

An analysis of Amiri Baraka's anti-white sentiment in his Literature

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“The Black Man will always be frustrated until he has land (A Land!) of his own”.- Baraka
(Harris 165)

Before directly commencing with the reasons behind Amiri Baraka's anti-White sentiment and the shape of its nature reflected in his literature it must be pointed out that an anti-Black stance still prevails in the United States of America although the country has seen its first Black President in the form of Barack Obama. The shooting of an eighteen year old African-American by the name of Michael Brown on the ninth of August 2014 by a white police officer, Darren Wilson is one such example. The Baltimore uprisings are also an example of this onslaught against the ruling “colour” (power) as it triggered off from the death of a twenty five year old African American resident named Freddie Gray who had died after sustaining injuries by white policemen.

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 to 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.”(Ibid xxv)

This is absolutely the correct phrase to describe Baraka's emotional stance. Let us look at some examples from his poetry:

“...Black poems to/ smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches/ whose brains are red jelly stuck/
between'lizabettaylor's toes. Stinking/ whores! We want poems that kill. / Assassin poems,
Poems that shoot guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons leaving

them dead with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland...”(Ibid 219)

The words – “bitches”, “whores” and phrases like “poems that kill”, “poems that wrestle cops” and “take their weapons leaving them dead with tongues pulled out” are enough to convey the message of hatred. The hatred towards the whites can be seen in the mentioning of Elizabeth Taylor’s name who was a white American actress and had acted in many films for example “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf”(1966), “A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”(1958), “Cleopatra”(1963). It has been noticed that Baraka uses a lot of verbal violence in his works which will be later discussed in this paper. However it is important for us to be aware of certain psychoanalytical interpretations of violence and violent men. In *A Psychologist’s casebook of crime from arson to voyeurism* edited by Belinda Winder and Philip Banyard it has been noted that:

“A modern application of Freud’s psychoanalytical approach can be found in James Gilligan’s (2000) *Violence: Reflections on our Deadliest Epidemic*, based on his interviews with violent men in his capacity as a prison psychiatrist...For Gilligan, the internal mental conflict that is the key to understanding some men use lethal violence is shame and loss of self-esteem. He suggests that violent men have often themselves been the objects of violence in the past-especially in their childhood- and that, as a consequence, they experience feelings of embarrassment, powerlessness and worthlessness.” (Winder & Banyard 157)

In his play *Dutchman* (1964) we see this hatred in the violent outburst of the character called Clay (who is an African-American) in his reply to a statement made by Lula (the white woman):

“Lula: You’re afraid of white people. And your father was. Uncle Tom Big Lip!

[Clay slaps her as hard as he can, across the mouth. Lula’s head bangs against the back of the seat. When she raises it again, CLAY slaps her again]

Clay: Now shut up and let me talk.

[He turns toward the other riders, some of whom are sitting on the edge of their seats...The others go back to newspapers or stare out the windows]

Clay: Shit, you don’t have any sense, Lula, nor feelings either. I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dullkicks and all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me.

Murder them too...It takes no great effort. For what?To kill you soft idiots? You don’t understand anything but luxury.

Lula: You fool!” (Reader 96)

Baraka uses the word “luxury” as a political concept. This will be clear if we turn to his *Political Poem* where he says:

“Luxury, then, is a way of being ignorant, comfortably an approach to the open market of least information.”(Ibid 73)

Now let us continue with Clay’s reaction to Lula:

“Clay: [Pushing her against the seat] I’m not telling you again, Tallulah Bankhead! Luxury. In your face and your fingers. You telling me what I ought to do...I’ll rip your lousy breasts off! Let me be who I feel like being. Uncle Tom, Thomas, whoever, its none of your business.” (Ibid 96)

Let us note the phrases highlighted once more. To the statement made by Lula when she says that Clay is afraid of white people the immediate reaction is the violent gesture of a hard slap across the face of the white woman as described in the stage direction by Amiri Baraka. Next we have the dictatorial tone found in Clay’s counter statement when he asks Lula to “shut up” followed by the even more threatening “I could murder you now”. Again when Lula shouts back (the exclamation “you fool”) Clay’s reaction is again the violent pushing of Lula against the seat and then later Clay says “Let me be who I feel like being” and it should not be the business of the whites to control the actions of the marginalised who are in this case the African-American people. This counter statement made by Clay who is representing the “Black” voice is very interesting as it tells us the tone of anger inherent in the gestures. This sentiment has been captured also by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin White Masks* which is an analysis of the entire history of racial stereotypes and colonial oppression reasserts itself. The man of colour finds himself dissected by the white gaze, his body and his individuality annihilated. In *Black Skin White Masks* he Fanon explicates an example:

“The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is man, the Negro is ugly...The nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms. Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up.” (Wyrick 36)

Baraka interestingly has authored the publication of an essay named *State/ment* where he says:

“The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect the nature of the society and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble, curse and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their

evil...He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul. The Black Artist must demonstrate sweet life, how it differs from the deathly grip of the White eyes. The Black Artist must teach the White Eyes their deaths and teach the Black Man how to bring these deaths about.” (Harris 169)

Here again we notice the extreme hatred in Baraka’s writings. He ends this essay by writing:

“The Black Artist must teach the White Eyes their deaths and teach the black man how to bring these deaths about. 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 not save them/ and we own/ the night.” (Ibid 170)

Returning back to the paly *Dutchman* we see that Clay’s anger keeps rising later on when he says:

“You great liberated whore! You fuck some black man, and right away you’re an expert on black people. What alotta shit that is...Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass...Just let me bleed you, you loud whore...And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder...Murder. Just Murder! Would make us all sane...They’ll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own. They’ll cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitaryisolation.” (Ibid 97)

Leon Trotsky, a leader of The Russian Revolution and founder of the “Red Army” in his essay *The Struggle for Cultured Speech* writes:

“Abusive language and swearing are a legacy of slavery, humiliation, and disrespect for human dignity-one’s own and that of other people.” (Trotsky 52)

Thus we can say that the language used by Baraka (through the voice of Clay) is totally justifiable in a country which has a tradition of slavery written all over its history through the Jim Crow laws and the barbaric Ku-Klux Clan, not to forget the Montgomery bus incident where the Rosa Parks was asked to leave her seat as she was sitting in that of a white man and where social thinkers were assassinated like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Baraka in his essay *Mumia, “Lynch Law” and Imperialism* writes:

“Whoever thinks Chattel Slavery is gone is not with us in the real world. Some aspects of it have changed, like cars, modernised for the times. The old chains are now less visible, fitted by the media and schools and laws.The Plantations are called “Plants” or Factories or whatever they call the myriad squalid money-making machines in which the rulers exploit

Black people and the whole working class. The Klan is now the police, with Blue uniforms replacing the sheets and hoods. The corrupt racist judges, are petty Klan administrators, the “Kleagles” of the bourgeois state’s “Klaven”, their courts, the midnight torch burning torture sessions, before the neck stretching and black corpse burning.” (Harris 570)

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 realises that he must “Choke my friends/ in their bedrooms” to escape their influence and vision. To elude Western metaphysical domination Baraka must call up the dark Gods of the black soul. He demands violence in himself and his people to escape the white consciousness. He no longer wants to be the Dead Lecturer. He wants life. In this book of poetry he attempts to reject the language of the Beat Generation and claim the black chant of political commitment.

The blackening and politicisation of Baraka’s art is formal as well as thematic. The poetic line becomes longer as the verse imitates 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 agonised 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 understands Baraka’s pain. In a negative review of *The Dead Lecturer* in *Salmagundi*, M.L. Rosenthal makes an important statement which anticipates the far more political art of Baraka’s Black Arts and Marxist periods:

“No American poet since Pound has come closer to making poetry and politics reciprocal forms of action.”(Harris xxi)

Rosenthal perceives that Baraka wants his poems to act on the world; as Baraka wrote to his friend, Black Mountain poet Edward Dorn, in a 1961 letter:

“Moral earnestness...ought [to] be transformed into action...I know we think that to write a poem and be Aristotle’s God is sufficient. But I can’t sleep...There is a right and a wrong. And it’s up to me, you, all of the so called minds to find out. It is only knowledge of things that will bring this moral earnestness.” (Ibid xxi)

In 1965, following the assassination of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, Baraka left Greenwich Village and the Bohemian world and moved uptown to Harlem and a new life as a

cultural nationalist. He argued in *The Legacy of Malcolm X* that black people are a race, a culture, a Nation. Turning his back on the white world, he established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem which was an influential model that inspired Black theatres 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. His exorcism of white consciousness and values included a ten year period of professed hatred of whites. In his autobiography, Baraka relates an apocryphal incident from this time, which conveys the uncompromising intensity of his hostility:

“A woman asked me in all earnestness, couldn’t any whites help? I said, you can help by dying. You are a cancer. You can help the world’s people with your death.” (Ibid xxv)

Baraka’s anti-white sentiment made him get involved in Black Nationalism. In his essay *The Legacy of Malcolm X and the coming of the Black Nation* he stresses on the need for an “image reversal” which is necessary in the West with respect to the notion of blackness. He says:

“The song title ‘A White Man’s Heaven is a Black Man’s Hell’ describes how complete an image reversal is necessary in the West. Because for many Black People, the white man has succeeded in making this hell seem like heaven. But Black youth are much better off in this regard than their parents. They are the ones who need the least image reversal. The Black Artist in this context is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind and Black judgement. The Black intellectual, in this same context, is needed to change the interpretation of facts toward the Black Man’s best interests, instead of merely tagging along reciting white judgements of the world.” (Ibid 167)

In the same essay he says that there are Black cities all over this white nation. Nations with nations. In order for the Black (man who in this case is a being who has suffered the prangs of alienation and is a marginalised being) to survive, says Baraka he must not only identify himself as a unique being, but take steps to insure that this being has, what the Germans call a “Lebensraum” or living room. While working as a director of the Black Arts Repertory Theater-School, Baraka had issued a call for a Black Nation. He had noted that six lakh people reside in Harlem. The first act must be nationalisation of all properties and resources belonging to the white people within the boundaries of the Black Nation. All the large concentrations of Black People in the West are already nations. All that is missing is the consciousness of this state of affairs. All that is missing is that the Black Man should take control.

Nationalisation means that all properties and resources must be harnessed to the needs of the Nation. In the case of the coming Black Nation, all these materials must be harnessed to the needs of Black People. Baraka, in that essay went on to say that only a united Black Consciousness can save Black People from annihilation at the white man's hands and that no other nation is safe unless the Black Man in America is safe. The urgency of his message to all the Black people of his country can be noted in his poem *SOS*:

“Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
You, calling all black people
Calling all black people, come in, black people, come
on in.” (Ibid 218)

However, during his Black Nationalist phase he had experienced some dead ends in the movement of nationalism and had embraced the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of socialist revolution. In an interview with William J. Harris in 1980 he had said:

“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.” (Reilly 178)

But it is important to note that in order to understand the tone of his later works it is essential for readers to understand the hatred Baraka had for whites which was more a kind of a reaction to the violence perpetrated on the Black People. I would like to end this paper by quoting some lines from Amiri Baraka's *Words*:

“The purpose of myself has not yet been fulfilled. Perhaps it will never be. Just these stammerings and poses. Just this need to reach into myself and feel something wince and love to be touched. The dialogue exists. Magic and ghosts are a dialogue and the body bodies of material, invisible sound vibrations, humming in emptiness and we build our emotions into blank invisible structures which never exist and are not there and are illusion and pain and madness. Dead whiteness.

We turn white when we are afraid.

We are going to be happy.

We do not need to be fucked with.

We can be quiet and think and love the silence.

We need to look at trees more closely.

We need to listen.

Harlem 1965” (Harris 178)

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