

## **“All I Do Is Think about You”: Some Notes on Pragmatist Longing in Recent Literary Study of Amiri Baraka**

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You made my soul a burning fire  
You're getting to be my one desire  
You're getting to be all that matters to me  
And let me tell you girl  
I hope and pray each day I live  
A little more love I'll have to give  
A little more love that's devoted and true  
cause all I do is think about you.  
—Stevie Wonder, “All I Do”

I seen something and you seen it too. You just cant  
call its name.  
—Amiri Baraka, “In Town”

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The Amina and Amiri Baraka recording entitled *The Shani Project*<sup>1</sup> begins with a ten-minute track that features crooner Dwight West singing a rendition of the above epigraph's lines from Stevie Wonder's "All I Do" accompanied by Amiri Baraka's recitation of his poem "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl."<sup>2</sup> The expert personnel of *The Shani Project* (Rahman Herbie Morgan on tenor sax, Brian Smith on bass, and Vijay Iyer on piano) interpolate the composition "Chazz," written by their late comrade and band member Wilber Morris for Charles Mingus, with music by Thelonious Monk and Billy Strayhorn, and the Afro-American traditional composition "Motherless Child" as musical accompaniment to all of the Barakas' poetic recitations. "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl" is propelled forward by Wonder's music and lyrics of romantic longing. The coupling of nationalist discourse with expressions of romantic desire is hardly a rare find in Black nationalist poetics. Sonia Sanchez's "After the Fifth Day" illustrates this trend with great economy by conflating revolutionary birth/becoming with reminiscence of a commonplace marker of courtship—the rose pressed in a book.

with you  
 i pressed the  
 rose you bought me  
 into one of fanon's books  
 it has no odor now.  
  
 but  
 i see you handing me a red  
 rose and i remember  
 my birth.<sup>3</sup>

Sanchez expertly couples a scene of revolutionary instruction and becoming with a bittersweet, odorless lament of love's labor (never really)

1. *The Shani Project* commemorates the memory of the Barakas' daughter, Shani Baraka (October 23, 1971–August 12, 2003), who was murdered alongside her companion, Rayshon Holmes. See Amiri Baraka, "Who Killed Our Little Shani?" September 1, 2003, available at <http://www.theblacklistedjournalist.com/column96.html>; and Ras Baraka's poignant poetic protest of love, loss, and outrage against homophobic violence against Black women, *Black Girls Learn Love Hard* (New York: Moore Black Press, 2006).

2. Amiri Baraka, "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl," published online on Al Aronowitz's Web site "The Blacklisted Journalist," Column 110, October 1, 2004, available at <http://www.bigmagic.com/pages/blackj/column110j.html>.

3. Sonia Sanchez, *Homegirls & Handgrenades* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984), 5.

lost. The handing off of a rose in the volume of Fanon by her lover marks the speaker's politicized "birth."

I will chart a particular through-line in Baraka's poetic project that couples together the performance of romantic longing with a radical political prescription that would benefit from neopragmatist critical attention. Scholarship from such a critical position often dismisses Baraka's post-Village work for its so-called essentialism and for its polemic edge, which allegedly undermines its aesthetic rigor. The fusion of love and politics read as a through-line in Baraka's poetics provides an insight on how improvisation links with radical political identity as revolutionary becoming. My reading contrasts sharply with recent pragmatist approaches to Baraka. Such approaches, I contend, misread his work as weak improvisation, a sort of "improvisation light," if you will. How can we think about the aesthetic, philosophical, and political juxtapositions within this recording and resist a narrative of poetic development that argues that Baraka's political commitment reduces the complexity of his aesthetic production? "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl" catalogs various defeats in the international socialist, Pan-Africanist, and Black liberation struggles (and optimistically predicts future victory) alongside the singular contours of Wonder's love lyric. "Nightmare" conflates romantic longing (Wonder: "I hope and pray each day I live / a little more love I have to give") with political desire of literally Sisyphean proportions (Baraka: "Take that rock you always pushin' and use it to waste the rat"). My essay will trace this layering of personal longing in "Nightmare" with radical political desire as a through-line connecting a broad-stroke sampling of Baraka's literary production. It charts a Gramscian inventory, a poetic record, of the personal self as "the starting-point of critical elaboration," as Gramsci says: "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."<sup>4</sup> I wish to prompt a discussion that sheds light on Richard Poirier's peculiar mentions of Baraka in the pages of *Partisan Review* while building upon prior efforts to think progression and innovation in Baraka anew. I will apply Poirier's groundbreaking scholarship on American pragmatism, performance, and American literature to Baraka's work to establish a critical backstory: a vital encounter between two literary figures covering two decades, an encounter mediated through publications and

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 324.

performance (including the academic job talk), a polemic in which neither figure fires back directly at the other. By provisionally identifying and naming such an encounter, critics of African American and American literature might begin the process of tracing how this encounter possibly overdetermines current pragmatist work on Baraka specifically and scholarship on Black radicalism in general. I will apply some of Poirier's own critical categories, interwoven with some of the best of Baraka scholarship, to foreground how attention to the performance of Baraka complicates recent pragmatist formulations on Baraka's post-Village literary production. I will read "Nightmare" alongside a sampling of work as a way to worry what I'm referring to as pragmatist longing in Baraka literary study.<sup>5</sup> My hope is to contribute to an opening up of inquiry, whereas recent pragmatist attention to Baraka partially represents a shutting down of interpretive possibilities. My reading of this particular arc of neopragmatist literary scholarship is indebted to the work of Raymond Williams.

What are the implications of tracking neopragmatist approaches to Baraka in the way that they potentially simplify the complexity of both his Black Arts Movement and Marxist literary production? Why engage neopragmatism as a target in the first place? How do such critical works force judgments as a sort of endgame logical consequence of their antiessentialist and antifoundationalist orientations? What are the consequences of such works' failure to take seriously the key performative aspects of Baraka's aesthetic?<sup>6</sup> How to account for the impact on reading and the consequence

5. Works that apply a pragmatist lens to Baraka studies include: Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004); Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

6. This failure often occurs as a consequence of directionality—American pragmatism has of late been used to read Afro-diasporic artistic production, not the other way around. Eduardo Cadava's work on George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* provides a brilliant corrective to this trend. In Cadava's hands, Jackson helps us to read Emerson anew. See Eduardo Cadava, "The Guano of History," in *Cities without Citizens*, ed. Aaron Levy and Eduardo Cadava (Philadelphia: Slought Books and the Rosenbach Museum, 2004), 137–66. As of recent, Walton M. Muiyumba's study on Baraka, Ellison, and Baldwin sets up a fascinating encounter between pragmatism and Black intellectual and artistic practice. See Walton M. Muiyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

of a large sampling of the scholarship's failure to mine Baraka's career for what critic Fred Moten calls "a specifically Afro-diasporic protocol"?<sup>7</sup> What I'm calling a pragmatist longing reduces the complexity of the Black Arts Movement by, paradoxically, shutting down space for such critics' further enjoyment/analysis of Baraka's post-Village production. What if what I'm calling *pragmatist longing* yearns for a narrow, essentialist Black nationalism that never existed? What is to be gained by critically engaging with criticism that can't hear what will be later examined in a discussion of Kimberly W. Benston as "the pitch of new-old black expressivity"?<sup>8</sup> A post-Village Baraka performative aesthetic of constituting meaning and a theory of subjective agency at the moment of undoing not only share a great deal of pragmatism's theoretical concerns but can also speak to such concerns and offer unique insights.

To provide a recent example of contemporary neopragmatist scholarship, I want to examine Andrew Epstein's impressive study *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*.<sup>9</sup> Epstein's work privileges pragmatism as a lens to examine postwar avant-garde poetry and friendship and lauds Baraka's "pragmatic pluralism" over a "logic of racially determined identity and selfhood founded on a bedrock of racial essence" (Epstein, 219). One of the stated goals of *Beautiful Enemies* (a work that expertly mines the archives of American postwar poetry to provide fresh readings of Baraka, O'Hara, Koch, and others) is to shine light on the "fundamental paradox," in which "at the heart of experimental American poetry pulses a commitment to both radical individualism and dynamic movement that is sharply at odds with an equally profound devotion to avant-garde collaboration and community" (Epstein, 4). Epstein rigorously charts both a "complicated form of American self-reliance" as well as an "experimental individualism" (Epstein, 8) that both hungers for and revolts from the implied unity of purpose in experimental-writing communities and the complications and burdens of friendship within these communities. His harsh judgment of Baraka's nationalist turn (perhaps inadvertently) contributes to a climate of a certain contemporary critical unwillingness to close read (or,

7. Charles Henry Rowell "‘Words Don't Go There’: An Interview with Fred Moten," *Callaloo* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 956–57.

8. Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 192.

9. Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically as Epstein.

following Charles Bernstein's apt phrasing, close listen<sup>10</sup>) Baraka's post-Village output. Pragmatist longing runs the risk of minimizing the complexity of Black nationalistic cultural production and shirks its critical responsibility to listen to what Moten calls the "deep immersion in the massive theoretical demands and resources of Afro-diasporic art and life."<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I am not simply trying to reassert Eric Lott's eloquently worded polemic retort to Rortyan pragmatist political philosophy: "When does your left universalism simply become hegemonic liberalism?"<sup>12</sup> Rather, I offer my initial staging of a paradox in the Stevie Wonder-enhanced Baraka recording and my attention to the performative aspects of Baraka's aesthetic as an opening up of an avenue of inquiry that pragmatist hastiness all too often shuts down. My intervention is an attempt to resist what I read as a pragmatist longing for a Black Arts Movement aesthetic redux as a straw man for critique. Recent scholarship by James Edward Smethurst and Cheryl Clarke and pioneering works by Benston<sup>13</sup> remind readers of the complexity and heterogeneity of Black Arts Movement praxis and production (as well as that of Baraka). Pragmatist longing in Epstein is further complicated and registers another valence in the care that the critic spends on analyzing the early period of Baraka's work. Epstein demonstrates an admirable and exciting deep appreciation for Baraka's poetry. However, his theoretical frame at a certain point contributes to his shutting down, a stifling of critical desire to read innovation in the later work. I will begin with the main example he provides—his reading of Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell: A Novel* (excerpted in *The Trembling Lamb* in 1963 and published in full by Grove Press in 1965)—and progress chronologically to "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl." This mining of "Afro-diasporic protocol" will conclude by applying Poirier's formulation of "the performing self"<sup>14</sup> as it relates to his published mentions of Baraka.

10. Charles Bernstein, introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–26.

11. Rowell, "Words Don't Go There," 956.

12. Eric Lott, "Boomer Liberalism," *Transition*, No. 78 (1998): 43; Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

13. James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Cheryl Clarke, *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Benston, *Performing Blackness*.

14. Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

In reference to Baraka's move from his Village environs uptown to Harlem and his subsequent immersion in the Black Arts, Epstein laments,

Writing at the knotty center of the New York poetry universe in the 1950s and 1960s, Baraka arrives at a vision of poetry as a continual and painful process of turning away from and returning to group affiliations and forms of assimilation. In the coda Baraka added to *The System of Dante's Hell* in 1965, almost five years after he wrote that disturbed, unsettled book, he stated, "The world is clearer to me now, and many of its features, more easily definable" (153). But to find his way to that sense of "home" to arrive at that certitude about his own identity and his interracial friendships with his avant-garde companions, Baraka had to abandon much, had to turn away once and for all from that which had moved him. (Epstein, 232)

Along with his move to Harlem and then Newark came certain changes in Baraka's writing and philosophical outlook. Gone from his poetry is the tentative, skeptical, self-doubting and lyrical sensibility that energizes—or, to some eyes, mars—the earlier work. In its place, one finds in both his Black Arts writing and his later Marxist work much straightforward political writing, dogmatic convictions, and an impatience with pragmatism's emphasis on the symbolic action inherent in troping and imaginative language use, in favor of a conception of the poem as a utilitarian weapon with real-world results. (Epstein, 230)

Epstein, echoing Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, is "interested . . . in pragmatism as a philosophical mode that most broadly challenges foundationalism and absolutism, emphasizes contingency, pluralism, and action, and espouses a version of individualism that is both antiessentialist and highly attuned to the social dimensions of selfhood" (Epstein, 54).

Allow me to offer a counterpoint to the above gloss on pragmatism. In Williams's *Keywords* entry for *pragmatic*, the Welsh Marxist critic marks the term as "an interesting instance of the very complex linguistic cluster around the notions of THEORY . . . and practice."<sup>15</sup> It is helpful to read this entry alongside Bruce Robbins's signaling of "common sense" in his reading of groundings in Rorty.<sup>16</sup> Consider Williams's discussion of the work of

15. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 240.

16. "If culture is the wrong way for intellectuals to argue that what they do is in the pub-

Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism as "a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and abstract conceptions":

It is ironic that Peirce, who introduced the term in this context, put much more stress on the problems of ascertaining facts and thus on knowledge and language as problematic. It is certain that the questions Peirce asked would stop any ordinary **pragmatist** dead in his tracks. But there is a sense in which the popularized version of "the philosophy of attending to facts and practical results" connected with flattering descriptions in sense . . . though the connection became false when it reached the reduced sense of "the art of the possible," meaning only shrewd, manipulative political calculation. The latter is still justified by distinction from *dogmatic*, the popular reductive word for *theory*, *principle*, or even consistency.<sup>17</sup>

An etymological inquiry into the word *pragmatic* reminds us that the categorical demarcations divide "practical results" from "the dogmatic"; Epstein's shunned "real-world results" versus "troping and imaginative language use" are unstable by definition. The protestation of definitive groundings as metaphysical renders the community, as an aggregate of actual kicking and breathing men and women actively making history, invisible.

Before addressing *The System of Dante's Hell*, I want to elaborate on the two sources Epstein signals as constituting his study's title. One foundational source is heavily theorized, the other all but ignored. The first, from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "On Friendship" (1841), is a hallmark of Epstein's work: "A friend, therefore, is a paradox in nature. . . . Guard him as thy counterpart. Let him be to thee forever a beautiful enemy, untamable, devoutly revered, and not a trivial conveniency to be soon outgrown and cast aside" (cited in Epstein, 3).<sup>18</sup> The second, framing Epstein's discus-

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lic interest, there is no right way. Rorty describes the search for legitimation as 'scratching where it does not itch.' In this case, as in many others, Rorty's version of pragmatism seems to consolidate the 'critique of metaphysics' with solid common sense. In the vocabulary of pragmatism, 'legitimation is but a phantasm of an interpretational authority sustained by little more than layers of fiction, desire, and exhibitionist theatricality.' In another vocabulary, all attempts at grounding are self-interested fictions, imaginary authorities set up in order to win some advantage for oneself over others. Intellectuals, philosophers, non-experts: we must all admit we are equally, democratically, groundless." Bruce Robbins, introduction to *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (New York: Verso, 1993), 23.

17. Williams, *Keywords*, 240–41.

18. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 351.



sion of *The System of Dante's Hell* (referred to mistakenly as Baraka's only novel) and play *The Toilet*, is from Baraka's liner notes for the 1964 John Coltrane recording *Live at Birdland*: "Nightclubs, are finally, nightclubs. And their value is that even though they are raised or opened strictly for gain (and not the musician's) if we go to them and are able to sit, as I was for this session, and hold on, if it is a master we are listening to, we are likely to be moved beyond the pettiness and stupidity of our beautiful enemies" (cited in Epstein, 204).<sup>19</sup>

Let's close the circle and linger a bit on Baraka's formulation of "beautiful enemies" and examine the complexities of its framing. Here, Baraka gestures toward the actual, the dictates of the institution, that both frames the reception of the musical performance as well as marks a site for the artist to push up against such limitations, offering up something new, something beyond the institutional *raison d'être* of profit margin. He undermines the institutional force of art for profit spaces, while simultaneously acknowledging their material actuality, since "Nightclubs, are finally, nightclubs." Baraka's words contain a challenge as well as utopian desire. The ability "to sit" promises transcendence of pettiness and stupidity by enabling the act of listening. His words posit stillness and (aesthetic/political/theoretical) contemplation as the conditions of possibility for effective revolutionary praxis. Yet it isn't clear from the liner notes who precisely constitute Baraka's/Trane's "beautiful enemies"—are they white racists, middle-class or working-class Black folk, profit-hungry club owners, the bourgeoisie, or patrons of the nightclub sitting across from the writer clanging together the ice cubes in a highball glass and frustrating the listener's effort to sit and be moved?<sup>20</sup> Such coupling of individual annoyance with political critique and the ambivalence in positing what group constitutes the paradoxical nemesis labeled "beautiful enemies" relate to what my essay will sketch as Baraka's post-Village aesthetic of becoming.

Epstein recounts the October 1961 FBI raid of Baraka's New York City apartment for the crime of sending obscenity through the mail: *The Floating Bear*, a journal published by Baraka and poet Diane di Prima, contained an excerpt from Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell* (as well as William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*), was intercepted in the post by the authorities and deemed obscene. As critic Aldon L. Nielsen recounts, "The newsletter was sent free to a list of artists and writers, among them

19. Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (1968; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 64.

20. My thanks to Brent Hayes Edwards for this insight.

the young poet Harold Carrington, then completing a prison sentence in New Jersey. One of the first readers of Baraka's new work, in which he sought to break himself out from under the influences of white writers, was the most representative functionary of the established order, Carrington's prison censor."<sup>21</sup> Epstein rightfully challenges the blanket pronouncements housed in the propagation of "containment culture" theories for failing to account for avant-garde writers' resistance to such forces through the construction of a sense of "self" that complicates both a vapid conformity as well as a vulgar individualism. Epstein posits a lauded Emersonian disturbance, an Emersonian privileging of "abandonment" in the American poetic avant-garde, and uses Baraka's words in their Black radical specificity as a theoretical rubric to think the repressive superstructure undergirding the poetic interventions of the American avant-garde:

Under this regime of surveillance and imposed homogeneity, facing what Baraka calls in *The System of Dante's Hell* "the torture of being the unseen object, and, the constantly observed subject" (153), the poets developed an aesthetic of experimental individualism that is particularly antagonistic to any kind of pigeonholing used in the name of conformity and repression. They are dedicated to the evasion of resolute identity and stable sense of self, and obsessed with the idea that mobility is essential to freedom. As marginalized agents in a time of enforced containment, poets like O'Hara or Ashbery know that they cannot afford to rest with someone else's proscriptive definition of their identity. (Epstein, 44)

As Epstein is careful to remind the reader, Baraka's *System* resonates with Harold Bloom's thesis on the "anxiety of influence" and recalls Emerson: "The imitator is the most pitiful phenomenon since he is like a man who eats garbage," as Baraka bluntly put it, echoing Emerson's similar warning that "imitation is suicide" in "Self-Reliance" (Epstein, 204).<sup>22</sup>

In "Sound and Image," the 1965 coda added to the novella, Baraka maps the literary terrain of his work as progressing from "sound and image ('association complexes') into fast narrative" to reflect on the "fix in my life, and my interpretation of my earlier life" as "Hell in the head," and "the tor-

21. Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Writing between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 90.

22. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 259. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (1966; repr., Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1998), 176.

ture of being the unseen object, and the constantly observed subject.”<sup>23</sup> Epstein generalizes a specific self-pronouncement on Baraka’s individual life as a commentary on Black life in North America to include white writers O’Hara and Ashbery. Certainly, such a coterie of poets felt the effects of the reification and alienation specific to late capitalist political economy. Yet the weight of objectification as well as surveillance is different for an author writing from the vantage point of a Black radical tradition, the past of which includes resistance to its members’ juridical/economic status as property. By positing a continuum connecting the three authors, Epstein erases the specificity of Baraka’s intervention in “Sound and Image.” In this coda, Baraka speaks to a Black history of repression and resistance captured in the coda’s intent to “bring back on ourselves, the absolute pain our people must have felt when they came onto this shore,” to become “more ourselves again, [to] begin to put history back in our menu, and forget the propaganda of devils that they are not devils” (*System*, 125). Yet Epstein also progressively chips away at the hegemonic scholarly tendency to not use insights of the Black radical tradition to engage and offer a reading of white cultural production. In this regard, Epstein’s insights share the same laudable spirit of multidirectionality of Cadava’s work on George Jackson, one of Baraka’s harshest Black revolutionary critics and the field marshal for the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and Emerson.

Baraka’s *System* attempts to break free from the influence of the poetic milieu in which he operated as practitioner and editor-advocate. Epstein reads the work as a “masterpiece of agonized irresolution, not redemption and self-discovery” (Epstein, 219). Baraka reflects in his *Autobiography*, “I felt, then, that I was in motion, that in my writing, which I’d been deadly serious about, was not just a set of ‘licks’ already laid down by Creeley, Olson, etc., but moving to become genuinely mine. I felt I could begin to stretch out, to innovate in ways I hadn’t thought of before. And in all my poetry which comes out of this period there is the ongoing and underlying contention and struggle between myself and ‘them’ that poetry and politics, art and politics, were not mutually exclusive.”<sup>24</sup> The novella reorganizes the nine circles of Dante’s hell as a semiautobiographical, experimental journey through Baraka’s hometown of Newark, New Jersey; New

23. Amiri Baraka, *The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000), 125. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically as *System*.

24. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984; repr., Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 247–48.

York City; and the Black Belt South—an immersion from the interracial artist milieu of Greenwich Village to the Black rural town called “The Bottom” (i.e., Shreveport, Louisiana). As Robert Elliot Fox argues, “Jones’s *System* . . . signifies upon Dante and Western metaphysics, as well as upon the black *bildungsroman* as neo-slave narrative.”<sup>25</sup> Baraka reorganizes the schematic of the Florentine poet in his placement of the heretics in the “deepest part of hell” since “it is heresy, against one’s own sources, running in terror, from one’s deepest responses and insights . . . the denial of feeling . . . that I see as basest evil” (*System*, 17). The “irresolution” that Epstein accurately names has to be thought alongside Baraka’s disavowal of elements of the work. For an artist like Baraka who so self-critically, self-consciously reevaluates his every move (self-criticism as a hallmark of communist tradition and what poet/librettist Mike Ladd refers to as “the old/Negro spirit of reinvention”<sup>26</sup>), such disavowals are informed as well as performative.

Epstein praises the complexity of the major critical interventions in Baraka literary studies for their “excellence,”<sup>27</sup> while simultaneously reducing the arc of their critical narratives to “one big conversion narrative” in which “we follow the questioning poet on a journey of progressive enlightenment, a clear movement from whiteness to blackness to Third World Marxism” (Epstein, 169). This dismissal occurs in Epstein’s study at the moment in which he most clearly states his preference for the poems produced during Baraka’s “early affiliation with white bohemia in postwar New York” and marks them as his “strongest and most enduring work” (Epstein, 169). It is not the case that the three critics signaled in the study minimize the ambivalence and interconnectedness between Baraka’s unlearning performance in *System* with the white avant-garde. Baraka’s latent Marxist

25. Robert Elliot Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

26. Libretto from Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, *In What Language?* (New York: PI Recordings, 2003).

27. Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a “Populist Modernism”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Kimberly W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); Kimberly W. Benston, ed. *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978); William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985). Considering the arc of my essay’s argument, it is interesting to note that Sollors’s study signals Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (1966) to further his reading of Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* (Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 140–41).

awareness of the need to go through institutions (and both aesthetic influences and contradictions) in order to get beyond them accounts for the lines of the novella that read, "YOU LOVE THESE DEMONS AND WILL NOT LEAVE THEM" (*System*, 58). In my reading of the contours of their specific (and quite different) critical volumes on Baraka, Werner Sollors, Benston, and William J. Harris all acknowledge that such a decoupling of influence is idealistic at its core and furthermore counterproductive. These scholarly treatments of Baraka's work take seriously, as they must, the weight of institutional racism overdetermining Baraka's movement toward a theoretical orientation of Black cultural nationalism. The aforementioned scholars refuse to conflate criticism of the thin line separating the critique of "binary" and "essentialist" logic that "pits 'dead' white traditional forms against those vital black forms that innovate upon them" (Epstein, 205) with a disavowal of the actual material force of such repressive inheritance. At a certain point, what Baraka refers to in his *Autobiography* as a "broad banner of our objective and subjective 'united front' of poetry" (cited in Epstein, 82) becomes an insufficient fighting formation to realize the poet's priorities, to transform the conditions of the majority of Black working people toiling in America's cities.

Baraka's initial exposure to Dante, the impetus for his undertaking to revise such a landscape, foregrounds the sort of historicity and entanglement, an acknowledgment of tradition and mapping, which Epstein represents as lost on earlier generations of Baraka critics. The work in its totality offers readers what the editors of *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* in a different context refer to as "the artwork as archive."<sup>28</sup> As Nielsen states, "Dante's schemata provided a structure within which Baraka could carry out his destruction of the bohemian logos and descent into the history of his own self."<sup>29</sup> Nielsen reminds us that Baraka developed his love for the Florentine poet at Howard University from his English teacher Nathan Scott. Another of Baraka's professors at Howard, Sterling Brown, conveyed to his student a sense of what he calls the "historiographic." Allow me to quote the following from Van Gosse's interview with Baraka in *Radical History Review* and from poet-critic Lorenzo Thomas's reflection on the mapping systems of *System* as it relates to Baraka's activism. From Gosse: "I learned about Shakespeare from Sterling Brown, about the blues under Sterling Brown. He taught us about music. He took us home,

28. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds., *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

29. Nielsen, *Writing between the Lines*, 80.

me and A. B. Spellman, and sat us down in front of his gigantic library of records, labeled, pigeonholed, referenced by genre, period. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson. That kind of specific, historiographic—I'd never had that kind of understanding."<sup>30</sup> And Thomas:

Baraka's connection to this city [Newark, New Jersey] was both practical and sentimental. In his studio at the Lower East Side apartment on Cooper Square he had kept a large street map of Newark tacked up next to his desk. It may have served his research needs for *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), but the map was also a sort of spiritual reminder, a yantra focusing the energies of his earliest personal awareness of the world and connecting him, at any remove, to the environs of his immediate agency. He possessed a profound understanding of the place and its people, which he later put to use in political organizing that helped elect Kenneth Gibson the first black mayor of Newark. Baraka also established a powerful black nationalist organization, the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) which later figured prominently in both national and Pan-African politics and in the development of the Congress of African People (CAP).<sup>31</sup>

The scene of instruction, in which Scott shares with students his love for Dante's rigidly mapped infernal landscape in which all beings, literary and historic, have their place, connects to this other moment in the author's Howard education. Brown's phonograph collection instills in Baraka a sense of analytic totality, important to his Marxist praxis and immersion in the tradition of Black Art and important to his earlier Black nationalist praxis and subsequent embrace of Marxism. Such praxis resulted in the transformation of an American urban landscape—the shift in political power of one of the first major American cities (Newark) to elect Black representation via a broad-coalition effort. The place marker of the heretics in Baraka's hell is actual and represents an engagement with real people, real communities, and real friendships (as was the case for Dante, lest we forget) to replace earlier friendships that did not endure (although some certainly did).<sup>32</sup> The foregrounding of individual desire as a constitutive part of collectivist poli-

30. Van Gosse, "Home Rules: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," *Radical History Review* 2003, no. 87 (Fall 2003): 120.

31. Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 150.

32. For an analysis of one of the key friendships that endured, see Amiri Baraka, *Ed Dorn & the Western World* (Austin, Tex.: Skanky Possum and Effing Press, 2009).

tics is performed in ample occasions in the work. The narrator of *System* in the section entitled "The Heretics" states, "My idea was to be loved" (*System*, 104). After the humiliation of failing to maintain his erection while with a woman from "The Bottom," the narrator flees the hostile landscape of "The Bottom" only to be beaten down by a crew of "3 tall guys": "'Bastards, you filthy stupid bastards, let me go.' Crazy out of my head. Stars were out. And there were no fists just dull distant jolts that spun my head. It was in a cave this went on. With music and whores danced on the tables. I sat reading from a book aloud and they danced to my reading. When I finished reading I got up from the table and for some reason, feet forward weeping on the floor. The negroes danced around my body and spilled whiskey on my clothes. I woke up 2 days later, with white men, screaming for God to help me" (*System*, 123).

This bleak conclusion, composed with masterful economy, anticipates "Sound and Image" in its foregrounding of sound as a creative, generative element of the performative. The work as a whole is often discussed as a sort of literary exorcism, a casting away of aesthetic influences that have run their effective course. An exorcism is many things, one of which is incantatory sound. The foregrounding of the performance of the scream as protest, lamentation, relates to Bertolt Brecht's statement in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, where "crying doesn't express sorrow so much as relief. But lamenting by means of sounds, or better still words [as in Baraka's "Sound and Image"], is a vast liberation, because it means that the sufferer is beginning to produce something. He's already mixing his sorrow with an account of the blows he has received; he's already making something out of the utterly devastating. Observation has set in."<sup>33</sup> It is the scream as generative force that registers progressive becoming, the yet-to-be-determined revolutionary futurity in the novella. The fact that the three Black men beat down the narrator does not cast a pale on the potential of revolutionary futurity and Black radical togetherness. The three men register the narrator as a petit bourgeois and, more important, a soldier in the repressive U.S. armed forces (they taunt him in a bar by passing around his Air Force cap). Furthermore, unity is never posited as an abstract, a priori guarantee in a Baraka imaginative landscape. It has to be built or performed, and the performance itself is a kind of work. It is in the cry, the allocation of sound as creative possibility and archive of blows received, where the connection between *System* and what we will examine in "Nightmare" is revealed.

33. Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (1965; repr., London: Methuen, 1978), 40.

As I will demonstrate, Baraka's consistently developing Marxist aesthetic speaks directly to these issues and overlaps with Epstein's gloss of Poirier's notion of the performative self: "The self in Emerson is not an entity, not even a function; it is an intimation of presence, and it comes upon us out of the very act by which the self tries to elude definition."<sup>34</sup> Benston has his own take on Baraka's elusive definition: "Refusing to fetishize even its own insights and assertions, Barakan Voice establishes itself in the very space of its perpetual undoing, founding itself as a process of restless positing and interrogation." This sort of establishment of voice coupled with its condition of possibility as undoing—the commitment to provisional contingency so eloquently theorized by Epstein—travels with Baraka uptown, travels with Baraka through the Red, Black, and Green journeying toward the (Communist) Red. It is the very commitment to the contingent lauded in a large sampling of Poirier's critical scholarship. Yet Benston is correct to tag and preface such a voice, naming it as a self-determined part of a larger Black tradition: "Whatever else Baraka's voice may be, it is fast, resolute in its very shifts and breaks, unwavering in its commitment to locate a precise pitch of new-old black expressivity, the elemental note of recorded blackness in the New World that would herald the supreme signature of revolutionary emancipation."<sup>35</sup>

Baraka's book-length collection *Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967* houses three separate (yet clustered together) volumes: *Sabotage* (1961–1963), *Target Study* (1963–1965), and *Black Art* (1965–1966). True to Poirier's observation in *The Performing Self* that "a considerable body of literature seems determined, that is, to evade analysis by being exhaustively and often satirically self-analytic,"<sup>36</sup> Baraka, instead of a preface, ups the ante and provides "An Explanation of the Work." The author notes,

You notice my preoccupation with death, suicide, in the early works. Always my own, caught up in the deathurge of this twisted society. The work a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness, that was just whiteness. European influence, etc., just as the concept of hopelessness and despair, from the dead minds the dying morality of Europe. There is a spirituality always trying to get through, to tri-

34. See Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 87; Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

35. Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 192.

36. Poirier, *The Performing Self*, viii.



umph, to walk across these dead bodies like stuntin for disciples, walking the water of dead bodies Europeans call their minds.

*Sabotage* meant I had come to see the superstructure of filth Americans call their way of life, and wanted to see it fall. To sabotage it, I thought maybe by talking bad and getting high, laying out on they whole chorus. But *Target Study* is trying to really study, like bomber crews do the soon to be destroyed cities. Less passive now, less uselessly “literary.” Trying to see, trying to understand. . . . “Will the machinegunners please step forward . . .” trying, as Margaret Walker says, “to fashion a way,” to clean up and move.

*Black Art* was the crucial seeing, the decisions, the actual move. The strengthening to destroy, and the developing of willpower to build, even in the face of destruction and despair, even with, or WITHOUT, the confrontation of blackness, whiteness, etc. These black men floating around like chocolate bars in the cosmos eat up by beastooth waiting for some devil to hangup a painting or something, a footprint in the snow, without institutions to show themselves, without real reflectors of them, but always seeing themselves, abstracted, and halfways, cubed, squared, drawn out of shape by their constant need to relate to the devil.<sup>37</sup>

The first thing to note is that the author traces a nuanced development that progresses in stages (whether or not a reading of the poems that follow agrees with such categorization). Irresolution, messiness, subjective preoccupation are signaled as such by Baraka in this framing gesture. We are offered up early on “death,” “suicide,” a stifled “spirituality,” observation as proactive praxis (*Target Study*), even Marxian terminology embedded in an act of textual, Black cultural, nationalist self-definition—“the superstructure of filth Americans call their way of life.” The lyric “I” as an agent of longing for the comforts of romantic love (“All I Do”) and the accompanying vulnerability such disclosures entail remain unnamed yet are consistently represented in *Black Magic*. It is this combination of familiar militant nationalist poetic quips with less familiar expressions of romantic desire that extends the sort of contingent, performative, and interesting labor in this post-Village work. Some examples are helpful. From the poem “Hegel”: “I am wrong, but give me someone / to talk to” (*BM*, 24). The short-form “Loku”:

37. LeRoi Jones, *Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art: Collected Poetry, 1961–1967* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969). Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically as *BM*.

Hold me she  
told me I  
did. (*BM*, 36)

“Where is the romantic life?” (*BM*, 83). From “Air”:

I wd do anything  
to be loved  
& this  
is a stupid  
mistake. (*BM*, 88)

And, finally, the concluding lines from “The woman thing”:

can you find someone in this nation willing to live with pure  
impression, and  
the world of essences, sometimes focusing  
to permit a man, to be seen, sliding through the world  
and this is a personal plea. (*BM*, 131)

Pure impression (perhaps to be understood as Hegelian sense-perception plus essence) is clamored for in “The woman thing.” A volume that so brazenly declares its intentions as war cry, the “strengthening to destroy, and the developing willpower to build,” is equally consumed with questions of romantic longing. The longing, mournful, and vulnerable “I” unravels and disrupts the voice of the confident, assertive, hypermasculine machine gunner. The Black nationalist “We” for a grounded Baraka is peopled by an aggregate of “I’s,” vulnerable, longing, and living the complexity and philosophical depth that is day-to-day existence. The performance of romantic longing when combined with the more prescriptive pieces in the entire book highlights a spirit of contingency in the text, an openness that a cursory reading of a work like “Note to America” does not initially reveal.

Charles Bernstein asserts that “Amiri Baraka is one of the most dynamic poetry performers of the postwar period. For Baraka, making the words dance in performance means taking the poems off the page, out of the realm of ideas, and into action.”<sup>38</sup> Or to put it another way: “Nobody says muthafucka like Amiri Baraka.”<sup>39</sup> Bernstein is in dialogue with William J. Harris on the relationship between poetry on the page (its debatable status as script) versus performance. His insights are helpful to think about the question of scoring/accompaniment implied in Baraka’s work:

38. Bernstein, *Close Listening*, 7.

39. Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 189.

Surely, it is always possible for some poems to seem thinner on the page than in performance, *and vice versa*. But I don't think this is the case for Baraka, whose work is always exploring the dialectic of performance and text, theory and practice, the literary and the oral—a dialectic that will involve clashes more than harmony. Performance in the sense of doing, is an underlying formal aesthetic as much as it is a political issue in Baraka's work. The shape of his performances are iconic—they signify. In this sense the printed text of “Afro-American Lyric” works to spur the (silent, atomized) reader *into* performance—it insists on action; the page's apparent textual “lack” is the motor of its form.<sup>40</sup>

Bernstein is referring to a reading at Naropa University on July 26, 1978, of the poem “Afro-American Lyric.” Baraka, always the framer of his own reception, introduces the work as “a poem influenced by Stevie Wonder and Al Green.”<sup>41</sup> The piece is a self-proclaimed “Communist poem” that forcefully argues that “there is no super nothing which entitles nobody to oppress nobody” and “ain't nothing legitimatizes this motherfuckin' upside down bullshit system.” Henry Threadgill's trio Air recorded this work for radio in Cologne, Germany, in March 1982 with full musical accompaniment. I want to linger on the 1978 recording sans musical accompaniment. My contention is that Baraka's framing of the reception of his own words, this highly performative act, not only spites his “beautiful enemies” but also helps chip away at an oppressive hegemonic order that makes it difficult for Coltrane's listeners to sit still. The self-determined interpretive nod to Wonder and Green encourages the active contemplation of the audience: Why Al Green and Stevie Wonder, and furthermore, which Al Green and which Stevie Wonder? Twenty-six years later, “Nightmare Bush'it Whirl” marks one possible answer to begin to address such questions.

Baraka commences “Nightmare” with a somber assessment of the contemporary political landscape:

Full of fiends, friends dyin'  
 Why we crying, was a zoomy yesterday power in they very sound,  
 & the laughter & wild crying, they fightin', keep tryin,

The singing of the epigraph's lines from “All I Do” commences after Baraka's recitation of “devil.” His poem asks the question “Was we always nostalgic

40. Bernstein, *Close Listening*, 7–8.

41. A clip of Baraka's reading is available for download at [http://www.naropa.edu/archive/syllabi/syl\\_ampoets20thcentury.cfm](http://www.naropa.edu/archive/syllabi/syl_ampoets20thcentury.cfm).

mistakes, unable to sleep even when awake?" It catalogs various defeats of a global Left:

Cd catch up. Malcolm. Could trap. Lumumba. Could dive down and  
beat, Biko . . . Cd speak Portugese  
Send poison fleas, Cabral. Cd whiteout mouth  
And sneak in as dressed up nothing, King . . . Could be wasted  
by the insanity of mistakes. Stalin . . . Could be lied about Or  
ignored, misused like diarrhea, clouding the world to a ho's toilet,  
Lenin.  
Could be studied to death in dust swept clean oh Marx Engels  
Under the academic prayer rugs of  
Loyal opposition bedbugs, right, Mayakovsky

The performance chronicles a litany of "humiliation, every night on whatever is playing, all the colored people everywhere they be slaying" that culminates in Baraka's grand refusal. In his recitation he accentuates every syllable of "not never nothing like that":

We ain't never  
Been that, never been that low, but you wake up in hell  
Sometimes you wanna know. But it ain't like that, take that rock  
You always pushin' and use it to waste the rat . . .

Baraka's voice belts out in affirmative rage, "Say I ain't dreaming, this ain't just screaming," and encourages his audience to drop "a tombstone" over "the beast."

The tombstone utilizes recorder technology, futuristically updating Brecht's wishes for his burial arrangements as expressed to his friend Walter Benjamin:<sup>42</sup> In the as yet unrealized liberated zone, the past enemy "was much more evil / than the future think." Baraka demands that there "got to be a cd inside the stone that holler out to all who approach: 'You might still have some problems but none of them bad as the ghost!'" The compact-disc recording archive serves as a place marker to accurately name an enemy, in the future, whose ferocity of evilness and accompanying problems can no longer be imagined.

42. "I know; they'll say of me that I was a manic. When the present is passed on to the future, the capacity to understand my mania will be passed down with it. The times we live in will make a backdrop to my mania. But what I should really like would be for people to say about me: he was a *moderate* maniac." Walter Benjamin, "Conversations with Brecht," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994), 98.

This poetic musical archive of defeat, this poetic recitation that advances a theory of peoplehood via a catalog of determinate negations, links Baraka's "Nightmare" to the "Syntax of Influence" that Brent Hayes Edwards posits as beginning with Brown's "Strong Men" and Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939).<sup>43</sup> Césaire's negritude is constantly becoming and defined in the work often by what it is not:

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor  
of the day  
my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's dead  
eye  
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral  
it dives into the ardent flesh of the sky.<sup>44</sup>

If you can listen, uninterrupted by the clatter of beautiful enemies, to a recitation of *Notebook's* litany of abuses, racial epithets, and supine images, you can almost hear Baraka's protestation as call-and-response—"not never nothing like that." Baraka's work posits a theory of resisting identity and historical interpretation performed by language, often marked by what it is not. Its armory of rhetorical moves complements Poirier's gloss of the Emersonian circle:

Rather, an Emersonian "circle," like a Foucauldian "discursive formation," actively creates truths and knowledge and then subtly enforces their distribution. It follows that truths and systems of knowledge are to be viewed as in themselves contingent, like other convenient fictions, and scarcely the worse, if you are an Emersonian pragmatist, for being so. It is fictions that give us hope. Among those forms of knowledge or truth created by an Emersonian "circle" is knowledge by an individual of its sense of identity or selfhood, along with the language by which that self is codified or becomes articulate. More significant still, a "circle" also determines the vocabulary by which the self learns to *resist* its own sense of identity, especially, since that identity should be recognized as, in part, an imposed one.<sup>45</sup>

For Poirier, the Emersonian circle both "creates truth and knowledge" and, more importantly, for this essay's concerns, "subtly enforces

43. Brent Hayes Edwards, "Aimé Césaire and the Syntax of Influence," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 1–18.

44. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. and ed. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 35.

45. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 22–23.

their distribution.” It is the later function that speaks volumes to an artist like Baraka. His dissemination of poetry often takes the form of recitation with the accompaniment of singers and a band. On the page and in performance, “Nightmare” enforces the effects of its poetic distribution, posing a theory of revolutionary subjectivity via a series of performed negations.

Ross Posnock dedicates his pragmatist take on Black intellectual history and aesthetics to Poirier. Epstein evokes Poirier’s learned interventions in Emerson literary studies throughout his study on friendship and American avant-garde poetics. Certainly, both writers should proudly lay claim to such an affiliation. Poirier has greatly enhanced an understanding of the intersections between pragmatist philosophy and American literature. Baraka’s Marxism insists on a sort of methodological stopgap, a limit point in analysis where you must posit causality, primary and secondary contradiction, a proportion of distribution. It constructs its methodological and aesthetic limits differently than Poirier’s Foucauldian and Emersonian model, and dialectically links production with distribution. The literary works and performances often exceed such stopgaps, as both tend to do. Yet in Poirier’s brief writings on Baraka (this is the only reliable record to access, since the votes denying Baraka tenure under Poirier’s watch as chair of English at Rutgers in 1990 are private),<sup>46</sup> the failure to consistently apply the critic’s own categories to Baraka’s immeasurable contribution to twentieth-century poetics has dire, often unacknowledged consequences. Perhaps it might be read as an inability to really listen to the performance for such points of convergence between the two thinkers.

In his 1972 *Partisan Review* article lambasting “the new cultural conservatism,” Poirier lauds LeRoi Jones (ignoring the changing of his name to Amiri Baraka) as a “brilliant exception” to both cultural conservatives and Black writers in the main that believe in the existence of a Black literature. Poirier is most likely referring to Baraka’s 1962 address to the American Society for African Culture, republished in *Home*, entitled “The Myth of ‘Negro Literature.’” Baraka makes a claim that Black literature has not achieved the critical significance of Black music because it is stuck on imitating “white” forms. He has since revised his earlier opinion and notes that the essay “was partially erroneous, [a] result of not having read the Afro American Tradition closely enough.”<sup>47</sup> Poirier avows Baraka’s exceptional

46. Robert Hanley, “Black Poet Says Faculty ‘Nazis’ Blocked Tenure,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1990.

47. This reflection is in an e-mail dated December 12, 2007.

status in the service of dismissing cultural conservatism and disavowing the existence of a Black literature:

There is no such thing as black literature but only some literature written by blacks. This is a fact derived from the nature of literature and not from the nature of the races, and it is a point of contention only to those who think of the production of poetry, fiction, and drama as the surest index of cultural achievement. Among those who do think so are not only most cultural conservatives but a good many blacks, with the brilliant exception of LeRoi Jones. Of course the insistence that there must be a black literature gives a weapon to those who are quite happy to use conventional measurements in the assessment of black culture. It allows them to ask, and they repeatedly do: what has been produced by blacks or by the younger generation comparable to the literary work of older generations? . . . the legitimacy of any such list and of the original question needs to be challenged.<sup>48</sup>

Is such a complicated disavowal of existence in the service of racial justice and fairness of evaluative criteria the logical consequence of his pragmatist frame? Does the moral of the backstory overdetermining recent pragmatist efforts to read Baraka's work finally boil down to "You don't really exist"?

Poirier writes in "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Literature and the Humanities,"

Then consider this black student's reaction when informed, probably by the chairman who approved or even gave these courses [seminars in minor figures of European literature referred to previously by Poirier], that the poet Baraka does not deserve a seminar and neither does the novelist Richard Wright. Surely even those who, like myself, would not want to approve seminars devoted to Baraka or Wright must recognize that they have at least condoned if not created historical precedents in English studies which make their opposition seem to a reasonable black like the most blatant racist and class bias. . . . There can be no such thing, as I tried to show in *A World Elsewhere*, as a successfully imperial self in literature.<sup>49</sup>

48. Richard Poirier, "On the New Cultural Conservatism," *Partisan Review* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1972): 439.

49. Richard Poirier, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Literature and the Humanities," *Partisan Review* 41, no. 4 (1974): 535-36.

In the first example by Poirier, praise of a polemical speech by Baraka offering up a challenge (albeit a problematic challenge) to his Black writer contemporaries that privileges Black music is used to prove the non-existence of a Black literature. Poirier fits within a larger debate on African American letters—you can hear echoes of Ralph Ellison in his assertion. In the second example, Poirier's logic of left conservatism mobilized to critique a right conservatism can't write itself out of the trap. Baraka in true Emersonian decomposing flare gave his job talk for a position of professor of English at Rutgers on the obsolescence of English departments, in favor of beefing up Africana studies, women's studies, and Latino and American studies. It is an unfortunate loss to generations of New Jersey public-university students that dissenting voters did not extend the same interpretive generosity, did not listen with the same acute ear to Baraka as Poirier did (with commanding intelligence), as evidenced in his writings on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*<sup>50</sup> or, for that matter, his reading of a lesser talent than Baraka (but no less controversial), in the figure of Norman Mailer.<sup>51</sup> The avowal of the legitimacy of the accusation of "blatant racist and class bias" in the written record cannot in the last instance "cover" the future greater disavowal housed in the brazen admission to never want to grant seminar status to the former and last poet laureate of New Jersey (or, for that matter, Richard Wright!). Ironically, the theory of revolutionary democracy as it relates to the construction of literature curricula in American universities, as posited by Baraka in the essay "Cultural Revolution and the Literary Canon,"<sup>52</sup> in its lauding of Melville complements Poirier's flagging of scholarly works on *Moby-Dick* in his *Poetry and Pragmatism*: "It was left for Melville to envision this as capitalism's destiny, murderous and self-annihilating."<sup>53</sup> Along with works on Melville by Donald Pease and Wai-chee Dimock, Poirier cites *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, a work by C. L. R. James (Baraka's comrade in struggle and colleague),<sup>54</sup> to make his argument. Imagine the possible corridor con-

50. Poirier, *The Performing Self*, 112–40. In my estimation, Poirier's essay "Learning from the Beatles" remains the most insightful treatment of the Fab Four captured in essay form.

51. Richard Poirier, *Norman Mailer* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

52. Amiri Baraka, "Cultural Revolution and the Literary Canon," *Callaloo* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 150–56.

53. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 55.

54. Despite their different positioning as it relates to Marxist politics, James expressed the wish that Baraka write the introduction to the reissue of his *Notes on Dialectics*. Because of James's death, this never materialized.



versations between these two New Jersey professors of literature on the topic of American empire and Melville's white whale if Baraka had been allowed to secure his job there. The openness evoked in Poirier's definition of performance is denied in some of the recent neopragmatist criticism of Baraka: "It is an energy in motion, an energy which is its own shape, and it seldom fits the explanatory efforts either of most readers or even of most writers."<sup>55</sup> Ideally, Poirier's consistent argument against the overemphasis of the political power of literary study<sup>56</sup> should allow room for Baraka's highly performative job talk premised on the abolishment of English departments. I'm tempted to assert that Baraka, in his application of Mao's theory of cultural revolution, believes more in the political import of the very literature (and the institutional homes of such literary study) that his talk undermined—at least, more than the women and men who cast their detracting votes.

The recorded intensity, the amplification of Baraka's voice in "Nightmare Bush'it Whirl," offers a quick second of reprieve when he recites the line "but when you wake up in hell / Sometimes you wanna know." The desire to know—the task of philosophy—is wedded in this poem to performative identity. The last line of the work, after the disclosure that oppressors have more trouble than the oppressed, is represented typographically in the published work as "A World! ##." On the page, on stage, and in the recording studio, Baraka steers his listeners through performance as "whirl" to the endpoint of constituting a "world." Such a world is inhabited by subjects, a Black nation, an international proletariat defined often in performance by what they ain't never been.

In a testament to the political implications of intimate longing, Marxist art historian John Berger has recently encouraged us to think seriously about "Another Side of Desire": "Desire, when reciprocal, is a plot, hatched by two, in the face of, or in defiance of, all the other plots which determine the world. It is a conspiracy of two. The plan is to offer to the other a reprieve from the pain of the world. Not happiness (!) but a physical reprieve from

55. Poirier, *The Performing Self*, xv.

56. "Literary teachers and critics should stop flattering the importance of their occupations by breast beating about the fact that literature and the humanities did not somehow prevent, say, The Bomb or the gas chambers. They had nothing to do with either one, shouldn't have, couldn't have, and the notion that they did, has been prompted only by self-serving dreams of the power of literature or of being a literary critic: the dream of the teacher who gradually confuses his trapped audience of students with the general public" (*The Performing Self*, 91–92).

the body's huge liability towards pain."<sup>57</sup> In Baraka's "Sounding: *A Measure, A Song, A Curse*," the poet proclaims, "And so the seasons, they tell us / Are more important, than ourselves." This assertion of a desire for a self defies an economic base that promises:

no selves.

only 12 hr barbaric killing of niggers and white ass working class motherfuckers with hard hands.<sup>58</sup>

No theory of the nonexistence of an imperial self in literature can finally diminish the lyric complexity of this verse, let alone transform the material conditions such a verse protests. Sometimes such selves sound longing as a performative reprieve from a world that robs us of loved ones, both filial and romantic. Critics just have to take the time and possess the will to fashion alternative structures that enable such a listening.

57. John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 130–31.

58. Amiri Baraka, "Sounding *A Measure, A Song, A Curse*," in *Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984–1995*, ed. Paul Vangelisti (Los Angeles: Littoral Books, 1996), 15–16.