and revolutionary Marxism, his hostility to the idea of the artwork as object and his desire to form an alternative based on Black music have been some of the few constants.

"Black Art" is, among many other things, a major statement of Baraka's literary theory from the height of his cultural nationalist period (1969: 116-117). In it, he attacks the idea of representational art and calls for a poetics which is fundamentally performative. The basic argument of this

text is that art must not be about revolution, call for revolution, represent revolution, or raise consciousness in a revolutionary way. Instead, art itself, the "poem" of "Black Art," must be the revolution. It is the poem itself which Baraka sees beating up policemen, exploitive shop owners, "mulatto bitches," and accomdationist "negroleaders."

As a manifesto, "Black Art" remains an object, a Being rather than a Becoming. It exists on the page as fixed as a work by Shakespeare or Eliot. The poem on the page can only ever be this, as long as the page is the end, the ultimate form of the work. Improvisation only fully enters into poetry when poetry is considered as a performance art, with the reading as the place in which the Becoming of the artwork takes place. Baraka realizes this around 1965-66, the time of the last poems in Black Magic Poetry, a section entitled "Black Art" which includes all the poems I discuss in this essay.

Looking back on the achievements of the Black Arts movement, Baraka has recently written "...we created the word as living music, raising it off the still, Apollonian, alabaster page. Now the words become a score" (1996: xiii). Most of what I am trying to say in this essay is contained in this phrase: the written word is associated with classicism, whiteness, and death, but it can be revalued through the performance practices associated with Black music. A score in jazz is an outline for an improvised performance, for Becoming, while in European classical music it is the perfect form of the work, its true Being to be realized as precisely as possible.

One interesting example of the poem as score is “Beautiful Black Women...” (1969: 148). Although it appears relatively unremarkable on the page, when Baraka performed this poem at readings and on record it became a unique piece of performance art with complex resonance. The reading is accompanied by a five man doo-wop group and a bassist repeating the hook from Smokey Robinson’s hit “Baby Baby.” Baraka threads his reading over and around the cyclic harmony and rhythm, evoking the type of recitation often featured on doo-wop records. Every performance of this piece is a Becoming in that Baraka’s delivery, the way he chooses to relate in pitch and meter to the music, is improvised, like a jazz player interpreting a standard ballad. Although this could be said of any poet who works with accompaniment, the recording of “Beautiful Black Women...” is far richer than that because of the implications of the use of doo-wop. The recitation, usually the most maudlin feature of a song, is revalued and made the center of the performance. Doo-wop carries the image of a group of neighborhood guys hanging out harmonizing, but here the experimental poet appears, seemingly naturally, at the center of the group. Most important, Baraka here, much as in his plays “Dutchman” and “Jello,” by fitting his poetry neatly into the smooth pop music, lifts up the veil and shows the revolutionary nationalist repressed inside of the gentle and elegant Smokey Robinson. Smokey’s romance, Baraka suggests, contains buried within it plans for the Black nation. There is a great deal more happening here than in most

intersections of music and poetry (including some of Baraka's other performances) where the music functions only as background texture adding ambiance and not substance.

As interesting a piece as the performance of "Beautiful Black Women..." is, if one did not have the opportunity to see it performed or to hear the recording, one would never know that it was anything but a written object like any other. This poem may be interpreted as a score, but there is nothing on the page to suggest this to the reader.

There are poems in the last section of Black Magic Poetry however, which can only be read as guidelines for improvisational sound-making, most notably "SOS," "Part of the Doctrine," "Trespass Into Spirit," "Vowels 2," and "Form Is Emptiness" (1969: 115, 200,151-2, 189-191, 155). These poems consist of syllables, sometimes words, arranged on the page in order to suggest pitch, stress, rhythm, and duration. The layout clearly evokes sound rather than typographical experimentation since the words are always altered in ways which can be vocalized. Nothing is done for the sake of the page. Even "Part of the Doctrine," which plays with the words "raise," "raze," "rays," and "race," is full of signs that it is designed for performance. The poems is in two blocks, the first all capitals the second, after a small gap on the page, all lower case, almost certainly calling for the first part to be shouted, then a deep breath, followed by the conclusion in a lower tone.

"Form Is Emptiness" is an invocation composed almost completely of religious figures and concepts. In most words, the syllable "ah" is emphasized and elongated as the trace of the name "Ra," the Egyptian Sun God. The poem begins and ends with Ra, set against the left margin, while the words in-between are variously indented in a rough diagonal moving to the right. While this layout suggests some kind of thematic interpretation, it also demands expression in performance, some kind of change in pitch, volume, intensity, etc.

As Baraka becomes increasingly committed to the idea of poem as score in the middle and late Sixties, he draws increasing criticism that his poetry is in decline, that his craft is not what it once was. This criticism, which even appears in sympathetic studies like those of Theodore Hudson and Henry Lacey, does not fully recognize Baraka's project as literary theory (Hudson 135, 139; Lacey 123). As Baraka makes clear to William Harris in an interview, he has stopped thinking of the page as the ultimate venue for his work and would prefer that people hear recordings or see him perform. He says:

> The question to me of a poet writing in silence for people who will read in silence and put it in a library where the whole thing is conceived in silence and lost forever in silence is about over.

and claims that most people who buy his poetry books have heard him read and get the books as a way to recollect the performance (Harris 147-8).

In 1967, when Baraka is writing the last poems of Black Magic Poetry, he directs the first performance of "Slave Ship," his work which has the

greatest affinity with the jazz avant-garde. “Slave Ship” is a historical pageant covering the history of African-Americans from the Middle Passage to the coming revolution. However, the script is extremely short, only twelve pages.

The performance of “Slave Ship” calls for a cast of actors, augmented by unspecified “musicians” and “dancers.” There are also specific sound effects/musical elements called for in the list of props.

However, the division of labor between actors, dancers, and musicians, and the distinction between music, sound effects, and the sounds produced by the actors, are undermined in “Slave Ship.” Within the extremely brief script, detailed stage directions overwhelm the dialogue, and the majority of the directions involve sound making, but it is seldom specified who is to be making these sounds.

There are extremely few moments in “Slave Ship” which call for acting in a conventional sense. Hardly any speech is more than one or two sentences, and those characters who do get more lines are caricatures: The Slave, The Preacher, and the offstage voice of the White Man. Even their speeches are presented in the script more as examples of possible vocal improvisations than as specific dialogue to be interpreted. For example, the Slave is directed to shuffle and “agree with massa;” the specific realization of this is insignificant, and the lines given him are likely only an example of a possible enactment of the stage direction (137-8).

The sounds of “Slave Ship” drive the action with the kinetic force of energy music. There is a continual build-up of drums, whips, chains, chants, screams, and an increasing droning hum. However, as in the music of Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, and others, the ordering of these sounds, though improvisational, is clearly narratively structured.

In light of “Black Art,” the use of improvisation in “Slave Ship” appears as a kind of performativity which attempts to resist what Baraka sees as the worthlessness of art. It is not enough that viewing “Slave Ship” could aid in forming a revolutionary consciousness. If this was the case, the play is no different from any other political drama. Instead, “Slave Ship” has to be a doing, not a thing done.

This is achieved by making collective improvisation central to the piece. Instead of a performance of “Slave Ship” being an interpretation of a fixed representational text, an act of mimesis, it is the immediate coming into being of the text through live creative activity, poesis. The performance is not a presentation of the text’s Being, but the experience of its Becoming.

“Slave Ship” does not fully satisfy the demands of “Black Art.” The text that would do so would be one whose performance would be the overthrow of capitalism and white supremacy. However, “Slave Ship” comes as close as any work to formally embodying Baraka’s revolutionary Black Aesthetic, by fully incorporating the improvisational procedures of free jazz into theater.

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