

THE AESTHETICS OF
LEROI JONES/AMIRI BARAKA:
THE REBEL POET

MAURICE A. LEE



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The Aesthetics of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet

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Preface

Amiri Baraka is one of the most influential writers of contemporary Afro-American literature. For the past thirty-five years his presence in the literary Diaspora has been one of the most persistent and controversial. Critics may disagree on the nature, structure, or purpose of Baraka's works, but none are apathetic towards them. The very essence of his literature, which is at times nihilistic, nationalistic, surrealistic, romantic, didactic, "hip," Marxist, or existentialist demands serious study if one studies it at all.

I first "discovered" Baraka in 1969 at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin at the height of the Vietnam protests. Black students had "closed" the campus in protest against low minority student enrollment and the increasing numbers of blacks being inducted into the military. Tempers on campus were high and the campus seemed ready to explode with the tension increasing between a divided student body and an inflexible administration. Baraka was invited to speak, and for a week prior to his visit, his movie "Dutchman" was shown in the College Student Union. The play and other works were on sale at booths protesting the war and the irresponsibility of the University towards its minority population.

Baraka spoke in the University Theater and requested that the black students congregate at the front of the auditorium. Although the house was packed, he directed all of his comments to that small minority seated up front. It was an emotional experience, difficult to duplicate as Baraka berated every person in the audience, black and white, for the conditions present on campus. His talk addressed three areas primarily: 1) black identity and protest, 2) capitalism and its decadent materialism, and 3) the role of education. The prevailing theme throughout his speech was that the "system" had to change or be destroyed. He challenged everyone in the audience to become involved in this philosophy. After the speech, there was much disagreement among faculty and students about what he had said, but no one denied that what he said was important.

Since that week of tension and unrest in 1969 to the present, I have been involved with reading, studying, and teaching the works of LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka). The current study develops a thesis inspired by the second subject area of Baraka's talk to us in 1969: "Capitalism and its decadent materialism." Much of that speech focused on the petty bourgeoisie and how capitalism was suffocating the proletariat. I felt then and have felt more strongly since that his major works have similarities to Marxist philosophy, that in some cases the aesthetics in his arts is dependent on Marxist aesthetics, and that in spite of Baraka's comments to the contrary, this Marxist connection is evident from his first collection of verse, *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, to his present writings.

Baraka now confesses to a Marxist philosophy (see the section on "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung Thought" in Werner Sollors' book *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* [1978]), but dates it since 1970. Sollors states: "In 1970, Baraka initiated the 'first modern' Pan-African Congress in Atlanta, the proceedings of which were published in 1972, under the title African Congress, and he campaigned

actively and successfully for the election of Kenneth Gibson, the first black mayor of Newark.” Sollors and others, notably William J. Harris, editor of *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader by Bookcase* (1991), view these events as the culmination of the Black Nationalist movement. I view them as an aggressive political move to imbue the proletariat with economic and political power, crucial and important tenets of Marxism.

My study, therefore, purports the theory that the Marxist influence in Baraka’s work has been consistent since 1961, and that since 1970 the philosophy has simply been more open and pronounced. As will be documented later, there is almost universal agreement among critics that Baraka’s works were influenced by Marxism after 1970, with most agreeing with the date of 1974. Sollors says, almost in jest and disbelief that “Baraka’s most recent shift took place within one single year; in the course of 1974 he became a communist looking at a bus full of people (another variation of the earlier formula)” (225). In spite of Sollors “key” and advice to the critic to at least view the conversion and the date with some skepticism, all critics follow Baraka’s lead about this date and influence.

I have chosen 1961–1969 as the time period to make the case for this Marxism, therefore, (the period of an incredible creative output by Baraka), for the following reasons: 1) the works during this period are representative of his best creative efforts; 2) there is a need relative to sound critical practice to examine the material during Baraka’s early years in terms other than the narrow “Black Nationalism” view prescribed by him. The general rule is that the author is least reliable to function as critic of his own works; and finally, 3) the works during this time frame are diverse enough to allow me to examine a broad range of issues in a condensed period of Baraka’s creativity. The two dominant genres used in this study are poetry and drama with emphasis on the major works during the aforementioned time period. The writings in *Home: Social Essays* and other works are used as a catalyst for this examination.

Baraka’s disavowal and at times strong denunciation of a Marxist influence (although he admits to a European one) prior to 1970 seemingly influenced critics not to explore this possibility. This reluctance to develop the Marxist possibilities in him was unusual since many precursors and contemporaries of Baraka were so influenced—Claude McKay, W. E. B. DuBois, Richard Wright, Eldridge Cleaver, Saunders Redding and John A. Williams, to name a few. The answer could be the extent of Baraka’s influence and “critical” power, or even more so, an indifference on the part of the critics. It is peculiar, however, that with poems like “Hegel” in *Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967*:

I am
trying to understand
the nightmare of economics. On the phone,
through the mails, I am afraid. I scream
for help. I scream
for help. And no one comes, has ever
come. No single redeeming hand
has ever been offered,

or “The New World” in the same volume which eloquently states: “No one that simple or priggish, to be alone out of spite and grown strong in its practice, mystics in two-pants suits. Our style, and discipline, controlling the method of knowledge,” that few critics would attempt to make the connection between Hegel, Marx, Engel or other German philosophers concerned with economics and the need for a new world order. Whatever the reason, the result is that no extensive study of Marxist influence on Baraka exists today for the decade between 1960 and 1970.

It is hoped that the present study will correct this imbalance on Marxist criticism relative to Baraka, will provide a sense of coherence in his work not noted previously, and in addition will prove to be an invaluable aid and an additional resource to the ongoing research on this writer.

Maurice A. Lee

Introduction

In the Preface, I spoke of attending a speech by Amiri Baraka at the University of Wisconsin's University Theater in 1969, a period of his professed Black Nationalism days. Twenty-three years later, March 1992, I again sat and listened to Baraka speak on themes similar to those in 1969: 1) black identity and protest, 2) capitalism and its decadent materialism, and 3) the role of education. This was quite a different speech than the one of Black Nationalism days, however, and the ambiance could not have been in more stark contrast.

The speech was at the University of Northern Iowa, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. In an audience of approximately four hundred students, only ten or fifteen minorities were present. It was clear that many students did not know who Baraka was, i.e., they did not have an appropriate historical reference for him, and other than readings assigned by professors for Baraka's visit, were not familiar with his works.

Baraka slowly warmed to the task of "educating" a novice audience, but one with an open mind. He spoke of the history of Afro-American expression in literature, poetry, and drama and outlined the contrast between Afro-centric and Euro-centric values and culture in these expressions. He addressed the new and not-so-new multi-cultural issues on university campuses and the conservative and hysterical responses to such issues. Why seek education, he challenged his audience, if all you want as adults is the "same milk from your mother's breasts you got as babies"?

He has an uncanny ability to connect themes that seem to be dissimilar and to convince an audience of their relatedness. And he demonstrated this skill to perfection as he talked of the pros and cons (mostly cons) of post-modernist trends in literature, Spike Lee films, multi-culturalism, the Rodney King incident, the difficulty of getting works published, the decline of Afro-American literary history, and the heresy of the Republican and Democratic parties.

As I sat in the audience holding a copy of Baraka's autobiography, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, the significance of his speech impressed me differently than in 1969. Although his talk at Wisconsin was more intense and certainly more political, he was not alone in his thoughts. Other Black artists in 1969 were giving similar speeches at universities, in churches, and in public forums and debates. In 1992, however, Baraka was one of the few artists who still openly, regularly, and determinedly attacked the academic, artistic, and political status quo. Bobby Seals, Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, Nikki Giovanni, Don L. Lee, Floyd McKissick, Renee Ferguson, Harold Cruse, Shirley Chishom, Anne Moody, Douglas Turner Ward, Hoyt Fuller, Dick Gregory, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Melvin Van Peebles were names in the late sixties and early seventies consistent with addressing the status quo of blacks in the afore-mentioned areas. Such was not the case in 1992, for various reasons, primarily the lack of longevity. Interestingly enough, such is not the case today; yet today, Baraka is now more controversial than ever with his recent poem "Somebody Blew Up America" on the 9/11 tragedy.

When Miles Davis died in October 1991, it was Baraka who was asked to eulogize him on the air. Baraka's poem ("ode") to Davis set the wires on fire, and requests for copies flooded the Detroit radio station on which he read his tribute. The "Detroit Free Press" printed the poem in its entirety. Likewise, when the Rodney King decision resulted in the eruption of Los Angeles, again it was Baraka who was often heard (on radio more so than television) putting the event in the appropriate artistic, political, social, economic, and racial context. Baraka's autobiography, written in 1984, is eerily prophetic in this regard. In speaking of revolution as a solution he states:

Sometimes, though, you feel you move through tragedy and shame. That you step forward in the midst of ruins and explosions, your eyes shining. Your survival insured somehow by the fact of the I running on that computer track between your ears, behind your eyes. You could see the Black arts in flames months before. Even while we did our heroic work of bringing the art, the newest strongest boldest hippest most avant of the swift dark shit to the streets, you could look up at that building some nights and swear it was in flames. That is shuddered and shook wreathed in hideous screams of fire. When you looked into the eyes of some very sick nigger, who might end up in an ice-cream suit selling dope or swaggering down Seventh Avenue mumbling his divinity, my brothers, or with little women never had to face a real real world playing half house in the half dark, naked and burning, you knew it was that brief youthful footstep erased by fire and a cooling, unremembering rain. But what was real survived the flame. (323-324)

Kimberly W. Benston in the Preface to his collection of critical essays on Baraka, *Imamu Amiri Baraka* (1979), states the following:

Name almost any black intellectual poet, or dramatist who has written in the past fifteen years and attained some stature and influence, and you name at the same time Baraka. He is to them all—whether or not they know and directly acknowledge it (and most of them do)—what Emerson was to writers of the "American Renaissance": the categorical explicator of a world they contemplate poetically or philosophically without avoiding its Barakian interpretation. (ix)

Such praise in 1979 is probably not as consistent in 1992 or 2003 given the emergence of other writers and the decline in stature of those writers in the sixties with whom Baraka was grouped. Significant as well is the decrease in the number of Afro-American Studies or Literature programs on university campuses in the last twenty years. But as evidenced by the events mentioned above, Baraka, perhaps more than any other artist today is still viewed as the one artist embodying the elements of and most knowledgeable about the facets of art, politics, social awareness, racial injustice, and economic despair as they relate to and impact on Blacks in the United States.

Although Baraka is not read as much today, other than the 9/11 poem, as he was in 1969, he is still one of the most significant artists writing and written about today. His significance is noted not only in his influence mentioned previously, but also in his longevity, his consistency, his growth, and his capacity to critique that which he has accomplished:

The fantasies we stepped into had to do with our misunderstanding as usual. The mixture of half Yorubaist, Malcom's death-fascination Islam, bourgeois politics, black nationalism, still dogged my steps. There were many of us across the country creating various weird structures out of the same confusion and metaphysics... I was not as into an open meta-physics ever until going into nationalism. I could attach names and a blatant embrace of this stuff as "blackness." The feudalism, reformism, male chauvinism, all crept in or rushed in under the rubric of nationalism. Blackness. Even the apotheosis of cultural nationalism I took because it was the best-organized form of the abstraction "blackness." (*The Autobiography* 325)

Baraka seems to be calling for a reassessment, a new critique of his positions since 1969, even though his popularity then was on the increase, his works being anthologized more and more, thus assuring his lofty status.

Increasingly significant is the fact that since that time, Baraka's works have continued to appear in more and more courses and disciplines—American Literature, Philosophy, Sociology, and Political Science—those with a dominant Euro-centric bias but now taught by professors sensitive to the needs of a diverse student body. This new trend and continued interest, in addition to broadening Baraka's audience and influence help to develop and to sophisticate new methods of criticism. This study hopes to explore and to develop one form of methodology pertinent to Baraka's works—Marxist criticism.

Marx is important in the development and examination of a Barakian aesthetic because of 1) his attitude toward capitalism, 2) the role he envisions for the working class in a "new" society, 3) his delineation of a human history (humanism), and 4) the development of a dialectic to examine and convey his concepts. Philosophically, critically, and aesthetically, Baraka plays a similar role in his examination of an oppressive society in which one class or race rules another. Whereas Marx attempts to effect a class revolution through radical politics, Baraka attempts to effect a radical politics through literature (art). At times one cannot distinguish between Baraka's politics and his art, and indeed he professes to both disciplines. What Baraka strives for through his "political art" is an enlightened citizenry and revolutionary aesthetics.

For much too long, critics have "skirted" around the obvious political nature of Baraka's works and refused to apply methodologies other than those to which he admitted. No writer, especially one of Baraka's stature, should have such immunity. This study does not impose a methodology on Baraka, in this case, Marxist, but uncovers one which is consistent throughout most of his literary career. Oddly enough, since he confesses to Marx's influence post 1970, determination of said influence prior to that time would make Marxism a more consistent methodology for examining Baraka's works, than, for example, Black nationalism.

In taking a Marxist approach to Baraka's works from 1961–1970, with particular emphasis on the 1961–1967 period (the final date signified by his name change from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka), this study goes against the flow of most Barakian criticism during this era. Most criticism examines the nationalistic, polemical, mythological, or revolutionary nature of his literary output. The works are so vital and rich with these themes and the critics so esurient for them, as Baraka spoon-feeds them, that the preponderance of this criticism is understandable.

Theodore R. Hudson's book *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka* (1973) was one of the first literary studies of Baraka's works. The primary focus of this book was "to fill the need for a critical survey of the literary works of LeRoi Jones, or Amiri Baraka" (xi). Interestingly enough, Hudson's comment that Baraka's "artistic and personal development has not followed an orderly, coordinated or casual progression" was ignored or discounted by much of the later critics (xi).

In his book, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (1976), Kimberly W. Benston focuses on the black diaspora and the Black ethos inherent in Baraka's works. His study provides invaluable insight into the "black cosmos" of Baraka's nationalism. Benston's thesis is that the Afro-American experiences in Baraka's works are more formalized than critics perceive them to be. In his other book on the writer—*Imamu Amiri Baraka, (LeRoi Jones)* (1979)—Benston seemingly expresses dismay and some discomfort with Baraka's aesthetic shifts. He states:

The unity of Baraka's art—of his continuing spiritual autobiography—has been obscured in great measure by the frequency and violence of his conspicuous changes, political and artistic. Indeed, amid his dazzling array of statement, counterstatement, and innovation, Baraka's espousal of "change" as both act and maxim has been the singular distinct constant. (5)

What is equally constant is that critics' views have changed and fluctuated, as has Baraka's. Lloyd W. Brown is one of the first critics to pay close attention to the relationship between Baraka's politics and his art in his book *Amiri Baraka* (1980). He, likewise, is one of the few critics to admit to "a suspicion which surfaces occasionally that there is something unstable (and therefore unworthy of serious scholarly attention) in an intellectual evolution that has brought Baraka from the 'Beat' generation of Greenwich Village poets, through the period of black nationalism, to the more recent conversion to Marxist-Leninism" (8, unnumbered). Although Brown, like other critics, supports these narrow designations of Baraka's development, he makes a noteworthy statement, which, I believe, supports my theory of the influences of Marxism.

As in other aspects of Baraka's writing the ideological shifts that are evident in the poetry go hand in hand with a fundamental theme that remains constant throughout: that is whether he is inspired by a vague radical outrage or by ethnic revolutionism, Baraka's insights are always rooted in a deep-seated contempt for what he sees as the defects of Western culture as a whole, and American society in particular. Moreover, despite the increasing alienation from all aspects of white America and the West, the poetry continues to show signs of Baraka's early association with nonblack artists. (104-105)

I believe that this contempt and alienation established an aesthetic dilemma for Baraka, and that a Marxist dialectic was for him an effective means of addressing the politics and art, in an attempt to resolve the dilemma.

When Henry C. Lacey's book was published in 1981—*To Raise, Destroy, and Create*—the title gave hope of a radical approach to Baraka's works. Lacey's study, however, adds nothing new to the few books written prior to his. What Lacey does differently from Hudson, Sollors, et. al is to examine all genres written during a designated period, e.g. from 1958-1962, rather than discussing each genre separately. In this regard, one is able to achieve a more united examination across disciplines.

William J. Harris provides such a unified study of Baraka for the scholar in his skillful analysis in *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. He approximates my thesis when he states:

It is important to realize that Baraka's current Marxist revolutionary nationalism both extends and negates his cultural nationalism. He is still committed to revolutionary revolt, but is now defined in Marxist terms; the enemy is no longer the white man, but the capitalist state... Marxism has not destroyed Baraka's belief in the autonomous black state and the uniqueness of black culture; it has only given him a framework for seeing the black struggle for independence in economic and materialist terms... Therefore, his shift from cultural nationalist to revolutionary Marxist was not as abrupt as it has often been seen: he has carried over the most revolutionary elements of his cultural nationalism into his Marxism. (17-18)

The adjustment I would make to Harris' statement would be that 1) the most "revolutionary elements" of Baraka's writing are Marxist; 2) that the Marxist elements are ever-present, beginning in 1960; and 3) that at a minimum, nationalistic and Marxist elements occur in Baraka's works simultaneously.

One other book deserves to be mentioned with those listed above, prior to my examination of selective articles on Baraka as well as new works by him, primarily those outside the time period of the study—the book by Baraka's ex-wife Hettie Cohen Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990). This is Ms. Jones's autobiography of her relationship with the then LeRoi Jones, chronicling her work, marriage, interests, divorce, and creative

life after the later Amiri Baraka. Although it is not a critical study, I think it is invaluable for critics who desire to do studies that equate a writer's personal life and culture with his artistic achievement and development. Hettie Cohen Jones's book is a highly articulate, intelligent, compassionate, and thought provoking document which will cause many critics, supporters, defenders, and naysayers of Baraka to reexamine much of what they write and think about him. For my study, her book will require too much speculation, but I would be remiss in not providing space for this document, which, coupled with Baraka's own autobiography, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, published in 1984, provides a tandem wealth of information for background critical study.

During the increasing interest in Baraka over the past three decades, it is articles more so than complete texts which provide the insightful and creative study of his works. Dozens of articles, reviews, and interviews have been documented over this time period. Of importance to my research as reflected in these articles is the increase in interest in Baraka's Marxist development on the positive side, coupled unfortunately with an uncompromising, rigid designation of 1974 as the point of the Marxist development.

William J. Harris established the following outline to chart Baraka's development in his above mentioned book: 1) The Beat Period (1957-1962); 2) The Transitional Period (1963-1965); 3) The Black Nationalist Period (1965-1974); and 4) the Third World Marxist Period (1974-). None of the scores of articles I reviewed deviated substantially from these categories. Yet, it is worth noting a few selective and important examples.

Ikenna Dieke's article, "Tragic Faith and the Dionysian Unconscious: An Interfacing of Novelist Baraka and Friedrich Nietzsche" (1990), addresses Baraka's sense of the "oppressed/downtrodden people" as the "totality of being, touching the very depths of the black soul, the unconscious black psyche." Dieke states further that "Baraka like Nietzsche demands that redemption be found in this world and not in the world beyond, within tragedy and suffering and historical/dialectical materialism, not necessarily beyond it" (103). This view, which I may characterize as Christian existentialistic and pseudo-Marxist, is important since Dieke applies this critique to Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell*, published in 1965. When Dieke applies such terminology as "dialectical tension, negation," and phrases life "a relation that is lived experienced and suffered," (103) to Baraka's aesthetics, he is utilizing language basic to the tenets of Marxism.

Although the Black nationalism era of Baraka is viewed positively, in general, one critic takes exception to the period with regard to Baraka's treatment of women. In effect, Sandra L. Richards frankly states in her essay, "Negative Forces and Positive Non-Entities: Images of Women in the Dramas of Amiri Baraka" (1982), that the Black nationalistic movement did not treat black women well. Of this drama she states:

missing are visions of women as positive, self-centered beings forging independent lives and working for the common good of both men and women. The paragons of political virtue are woefully impotent beside their alive, destructive sisters; they are self-righteous and unbelievably imperious beside the soul-searching brothers. (239)

She concludes this passage by doubting Baraka's "espoused commitment to human betterment" (239-240). It is yet to be determined if women fare better in a Marxist approach to the same dramas. At least, Richards has raised important issues about Baraka's purpose, politics, and art as proffered and demonstrated.

W. D. E. Andrews shows insight relative to the Marxist influences in Baraka's works in his article "The Marxist Theater of Amiri Baraka" (1984). He states that

it was becoming increasingly clear to Baraka that if nationalism fails to be a form of preparation for socialist construction or social revolution, it becomes as reactionary as the white variety. The Black bourgeoisie were showing themselves ready to co-opt the message of black nationalism without ever thinking of sacrificing their middle-class privileges or aspirations. (138)

As with other critics, Andrews indicates that this awareness began in 1974 when “Baraka was exposed at the sixth Pan-African congress in Dar es Salaam” to the “themes of Nkrumah, Touré, and Cabral” (138). Andrews is clearly disappointed in the Marxist plays, however. He complains that the “plays... do not allow the spectator to make his own discoveries or to draw his own conclusion.” He states further that Baraka’s plays “reflect his assurance that history is imbued with purpose... What is not so certain is that determinism has not been confused with prophecy and drama with private wish fulfillment” (160). In an ironic sense, Andrews has provided an astute critique, albeit not intended, of himself and his peers who examine an artist’s works in terms he dictates. Such compliance does not allow them “to make [their] own discoveries or to draw [their] own conclusions.”

And finally in Craig Werner’s article “On the Ends of Afro-American ‘Modernist’ Autobiography,” one notes the critic’s understanding of the Marxist influence on Baraka and a change in his style when he left “downtown New York City.” He states:

As even a cursory examination of Baraka’s poetry reveals, his writing voice underwent a major transformation after he left the downtown New York City context where he associated closely with avant-garde white writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley for the aggressively black political world of Harlem and Newark. What is most striking about Baraka’s text as Afro-Modernist autobiography, however, is the author’s representation of his life and writing—including that association with his nationalist “conversion”—as a process of accepting an elusive and frequently contradictory self. (216)

Critical to this study is Werner’s identification of the voice change in Baraka’s poetry, and the recognition of the “contradictory self,” which this author sees at the least as Baraka’s fluctuation between nationalism and Marxism, and to a larger degree as his attempt to sophisticate a Marxian dialect appropriate to the changes in his aesthetics. Werner’s concluding critique of *The Autobiography* is worth noting:

What is least clear, in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, is the centrality of Baraka’s Marxist perspective to the Afro-Modernist autobiographical voice. Ideally, this voice should be as firmly grounded in, and as much in advance of, the political and expressive realities of its time as were those of Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. DuBois. At points Baraka loses his grounding and relies on theoretical ideological terms that recall the solipsistic abstraction of his village period. Yet the book also includes numerous passages—the black, brown, yellow analyses stand out—that combine the concrete and the abstract, the philosophical and the political, the self and the community. (219-22)

This study does not deny the validity of Baraka’s losing ground or focus in his autobiography, but it does suggest that when this work is put in the context of a continuum of Marxist influence since the sixties, the Afro-Modernist voice is more consistent, albeit not always as loud. It should be noted that Werner’s work is one of the first to define Baraka’s poetic voice in “Afro-Modernist” terms.

Many other articles written on Baraka after the meeting described by Andrews above reflect his conversion to Marxism, and significantly enough do not address black nationalism, or the “beat” period ethos or any other influences on Baraka after this time. The critics are consistent, then. No Marxism before 1974, only Marxism after 1974. Rather than spend much more time, however, simply repeating different critical variations of the same theme of Baraka’s Marxist conversion in the seventies, I think it fitting at this juncture to establish a framework and lay the foundation for ideas critical to my study. If