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BEFORE THE HURRICANE

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THE EARLY POETICS OF AMIRI BARAKA/LE ROI JONES

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Prof. SADDIK GOHAR

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**The Early Poetics of Amiri Baraka/Le Roi Jones**

*Author:*

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**CRDEEP Publications**

**BEFORE THE HURRICANE : *The Early Poetics of Amiri Baraka/Le Roi Jones***

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## Summary

Concentrating on the dramatic works of Imamu Amiri Baraka / Le Roi Jones , critics almost ignore the themes of his *avant-garde* poetry in the 1950's and 1960's . Baraka's poetry collections , *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and *The Dead Lecturer* which constitute the poet's first phase of poetic development and include the entire body of his early poetry , written in the period from 1954 to 1964 , are constantly analyzed as a poor imitation of the *avant-garde* tradition in American poetry during the post-war era . Approaching Baraka's early from such a narrow perspective , critics ignore the ethnic / racial dimensions in *Preface and The Dead Lecturer* and seek to separate the poetry of these two collections from Baraka's revolutionary poetry in his subsequent phases of poetic development in the late 1960's , 1970's and 1980's. The major critical argument in this book aims to affirm that the poetry of *Preface* and *The Dead Lecturer* , through profoundly influenced by the traditions of contemporary and *avant-garde* American poetry , reveals a growing racial consciousness which occurs in the first collection , *Preface* as an undercurrent of opposition to the American culture and manifests itself in the ethnic and revolutionary motifs which characterize the major poems in *The Dead Lecturer* . Within this context Baraka's Poetry in *Preface* and *The Dead Lecturer* will be explored in terms of content and form as an integral part of his poetic development and search for an appropriate black voice capable of expressing the pains and aspirations of blacks in America . This black voice appears in *Preface* in terms of scattered images and allusions such as Baraka's questioning – even rejection – of Eliot's moral order which personifies Western religion and values . It also appears through Baraka's rejection of the American myths of innocence and popular culture heroes . In *Preface* , Baraka denounces the heroes of the white American popular culture , and the racial figures created by Western media and movies , such as the American cowboys , because they are representatives of destructive images which justify a long history of racial injustice , violence , corruption, evil and false heroism . In *The Dead Lecturer* , the poet's black voice manifests itself in the shape of the scream metaphor – developed from black music – which is a reflection of the collective black consciousness and feeling . In *The Dead Lecturer* , the scream gradually becomes a symbol of all black suppression of positive impulses turned into rage and violence . It also functions as the scream of the oppressed, the scream of political anger and artistic / poetic rebellion .

Baraka's growing consciousness as a black poet is also reflected in *The Dead Lecturer* in his rejection of the egocentric poetry of the *avant garde* and his own portrait of the artist as a suicide man in *Preface* . It also occurs in the poet's denunciation of institutions of white America which represent intellectual and racial attitudes that have traditionally contributed to the brutalization of black Americans . The poet's revulsion at America as a moral wasteland and a cultural wilderness in his poetry , in this context , is not merely an indication of American corruption , as critics claim , but it rather reflects Baraka's growing racism during the early period of his poetic development Moreover , the argument of this book affirms that the growing racial tendencies of Baraka occur in terms of the poet's inversion of Western white images and artistic forms to fit his black intentions . For example , he denounces the black stereotypes created by racial white imagination and inverts them in order to refute white bourgeois concepts of black Americans . He also inverts images of degraded and submissive blacks turning them into black heroes who are able to challenge the oppressor and defend their dignity . In addition , Baraka inverts poetic images and myths inspired by white literature such as Eliot's moral / religious myth expressed in "*The Waste Land*" and "*Four*

*Quartets*" as well as Yeats's artistic vision in the "*Crazy Jane*" poems in order to fit the black situation.

More evidences of Baraka's ethnic attitudes , which occur in his early poetry are revealed through the poet's call for protest against all forms of white oppression and exploitation . In the ethnic poems of *The Dead Lecturer* , Baraka initiates a radical dynamic and advocates dada violence as a potential means of terminating white corruption and evil . In spite of the violence which characterizes Baraka's ethnic poems in *The Dead Lecturer* , the researcher observes that these poems do not reveal a separatist attitude similar to the one which pervades Baraka's revolutionary poetry in the late 1960's and early 1970's . In *The Dead Lecturer* Baraka , through impatient with the rise of white racism in the 1960's , still considers himself a part of the mainstream American society and culture . His revolt and violence , through reflecting his growing racism are mainly articulated in his own terms as an *avant-garde* racial not as a separatist / militant black poet . Thus, one of the basic areas of argument in this book is that Baraka , in his *avant-garde* / pre-black poetry , particularly *the Dead Lecturer* was involved in the painful process of liberating himself from a group which attracts him aesthetically and appalls him ethnically. In other words , Baraka was in the process of dissociating himself from the white mainstream culture and value system which coincides with the poet's separation from his white wife and his desire to break away from methods of writing adopted by the white *avant-garde* movement in Greenwich Village . In order to do this , Baraka has to pass through a racial of self-brutalization in his struggle to exorcise his white past and destroy an old order of which he was a part . The poet's self-brutalizing process is reflected in his ambivalent attitude toward Western culture and white literature/art as reflected in his poetry . At the time Baraka rejects white poetry / culture and the moral values of the West , he uses and develops white/*avant-garde* poetic/artistic data – forms , themes , imagery and techniques – to express his black tendencies and growing racial consciousness . Within this context the argument of this book also emphasizes that the *avant-garde* tradition from Ezra Pound to Allen Ginsberg has provided the aesthetic criteria and poetic data for Baraka which enables him – more than critics seem to recognize-to transcend that tradition and become a revolutionary black poet . In this sense , the ethnic/racial poems in *The Dead Lecturer* indicate , on a metaphorical level the poetic death of Le Roi Jones , the *avant-garde* white-oriented poet , and pave the way for the birth of Imamu Amiri Baraka , the militant black poet of the late 1960's and early 1970's . Thus , the critical argument of this book reveals that Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry in *Preface* and *The Dead Lecturer* should not be approached as an isolated entity but as the first phase of his poetic development and a precedent for the revolutionary / militant poetry of the late 1960's and early 1970's .

On the other hand , Baraka's *avant-garde* / pre-black poetry particularly in *Preface* is characterized by its autobiographical nature , therefore , a brief review of the poet's autobiography is significant in terms of exploring the background elements which shape the poet's early poetry and pave the way for the emergence of his revolutionary poetry in the late 1960's . Equally , Baraka's views on black literature / music , his attitude toward the American culture and his literary theories of writing constitute an integral part of his development as a poet . Thus , a survey of Baraka's critical essays , which from the aesthetic and theoretical basis of his career as a poet is a significant basis for the critical argument in this book . Within this context , this critical book is organized into three chapters and a conclusion . The first chapter is a critical review which covers Baraka's autobiographical, cultural and aesthetic background as well as the entire body of his essays and artistic / literary theories from the early 1950's until the late 1980's . Nevertheless , the data of the first chapter is merely a presentation of Baraka's view which is used in subsequent chapter as a critical basis for analyzing Baraka's poetry , particularly his early poems written at the time between

**1954 and 1964** . The second chapter of this book explores the poems of Baraka's first *avant-garde* poetic collection , **Preface To A Twenty-Volume Suicide Note** , in order to emphasize the poetic contributions and innovations of Baraka not only as a significant *avant-garde* artist but also as an emerging black poet . In this chapter the poetry of **Preface** is divided into five categories : the first category covers poems which deal with the theme of suicide and death . The second category includes poems which deal with the myths of the American popular culture. The third category is devoted to the poems which attack the black middle class ; the fourth category reflects the poet's experience in Cuba and the fifth category covers Baraka's wasteland poems in his first poetic collection .The third chapter critically examines Baraka's second poetry collection , **The Dead Lecturer** , in order to analyze the aesthetic and ethnic characteristics of this volume and connect them with the poet's revolutionary / militant phase of poetic development in the late **1960's** and early **1970's** . The conclusion is a summary of the argument in the entire book which affirms Baraka's artistic contributions as an *avant-garde* poet . It also emphasizes the existence of a pattern of ethnic motifs in Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry which pave the way for his revolutionary phase of poetic development in the late **1960's** and early **1970's**.The evolving pattern of ethnic/racial motifs in Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry which is aesthetically articulated in the poetic criteria, advocated by contemporary white poets , is an indication of the ambivalent attitude of Baraka's toward white poetry , society and culture at that time . This ambivalence manifests itself in terms of the poet's two names – Le Roi Jones , the white / Christian name and Imamu Amiri Baraka , the black / Muslim name, his interracial marriage and his double attitude toward the white culture and art –his interest in the *avant-garde* movement in Greenwich Village as well as his increasing desire to break away with it in order to go to Harlem and become an ethnic black poet . Baraka's ambivalence which occurs on personal , ideological and aesthetic levels, is one of the things which distinguish Baraka's early poetry collections from the poetry of any other white *avant-garde* poet or group of poets . Within such a frame of reference , this book aims to draw more critical attention to neglected areas of Baraka's early poetry and locate him in his proper place not only as an *avant-garde* or a revolutionary black poet in the process of development but also as one of the most innovating and controversial figures in contemporary American poetry .

## Chapter one

***The Cultural Background of Amiri Baraka Introduction***

Baraka was born in Newark , New Jersey , in **1934** . After graduation from High School in **1951** , he enrolled at the Newark branch of Rutgers University on a science scholarship. In Rutgers , he feels like a black outside in a predominantly white world . In **1952** , Baraka transferred to Howard University in Washington , D.C. , where he studied with the famous poet-critic Sterling Brown who initiated Baraka into his study of Jazz criticism and black music . Baraka also took courses in philosophy , religion, German and English literature . Baraka , however , despised Howard University and considered it a "sick" institution , devoted to middle-class values and filled with Negro self-hatred . Nevertheless , Baraka's exposure to black folk culture and black music at Howard was as important to his writing as reading in Western philosophy and Western literature . It was as this period that Baraka developed an interest in both the history of Jazz music and Jazz criticism , an interest that would eventually lead to a career as one of the most significant Jazz critics and historians of the sixties .

After his graduation from Howard , Baraka enlisted in the United States Air Force . He served most of his tour in Puerto Rico (**1954-1957**) . Baraka Air Force experience seems to have intensified and broadened his sense of racial and cultural isolation which he first developed as Rutgers University . In Puerto Rico , his feelings amounted to more than mere isolation. His was a growing and fundamental alienation from American society as a whole , from a sociopolitical system that he found culturally and racially incompatible ,even repressive . In an interview , Baraka says :

***...The Air Force made me understand the white sickness. It shocked me into realizing what was happening to me and others . By oppressing Negro , the whites have become oppressors , twisted in the sense of doing bad things to people and justifying them finally , convincing themselves they are right , as people have always convinced themselves***  
(1).

Baraka's alienation , during the air force period , did not take specific shapes but we are only left with impressions of an angry young man who is full of the spirit of rebelliousness . Such rebelliousness led to a marked withdrawal into his reading and into his writing . William J. Harris argues :

***In the Air Force , Baraka committed himself to becoming an intellectual : reading steadily , sometimes two books a day , keeping a journal , writing poetry , and submitting his poems both to major magazines like the New Yorker and Harper's and to little magazines as well*** (5) .

Baraka's intellectual activities during the period typify a continuing ambiguity in his life as a revolutionary : his alienation from America goes side by side with his participation in American society . For example he is repelled by the American air force as a symbol of the white American system but his intellectual rebelliousness against such system is stimulated by his reading in America's literary and cultural heritage . Baraka's intellectual vacation ,



however , was ended when an anonymous letter accused him of being a communist and he was dishonorably discharged in **1957** .

Following his military discharge , Baraka moved to New York to begin his career among the Greenwich Village Beats . There , he became deeply involved with the entire post-World War II *avant-garde* . His friends and teachers included writers such as Allen Ginsberg , Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson . The Beat movement according to William Fischer "represented an expression of defiance flung in the face of middle-class American conformism and materialism" (197) . Baraka was deeply involved in the Greenwich Village scene of art , ideas , drugs and sex . In the Village , Baraka met his first wife , Hettie Cohen , a middle class Jewish lady . After their marriage , she "produced , in quick succession two beautiful mulatto girls<sup>(2)</sup>" . Hettie was also a participant in the Beat scene and she and Baraka co-edited the influential *avant-garde* literary journal Yugen which published works by some of the best of the new writers , including Ginsberg , Olson , O'Hara and Jack Kerouac .

In Greenwich Village , Baraka was attracted to the poetry of the Beats particularly the poetry of Allen Ginsberg . In an interview with William J. Harris , Baraka refers to the influence of the Beat poets on him :

*Well , coming into New York I was first impressed by Allen Ginsberg's Howl . It was impressive to me because it was different from the poetry I had read. And I was depressed by a lot of the poetry I had read because it was mainly academic poetry , poetry shown to me by academics , and I wanted to be a writer , but I didn't really want to write that kind of poetry even though it had influenced me. When I saw Allen Ginsberg I was gratified that I saw poetry that was stronger , open , talked about things I could relate to – There was some kind of commonality of interest . It was '57 when I came out of the service , the Air Force . I think I saw Howl some time in '57 and that's how I related to it . As far as the Black Mountain People , the San Francisco People , the New York school , I began to meet those people when I started publishing a magazine in 1958 called Yugen . You know , in the process of doing that I met Gil Sorrentino from Brooklyn who knew some of the Black Mountain Poets- so I got to know some Black Mountain poets . I met people like Joel Oppenheimer , then got turned on to people like Charles Olson , and you know , Ginsberg connected me up with people like Phillip Whalen , Snyder , and Kerouac . Then I met , being in New York, some of the New York Poets like Frank O'Hara – O'Hara , Koch , Ashbery , the whole New York Poet thing .And the magazine I published tried to publish all of those , representative of all I liked in all of these groups. The commonality of all these groups was a line of departure , a line of demarcation . They were not writing academic poetry . They were against academic poetry . Although in many cases a new academy has been raised around some of them . At the time , the point of demarcation was opposition to a kind of academic poetry which dominated America <sup>(3)</sup> .*

In the *avant-garde* , Baraka experienced a socio-intellectual group whose ideas corresponded to his own . He noted in an interview with S. H. Melhem : "I was drawn to them because they legitimized things I wanted to do and that I felt" (99) . For example , Ginsberg's Howl (1956) moved him "because it talked about a world I could identify with and relate to . His language

and his rhythms were real to me . Unlike the cold edges and exclusiveness of the *New York* poem that had made me cry , Ginsberg talked of a different world , one much closer to my own<sup>(4)</sup>" . In Melhem's interview , Baraka also says :

*Allen . . . was talking about the 'nigger streets' and junkies and all kinds of things that I could see and I could identify with , and I said , yeah , that's closer to what I want to do <sup>(5)</sup>" .*

In essence the *avant-garde* provided Baraka with his first intellectual and artistic models . The Greenwich Village years (1957-1964) , for Baraka , were years of increasing prominence . Baraka was coming to the attention of the academic world and the so-called literary establishment . This was the period in which Baraka's early but major poetic works published : *Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) . In an interview with Kimberly Benston , Baraka comments on the poetry of that period :

*The poetry of that period was still definitely relying heavily on the Creeley-Olson thing . But , while the Creeley-Olson thing is still there in the poetry's form , the content was trying to aggressively address the folks around me , the people that I worked with all the time , who were all Creeley-Olson types , people who took an antipolitical or apolitical line (the Creeley types more so than Olson's followers – Olson's thing was always more political) . I was coming out saying that I thought that their political line was wrong . A lot of the poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* is speaking out against the political line of the whole Black Mountain group , to which I was very close. That was a very interesting mélange of folks in New York at the time . You know we had the Black Mountain group , the New York poets ( O'Hara , Kenneth Koch , John Ashbery , Jimmie Merrill, and those people) , and then we had the Ginsberg group. So there were three crowds . I was sort of tight with all them , I hung out with all f them ; but the overwhelming line was always anti-political . Or , when politics did emerge , as in Olson's work , I didn't agree with it . (306)*

In addition to the former volumes of poetry , Baraka also published *Blues People* , a prose book that dealt with jazz music and criticism and a group of critical essays collected in *Home : Social Essays* .

Baraka's two volumes of poetry , *Preface* and *The Dead Lecturer* reflect the kind of radicalism that had been developing since Baraka's college years – an intense but vaguely defined rebelliousness that found its targets in racism , social injustice at home , and America's role abroad , especially in Third World countries . Three major events in the early sixties stimulated Baraka's early radicalism and provided the impetus toward Baraka's subsequent development as a revolutionary black poet- the urban revolution , the emergency of Third World nations in Africa and elsewhere and the social violence of the sixties in the United States .

Baraka visited Cuba in 1960 and he called the trip , in his autobiography , " a turning point in my life" (163) . Visiting this new world in the Caribbean radically changed his orientation toward art and politics . Baraka's visit to Cuba moved him toward writing political poetry . In his interview with Harris , Baraka points out :

***I know a lot of what had moved me to make political statements were things in the real world, including poetry that I read , but obviously the civil rights movement upsurge , the whole struggle in the South , Doctor King , SNCC , the Cuban revolution – all those things had a great deal of influence on me in the late fifties and early sixties (144) .***

It is clear from Baraka's interview with Harris , that the visit to Cuba has had a profound effect on him . Fidel Castro's Cuba offered Baraka a firsthand view of a revolutionary process in progression . The visit did not turn Baraka into a revolutionary Marxist at once , yet , it showed him the limitations and contradictions in his own posture as radical and rebel within the Beat generation in America. In his essay "***Cuba Libre***" ,collected in ***Home***, Baraka said that his bohemian contemporaries , the rebels , "have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics . Drugs, juvenile delinquency, complete isolation from the vapid mores of the country , a few current ways put . But name an alternative here" (61) . The Cuban alternative that attracted Baraka called for young intellectuals to invest their energies in creating a new and more human society.

Revolutionary Cuba offered Baraka his first concrete impression of an alternative to the kind of system in which he has been participating with an increasing sense of separation . After the trip , Baraka began his journey toward a politically committed poetry . From here on , his radical critique of America began to acquire a sharp focus. Equally the Cuban revolution enhanced Baraka's awareness of America's role abroad . His hostile attitude toward white racism at home was complemented by the moral bankruptcy with which America seemed to be responding to revolutionary and independence movements in the Third World .

By the end of his Greenwich Village years , Baraka became dissatisfied with his bohemian white friends . He complained to his old friend , the painter Larry Rivers "Hey, you're all over these galleries , turning out work for these rich faggots , you're part of the dying shit just like them<sup>(6)</sup>" . Rivers , himself comments on these years :

***(Baraka) Le Roi Jones , the Cisco kid , he was a friend of mine . In the late fifties , early sixties , he was my connection to a lot of things ... Then after 1964 , after his play Dutchman was produced , suddenly it all changed . We were invited to a symposium on I don't know what – "art vs. life," some funny things – and suddenly he decided to come out of some kind of closet with the most intense hatred of every white person he knew . It was the beginning of those very aggressive situations . I couldn't believe it . I was shocked and upset , and that began the deterioration of our friendship . Finally , he told me I was just painting for a bunch of uptown fags . He's come off it a bit like all of us do with time .<sup>(7)</sup>***

Equally , in 1964 , when a white woman asked Baraka what whites could do to help black people , he replied "you can help by dying . You are a cancer<sup>(8)</sup>" Baraka's violence was a sign of his need to break with a social group that once attracted him aesthetically and repulsed him ethnically and politically . Despite Baraka's anger against the Greenwich Village group , some American critics celebrate his anger as sacrament<sup>(9)</sup> . Stephen Schneck is more descriptive :

***He was laved with cocktail party love and lionized with literary lauders and cash monies . At first , the blasé New York cultural scene was***

*titillated by his maledictions . He was invited to all the enchanted circle-beautiful people parties. Literary events, show business orgies , and hip gatherings . The more he attacked white society, the more white society patronized him . Who'd have suspected that there was so much money to be made from flagellation ? Whitey seemed to insatiable ; the masochistic vein was a source of hitherto untapped appeal , big box office stuff , and Le Roi Jones was one of the very first to exploit it . Naturally the smart money crowd , the commercial-intellectual establishment decided he was running a game , that he was into a gimmick, a commercial pose , a successful device . After all, Le Roi had been around the Village for years , had run with the white beatniks in the early '50s , had married a white Jewish girl . So how could he really mean what he was saying ? Actually mean it ? (14) .*

During the later years of his Village era , Baraka was trying "to fashion away ; to clean up and move<sup>(10)</sup>". He was to explain later : "each night in a makeshift Harlem theater a group of young Negroes give vent to their hatred of white people . They act out dreams of a day when the Negro will stand apart from the white world , and Harlem will be an independent nation<sup>(11)</sup>" .

In his comment on the situation in the mid-sixties , Werner Sollors says :

*In the mid-1960's , in the more and more ethnocentric phase of Black cultural nationalism Baraka came to see are predominantly as a "weapon" : and he adhered to this pragmatic concept of literature even as the politics of his commitment changed . His antibourgeois opposition was now rephrased as a black-white antagonism . In 1965 , the year of the assassination of Malcolm X and the ghetto revolt of Watts , Baraka withdrew from the literary avant-garde that had been his--second--home, left his family and moved to Harlem . There he started the Black Arts Repertory Theater/ School , employing only Black actors and catering exclusively to black audiences . The Harlem Theatre project , although short-lived , was an innovation that revolutionized Black Theatre in America : it provided a model that was quickly followed throughout urban Black America .The Black Arts Repertory Theatre , which was financed with federal money , was closed when the police claimed to have discovered a weapons arsenal the building (5) .*

In the mid-sixties and due to the violence of white racism and the growing militancy of the black civil rights movement , two crucial changes occurred in Baraka's personal life : in **1965** , he was separated from his first wife , Hetti , from whom he was subsequently divorced and in that year , he moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem . Equally in **1965** Malcolm X , the black activist and politician was killed and his death was , for Baraka , a sign of the absolute evil of white society . When he received his name Imamu Amiri Baraka from the same orthodox Muslim who buried Malcolm X , Baraka became the symbolic heir to Malcolm , the Malcolm X of black literature . Baraka's stature as a poet's hero and rebellious outlaw was affirmed at various points in the **1960's** . At that time in Harlem , Baraka became a cultural nationalist ,committed to black people as "a race, a culture , a nation<sup>(12)</sup>".With other young black intellectuals such as Larry Neal , Don L. Lee and Ron Karenga , Baraka developed the meaning of cultural nationalism and the black aesthetic . In **1966** , Baraka published his

important book **Home : Social Essays** which included many of his ethnic/esthetic views and theories .

In 1967 during the Newark ghetto riots Baraka was injured, arrested by the police on charges of unlawfully carrying fire-weapons and resisting arrest . At his trial the Jewish Judge , Leon W . Kapp read to the all-white jury Baraka's militant poem "**Black People**" which aims to move blacks to revolt against white violence . In 1969 Baraka's significant book of black revolutionary poetry **Black Magic** was published . In the early seventies , he also published other books such as **It's Nation Time** , **Spirit Reach** , **In Our Terribleness** , **Tenzi Ya Imamu** and **African Revolution** .

In a conversation with Ida Lewis in 1970 , during his black/ pre-Marxist phase , Baraka , the black activist at the time , rejected Marxism . He said :

*Too many radicals are so fixed on white people's philosophy , their company , their needs that they really obscure what our own people are about . We should be contemplating how to free ourselves , not trying to impose an alien philosophy on our people ... Our freedom is not contained in the doctrines of Marx or Latin .* <sup>(13)</sup>

Nevertheless and in the mid-seventies , Baraka rejected black nationalism and proclaimed his conversion into international socialism (Marxist-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung thought ) . In 1974 , Baraka , the socialist revolutionary , denounced black nationalism . He said : "It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy ... the black liberation movement in essence is a struggle for socialism<sup>(14)</sup>" . In an interview with William J. Harris , Baraka explained the reasons for his ideological metamorphosis . He said :

*I was involved in some kind of organized political struggle that my activism caused me to continue and that continued activism is what produced my communist views . I saw that Nationalism could not solve the questions that were raised by the day by day struggle* (139) .

In 1975 , Baraka completed **Hard Facts** , his first Marxist volume of poetry . In 1979 , he published his **Selected Poetry** which included **Poetry for The Advanced** , another Marxist collection of poems . In 1984, Baraka published his significant autobiography Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka . In 1985 , Baraka wrote a poem sequence , "**Wise / Why's**" which illustrates the poet's development of a poetry that fuses musical with verbal forms and addresses black-American history .

### **The Aesthetic and Intellectual Background**

In 1963 , Baraka published **Blues People** , a book which reveals his views on black music and its influence on black literature . In 1966 , Baraka published his significant book **Home** which includes a collection of essays . These essays reflect Baraka's hostile attitudes toward the modern American society . The essays equally reveal Baraka's concept of art and his views on the role of black literature in America . In 1969 , Baraka published **Raise Race Rays Raze** , a book which includes a collection of militant essays that reflect Baraka's radicalism in the mid and late sixties. Equally , Baraka published **Kawaida Studies . The New Nationalism** in 1972 , a book which includes a variety of essays that reflect Baraka's ideology and attitudes in the early seventies as a black nationalist . In 1975 , Baraka published his essay "**Why I Changed My Ideology**" which characterized his conversion to socialism .Thus, a critical survey of Baraka's essays would be a significant entry to

understand the nature of his poetic development and explore his literary and cultural background . In this connection , Lloyd Brown points out that Baraka's essays are integral to our understanding of his poetic career Brown argues :

*The essays do indeed provide a direct introduction to Baraka's rather varied career , one that begins on a fairly conventional note : a collage education at Rutgers University an Howard University was followed by service in the United States Air Force . Thereafter , as a young writer , he joined the "beat generation " poets of Greenwich Village . Here his writing reflected that radical dissent from the American mainstream which he shared with comparable white writes , but which soon crystallized into a specifically racial rebellion against white America (27) .*

Brown continues :

*His move from the earlier radicalism of Greenwich Village to the Black Power politics of Harlem and Newark coincided with the political events of the middle 1960s when a new black militancy challenged the nonviolent tactics and integrationist goals of the older civil rights leadership . In fact although the shifts in Baraka's political attitudes have sometimes bemused admirers and detractors alike , the wandering of the prodigal has always followed a certain logic while being symbolic of social movements around him . It has been logical in that the political stance has always seemed to be the natural sequel to the previous position. Hence the black nationalism of the middle 1960s continues that revulsion at racial injustice and socioeconomic inequity which characterizes the earlier radicalism . Similarly , Baraka's abandonment of black nationalism in favor of socialism actually confirms his lifelong radicalism . Moreover , although there has been no corresponding shift to socialism in black American politics at large , nonetheless Baraka's change is once again symptomatic : it reflects a certain sense of anticlimax , even of disenchantment and failure ; which seems to have replaced the populist energies of the Black Power movement in the 1960s . In this context , then , Baraka's switch to scientific socialism is not only a personal recognition of the failure of black nationalist politics . It also symptomizes a similar recognition in the society at large , one that is often implicit rather than explicit , but very real for all that (27-28) .*

Baraka's essays cover his career as a writer which is characterized by growth and change – beginning with his 1960 essay on the Cuban revolution which is found in Home : Social Essays . The arrangement of Baraka's essays , on the other hand , reflects the patterns of his change . Baraka's essays in Home trace his aesthetic and intellectual development from 1960 to 1965 . The essays in Raise Race Rays Raze cover the evolution of Baraka's black nationalist ideology from 1965 to 1970 . His essay in Kawaida Studies which were written between 1970 and 1972 combine his continuing interest in black nationalist ideology with a more urgent preoccupation with the practical issues of political organization . And finally his essays in Daggers and Javelins (1974-1979) confirm and explain his conversion to Marxist socialism .<sup>(15)</sup>

During his visit Cuba in **1960** , Baraka met Fidel Castro and many Latin American intellectuals . He records this experience in "**Cuba Libre**" , one of his significant essays and "a touchstone for his growing disaffiliation with the American system and with aesthetic protest"<sup>(16)</sup> . Baraka's visit to Cuba taught him something new about the concept of revolution . In "**Cuba Libre**" Baraka points out :

*The idea of "a revolution" had been foreign to me . It was one of those inconceivably "romantic" and /or hopeless ideas that we Norteamericanos have been taught since public school to hold up to the old light of "reason". That reason being whatever repugnant lie our usurious "ruling class" had paid their journalists to disseminate. The reason that allows that voting , in a country where the parties are exactly the same , can be made to assume the gravity of actual moral engagement . The reason that permits a young intellectual to believe he has said something profound when he says , "I don't trust men in uniforms" . The residue had settled on all our lives , and no one can function comfortably in this country without it . That thin crust of lie we cannot even detect in our own thinking . That rotting of the mind which had enabled us to think about Hiroshima as if someone else had done it , or to believe vaguely that the "counter-revolution" in Guatemala was un "internal" affair (61) .*

The Cuban experience was one cause of Baraka's transformation from aesthetic to political protest , from a belief in the end of ideology to a new politicized awareness. Baraka describe himself before the Cuba trip as follows :

*Being an American poet , I suppose , I thought my function was simply to talk about everything as if I knew ... it had never entered my mind that I might really like to find out for once what was actually happening some place else in the world (12) .*

Equally , the aesthetic protest of the Beat / Bohemian movement against the American society has become a....

*so-called rebellion against what is most crass and ugly in our society , but without the slightest thought of ,say any kind of direction or purpose. Certainly , without any knowledge of what could be put up as alternatives . To fight against one kind of dullness with an even more subtle dullness is, I suppose , the high water mark of social degeneracy . Worse than mere lying (20) .*

In Cuba ,Baraka ,in his attempt to explain his politics, portrays himself as defensive of his aesthetic position . He told the Latin American intellectuals : "Look ,why jump on me ?I'm a poet . . . . What can I do ? I write , that's all . I'm not even interested in politics" (**42**) . In response , the Mexican intellectual Senora Betancourt called him a "cowardly bourgeois individualist" and Jaime Shelley , the Mexican poet , added :

*You want to cultivate your soul ? In that ugliness you live in , you want to cultivate your soul ? Well, we've got millions of starving people to feed , and that moves me enough to make poems out of (42-43) .*

Baraka's argument with the Latin American intellectuals made him aware of the limitations of the aesthetic protest of the Beat / Bohemian poets and articulated his "awakening disaffection with America"<sup>(17)</sup>. By the end of the essay on Cuba Baraka evaluates his pre-Cuban past as follows :

*The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics . Drugs , juvenile delinquency , complete isolation from the vapid mores of the country , a few current ways out . But name an alternative here . Something not inextricably bound up in a lie . Something not part of liberal stupidity or the actual filth of vested interest . There is none . It's much too late . We are an old people already . Even the vitality of our art is like bright flowers growing up through a rotting carcass . . But the Cubans , and the other new people (in Asia , Africa , South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way (61-62) .*

Critic Brown comments on the "*Cuba Libre*" essays stating that:

*on the whole the "Cuban Libre" essay and the attitude which it helped crystallize in Baraka himself clarify the kind of radical rebelliousness which marks much of his earlier writing . He is repelled by socioeconomic inequities , by the middle-of-the-road blandness of the society as a whole , and by the "middle-brow" tastes that he attributes to most Americans . And the moral failures that he sees at home are duplicated abroad in American's hostility to the Cuban revolution (30-31) .*

James T. Stewart argues that "the dilemma of the (Negro) artist is that he makes assumptions based on white models . These assumptions are not only wrong , they are even antithetical to his existence" (3). In "*The Myth of a Negro literature*" , Baraka criticizes Negro literature from the time of Phyllis Wheatley ( 17<sup>th</sup> c. slave poetess) to the present time as one of "agonizing mediocrity" . Baraka attacks such Negro literature because it has always been addressed to white people expressing the assimilationist tendencies of black middle class with its bourgeois attitudes , so that the black writers would attain a statues in the American society . Baraka illustrates this point :

*The Negro artist , because of his middle-class background , carried the artificial social burden as the "best and most intelligent" of Negroes , and usually entered into the "serious" arts to exhibit his familiarity with the social graces .i.e., as a method or means of displaying his participation in the "serious" aspects of American culture . To be a writer was to be "cultivated" in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was also to be a "quality" black man. It had nothing to do with the investigation of the human soul . It was , and is , a social preoccupation rather than an aesthetic one . A rather daring way of status seeking . The cultivated Negro leaving those ineffectual philanthropies , Negro colleges , looked at literature merely as another way of gaining prestige in the white world for the Negro middle class . And the literary and artistic models were always those that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class , which automatically limited them to the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available . Negro music , to*



***the middle class , black and white , was never socially acceptable .It was shunned by blacks ambitious of "waking up white" , as low ad degrading . It was shunned by their white models simply because it was produced by blacks (107-108) .***

In the same essay , Baraka distinguishes between Negro literature , written by middle class blacks who seek assimilation into the white mainstream culture , and black music , composed by blacks artists from lower classes . Baraka points out :

***Negro music alone , because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul , and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes , has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class . Blues and Jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of "Negritude" in formal American culture simply because the bearers of its tradition maintained their essential identities as Negroes ; in on other art (and I will persist in calling Negro music , Art) has this been possible (106) .***

As a whole , *"The Myth of a Negro Literature"* compares black literature unfavorably with black music revealing the latter as the expression of "the black man's soul" and scorning the former as superficially "cultivated" middle class attempts to imitate white literary models . The Negro literature , therefore , fails Baraka's standards of serious art , those standards by which he judges black music as experience form . Nevertheless, black music is a vital art form not only because it expresses "the black man's soul" , but also because it proceeds from the souls of the black poor and the black working class . Negro literature , on the other hand , is the product of educated middle class writers whose education encourages a cultural imitation of the white man . In the light of this argument , it is possible to link *"The Myth of a Negro Literature"* with Baraka's black aesthetic of the later years . Because of Baraka's attitude toward the Negro middle class , the essay may also be approached as an early progenitor of the development which eventually leads Baraka to Marxist socialism .

In *"The Myth of a Negro Literature"*, Baraka urges black writers to write keeping in mind the emotional history and life of the black nation . He calls the Negro author to write from an orientation of a Negro "to go from where he actually is , completely outside of that conscious white myopia" (113) . Baraka concludes his essay saying :

***If there is ever a Negro literature , it must disengage itself from the weak , heinous elements of the culture that spawned it , and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America. But as long as the Negro writer contents himself with the imitation of the useless inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind, academic or popular , and refuses to look around him and "tell it like it is" – preferring the false prestige of the black bourgeois or the deceitful "acceptance" of buy and sell America , something never included in the legitimate cultural tradition of "his people" – he will be a failure , and what is worse , not even a significant failure , and what is worse , not even a significant failure . Just another dead American (115) .***

In *"The Myth of a Negro Literature"* Baraka , obviously, asserts that Negro writers must go outside the white culture and the submissive attitudes of the black middle class . Instead

the black writer should manipulate black cultural heritage and adopt a black frame of reference in order to be creative .

Baraka also urges black writers to keep in mind the emotional history and the culture of black Americans in order to produce a real black literature and give expression to the unique black experience . Baraka feels that America must be written about in realistic terms by making black alienation into a powerful American literature . Baraka argues in his essay "Black Writing":

***The Negro as he exists in America now and has always existed in this place is a natural non-conformist .This non-conformity should be put to use (164) .***

In his insistence on a vital black literature , Baraka is very severe not only with Negro writers who do not write from an orientation of black culture but also with the black middle-class as a whole for adopting the white manners and values . In his book **Blues People** , Baraka states :

***The black middle-class from its inception has formed almost exclusively around the proposition that it is better not to be black in a country where being black is a liability (123) .***

Baraka even makes distinction between the middle-class Negroes and the other classes in the black community . He calls them "Kneo-Grows" or "Uncle Toms"<sup>(18)</sup> and uses these terms in a derogatory sense . Baraka prefers to use the term "Black" with capital "B" when he refers to the black masses who belong to the poor classes . Baraka wants them to change and if possible destroy the American way of life . In his poetry , Baraka moves the black masses toward revolution and violence against the existing socio-political system in the United States .

In his essay , "**What Does Non-Violence Mean ?**", Baraka describes the racial conflict in America during the sixties :

***There is a war going on now in the United States . Anyone who does not understand how this could be possible is more naïve , fortunately or unfortunately , than one would think this century would permit . Recently in that war , four Negro children were blown to bits while they were learning to pray . The leader of the Jackson , Mississippi , NAACP (himself a reluctant convert to "the doctrines of non-violence") was assassinated in front of his home. Police dogs , fire hoses , blackjacks , have been used on Negroes , trying to reinforce a simple and brutal social repression . And all these terroristic tactics are used , finally , toward the same end : to make young bucks and tottering school marms confess to the same lie the racks and iron maidens of the Inquisition demanded – that there is something other than reality . While a Negro is under a hose or thrown against a building by some dumb brute , he is supporting that lie as well as the lie of his own inferiority . The inferiority of the suppliant . The readiness of the weak to repeat themselves .To be no more than weak , or no smarter than their torturers . Yet , in spite of this , and in the face of such brutality , certain elements in America ask the Negro to be non-violent (133-134) .***

Despite the violence and radical policy of the American society, the middle-class Negroes seek integration into a society which oppresses the black nation. In *"What Does Non-Violence Mean?"* Baraka elaborates on this issue:

*The fact that the Negro was brought here as an African slave, and that he labored some two hundred years in slavery, is by now supposedly forgotten. (During slavery a liberal, or a moderate, was a man who didn't want the slaves beaten. But he was not asking that they be freed). Certainly the Negro middle-class has forgotten, or at least it is their job to pretend they have forgotten, and for this reason even the law moan of blues from some un-American tenement is almost as much of a social affront as a sign on a water fountain. This is the missionaries' legacy, the last pure remnant of the slave mentality – cultural shame (135).*

Baraka argues that blacks have been subjected to white oppression and tyranny simply because they remained non-violent in their resistance:

*If one examines the history of black men in the West, and especially in the United States, that they have most often been objects of violence rather than perpetrators. It would seem too that if there were any need to caution some group against violence, and influence them toward a path of righteous passivity and moral indignation, it would be the white man. at this point, who needed such persuasion (144).*

Rejecting the passive resistance concept adopted by Martin Luther King Jr., Baraka explains the dangers of being non-violent in a society which preaches the genocide of the black people both physically and culturally:

*Nonviolence, as a theory of social and political demeanor concerning American Negroes, means simply a continuation of the status quo. As this "theory" is applied to define specific terms of personal conduct Negroes are supposed to utilize, it assumes, again, the nature of that mysterious moral commitment Negro leaders say the black men must make to participate as a privilege class among the oppressed. Nonviolence on this personal (moral) level is the most sinister application of the Western method of confusing and subjugating peoples by convincing these peoples that the white West knows what is best for them. Since the Negro exists at a particular place in American society, which has been constantly redefined by the warring elements in white society. Nonviolence and Passive Resistance are only the echoes of a contemporary redefinition of the Negro's place, as seen by the most powerful of those elements, the industrial-liberal née missionary element, which since the Civil War has held the upper hand in the overall power structure of the society. But even couched in purely secular terms, the emphasis on passive resistance and moral suasion in undiluted leftover from the missionary era, and its intentions are exactly the same. Only God has been replaced, as he has all over the West, with respectability and air conditioning. The Negro must have both before he is "ready" for equality is the way another answer goes. To enter into the mainstream of American society the Negro must lose all identity as a Negro, as a carrier of possible dissent. He must even*

*assume a common cultural liability , and when the time comes for this white society to die , he will be asked to die with it , and for the same reasons it will die (144-145) .*

Then , Baraka makes an analogy between middle class blacks in America and the Jews in Hitler's Germany . Both of them seek integration into the mainstream culture and both of them are victims of the culture they seek to adopt . Baraka , equally, denounces the American Jews and the middle class Negroes for having no program of resistance against white racial oppression:

*A closer analogy is the fate of the European Jews , and more specifically the fate of German Jews at the hands of Adolph Hitler . The German Jews , at the time of Hitler's rise to power, were the most assimilated Jews in Europe . They believed , and with a great deal of emotional investment , that they were Germans . The middle-class German Jew , like the middle-class American Negro , had actually moved , in many instances , into the mainstream of the society, and wanted to believe as that mainstream did . Even when the anti-Jewish climate began to thicken and take on the heaviness of permanence , many middle-class Jews believed that it was only the poor Jews , who , perhaps rightly so , would suffer in such a climate. Like these unfortunate Jews the middle-class Negro has no real program of rebellion against the status quo in America, quite frankly , because he believes he is pretty well off the blatant cultural assassination , and the social and economic exploitation of most Negroes in this society , does not really impress him . The middle-class Negro's goal . like the rest of the American middle class , is to be ignorant comfortably (149 – 150) .*

Baraka also argues that the black people in America should adopt violence in their resistance against the racial oppression of the white man as the only way of surviving under a system that seeks their murder :

*I advocated a violence , a literal murdering of the American socio-political stance , not only as it directly concerns American Negroes , but in terms of its stranglehold on most of the modern world .*

*The Negro must take an extreme stance, must attack the white man's system , using his own chains to help beat that system into submission and actual change . The black man is the only revolutionary force in American society today , if only by default . The supposed Christian ideal of Nonviolence is aimed at quieting even this most natural of insurrectionary elements . As an actual moral category all rational men are essentially nonviolent , except in defense of their lives . To ask that the black man not even defend himself. (as Robert Williams tried to defend himself and the rest of the black community of Monroe , North Carolina , a few years ago , before he was framed in a bogus kidnapping charge by local whites with the aid of the Federal Government) is to ask that the black man stay quiet in his chains while the most "liberal" elements in this country saw away at those chains with make-believe saws . The Negro , again , in this instance, is asked to be what the white man makes of him . Not only does the white man*

*oppress the Negro . but he is even going to tell him how to react under the oppression . Surely , however , the most patiently Christian man must realize that self-defense in any situation is honest and natural . It is also obligatory , otherwise there is no use in asking for any right since the asker will probably not be around to benefit by its granting (151) .*

Baraka's concept of violence resistance is inspired by the teachings of the black-American Muslim revolutionary Elijah Muhammad :

*The political overtones of the Muslim movement represent this kind of violence against the liberal middle class missionary power structure as withdrawal and actual political rebellion . This is why the intelligent white man and the middle-class Negro are so frightened of this group . Because , certainly , the only real terror in Elijah Mohammad's program is the fact that even though it utilizes a fancied ethnic hegemony as its catalyst , its "goals" and its version of U.S. social history are quiet practical , as even a thinker like Thomas Jefferson has attested . "The slave ... when freed ... is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture ..." (143) .*

In "*The Legacy of Malcolm X and the Coming of the Black Nation*" , Baraka points out that the major contribution of Malcolm X , the black activist who was assassinated in the sixties , was his vision of and work toward awakening the black national consciousness :

*Malcolm X was killed because he was dangerous to America . He had made too great a leap , in his sudden awareness of direction and the possibilities he had for influencing people , anywhere . Malcolm was killed because he wanted to become official , as , say , a statesman. Malcolm wanted an effective from in which to engage the white man , a practical from . And he had begun to find it . For one thing he'd learned that Black conquest will be a deal . That is , it will be achieved through deals as well as violence . (He was beginning through his African statesmanship to make deals with other nations as statesman from a nation. An oppressed Black Nation "laying" in the Western Hemisphere) (237-238) .*

The Baraka illustrates the concept of black consciousness as preached and advocated by Malcolm X:

*The point is that Malcolm had begun to call for Black National Consciousness .And moved this consciousness into the broadest possible arena, operating with it as of now . We do not want a Nation , we are a Nation . We must strengthen and formalize , and play the world's game with what we have , from where we are , as a truly separate people . America can give us nothing; all bargaining must be done by mutual agreement . But finally , terms must be given by Black Men from their own shores-which is where they live ,where we all are, now . The land is literally ours. And we must begin to act like it (239-40) .*

Baraka also argues that the ideology of Malcolm X was both political and religious :

***Malcolm X's greatest contribution , other than to propose a path to internationalism and hence, the entrance of the American Black Man into a world-wide allegiance the white man (in most recent times he proposed to do it using a certain kind of white liberal as a lever) , was to preach Black Consciousness to the Black Man . As a minister for the Nation of Islam , Malcolm talked about a black consciousness that took its form from religion . In his last days he talked of another black consciousness that proposed politics as its moving energy (241) .***

Baraka adds :

***Another very important aspect of Malcolm's earlier philosophy was the whole concept of land and land-control as central to any talk of "freedom" or "independence" . The Muslim tack of asking for land within the continental United States in which Black People could set up their own nation , was given a special appeal by Malcolm , even though the request was seen by most people outside the movement as "just talk" or the amusing howls of a gadfly (241) .***

The political / religious ideology of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad during the sixties profoundly influenced Baraka's concept of art / poetry at that time . Baraka argues :

***The Black Artist must demonstrate sweet life, how it defers from the deathly grip of the White Eyes . The Black Artist must teach the White Eyes their deaths , and teach the black man how to bring these deaths about .***

*We are unfair , and unfair  
We are black magicians , black art  
We make in black labs of the heart  
The fair are  
Fair , and deathly  
White  
The day will not save them  
And we own  
The night.<sup>(19)</sup>*

***"The Legacy of Malcolm X and the Coming of the Black Nation"*** clearly reveals Baraka's ideological position in the mid sixties : he preaches black separation. Nevertheless . the black nation which Baraka talks about in his essay is not in reality a physical nation of land , boundaries and political structure , but it is a nation of unified black people , a collective consciousness, a group pride ,a cooperative socio-economic entity and progenitor of black culture necessary for the survival of blacks in a racially oriented society .

In ***"Tokenism : 300 Years for Five Cents"***, Baraka points out that blacks in America have not yet become fully free people despite the end of the slavery era :

***Negroes have been in this country since the early part of the seventeenth century . And they have only "legally" been free human beings since the middle of the nineteenth . So we have two hundred years of complete slavery and now for the last one hundred years a***

*"legal" freedom that has so many ands , ifs , or buts that I , for one , cannot accept it as freedom at all but see it as a legal fiction that has been perpetuated to assuage the occasional loud rumbles of moral conscience that must at times smite all American white men (70) .*

Brown illustrates other notions which appear in Baraka's essay :

*Social traditions like Tokenism are not only symptoms of the failure of American idealism Tokenism also reflects another major flaw . It represents a fallacious but popular notion of "progress" . Progress is equated with political symbolism. The racial token is therefore useful to the society because the appearance of the "token" black in a symbolic act of integration enforces the cherished idea that there has been meaningful and fundamental change – that there has been "progress" . The essay on tokenism , therefore , insists that the only notion of substantive progress that has ever been appealing of influential has been that of a quantitatively defined progress based on the accumulation of wealth ; and this limited definition of progress has too often substituted for a morally determined commitment to the improvement of the human condition at all levels (32) .*

In *"The Las Days of the American Empire"* . Baraka denounces middle class Negro who ignore their history of slavery and oppression at the hands of the white man and seek integration with a hostile culture :

*MC Negroes , I know you can still be made too . Perhaps something in the faces of white terrorists will frighten you out from under your shaky cover stories ; cover stories like "middle class" or "college trained" or "qualified Negro" or any other fake entrances into this crumbling Room , which somehow cut off your testicles, usually with the hard cold edge of a dollar bill. Anybody can print money but not everybody can live in the world with the peaceful strength of the truly virtuous man . White Americans cannot (197) .*

In the same essay , Baraka attacks the white police in America as a representative of a repressive , racial system :

*Policemen are menacing sub-humans , whose socio-cultural conditioning – because they are usually grandsons of immigrants , i.e. , poor whites – has usually prepared them to hate Niggers even before they get the official instruction (like James Bond) that they are "licensed to kill" (207).*

Baraka adds that American blacks , in their turn , should seek to destroy the white system with all its racial institutions :

*I was asking , what is the hope ? I say if your hope is for the survival of this society , this filthy order no good. You lose .The hope is that young blacks will remember all of their lives what they are seemed , what they are witness to just by being alive and black in America, and that eventually they will use this knowledge scientifically , and erupt like Mt.*

***Vesuvius to crush in hot lava these willful maniacs who call themselves white Americans (208-209) .***

In an essay entitled "*City of Harlem*" Baraka traces the history of Harlem city and the forces which created and determined it :

***Harlem is a community of nonconformists , since any black American , simply by virtue of his blackness , is weird , a nonconformist , not an artists' colony – though blind "ministers" still wander sometimes along 137<sup>th</sup> Street , whispering along the strings of their guitars – but a colony of old-line Americans , who can hold out , even if it is a great deal of the time in misery and ignorance , but still hold out , against the hypocrisy and sterility of big-time America , and still try to make their own lives , simply because of their color , but by now , not so simply , because that color now does serve to identify people in America whose feelings about it are not broadcast every day on Television (93).***

In a "*Letter to Jules Feiffer*" , Baraka shows his interest in Third World countries as he speaks about the problems of these countries : such an interest will reach a culmination during Baraka's Marxist phase :

***Their problems are usually things we do not even question , i.e. , enough to eat , clothes to wear , a decent place to live, a livelihood . And no amount of thin-swilled middle-headed talk about moderation is going to ease any of these ills . Fidel Castro , Kwame N'Krumah , Sukarno , Nasser , and some others have actually done something about their ills , in their own countries (65) .***

In "*Black is a Country*" Baraka draws an analogy between the struggle of Third World countries for independence and the struggle of the black people in America against the oppression of the white man :

***What I am driving at is the fact that to me the Africans, Asians , and Latin Americans who are news today because of their nationalism , i.e. the militant espousal of the doctrine of serving one's own people's interests before those of a foreign country , e.g. , the United States , are exactly the examples the black man in this country should use in his struggle for independence . And that is what the struggle remains, for independence – from the political , economic , social , spiritual , and psychological domination of the white man . Put more simply , the struggle moves to make certain that no man has the right to dictate the life of another man . The struggle is not simply for "equality" , or "better jobs" , or "better schools", and the rest of those half-hearted liberal cliches ; it is to completely free the black man from the domination of the white man (84).***

Baraka continues :

***America is as much a black country as a white one . The lives and destinies of the white American are bound up inextricably with those of the black American, even though the latter has been forced for***



*hundreds of years to inhabit the lonely country of black. It is time we impressed the white man with the nature of his ills , as well as the nature of our own . The Negro's struggle in America is only a microcosm of the struggle of the new countries all over the world (85) .*

In "*American Sexual Reference : Black Male*", Baraka severely attacks homosexuality as a symptom of the decadent white American culture :

*But for a man to be living in a certain social order , in fact , to have benefited by that order (and the filth of its image) and yet claim to have no connection with it is unrealistic in the extreme .The artist is the concentrate, as I said , of the society's tendencies – the extremist . And the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society is homosexuality . The long abiding characterization of the Western artist as usually "queer" does not seem out of place . White North American culture is committed to the idea of individualism , ego-satisfaction , and personal gain . "Free enterprise" , an old white man with drooping eyes will tell you . And he will mean individualism , ego-satisfaction and personal gain – at the world's expense (219) .*

In the same essay , Baraka criticize the white man's attitude toward sex :

*The white man's attitude toward sex in general is diseased . Because of his unconscious reluctance to reproduce himself the white man must make sex dirty . It is in the "individualistic" ego-oriented society that homosexuality flourishes most since the responsibility of bearing one's generations is not present among the kind of decadent middle class such a society creates (230-231) .*

The white man's attitude toward sex , according to Baraka , springs from the white man's permeated cultural values :

*Sex was dirty , because first of all it meant a nakedness that could not be supported , because men surrounded and grown fat on evil cannot envision themselves as naked , i.e. , completely seen , except in a vision of terror , hence evil . Also there was / is in the white man's unconscious , in response to his own evil , the desire not to create himself again a definite anti-regenerative drive . (Let us say it is nature's way of cutting down on destructive species.) And when the white man speaks of population explosion , he means the non-white plotters more than himself , and he is really only running down a very sophisticated plea for genocide . The black man , then , because he can enter into the sex act with less guilt as to its results , is freer (228).*

Whereas the black man has no sexual guilt feelings , the white man's Christian puritan culture is devastating to his sexuality :

*In the white man's sexual life is found the exact replica of his conscious , unconscious , social life. Reich has written about the repression of sexuality in the white man , and how this blocking of natural emission and other violent energies causes cancer and madness to white*

*Americans . And this sexual energy is a dirtiness, an ecstasy , which always threatens the "order", i.e. , "rationalism" , the humane sexual social order the white man seeks with all his energies to uphold (233) .*

Then , Baraka traces the history of sexual relationship between blacks and whites . He says :

*In slavery times , theoretically , the slave master could make it with any black woman he could get to . The black man was powerless to do anything to prevent it ; many times he was even powerless to keep his woman with him , or his children . One effect of this largely one-sided "integration" was to create a very deep hatred and suspicion in the black man for any black woman who had dealings with white men . This is a feeling that still exists (221).*

Baraka also refers to the complex relationship between the black man and the white woman on the sexual paradigm :

*On the other hand , the black man and the white woman were not supposed to have any connections, even in anybody's wildest fantasies. This was (is?) the great taboo of the society . This taboo did a number of things . For one , it created for such a possible blackman-whitewoman union an aura of mystery and wild sensuality that could provoke either principal to investigate , if either were intrepid or curious enough (221)*

Baraka seems to be influenced by the myth of black sexual superiority when he says :

*The reason the white woman was supposed to be intrigued by the black man was because he was basic and elemental emotionally (which is true for the non-brainwashed black, simply because there is no reason he should not be ; the black man is more "natural" than the white simply because he has fewer things between him and reality , fewer wrappers , fewer artificial rules) , therefore "wilder" , harder , and almost insatiable in his lovemaking (221-222) .*

Baraka attributes the attraction of the black man to the white woman to historical reasons :

*The reasons the black man was drawn to the white woman , I think , were quite different . There has never been any large currency , to my knowledge , for any rumor that white women were better bed partners than black , as a matter of fact the myth has always preached quite the opposite . But there was a social beatification to the gray lady , which issued from certain aspects of the situation .One aspect is , of course, the wildly "protective" attitude white society has for the White Woman , as for as copulating with a black man is concerned . Also , because of this protective (defensive) order the white man spread around the white woman , she became , in a sense , one of the most significant acquisitions of white society for a certain kind of black man (222) .*

Baraka continues :

*For the black man , acquisition of a white woman always signified some special power the black man had managed to obtain (illicitly , therefore with a sweeter satisfaction) within white society . It was also a way of participating more directly in white society . One very heavy entrance into White America . (No matter if any of these directions said "Love") . The innumerable rape scenes "reported" in the South and the North of white women by black men , whether all true or not , still propose a wide emotional state for such liaisons just by virtue of their telling . (They say a lot of women want to be raped ! But by a black man ??? That's pretty far out ... and scary ?) The most heinous crime against white society would be just that , the rape , the taking forcibly of one of white's treasures (223-224) .*

According to Baraka , white women are sexually drawn to black men because of the racial politics of the white man :

*The black man is covered with sex smell , gesture , aura , because , for one reason , the white man has tried to keep the black man hidden the whole time he has been in America . These were heathens that were brought over in the slave ships , or savages , or animals, they were – are you kidding ? – definitely not men , not human . And when the possibility arose that these animals really might be men , then the ball-cutting ceremony was trotted out immediately , just to make sure that these would-be men wouldn't try any funny stuff (especially not with the real men's old ladies) . So the white man has tried to cover black people humanity , to make it easier on himself whilst running his humanness , his being , then you cover that part of your own which would respond to the sex-man's humanity had you allowed him to keep it . But the stud role , which is joke / myth / conditional fact of a kind of Negro role within these liberalized communities, is a vector form straight-up America as well . In the various bohemians and near bohemians there is a kind of openness about the white man's (and women's) needs , hence such normally hidden or reversed image of the black man as super stud for white women (as that image is projected by both black and white ) is not only given large currency , but taken literally by both black and white . In straight-up America this role is reversed , for obvious reasons . Here the black man is called rapist . Where even the rolling of his eyes can get him in trouble . That is , the average ofay thinks of the black man as potentially raping every white lady in sight . Which is true , in the sense that the black man should want to rob the white man of everything he has (226-227) .*

In spite of the fact that he was married to a white woman, Baraka affirms the impossibility of the success of mixed marriages a racial society . Baraka says :

*Mixed marriages , etc , take place usually among the middle class of one kind or another-usually the "liberated" segment of the middle class , artists , bohemians , entertainers , or the otherwise "famous" (Liberated here meaning that each member has somehow gotten at least superficially free of his story . For the black man this would mean that he had grown , somehow , less black ; for the white woman it means , at*

*one point ,that she has more liberal opinions , or at least like to bask in the gorgeousness of being a hip , ok, sophisticated , outcast . There is a whole social grouping of white woman who are body-missionaries , and feel themselves elevated through such acts as would qualify them as either "swingin' chicks" or strong women , in a land of women who are , as Ezra Pound said awhile back , "Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall ... dying piece-meal of a sort of emotional anemia." This is what's known , in the West, as being ladylike (223).*

Baraka , however , affirms that even in white-black sexual relationships, blacks are genetically superior :

*Black creation terrifies the white man , because it is strong , ubiquitous . The white man is like the land , so minute in the world , so in danger from the raging sea which sweeps the world into any shape it wills . Black creation is as strong as black flesh . If the raped white woman has a child (or the raped black one) it is a black child . The black woman can bring forth nothing out of her womb but blackness , the black man can send out no other kind of seed . And that seed , anywhere , makes black (222-223) .*

Probably due to domestic and ethnic reasons , Baraka in this essay reveals his racial opinion of the white woman . He says :

*Although I will add here that the Miss America contest proposes for its vision of American White Ladies that they are the ugliest on the plant . The image I get is of a dumpy , but somehow seductive , strong whore who waddles around the house in expensive cosmetics (222).*

In "*American Sexual Reference : Black Male*" Baraka refers to the sexual phobias and racial myths in the American culture . When dealing with the black-white sexual tensions , Baraka does not reject the white racial cliches about the black stud but he adopts these cliches to foster some notions of black sexual supremacy. As he explores the racial and sexual myths of white America , the terms of Baraka's protest identify him more closely with the white American mainstream than he seems to recognize .

On the other hand , Theodore Hudson believes that Baraka, in his essays – when he was a bohemian artist – exhibits a tone of benign moral superiority when he discusses the social , moral , and political faults of the United States (86) . It is obvious that Baraka's target in his pre-revolutionary essays is the moral bankruptcy which he attributes to America's foreign and domestic policies and the institutionalized hypocrisy which , in his opinion , sustains that bankruptcy . For example , Baraka is against America's role in the Third World because that role seems to contradict all of the values Americans take for granted as their heritage – the idealization of America's past and the traditional rhetoric of freedom and equality . Baraka's revulsion at what he sees as America's institutionalized hypocrisy has two noteworthy consequences according to Brown . Brown believes that "in the long run it fuels his scorn for the contradictions between rhetorical idealism and political reality ; and conversely, it inspires a passionate quest , throughout his career, for a sense of socio-political unity and consistency , for a politically defined wholeness in which political contradictions and moral dichotomies are resolved . Baraka's angry fascination with institutionalized hypocrisy also explains , in part , the ideological restiveness which has marked much of his life".<sup>(20)</sup>

Baraka's essays in *Home* reveal his protest against the American culture as a bohemian artist and a minority writer . In the mid sixties and due to socio-political circumstances Baraka became convinced of the futility of his protest as a member of the *avant-garde* Beat movement . His nationalism , thus , emerges in response to the racial situation in the mid sixties and to the gradual conviction that any form of integration into a hostile / racial society is undesirable . Baraka's definition of black nationalism undergoes a gradual evolution . First , there are a vague sense of global black unity and a deepening alienation from white American mainstream , and then these are followed by outright separation . <sup>(21)</sup> The essays found in his books *Raise Race Rays Raze* and *Kawaida Studies : The New Nationalism* record the racial violence in America in the late 1960's and reflect Baraka's views as a growing nationalist black artist in the early seventies .

In his essay "*Newark Before Black Men Conquered*" found in *Raise Race Rays Raze* , Baraka comments on the bloody confrontations between the white police and the black people during the Newark riots in the late sixties.

*You try talk to a Newark policeman .He says WHATTA YOU WANT ? SHUT UP ?? GET OUTA HERE ! These are the first words in the policeman's handbook : WHAT ? WHATTA YOU A WISE GUY ? Dumb bastards . People were lined up on 17<sup>th</sup> Ave between Hayes Homes and the precinct . Core's Curvin was out there as pickets marched and policemen made their cracks . Crowd had walked there from round the Ward; trying to dig what was happening . The day after stones and cries and bottles and wishes bashed against the precinct (73-74) .*

The confrontation between the white police and the black masses usually leads to the and victimization of blacks :

*The heat sent along the blood . Bloods sent along the streets all that night . By morning blood and violence hung in the air walked the air in Newark thick heavy you thought it was mus-keetas or invisible rain . Crowd was there in the afternoon , on the spot , were last night rocks and tempers flew ,to begin the long drama. By afternoon the crowd made it hard for three or four cars to go up Balmont Ave . People moved in South and Central Wards , shopping out like it was Saturday . (This was Thursday afternoon.) Something was speeding but blocked. A stopped motion ! (74)*

Baraka , himself , was arrested and beaten by the white police during the Newark riots . This experience deepens Baraka's vision of the racial events in Newark and gives more sincerity of his description of such critical moments in black history :

*The wounded Blacks ... from falls or bullets or flying paddy wagons lay on the ground , except when some Black people in cars moved to pick them up ... but still they had to go to the Devil's hospitals , and gunshot wounded were arrested on the spot . In the hospital by midnight lines and stacks of Black people . Women bayoneted , shot in the breast clothes torn off screaming and crying in the halls . "You a poet?" a small Semitic eye-glassed knows . "It'll be a long time before you write anymore poetry" . A thing like a smile slithered through the vomit wheels and humanoid engines . This was a "doctor" speaking in The*

*City Hospital . Four dead that night . Ten killed the next .As the blood , the specter crouched in even the shiny America , opened the wop's noses and their state police brothers . They began killing ,When the word was given. Shotguns spiting like the live dicks of their fantasies . They walked down the center of the streets shooting . For every so-called snipers bullet , the police issued 1000 rounds . In all directions . Yet where were the snipers ?? Have any been captured ?? Can anyone prove such a thing as a Black sniper exists ?? Most of the snipers stories were started by devils to legitimize their murdering . But it was not snipers who were killed, but any (black) body . Where there was the actual danger of someone having something to shoot back at police , & they hit the ground like they wanted to go through it . Saturday night some Brothers shot into the jail . Shot out the around bulb lights in front of the jail. Crackers thought it came from a factory roof cross from the jail. Suddenly all the devil music playing on the radio (Joni James or one of them no singin' bitches) was turned up full blast on the radio , the lights all over the jail are turned out . The brothers pop pop pop . Dudes hitting the concrete floor, the pavement , and it was a full five minutes before any of the national guard and police and stuff returned the fire . By that time they were shooting at the night . A great swell of happy Black noise rocks the jail and the guards shrink into the shadows quiet and breathing heavy . They ease down the stairs to the center , and huddle down there , getting their pieces checked out (76-77)*

Baraka's account of the racial violence in Newark affirms his separatist attitude in the late sixties :

*There is no connection between us and them. Not in anyone's minds but the paid for and the cruelly misdirected. It was never about law and order in Newark . But about Force . It was never about Right in Newark , but about Power . Power legitimatizes anything ... even fags and beasts . White people murdered Black People in Newark . They are reading to do it again . They murdered in the name of White Needs . The primal energy drive of their "lives" . Just as they have been tearing down our houses and keeping our children in dumps they call schools , because of White Needs . if they did not need these things they would not exist . In those "calm" suburbs no feelings exists for human life, only the artificially inseminated beep of white destiny as it passes out to us with Dick Van Dyke and Andy Williams . Some of our children were killed to make the world safe for the Flint-stones and Johnny Carson . In the nightmare of our lives as slaves for white people , where an evil cracker named Lyndon Johnson is supposed to mean something to us , other than enemy (78).*

The violence and brutality of the racial events in the sixties made Baraka encourage the notion of separation and urge blacks to break with a society that seeks their destruction :

*We are the promise of humanity here in the Western world . But we cannot live in peace or harmony or with intelligent disposition of our energies while we are slaves . Why should we be a part of a society in*

*which we are slaves ? Does it make sense ? The cities must be Black ruled or they will not be ruled at all ! These colonies spread around the globe are responsible for the luxury of the devils and they are spread around this country for the same reason . The only way we will keep wealth and health in our communities is to build businesses and industries of our own . The white man kills competition . We do not want to be with him . We want to be together . We want to have lives which we can enjoy , in our own Black way . We have our religions . We have our Black science, older than any on the planet . We have our beautiful People able to do anything and make anything and bring anything into being (79) .*

In his revolutionary book *Raise* , Baraka , the Imamu , the spiritual leader who rails against the white evil , gives instructions on how to overcome such an evil and provides the litany for the Jihad . In his essay "*Mwalimu Texts*" , for example, Baraka seeks to establish the righteousness of the Jihad. He says :

*We mean only good faith and good works and beauty to the world . We are ultimately constructive forces . We are positive spirits ... Our ideology is "give power to the bringers of positive change" (167) .*

As a black nation living in a white-dominated racial society , blacks should be powerful . In "*November 1966: One Year Eight Months Later*" , Baraka argues :

*As black men we now understand that we can have nothing without power . Everyone should understand power tends toward the total , of being , the total . If I write President Johnson's speeches for him , he is dead in a week . Any power represents a total . So the asking for Black Power is the articulated primal cry. It could not mean simply "voting registration and electing sheriffs in counties which are 80 % black" . These are the simple garments of a more dazzling bid . Just as the thrust of Black Art was to free our images, to disentangle them from the image (s) of the oppressor, so Black Power is the thrust of our total .We must have a world , too . "Look down , it is your , these stores and houses , these hills and streams". We have a part of this earth , now. We must have a part of this earth , now. We must build our own societies . As we have, Black Men , before , and before that , and even before that (29) .*

In "*The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rights & Power Moments*" , he adds :

*Black Power movements not grounded in Black culture cannot move beyond the boundaries of Western thought . The paramount value of Western thought is a security and expansion of Western culture . Black Power is inimical to Western culture as it has manifested itself within black and colored majority areas anywhere on this planet . Western culture is and has been destructive to Colored People all over the world . No movement shaped or contained by Western culture will never benefit Black people . Black power must be the actual force and beauty and wisdom of Blackness ... reordering the world (74) .*

In "*The Fire Must Be Permitted to Burn Full up : Black Aesthetic*" , he preaches :

*Revolution , will provide a fire in your loins , then hot rhythms , Jim .  
Work is the spirit of rhythm . Carry yr book with you . Hard work .  
Brutal work . Sing sing , song in yr back pocket. Build a house man .  
Build a city . A Nation . This is the heaviest work . A poem ? One page ?  
Ahhh man , consider 2000,000,000 people , feed and clothe them . in the  
beauty of god . That is where it's at , and yeh , man , do it well .  
Incredibly Well (122-123).*

In *Raise* , Baraka refers to the hypocritical blacks , "false prophets and fallible priests"<sup>(22)</sup> who are not interested in black nationalism . In "*Nationalism Vs Pimp Art*", Baraka considers the idolaters "Eldridge Cleaver and his misguided Jew-oriented revolutionaries", and the exploiters (Jim Brown , Bobby Hooks, all sucking around looking black for white) , the ...

*...robot kneegrows ,lustful winduptoys created by massa in response to  
the power of Black Nationalism , mack around the pseudo "liberated  
zones" of America being black , as Weldon Smith says , "for a quick  
fuck", in for instance literature , theatre , graphics ,&c. so there are  
these same pimps , like the dream fulfillment numbers of panting white  
ladies who feared their peepholes would dry up under the sudden late  
SNCC , late Malcolm decamp of young Black people from out the  
various village. Haight-Ashburys , &c. existing in the main area of "the  
movement" itself (129) .*

In addition Baraka considers black artist who imitate white art and are "emotionally committed to white people" as "extreme examples of Pimp Art gone mad" (129) .

In "*Raise # 3 Presidents*" Baraka argues that black nationalism is a necessity for surviving in a white-dominated society :

*We have no nation . We are the captives of a nation . Slaves of the white  
nation . Black people must become nationalists , we must become  
interested in Black Nationhood . Then we will have a nation . Then we  
can elect leaders , &c. If that is what we decide on as our means of  
leadership succession . It is only when black people become nationalists  
and become passionately interested in Black Nationhood , that we will  
have a nation . Black People do not have a nation now because , we do  
not want one . Some of us do , but we are not yet organized & black  
programmed enough to make one . We will be black slaves of white  
nations until we want to be something else bad enough to force the issue  
. The white nations will never let us go free of their own accord . In fact  
, it is impossible for them to give us independence . We are the ones in  
charge of that – Black Independence . We are the only ones in charge of  
that . And it is up to us to force the issue . We must be Black  
Nationalists or we are in support of white nationalists . We must be  
revolutionary black nationalists passionately involved in the quest for  
Black Power , otherwise we are supporters of White Power . Either we  
will be Black Men & Black Woman or we will be slaves & Niggers .  
Either , or Free / Slave . Black/ White . There is no neutrality .  
Neutrality is a cop art . Neutrality is a lie . So-called neutrality is just*



*another way of supporting what already exists – black slavery & white domination (187-188) .*

In *"The Practice of the New Nationalism "* , Baraka states :

*In the cities , political power is national priority. The nationalist aims for an organized community . This is our only survival . You cannot organize Black people by shouting "kill the pig" . I know . You can only get the pig to look at you very closely , and try to kill you ... Involve all levels of the community in nationalist programs . Involve nationalism in possibly accomodationist [ sic ] programs . The strongest center will dominate ... We must not alienate this mass of Blacks who constitute the majority of us . So that a program for "integration" administrations of this or that are good programs fo nationalists to get behind , because in so doing they can hook up with great segments of the community , usually segments that include professionals as well the unemployed (162-63) .*

In *"An Article / Story about Newark Policemen Using their Real Names , &c."* , Baraka argues that blacks need a political / military force to protect them against the white devil :

*We must have armies and statesmen and institutions of blackness . We must preserve our history preciously against the corrosions of oppression and enslaved mentality . I wanted to show them simply that they were beautiful against the Shadow world . Against the Shadow's world . The obstrucater of light . That light was the primary reality or darkness . And that we were both actualities . And the fake , the imitative , the crony, was our enemy . Was the real devil . THE DEVIL Can you dig a devil ? Are you ready for that concept , baby ? A devil. A bad thing , floating around the world . In your ead even . The devil float around in yr head eatin up your peace. He want a piece of yr peace . "Hunkies" is what are used to say , on the street to each other trying to rip off some poison food "kits" and shit from each other , "Hunkies" , meaning gimme some that. Well that's the way it seem naturally to be (93-94) .*

Nevertheless , Baraka claims , black nationalism is not a kind of organized terrorism and it does not evoke racial hatred . In *"Meanings of Nationalism"* , Baraka illustrates :

*But it is not hatred that nationalism is about but the development of self . To grow the small self hooked up to become the larger self , selves in tune with (a value system) the morality of perfection . We are not racists . Only a Negro with a Jew talking thru his mouth could make the statement about "Black racists" . There is no such . (Vide especially Fanon "Racism and Culture") . Racism is one definition of an aspect of European culture . It is a description of one vector of that culture. Racism is not applicable to Black people , except as a pathology which manifests as a hatred for themselves given them by the powerful white culture .Racism is one aspect of European and Euro-American culture. It is traceable at least back through the "Teutonic Origins" theory ,*

***authored by Tacitus, which began to organize people into xenophobic racial categories of descending importance under the Greys (i.e. the worshipper of the Grey with Hecate . Grakoi , Greek , means Grey) . That is , they have made the world's peoples "inferior" , with theory (105) .***

In "***The Practice of the New Nationalism***", Baraka refers to "Kawaida" a black value system which is established by the famous black nationalist , Ron Karenga . Baraka points out :

***The most profound value system of the new nationalism is called Kawaida , the doctrine of Maulana Karenga. It is this value system which is the atom hot nucleus of positive political movement in Newark . Negro & elections are not new , they are depressingly familiar in my random recollection . But Black people galvanized & given positive motion by a Black value system , a Black ideology of change , is a new & vitally rejuvenating phenomenon (160) .***

The Kawaida doctrine is explained in Baraka's book ***Kawaida Studies : The Nationalism*** and it is based upon seven principles, the Nguzo Saba : Umoja (unity) , Keyichagulia (self-determination) , Ujima (collective work and responsibility) , Ujama (cooperative economics) , Nia (purpose) , Kuumba (creativity) and Imani (faith) (9-10) . Kawaida is really more a practical ethical system than it is a theoretical and structured religion . In other words , Kawaida is a calculated religion (a mixture of Islamic concepts and African / Ancient Egyptian religions) that has as a major goal the orderings of its adherents' lives to the extent that they are "predictable" in their behavior and this desired behavior is one that Baraka feels will unify black people's minds and actions for their mutual well-being .<sup>(23)</sup> Kawaida , the doctrine of Maulana Karenga , according to Baraka , "is the most complete and dynamic black ideology . It is a synthesis of all the really significant Black Thought of the late 50's and 60's , indelibly Afro-American , that it is consciously designed for Africans in America , who have a special way into the struggle , and perhaps a special role , as the second largest and richest African Nation in the world" (7-8) . Baraka believes that Kawaida will help to "transform black people" and by doing this America will be transformed . The seven principles of Kawaida , according to Baraka , are the ten commandments . If people follow these principles , they cannot kill , steal , bear false witness, commit adultery or any of the things "the Western world thrives on". Baraka feels that Kawaida , as a black value system is superior to the "practiced morality of Euro-American civilization and therefore useful to black people .

In the mid-seventies and due to the decline of the black nationalist movement with all its organizations such as the Congress of African People , Baraka turned to Marxist-Socialism. In "***Why I Change My Ideology : Black Nationalism and Socialist Revolution***" , Baraka acknowledged that black nationalists have committed a mistake in defining black American culture simply as an extension of Africa . In this essay Baraka takes pains to explain his switch from one ideological position to another :

***One question to which we must constantly respond is why did we change our ideology . We, Meaning the Congress of African People , but also specifically Amiri Baraka . Change, because many people knew us as outspoken nationalists, called by many, cultural nationalists , which meant that we thought that African culture reclaimed and projected by Black people in the United States , and anywhere in the world , would***

*provide the consciousness for us to liberate ourselves . We went so far as to try to impose continental African mores and customs, some out of precapitalist feudal Africa , upon Black people living in North America , whose culture actually is that of Africans living in America for three centuries , Afro-American . We thought of culture in too many ways as a static quality , not as something changing with reality , in all ways, and at base directly shaped by the economic and political systems in which it developed . And even though continental African culture could be utilized by Afro-Americans, in a progressive way , it tended to reflect a petit bourgeois nationalist commitment to "return to the source" , as Amilcar Cabral has contended . To try to get back to the source of our legitimacy as independent people struggling for our liberation , to signal to the world that we had not been totally absorbed by Imperialism's cultural aggression . But from Cabral we also began to understand that even our concern for culture had to be re-examined , and that finally our culture here in North America , if it was going to be a national Black culture , had to be the culture of the Black working class, urban and country , as well as the progressive nationalist projections of the urban petit bourgeoisie , which did include a determination to identity with Africa (30-31) .*

Discussing the reasons for the failure of black nationalism , Baraka adds :

*We changed our views from cultural nationalists because we have always viewed ourselves as revolutionaries . Black people struggling for national liberation . We have not ever thought we needed to be fixed at any point or intractable on any view , except the view that we must be totally dedicated to the liberation of Black people in North Africa . When we were Pan-Africanists we said we struggled for the liberation of Black people all over the world and we are still wholly committed to that view . But at the same time, we saw that it was not simply white people that oppressed us . With the end of the sixties and the full emergence of neo-colonialism – that is , the rule of Imperialism through native agents , not only throughout Africa , and the rest of the Third World , but like one of those trick wishes the gophers get on the twilight zone – we saw this plague spread throughout the United States , under the guise of Black Power . So that in many places across this country where once it seemed simply like Black versus white . the growth and consolidation of our Black petit bourgeoisie , our middle class , grown fat off the gains made by the struggle of the people , in the civil-rights movement, our development to the consciousness that we were an oppressed Black nation , i.e., Black nationalism , the Black Power movements , Rebellions , Marxism , Africanism –these developments along with others, made us re-evaluate our position (31-32) .*

Baraka illustrates that black nationalism as an ethnic movement has declined at the end of the sixties for many reasons :

*At the end of the sixties , much of the militancy had been co-opted and many of the militants themselves dead . locked up , exiled .By the middle seventies , the Black mayors , congressmen , ambassadors , generals ,*

*athletes, entertainers , businessmen still crying Black , had moved into residence still crying Black , had moved into residence in the American system , and those of us who were still determined to serve the people begun to understand that merely putting Black faces in high places , without changing the fundamental nature of the system itself , simply served to make that system more flexible and more dangerous , since for the masses of us – even though there had developed a class of Blacks whose interests obviously differed with the majority of us ... because of their rise and inclusion into the petit bourgeois- the hardship , exploitation and oppression continued (33) .*

As a Marxist , Baraka provides a new definition of racism :

*Racism is not merely the belief in the inferiority of a people : it is also the military enforcement of that enforced inferiority . And racism has become , since the development of the slave trade , an integral aspect of Euro-American culture . Racism is not merely a device the ruling class gets out of the closet to divide Black and white workers : racism and chauvinism are ideologies of capitalism , justification for the economic base , embedded in the thought , laws , customs and social relations of the capitalist world (33).*

Baraka , nevertheless , believes that Marxist Socialism is a continuation of the black struggle for liberation :

*Our revolutionary socialist ideology does not turn us away from Black Liberation ; it teaches us that there can be no Black liberation until capitalism is destroyed; that not only do we suffer from national oppression as an oppressed Black Nation , but also from the class oppression of workers in relationship to the capitalists . A double oppression , a super exploitation , and the duality of this oppression and the twin aspects of our struggle , must be understood if we are to struggle with the intensity our liberation demands . For this reason a revolutionary nationalism is necessary , even as communists seeking the find and ultimate destruction of the capitalist system through violent revolution ; a revolutionary nationalism only in so far as it continues to confirm our struggle as part of the Black Liberation movement . But this is important : the Black Liberation movement must be seen as a part of the struggle waged by peoples around the world to end the primitive social system based on exploitation of the masses of humanity (36) .*

Afterwards , Baraka explains his new ideology :

*We see our rule , as a revolutionary communist organization , to begin to integrate Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung-Thought with the day-to-day practice , day-to-day struggle , of the black Liberation movement; to inject scientific socialism into the movement of working people for a bitter life , because they will understand that finally the only way to a better life for all the people is through elimination of capitalism and the coming of socialism . That is , to end the private ownership of the means*

*of producing and distributing and exchanging wealth , and see to the public ownership , the collective ownership , of the land , the factories , the machines , the mineral wealth , the energy resources (38) .*

Baraka's Marxist ideology includes a program of organized struggle against Western / capitalist exploitation of people in America and Third World countries :

*our revolutionary theories can only come to completion in practice , right out on the sidewalks . The development of our revolutionary parties will only come with the day-to-day practical struggle not only against bad ideas but in open confrontation with revolutionary forces . The only way out of the depression for the capitalists is war. War in the Middle East , most likely ; or war in Southeast Asia . In the Middle East it will be the oil swindle . We are told that the Arabs are responsible for the unemployment in the United States , that the Arabs are responsible for the depression, that the Arabs are causing our problems because they raised the price of the oil. But the truth of this matter is that Rockefeller and Company controls the oil . Standard Oil , Exxon , Mobil , Gulf , Royal Dutch Shell, Texaco , British Petroleum , control the oil .The Arabs are only struggling for a share of the profits on that oil coming out of their land , while Rockefeller and Company realize super profits , and control Europe because Europeans depend on Middle East oil.....(40) .*

A part of Baraka's revolutionary ideology is inspired by the teachings of Mao :

*We realize , as Mao said , that for so-called revolutionaries there are only three ways to relate to the masses of the people , either as revolutionaries helping to lead them in making revolution ; or through subjectivism and error , trailing the masses gesticulating and criticizing ; or the get in the peoples way . We choose the first or to get in the peoples way . We choose the first way (41) .*

Baraka adds :

*We are proving every day that we are determined to see those three magic weapons that Mao spoke of some into being in the United States , to function to liberate Black people and oppressed people all over this land , as part of the liberation struggles of oppressed people worldwide . Guided by the science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-Tung Thought (41-42) .*

Baraka ends his essay with the following celebratory note :

*Expose the illusion of bourgeois democracy and rip the covers off their lackeys! Let the people  
find out armed struggle is inevitable!  
Victory to Black people !  
Victory to the strugglers !  
Victory to all oppressed people ! (42)*

A part from the reasons that Baraka offers for the failure of black nationalism, Baraka's shift to socialism completes a cycle of sorts in his intellectual development. In other words, Baraka's admission that the black nationalists were unrealistic in treating black Americans as Africans returns him to an earlier position- that has already been noted in his pre-black essays – that however distinctive, the black American experience is basically American. Baraka's Marxist phase seems to be a culmination of the sympathies that were first stirred by the early visit to Cuba. For despite the black nationalist interlude both the early interest in Third World revolution and his commitment to socialism in the mid seventies are the outgrowth of a certain commitment to the ideal possibilities of American society, a commitment that accentuates Baraka's revulsion at the failures of the American society without (apart from his black nationalist phase)<sup>(24)</sup> inspiring the need to reject it in its entirety. In abandoning racially defined approaches to the problems of American society, Baraka is therefore reaffirming some of his earliest perceptions of the American society. In this context, Baraka's conversion to Marxist reflects a long-range consistency in Baraka's political ideology. Despite Baraka's switch from one ideology to another his antipathies to the American mainstream culture remained consistent.

### ***Baraka's Concept of Art***

Baraka's early essays when he was a bohemian artist rarely emphasize the implications of his ethnicity and attribute great importance to the contradictions between bourgeois and bohemian than white and black. Moreover, Baraka's Beat / bohemian aesthetic; while striving for a unity of life and art, ignores the social and political implications of poetry. During his *avant-garde* phase, Baraka believes that the effect of the poem on the reader and its relationship to reality are subordinated to the primary demand that a poem be an "honest" expression of his author. In "*How You Sound*", Baraka echoes his contemporaries.

***MY POETRY is whatever I think I am ... I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN ... I must be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem, "All is permitted" ... Three cannot be anything I must fit the poem into. Everything must be made to fit into the poem. There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what***

According to this view, the socio-political aspect of poetry is totally secondary to the "expressive" elements of art. The literary tradition is utilized to feed the needs of the writer. Since the bourgeoisie remains associated with artificial worship, Werner Sollors argues, "Baraka Bohemian aesthetic is anti-objectives: artifacts are secondary, art takes place in the creative process" (32).

After his return from Cuba, Baraka establishes the elements of his post Cuban aesthetic. To Baraka, the real artist must express political, ethnic and aesthetic commitment in the best modern idiom, informed by Pound and Joyce, Melville and Kafka, but as a black artist, he must also draw on black speech and black music from folk expression to avant-gardism. The artist must not surrender to bourgeois concepts and "artifact fetishism" and must give priority to the dynamic and improvisational process which Baraka calls "art-ing"<sup>(26)</sup>. After his experience in Cuba, Baraka develops his artistic theory which is primarily expressed in "*How You Sound*": "I must be completely free to do just what I want in the poem".

Baraka extends the freedom of spontaneous art to include political freedom. Thus, Baraka states in "*Tokenism :300 Years for Five Cents*" that it is not progress that the majority of Negroes want but freedom (70). Raking "freedom" a political just as much as an aesthetic

demand means asking writers to be socially committed . In *"Brief Reflections on Two Hot Shots"*, Baraka maintains that , unlike the black novelist James Baldwin, a writer ...

***Must have a point of view , or he cannot be a good writer . He must be standing somewhere in the world , or else he is not one of us , and his commentary then is of little value (118) .***

Baraka's shift from the non-ethnic point of view of the early sixties to the ethnic consciousness of the mid sixties is symptomatic of the period in which it occurred . Baraka sees Western culture as stagnant , debilitated , arid and sees America as a moral waste land . Because Baraka , in the mid sixties came to believe that art should have a social function , he sees Western art as non-art : "The world art", he says , "is something the West has never understood . Art is supposed to be a part of a community like scholars are supposed to be a part of a community ... Art is to decorate people's houses , their skin , their clothes , to make them expand to the right in the community , where they can have it when they want it ... It's supposed to be as essential as a grocery store ... That's the only way art can function naturally"<sup>(27)</sup>. The major point in this connection is that the Western world worships the artifact when it should value the artistic act. This is the central issue of Baraka's essay *"Hunting is not Those Heads on the Wall"* .

***Overemphasis on the artifact , Baraka feels, wrongly negates expression in favor of reflection "It was, and is", he asserts in Blues People , "inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music , dancing , song , the artifact , and a man's life or his worship of his gods .Expression issued from life, and was beauty . But in the West , the 'triumph of the economic mind over the imagination' , as Brooks Adams said , made possible this dreadful split between life and art" (28)***

Thus , in the absence of a living art , Baraka says in *Home* , Western "white man is in love with the past ... because it is in the past that he really exists ... The white man worships the artifact" <sup>(28)</sup> .

Baraka , in is nationalist phase , rejects the theory of art-for-art's sake , which focuses on the aesthetic pleasure of art ,as a product of Euro-American culture . Instead , he advocates a committed and pragmatic art . In *"Brief Reflection on Two Hot Shots"* , Baraka says : "A writer must have a point of view , or he cannot be a writer . He must be standing somewhere in the world or else he is not one of us , and his commentary is of little value" (118) . Baraka's nationalist theory of art is motivated by political and moral orientation toward the black world thus advocating a literature for social change . . Baraka sees art primarily as a weapon and he writes socially committed poetry particularly during his ethno-centric phase of poetic development in the mid and late sixties. In his essay *"State/Meant"* , Baraka defines the black artist's role . Baraka says :

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

*Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image the world . He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul . The Black Artist must demonstrate sweet life , how it differs from the deathly grip of the White Eyes . The Black Artist must teach the White Eyes their deaths and teach the black man how to bring these deaths about <sup>(29)</sup> .*

In "**Black Writing**", Baraka urges black writers to write from an ethno-centric position . Baraka argues :

*Black writers are stuck because they're always talking about their people . "There is no real answer to that. But who does anyone talk about ? Hemingway is always talking about his people , or Joyce . What does anyone think the Dubliners were- -abstract literary categories ? "* (163)

America , Baraka feels , must be written about in realistic terms . As this applies to black writers , he says :

*I think though that there are now a great many young black writers in America who do realize that their customary isolation from mainstream is a valuable way into any description they might make of an America . In fact ; it is just this alienation that could serve to make a very powerful American literature , since its hypothetical writers function in many senses within the main structure of American society as well . The Negro, as he exists in America now , and has always existed in this place (certainly after formal slavery ) , is a natural non-conformist . Being black in a society where such a state is an extreme liability is the most extreme form of non-conformity available . The point is , of course , that this non-conformity should be put to use (164).*

In "**Work Notes – 66**" , Baraka argues that black art has an important message :

*Art must serve to illuminate and educate , Enlighten by delightin , Stimulate : the image must carry and carry us to the goal the place desired . Each aspect of black life must have light shed on it , must be analyzed , must make the pain of recognizing the exact place of our crucifixion , the exact sloth and cowardliness , the precise ugliness and ignorance (14) .*

Black art , as Baraka states in "**Black Art , Nationalism . Organization , Black Institution**" is deeply rooted in black life and black cultural heritage :

*The art of the black man , the knowledge of the black man are his but they are not completely his unless he is conscious of them , and more , conscious of their uses . The Role and Source of Black Art – From the life and history of the people . The environment and vibration , of the people . All the people as a body , one cell of creation , united , conscious , or disunited , i.e. unconscious , in love with illusion , powerless . To be conscious , is to be united with yourself . It is to be in*



***Reality . The closer we move to Reality , the closer we move toward Unity . They are the same , one thing . To be a black artist is to go back in time for the purpose of developing and defending what we need in the present for the future (97) .***

Black art , as Baraka maintains in "*Nationalism Vs Pimp Art*" should have an ethno-nationalism vision :

***The Art is The National Spirit . That manifestation of it. Black Art must be the Nationalist's vision giving more form and feeling , as a razor to cut away what is not central to National Liberation . To show that which is . As a humanistic expression Black Art is a raiser , as a spiritual expression it is itself raised . And these are the poles , out of which we create , to raise , or as raised (127) .***

In "*Negro Theater Pimps Get Big off Nationalism*" , Baraka illustrates that any black artist should be aware of the Kawaida doctrine of the black activist , Ron Karenga, in order to produce functional and effective black art :

***The black artist who does not know the thought of Maulana Karenga is probably moving too randomly (ovyo is the Swahili word for that) . Identity , Purpose and Direction is what you need and what you must provide to the black community . If you are providing them with the identity, purpose and direction of the oppressor you are ignorant or sick . The Negro Theater Pimps are both (115) .***

In spite of the anger and violence of black poetry , Baraka believes that such poetry has a human message to deliver .In "*The World You're Talking About*" , he says:

***The Black Poetry deals with the spirit . I've said, "We are human knowing spirit" . Our reach , our walk , our animation past , our selves standing mute on the block before the iceman's trigger . Whatever our "techniques" , we are , our lives demand that we be , humanists . So our content is reality about a world of humans and their paths and forms (35-36) .***

In addition , Baraka attacks white American poetry in "*Poetry and Karma*" :

***American poetry reflects American lives , The various kinds , as they are found , in America , from whatever voices . Each voice is a place , in America ,in the totality of its image . All these vices are different facts of that image . The whole , it should be clear , is like that of the final Dorian Gray , stretched out on the floor in his Victorian vine , drowned in his own putrescence and evil . The portrait changes , miraculously back to the fair , the uplifted . Dorian himself is the reality (17) .***

To Baraka , American poetry is a reflection of a decadent culture :

***The poetry in America is America's heart . Americans die from heart failure . No hearts , abruptly . (Quiet as it's kept they never had any to begin with) . A centuries old defect .The poetry of straight-up Christian***

***White America is White Christian Poetry . A poetry that runs its madness elopement in search of the sweetness of dead/ness . The chitterwhimper of some kind of highly domesticated animals who laugh or growl when near human beings . Tiny hairless flesh eaters who eat their doo-doo with little fingers extended . They are so cool (18) .***

Then , Baraka denounces white American poetry which he admired when he was an avant-gardist poet :

***White poetry is like white music (for the most part , and even taking into account those "imitations" I said , which are all as valid as W.C. Williams writing about Bunk Johnson's band . Here the axles turn , the rust churned and prepositioned . The death more subtly or more openly longed-for . Creeley's black box , Olson's revivification of the dead , Ginsberg's screams at his own shadowy races or the creepier elements completely covered up with silver rubied garbage artifacts and paintings and manners and ideas , my god they got a buncha idea , and really horrible crap between them and anything meaningful they probably belch without feeling (23) .***

Rejecting white-oriented poetry during his militant phase , Baraka wants the black poet to create black poetry by separating himself completely from the American Mainstream culture . Baraka aims at linking poetry and politics in order to give expression to black experience and assist in the liberation of black people . Black poetry / art should be addressed directly to black people and it should provide them with an insight into their cultural heritage . The black artist should provide "identity, propose and direction" in his art . Black art according to Baraka should not only inspire and educate blacks by elucidating the black American consciousness but it should also aid in the destruction of white America. In his phase as a militant black poet, Baraka separates himself and his art from white culture . He writes poetry exclusively for black people prophesying the black millennium in an apocalyptic rhetoric .

Baraka's black art , as defined by Maulana Karenga , is "functional , collective and committing" . Thus , black art is collective because it is created out of the context of the black people . It is functional because it is a useful art created for the sake of a purpose . Black art is also committing because it commits blacks to revolution and change . In "*Negro Theatre Pimps Get off Nationalism*", Baraka argues that black art must reflect and support black revolution . He says : "black art must expose the enemy , praise the people and support the revolution" (112) . During his phase of extreme nationalism , Baraka redefines the function of art . To him , the pragmatic value of a work of art , that is , its effect on audience , is more important than its expressive qualities . In Baraka's concept of black aesthetic , the transformation of a message from a teaching black author to a learning black audience is the touchstone of literary achievement , other considerations are of secondary importance . The final value of a work of art , according to Baraka , is judged in terms of its effective quality : "The question is not how beautiful is a melody , a play , a poem or a novel , made the life of a single black man "<sup>(30)</sup>. This black aesthetic is a reversal of the earlier Beat aesthetic of Baraka that "I must be completely free to do just what I want in the poem" . Moreover , the advocates of a black aesthetic such as Larry Neal, Addison Gayle Jr. , and Baraka lay down a set of rules by which black literature is to be judged . Black literary works , according to these writers , should depict black life with its distinctive styles and rhythms . Black writers who stick to the black aesthetic should rediscover black historical and culture heritage seeing it

with newly focused eyes , revealing the strength which has enabled blacks to endure three hundred years of prolonged oppression . The advocates of the black aesthetic have established certain criteria by which they measure works of art eliminating from consideration those literary works, poems , plays and essays which do not adequately reflect the black experience . The advocates of the black aesthetic do not want black literary works to be judged in terms of the critical standards of Western white art because they do not accept the Western frame of reference for black literature and black people, Frantz Fanon argues that "in the time of revolutionary struggle , the traditional Western liberal ideals are not merely irrelevant but they must be assiduously opposed" <sup>(31)</sup> .

Some critics , nevertheless , have questioned the existence of a thing called black aesthetic . They point out that no one has convincingly demonstrated that a black aesthetic refers to a unique black mode of creating and perceiving art . Nevertheless, the advocates of the black aesthetic theory point out the inadequacy of Western art in dealing with the experience of black people . According to Baraka , black art should arise from a uniquely black cultural tradition and demand a critical approach totally related to the ethnic experience of black people .Equally , Addison Gayle Jr. , one of the most famous articulate proponents of a black aesthetic contrasts black aesthetic with white aesthetic. He perceives the white aesthetic as a single-minded approach to art for art's sake whereas a black aesthetic is defined as a functional view of art , one which rejects the notion of the art for art's sake . In his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* , Addison Gayle Jr. argues :

*Each has his own idea of the Black Aesthetic , of the function of the black artist in the American society and of the necessity for new and different critical approaches to the artistic endeavors of black artists . Few , I believe , would argue with my assertion that the black artist , due to his historical position in America in the present time , is engaged in a war with this nation that will determine the future of black art . Likewise , there are few among them-and here again this is only conjecture – who would disagree with the idea that unique experiences produce unique cultural artifacts , and that art is a product of such cultural experiences . To push this thesis to its logical conclusion , unique art derived from unique cultural experiences mandates unique critical tools for evaluation . Further than this , agreement need not go (23) .*

Equally , Larry Neal , in "*The Black Arts Movement*"<sup>(32)</sup> illustrates his concept of a black aesthetic as follows :

*When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant . First , we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic . Essentially , it consists of an African-American cultural tradition . But this aesthetic is finally , by implication , broader than that tradition . It encompasses most of the useable elements of Third World culture . The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas , and white ways of looking at the world . The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an ethnic which asks the question : whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful , ours or the white oppressors' ? What is truth ? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express , that of the oppressed or of the oppressors ? These are basic questions . Black intellectuals of*

*previous decades failed to ask them . Further , national and international affairs demand that we appraise the world in terms of our own interests. It is clear that the question of human survival is at the core of contemporary experience . The Black artist must address himself to this reality in the strongest terms possible . In a context of world upheaval , ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world . Consequently , The Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement . Ethical , that is , from the view point of the oppressed . And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to Euro-American cultural sensibility. This sensibility , anti-human in nature , has, until recently , dominated the psyches of most Black artist and intellectuals ; it must be destroyed before the Black creative artist can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society (254) .*

Like Larry Neal , Baraka as a black militant poet , lays emphasis on the role of the artist and his commitment to certain goals which are of primary importance . Baraka , through his black art, wants the American way of life radically changed , if not completely destroyed ; a notion which equally dominates Baraka's phase as a Marxist-oriented writer .

### ***Baraka's Concept of Revolution And Violence***

A careful reading of Baraka's essays affirms that the poet's racial consciousness in the mid 1960's undergoes a process of transformation manifesting itself in the poet's attitudes toward the concept of violence and revolution which subsequently influence his concept of art . For example Baraka as a poet does not believe in non-violence or passive resistance as mode of racial change as advocated by Martin Luther King . According to Baraka , non-violence offers no real alternatives to the existing system and a change in the status quo could be brought about only by resorting to violence . Baraka feels that the passive resistance program , speeches , marches and demonstrations could not solve the racial conflict in America . The only alternative , therefore , would be the destruction of the present socio-political structure . In 1963 Baraka wrote , "The only genuine way , it seems to me , for the Negro to achieve s personal autonomy , this equality of means , would be as a truly active moralizing force within or against American society as it now stands. In this sense I advocate a violence , a literal murdering of the American socio-political stance , not only as it directly concerns American Negroes , but in terms of its stranglehold on most of the modern world"<sup>(33)</sup> Of course , Baraka's earlier call for the destruction of the American socio-political system must be considered along with his later learning from Malcolm X about "deals" , his later political activities in Newark , and his later national political activities . Whatever the future proves his stance to be , he has been consistent in preaching revolution . Revolution connotes upheaval , violence , drastic traumatic change .

Baraka has not consistently and systematically defined this revolution . At times it seems political , at times social , at times cultural , At times it seems to mean a physical revolution , but more often it seems to mean an ideological revolution . "Revolution is Enlightenment", he declares, and "you must have the cultural revolution, i.e., you must get the mind before you move another further . There is no violent revolution except as a result of the black mind expanding , trying to take control of its own space"<sup>(34)</sup> .

More than once Baraka uses the term revolution where others would probably use the term evolution . This being so , it is well to note here that this his concept of time is not characterized as past, present , and future. In *A Black Value System* he asserts , "There is no time . Only change " (14). In his introduction to *Black Magic* he says that "we begin to look into the future, which is happening at the same instant , but further away"<sup>(35)</sup>. If there is to be a revolution by blacks , conviction alone will not suffice ; there must be unity among other things :

*But too often , certainly most times in the past , the white man has been able to win out, maintain his stranglehold on us , merely because most of us were so busy looking out for ourselves , which is the "ME ONLY" syndrome, that we were willing to let the worst things in the world happen to our brothers . With black people all over the world dying the most horrible kinds of death imaginable some fools would still be walking around with their behinds in the air saying "But I'm Cool" .Well the word is No You're Not ,not as long as one of your brothers and sisters is being messed over by "the man".<sup>(36)</sup>*

Baraka's concept of revolution include both physical and verbal violence . He has stated frequently that art should be a weapon of social change and on certain occasions it becomes an incentive to or a substitute for physical violence . Baraka says that poems should be like "fists" , "wrestlers" , "daggers" and "guns" as expressed in his poem "*Black Art*" .Baraka wants "poems that kill / assassin poems , poems that shoot guns , poems that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons / leaving them dead with tongues pulled out"<sup>(37)</sup>.

At different stages of his poetic career Baraka's idea of revolution includes physical , cultural and socialist revolution .While Baraka advocates physical revolution in his earlier phase and cultural revolution in the middle phase , he strongly preaches socialist revolution based on Marxist ideology in his Marxist phase of poetic development . Baraka urges blacks in America to take an extreme stance and attack the white man's system and he even prophesies the destruction of America. Therefore , he wants the black man to retain his ethnic characteristics of his African past and adopt a new value system and become conscious of the past of the black nation that he envisions . To this end , Baraka expects the black Americans to remain united and achieve their cultural nationalism and usher in a new black era where major role of the black artist in such a context is "to aid in the destruction of America".

The destruction of the American system will be achieved , according to Baraka , through literal violence and active resistance . Thus , Baraka maintains that art / poetry should be used as a weapon in the struggle against white racism . In this revolutionary sense art / poetry is used as a substitute for literal violence . But in another sense such art might be an incentive to literal physical violence and active , violent reaction .

Baraka believes that when blacks use violence , they use it as a matter of defense not as a kind of aggression . He sees a clear danger of race genocide in America , with blacks as the victims . He believes that America , a violent nation , employs exterminators who are "licensed to kill" . The American police , according to Baraka , is the foulest social category in the modern world . In "Jitterbugs" a poem from *Black Magic* , Baraka , speaking about the white police , claims that :

*... They have made  
this star unsafe , and this age , primitive , though*

*yr mind is somewhere else , your ass aint (92) .*

In a poem entitled "*Cops*" from *Black Magic* , Baraka ends a description of white policemen he knew as childhood playmates and associates with the following lines :

*... You wanna stand in front of s bar ,with a gun pointed at you ?You  
wanna try to remember why you like somebody while the bullet comes .  
Shit (186).*

Within this frame of reference, Baraka, in "*Black is a Country*" maintains that blacks should not seek "progress" but instead freedom –"to be completely free ... from the domination of the white man . Nothing else" (84) . The black man must achieve self-determination , must be free to act in his own best interests if he is to survive .

Baraka's insistence that blacks rule themselves is based on notions of blacks as racially superior to white . Some of these notions reach mythic proportions . In an interview with Saul Gottlieb , Baraka was asked , "Do you believe there's a genetic superiority of the black race over the white?" His answer came as follows : "Well , yes . The black man was here on this planet first , and he will be here long after the white man is gone" (96). Baraka's belief in the genetic superiority of the black race finds overtones in Frances Cress Welsing's "*Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation*" , which provides an illuminating , though controversial , hypothesis concerning the psychological dynamics of racial hostility. Welsing argues that whites , recognizing their genetic inferiority to peoples of color , instituted a complex system of white supremacy domination and can be expected to maintain it in order to assure their genetic survival :

*The quality of whiteness is indeed a genetic inadequacy or a relative genetic deficiency state of disease based upon the genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin which are responsible for all skin coloration .... Color always "annihilates", phenotypically and genetically speaking , the non-color , white ... The Theory of Color-Confrontation stats that the white or color-deficient Europeans responded psychologically with a profound sense of numerical inadequacy and color inferiority upon their confrontations with the massive majority of the world's people all of whom possessed varying degrees of color producing capacity . This psychological response , be it described as conscious or unconscious , was one of deeply sensed inadequacy which struck a blow at the most obvious and fundamental part of their being their external appearance . As might be anticipated in terms of modern psychological theories , an uncontrollable sense of hostility and aggression developed defensively which has continued to manifest itself throughout the entire historical epoch of the mass confrontations of the whites with people of color (34) .*

Expanding upon her theory , she also asserts ,

*The thrust towards superiority over peoples of color , the drive toward materialism , acquisition and accumulation , the drive towards power , all of which are cornerstones of the universal white supremacy culture ,*

***are viewed in terms of the Color-Confrontation Thesis as responses to the core psychological sense of inadequacy (38) .***

Thus , according to Welsing , the continued subordination of colored peoples must be a prime function of Western culture if it is to continue to survive . Black articulation of reality , because it challenges white standards , is then by definition revolutionary and radical, striking at the heart of a constellation of fiercely held beliefs . That whites may give a black perspective overt approval does not diminish its disruptive potential on hidden psychological levels , and in fact , more "harsh" or "extreme" viewpoints may provoke explicit antagonism .

From this frame of reference , Baraka , in **Black Music** , argues that blacks as "a first people , the primitives , not evolving must re-civilize the world" (195) . Within this mythic history , blacks are socially superior and are possessors of original virtue, whereas whites are racially inferior and are plagued by original sin . In his poem "**I said it**" , from **Black Magic** , Baraka declares :

***...In those barren caves , on those inhuman cold scenes the white man's hairy ancestors made their first baby gestures to fuck up the world . The cold could not sustain human life , witness the dog-jawed cracker of the West . Who is so cold would wipe his behind on the souls of men (168) .***

In a racially – oriented society – such as America –Baraka does not only practice reverse racism as the above-mentioned lines indicate , but he also uses violence progressively as an eventual means of achieving the black identity of his people . This radical assertion of black existence through violence is seen in Baraka's poetic works in the mid sixties . In the late sixties , Baraka's violence is used as a means of destroying the existing white system in order to be replaced by a new black system . This notion is seen in the title and themes of his prose / essay book **Raise Race Rays Raze** Where Baraka aims at destroying the entire white race in order to build his black utopia . Baraka's violence is also revealed in his militant / ethnic poetry of that time .

### **Black Music and Baraka's Poetry**

In an interview with Kimberly Benston , Baraka was asked about the relationship between his poetry and black music :

***Benston : Some people have discussed your poetry in terms of specific jazz movements and musicians , speaking of Parkeresque and Coltranesque poems and phases . Is music still a major influence on your poetry?***

***Baraka : You mean trying to infuse my poetry with some particular sound ? Well , all this particular time , I'm not focused on that as much . In the last few years , I've listened certainly to more rhythm and blues , more rock music , than anything else-and certainly what I try to do in poetry is linked more to that ten years ago when I was listening to avant-garde jazz primarily (311) .***

Baraka's response to Benston's question shows the importance of black music to him as a poet . Thus , it is not surprising that black music provides the paradigm for Baraka's poetry . Early in his career , he found black music the highest achievement of black culture , In *Home* , Baraka argues that "only in music , and most, notably in blues , jazz and spirituals , i.e., Negro Music , has there been a significantly profound contribution by American Negroes" (106).

In *Blues People*, Baraka attempts to define the social and emotional implications of what he comes to see as the fundamentally different nature of his black American culture *vis-à-vis* what he calls the American mainstream . He sees this difference in terms of the distinction between African and Western music :

*If we think of African music as regards its intent, we must see that it differed from Western music in that it was a purely functional music . Borneman lists some basic types of songs common to West African cultures : songs used by young men to influence young women (courtship , challenge , scorn ) ; songs used by workers to make their tasks easier ; songs used by older men to prepare the adolescent boys for manhood , and so on. "Serious" Western music, except for early religious music, has been strictly on "art" music. One would not think of any particular use for Haydn's symphonies , except perhaps the "cultivation of the soul" .... It was , and is , inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music , dancing , song , the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods (28-29) .*

Baraka's conception of an art which issues directly out of the experience of the black masses –as having a social function – is germane to the cultural and political intentions of Baraka's poetry in the late sixties and is the black American basis for rejecting the notion that a poet's work should not deal with politics .

In *Blues People*, Baraka also discusses the important features of African music that determine the development of black American blues and jazz especially in terms of the rhythms and of the tonal flexibility in African vocal music . William C. Fischer in "*The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka*" argues :

*Baraka identifies such non-Western stylistic elements as communal antiphony and improvisation , interpreting their social significance as they are acted upon by the tensions of Afro-American experience. Consistent with his cultural ideology , Baraka characterizes as the blues those surviving Africanisms in music that have remained most resistant to the incursions of Western musical styles and conceptions . The closer Afro-American music stays to the marrow of the blues tradition the closer it is to the people , and so a faithful , accurate representation of their black perspective on the American experience (277) .*

Thus , Baraka's views on art are derived from the black American cultural experience where music occupies a central place . Baraka's view of an art that has a socio-political function is opposed to the Euro-American concept of art . To Baraka , the Western world worships the artifact instead of valuing the artistic act . Baraka believes that "the academic Western mind is the best example of the substitution of artifact worship for the lighting awareness of the art process " (*Home* 174).



In *Blues People*, Baraka seeks to demonstrate that black music is essentially the expression of an attitude or an idealization of attitudes about the world. This attitude invests this art from with a specific social and cultural interest. The musical note emanates from a body of socio-cultural philosophy and conveys a precise emotional response to life. Then Baraka draws an analogy between Western and African music. Serious Western music, according to Baraka's views in *Blues People*, has been strictly an "art" music and it has never formed an integral part of Western life. The Western musical notes could be appreciated for its aesthetic, "non-functional" attributes. Baraka adds that "soul has no value in Western life and thus pure expression comes to have little value in art. But in African culture, art always maintains a functional rule and no distinction could be seen between life and art. Thus, the concrete art object is as valuable as the manner of its creation. This affirms that "functionalism" is the key object which distinguishes between African and Western aesthetics. Baraka argues in *Blues People*: "It was and is conceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact and man's life or his worship of gods. Expression issued from life and was beauty" (29). This concept of art has a profound influence upon Baraka's aesthetic evolution as a black poet.

Nate Mackey in *"The Changing Same : Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka"* affirms the importance of black music for Baraka's poetry.<sup>(38)</sup> In Baraka's opinion, black music is aesthetically as well as socially more significant than black literature, therefore, he attempts to translate the values of black music into a modern literature. According to Baraka's statement in *"The Myth of a Negro Literature"*, black literature, as opposed to black music, is addressed to white people, as an expression of the assimilationist tendencies of the black middle class. In *Black Music*, Baraka praises the black music which he feels most closely reflects emotional states and life styles of black people. Baraka, equally, praises the black musicians who express in their music what Baraka considers black cultural nationalism. Baraka is interested in black music because, unlike Western music, it emanates from the artist's emotional engagement in black life, from "his own blood tone". (*Black Music* 135).

In his comment on John Coltrane's work Baraka declares in *Black Magic* that Coltrane, a black musician, knows "how to murder the popular song. To do way with weak Western forms" (174). According to William J. Harries, "Coltrane takes a weak Western form, a popular song and murders it, that is, he mutilates and disembowels this shallow but bouncy tune by using discordant and aggressive sounds to attack and destroy the melody line. The angry black music devours and vomits up the fragments of the white corpse"(14). Baraka equally takes weak Western forms, destroys them and creates something new out of rubble. He transposes Coltrane's musical ideas to poetry, using them to turn white poetic forms backward and upside down. This murderous impulse is behind all the forms of Baraka's aesthetic and art. Moreover, The black jazz musicians like Coltrane have routinely revised popular white tunes into black compositions by criticizing and parodying white songs. Baraka's application of this inversion formula from jazz to black art and black life is not the only formulation of the jazz aggressive impulse, but it is a formulation that is central to Baraka's art, an art that constantly changes existed ideas, symbols, images and social forms from white a black. The formula can express itself in various forms of destruction from inversion to mutilation.<sup>(39)</sup>

In his poetry, Baraka, revises the great white poets who represent the Western tradition such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg. Like the black musicians, Baraka transforms white forms and themes into black ones. His early poetry reveals his attraction to his white predecessors, his rejection of them and finally his

transformation of them into his own black art . It is clear that Baraka learned from the white *avant-garde* how to write and think about poetry but from the black musicians , he learned how to reject, invert and transform what the white *avant-garde* had taught him . Furthermore , Baraka is not only interested in transforming white forms into black ones , but he consciously seeks a method that grows out of a black tradition , because for him , *avant-garde* forms cannot fulfill his purposes as a black poet . Eventually , Baraka turns the ideas and forms of white-oriented *avant-garde* art into black art , taking the *avant-garde* didactic and turning it into black didactic , white dada into black dada , *avant-garde* stereotypes of blacks into revolutionary black images for blacks .<sup>(40)</sup> Understanding the ethnic nature of black music , according to Harris is "crucial to understanding Baraka's poetry because it provides the means through which this fusion (between black music and Baraka's poetry) is effected" (23) . Black music , particularly jazz "having its source in the radical and aggressive musical tradition of Parker and Coltrane" is itself a critique of white America . In *Home*, Baraka comments on this reversal when he observed that " *The song title 'A White Man's Haven is a Black Man's Hell'*" describes how complete an *image reversal is necessary in the West* " (247) . The title of the song implies that the misery and misfortune of blacks in America is a direct consequence of the white man's luxury and exploitation of the black nation . Thus , black music , particularly jazz , is significant to Baraka's poetry in the sense that it has its deep roots in the social and economic realities of black people . Baraka, in *Black Music* , expressed his view of black music in separatist terms . His view of black music as black spirit complements the emphasis on the perceived differences between white and black arts . Baraka says : "We want different contents and different forms because we have different feelings . We are different peoples" (184-185) .

### Chapter one Notes

1. Baraka's interview with Judy Stone . *"If It's Anger ...Maybe That's Good"* . *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 August (1964) , p.39 .
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4. *The Autobiography of Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka* . New York : Freundlich books , 1974 , p . 150.
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6. *The Autobiography of Le Roi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, p.189.
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11. Quoted in Theodor Hudson R. *From Le Roi Jones to Amiri Baraka : The Literary Works* . Durham , N.C. : Duke Univ .press , 1973 , p. 20 .
12. Baraka . *Home : Social Essays* . New York : William Morrow , 1964, p . 248.
13. Ida Lewis . *"Conversation : Interview With Le Roi Jones"* . Essence , September 1970 , p . 25 .

14. Joseph F. Sullivan *"Baraka Abandons Racism"* The New York Times , 27 December 1974, p . 35.
15. Lloyed W. Brown . *Amiri Baraka* . Boston : Twayne publishers ,1980, p.28.
16. Werner Sollors *Amiri Baraka / Le Roi Jones : The Quest For a Populist Modernism* . New York : Columbia Univ . Press , 1978 , p.65.
17. Hudson .*From Le Roi Jones To Amiri Baraka*, p.78.
18. "Uncle Tom" is a derogatory term which refers to the middle class Negroes who are interested in the assimilationist dream of integration with the white mainstream American culture .
19. "The Legacy of Malcolm X" . *Home : Social Essays*, p. 252.
20. Brown . *Amiri Baraka* , p. 31.
21. Brown . *Amiri Baraka* , p.35.
22. Hudson .p.107.
23. Hudson .p.104.
24. Hudson .p.144.
25. Quoted in Werner Sollors , p .32.
26. Werner Sollors .P.73 .
27. Saul Gottlieb."*They Think You're an Airplane and You're Really a Bird*" . *Evergreen Review* , December , 1967, p. (50-53).
28. "American Sexual Reference" . *Home :Social Essays*, p.232.
29. Baraka . *Raise ,Race , Rays ,Raze : Essays Since 1965* . New York : Random House , 1971, p. 112.
30. Addison Gayle Jr., ed. *The Black Aesthetic* . New York : Double day ,1971,p.22.
31. Quoted in Hoyt Fuller's article "Towards a black Aesthetic" . *Black Expression* , ed. Addison Gayle Jr., New York : Weybright and Tally, 1969, p.268.
32. Larry Neal . "The Black Arts Movement" .*The Black Aesthetic* , ed. Addison Gayle Jr. New York. Doubleday. 1971,p.259.
33. "What Does Non-Violence Mean?" *Home : Social Essays*, pp.150-151.
34. Baraka . *A Black Value System* . Newark : Jihad Productions ,1970 , p.10.
35. Baraka's "Introduction" . *Black Magic* ,p.1.
36. "The Last Days of the American Empire" . *Home: Social Essays* ,p.196.
37. Baraka . *Black Magic* , p.116.
38. Nate Mackey . "The Changing Same : Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka" . Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) : *A Collection of Critical Essays* , ed. Kimberly W. Benston . Englewood Cliffs , New Jersey : Prentice-Hall , Inc., 1978 .p.122.
39. Harris . *The poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka : The Jazz Aesthetic*, p. 16.
40. Harris .p.17.

## Chapter Two

***A Critical Study of Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note 1961****Introduction*

Throughout the early phase of his poetic career, Baraka often refers to the unique position of the black man and the black artist in America<sup>(1)</sup>. Writing in *Home*, Baraka states that black people live in "a no-man's land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially a part of it as to stain its whole being, an ominous gray" (114). This position, Baraka believes, offers the black writer a special insight into his social and cultural milieu. In *Home*, Baraka equally writes specifically of the black artist's unique critical angle; it is "classically perfect outside and inside at the same time" (164). One of Baraka's major issues in his early poetry is his attempt to assume this objective position in order to view objectively what he calls the antithetical black and white cultures of America. The result is a portrait of an ambiguous, gray world in which irrational horrors and contradictory tensions rend individuals.

Thus, using a classically perfect viewpoint, Baraka's first anthology, *Preface*, graphically describes the individual's place in an American social and cultural context which he calls in *Blues People* "the hopelessly interwoven fabric of American life" (111).

Kimberly Benston in *The Renegade and the Mask*, argues that Baraka in *Preface* organizes his "attack around the central perception of the individual as both the generator and the victim of brutal cultural crisis" (98). Furthermore, in "*The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Amiri Baraka*", William Fischer points out the *Preface* "represents the beginning of a remarkable cultural, political and artistic reformation, leading inevitably to his later revolutionary poetry" (259). In addition, Clyde Taylor in "*Baraka as poet*" comments on the poems of *Preface* saying:

*Quick poems, light on their feet, like a fancy middle-weight. Mostly, his poems carry no argument, no extractable, paraphraseable statement. They operate prior to the pros and cons of rational, persuasive, politic discourse. Even after several readings, one is likely to remember mainly a flavor, a distinct attitude of spirit, an insistent, very personal voice. His poetry is written out of a heavy anti-rationalist, anti-didactic bias. Its obligation is to the intentions of its own feelings. Its posture is in defiance of criticism. The critic is for him the sycophant and would-be legislator of official (white) reality, an implacable enemy, the best symbol of the spiritually dead pseudo-intellectuality of the West (127).*

Written when Baraka was a member of the Beat movement, the poems of *Preface* (written between 1954-1961) poignantly mirror the frustrations of the alienated post-war generation. The volume carries the feelings and overtones of the period where death becomes a basic theme to signify the moral decay and the cultural wasteland of that time. The issue of isolation, alienation, and the radical protest against social and moral decay are integrated with signs of an incipient ethnic revolt. Baraka's revulsion at American society as a

moral wasteland and culture wildness is not merely an indication of American corruption as critics<sup>(2)</sup> claim , but it rather reflects Baraka's growing racism during this early period . Nevertheless , Baraka's poetry in *Preface* was not written for a black audience because the poet's racial attitudes had not taken a coherent shape by that time . Being a member of the Beat movement Baraka's poetry in *Preface* was , in a way , a sincere reflection of the atrocities and moral staleness which come as a result of the brutality of the post-war epoch . Thus , the poet , in his first volume , withdraws from the external world into a state of egocentricity and solipsism . Such an approach leads the poet to concentrate on the theme of death which the title of the volume provokes .

### ***The Influence of Contemporary American Poets And the Avant-garde Movement on Baraka***

Most of the poems of Baraka's first anthology *Preface* were written during the fifties, a crucial era . According to Fischer , "it was the era of peaceful protest against the Bomb, of passive resistance to racial injustice . In more specific racial terms , the politics of integration stood as a radical attack against the separation of segregation" (264) . During that time the young Baraka was greatly influenced by white poets such as Ezra Pound Charles Olson and others . In 1959 , Baraka said :

*For me , Lorca , Williams , Pound and Charles Olson have had the greatest influence . Eliot , earlier (rhetoric can be so lovely , for a time ... but only remains so far the rhetorician) . And there are so many young wizards around now doing great things that everybody calling himself poet can learn from ... Whalen , Snyder, McClure, O'Hara , Loewensohn , Wieners , Creeley , Ginsberg &c. &c. &c.*<sup>(3)</sup>

As an *avant-garde* poet , Baraka sees himself and his friends in the Beat movement as an extension of the poetic tradition represented by William Carlos Williams and Pound . In his introduction to *The Moderns* , Baraka points out :

*The concerns that made [contemporary avant-garde] poetry seem so new were merely that the writers who were identified with this recent poetic renaissance were continuing the tradition of twentieth century modernism that had been initiated in the early part of this century . William Carlos Williams , Ezra Pound , The Imagists , and the French symbolist poets were restored to importance as beginners of a still vital tradition of Western poetry . It was an attempt to restore American poetry to the mainstream of modern poetry after it had been cut off from that tradition by the Anglo-Eliotic domination of the academies* (11) .

Baraka's early poetry in *Preface* was influenced by the "Projectivist School" poets particularly Charles Olson, the great white whale of American literature . Kimberly Benston in *Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) : A Collection of Critical Essays* , argues:

*Settling in Greenwich Village in the late fifties , Baraka (then Le Roi Jones) quickly gained a formidable reputation as a poet among the more accomplished of America's avant-garde artists . The early poetry collected in *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) reflects the modes of those "schools" with which the young Le Roi Jones had*

*become intimately acquainted : the quasi-mystical emphasis on pure or "open" sound advocated by projectivists like Robert Greeley and Charles Olson ; the sophisticated blend of irregular "elegance" and crafted "impurity" of the so-called New York Poets (Kenneth Koch , Frank O'Hara, and others) ; the bitter , vituperative stance before Western culture characteristic especially of Baraka's friend Allen Ginsberg (2) .*

From the projectivists and from Olson in particular , Baraka absorbed his sense of the poem as open form . For example , speaking of form , Baraka affirms in *New American Poetry* :

*There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what a poem ought to be . "Who knows what a poem ought to sound like ? Unit it's thar' says Charles Olson ...& I follow closely with thnt ... ù'm not interested in writing sonnets , sestina or anything ...only poems" (425) .*

Keeping in mind that poetry is essentially an oral art intended for recitation in some form , the projectivists dealt with the poem as breath units . Baraka who followed Olson's lead , was quite conscious of his own modifications . In an interview with David Ossman in *The Sullen Art* , Baraka illustrates :

*I don't mean that I write poems completely the way I'm taking now , although I'm certain that a great deal of my natural voice rhythm dominates the lines . For instance , my breathing – when I have to break the line in most cases . Sometimes I can bring the line out longer to effect – you learn certain . ticks , departures from a set method . But mostly it's the rhythms of speech that I utilize , trying to get closer to the way I sound peculiarly, as opposed to somebody else (80).*

It is obvious now that Baraka was influenced by Charles Olson and the poetic criteria set forth in the manifesto on "Projective Verse" (1950) . Olson's dicta regarding open verse , poetic field, the translation of energy and the simulation of speech pauses through the manipulation of typographical space were all part of Baraka's earlier concept of poetry . Baraka was interested in Olson's theory of the breath unit : "The line comes (I swear it ) from the breath , from the breathing of the man who writes , at the moment that he writes"<sup>(4)</sup> . In *"How You Sound"* , Baraka says :

*At the heart of poetic self-identity is the re-creation of the sound of man's experience : "MY POETRY is whatever I think I am ... What I see , am touched by (CAN HEAR) ...'Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Unit it's thar' . Says Charles Olson ...& I follow closely with that ...(You have to start and finish there ... you own voice ... how you sound ."*<sup>(5)</sup>

The poems of *Preface* also affirm Baraka's debt to William Carlos William and Charles Olson . The poet admitted this debt in *"How You Sound?"* published in Donald M. Allen's *New American Poetry 1945-1960* . In his comment Baraka says :

*I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives . What I see, am touched by (CAN HEAR) ... wives , gardens , jobs , cement yards where cats pee , all my interminable*

*artifacts ... All are a poetry , & nothing moves (with any grace) pried apart from these things . There cannot be a closet poetry . Unless the closet be as wide as God's eye ....There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what the poem ought to be . 'Who knows what a poem ought to sound like ? United it's thar' Says Charles Olson ... & I follow closely with that . I'm not interested in writing sonnets , sestinas or anything ... only poems ... The only 'recognizable tradition' a poet need to follow is himself ... & with that, say ,all those things out of tradition he can use , adapt , work over , into something for himself . To broaden his own voice with . (You have to start and finish there ... your own voice ... how you sound) .... we want to go into a quantitative verse ...the 'irregular foot' of Williams ... the 'Projective verse' of Olson . Accentual verse , the regular metric of rumbling iambs , is dry as slivers of sand . Nothing happens in that frame anymore . We can get nothing from England and the diluted formalism of the academy (the formal culture of the U.S.) is anaemic & fraught with incompetence & unreality (41) .*

Tracing the influence of Williams on Baraka's poetry in Preface Henry Lacey maintains :

*Baraka shows his kinship to Williams , first of all , in the frequent homeliness of a subject's matter . Like the earlier poet , Baraka is concerned with breaking down the barriers between that which is considered worthy of poetic treatment and that which is not . It is this attitude that allows him to include elements from the "low brow" realms of comic strip , radio , and movies in his verse . These things , like "old junkies" ("Way Out West") and radio desk jockeys ("Symphony Sid") . are all his "interminable artifacts" , and it is the poet's contention that the poetry or art which refuses to deal with such subjects is an art of lies (27) .*

Lacey continues :

*An examination of the poems of Preface will show immediately the highly inventive or improvisational nature of Baraka's early verse . His form varies from the almost "closed" verse of the title poem of the collection to the prosaic lines of "Vice" , from the lyrical lines of "The Clearing" to the truncated lines of "Way Out West" , from the Whitmanesque sweep of "One Night Stand" to the taut lines of "Betancourt". There are also poems that include all these styles. "Hymn for Lanie Poo" is perhaps the most striking example of the latter . In any event , the works are generally evidence of the poet's attempt to find forms compatible with content , a central tenet in Olson's doctrine of "Projective Verse"(28) .*

Baraka originally turned to the white *avant-garde* – when he was writing Preface – because it provided forms that were original in the way black music was original and he gained a great deal from his association with the white bohemians during that time . Baraka learned from Williams and Olson to focus on the local . He gained from the *avant-garde* flexible techniques for creating an art that could reflect both black language and black forms . Baraka , in Preface , follows three white innovators – he follows Williams and Pound by writing in

his own language instead of standard English , and he follows Olson by using visual effects that , imitating the pauses and hesitations of actual speech , help him recreate the black language .

In terms of poetic techniques , Baraka's experiments, in *Preface* , invokes a radical departure from the demands of an agreed metrical voice . Being influenced by Olson's concept of the poem as "breath units" , Baraka attempts to make the metrical movement , of his poems in *Preface* , a direct expression of perception , of the movement of consciousness , rather than the mold into which experience is cast . In seeking to capture the vitality and rhythm of the living spoken language, Baraka's poems in *Preface* demand to be read aloud . Furthermore , Baraka's idiom , in *Preface* , does not only violate traditional metrical perceptions , but it also disturbs the agreed shape of English syntax . In *Preface* , the syntax becomes elliptical , volatile , commas are lost and brackets left unclosed .In *Preface* , Baraka revolts against the structures and tactics of traditional poetry in order to articulate daringly new areas of being . In overthrowing traditional proprieties and self-containment of cultural , Baraka seeks to evolve a form of absolute personal speech , a poetry deprived of ceremony and stripped to personal revelation .

In *Preface* , Baraka seems to align himself with the mainstream American writing more than with black literature . He dedicated *Preface* to his white friends such as Ginsberg ,Snyder ,Wieners, McClure ,Olson and Rubi Betancourt , a woman Baraka met during his 1960 visit to Cuba . The book is also dedicated to his white wife , Hettie Cohen .In *Preface* , Baraka's mythos does not develop along insistently political or racial lines ; instead, the contemporary *angst* is more generally registered as being of personal rather than political origin.

When Baraka wrote *Preface* , he was writing along with a group of young predominantly white poets (The Beats) who attempted to set themselves apart from America's social decay and "fusty academic tyranny over art"<sup>(6)</sup> . The Beat writers / artist in the fifties separated themselves from the styles and ideals of the American mainstream . "Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* sets the tone of their concern , with its keen sense of satire and pathos , of the conflict between man's ideals and his actions , between his creative life and imminent death , between his being and the encroachment of the material of the material non-life around him"<sup>(7)</sup> . In his comment on the Beat Generation artists , Werner Sollors says :

***The Beat Generation was an archetypal American Bohemian art movement . Beat poets were constantly at odds with the Philistine excesses of the 1950's : they protested against bourgeois concern with wealth and "progress" , against the Cold War and anticommunist witch-hunts , against H-bomb tests and defense drills , and against the persistence of racism in American society . Their essentially aesthetic protest , however , was so "total" and "radical" that it did little to further its supposed social ends in the larger society (21) .***

The poetry of the Beats tends to be an angry poetry of revolt and revenge against the craziness of a self-contradictory , self-destructive world . Their stance contained no reformist intent because it was informed by disillusionment , by consuming hates and fears that permitted no hope for a better order of things . As a Beat poet , Baraka , in *Preface* does not devote himself to the orthodox poetic practice of attempting to create order out of disorder but he reflects the disorder itself .Confusion , anarchy , and exasperation are registered in a



typically rhapsodic , frantic style , the distortions of a nightmare world reflected in poetic fragments .

As a Beat poet , Baraka was deeply involved in Greenwich Village / New York scene of art ideas , drugs , sex , bohemian debaucheries and revolutionary activities . In the *avant-garde* , Baraka experienced a social / intellectual group whose ideas corresponded to his own . In an interview with D.H. Melhem , Baraka noted : " I was drawn to them [the *avant-garde* / bohemian poets] because they legitimized things I wanted to do and that I felt" (87) . In the same interview Baraka admitted that he was influenced by Allen Ginsberg's poetry because it talked about a world I could identify with and relate to . Baraka adds : "His language and his rhythm were real to me . Ginsberg talked of a different world . one much closer to my own ... Allen was talking about the (Nigger streets) and junkies and kinds of thing that I could see and I could identify with and I said yeah , that's close to what I wanted to do" (99) . In essence, the *avant-garde* provided Baraka with his first intellectual and artistic models .

### **Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note**

#### ***A Critical Review***

In 1961 , Baraka published his first volume of poetry. **Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note** which includes twenty eight poems covering the period from 1954 until 1961. In an introductory note on the poems , Baraka comments : "I have arranged the book in as strict a chronological order as I could manage" (2). The dedication page bears the inscription : " This book is Hettie's" (3) meaning his first white / Jewish wife Hettie Cohen . Baraka derived the title of his first anthology from a three-line poem of Langston Hughes , "*Suicide Note*":

*The calm  
cool face of the river  
Asked me for a kiss* <sup>(8)</sup>

The subjective of Baraka's poetry in Preface impresses itself upon critics . Werner Sollors argue :

*The early poems are collages of several recurring thematic elements . In most of the poems an omnipresent "I / eye" remains in the center of consciousness . Often the poet probes into the realms of autobiography and identity , high art and avant-gardist artists , Black music , American popular culture , and the heroes and anti-heroes of the Western world . Or he expresses himself as an outsider in protest against "others" , while exorcising his own past and indulging without inhibition in provocative sexual themes* (37) .

Whereas Sollors deals with **Preface** from an autobiographical perspective , Lloyd Brown sees the poetry in **Preface** as a reflection of the poet's anger against the American society . In Brown's argument in **Amiri Baraka** , Baraka's "perception" of America [in **Preface**] is linked with a broader and pervasive skepticism about the human condition as a whole . (106)

Henry Lacy links the poetry in **Preface** with the Beat movement. He point out :

***Preface (1961) , though it appeared near the end of the Beat movement , is nonetheless representative of the Beat psyche ...***

He adds :

*The poems of this first collection , characterized by a pervasive sense of despair , alienation , and self-deprecation , reflect also the Beat's scorn for the pressures exerted by the forces of convention pretense , and materialism . The classic Beat response to these forces , however , was one of cool disengagement . One recognized ugliness , perhaps wrote poems about it , but one did not become so "un-cool" as to think he could actually do anything about it . Much of the tension in the poems of Preface stems from this young black Beat poet's struggle to replace his cool withdrawal with a sense of committed . The degree of his discomfort with disengagement reaches its peak , of course , in his dramatic break with the Village scene some four years later . This early questioning of the merits of cool disengagement must , undoubtedly be seen in light of the times . Baraka , thought often cynical in his comments on the Civil Rights Movement of the early 60's , was profoundly affected by it . His awareness of the new black activism , coupled with a first hand , almost apocalyptic , experience in post-revolution Cuba, all but destroyed his cool indifference . The evidence of the struggle lies in the poems (3-4) .*

C. Lynn Munro , in "*Le Rio Jones : A Man in Transition*" , discusses ***Preface*** as a part of the Euro-American tradition of modern poetry :

*The apolitical and highly introspective nature of Jones' early writing is a by-product of his apolitical personal ideology at that particular point in his career . He had no intention of involving himself directly in politics because this was outside of his responsibility as a writer as he conceived it at that time . He sought instead, to record his personal version of the American experience. Although he occasionally probed into the maladies of the American society this was done strictly within the limits of his own encounter with society in order personally to come to grips with it . He had no intention of effecting change . Rather , he was bent upon organizing the contradictions which he saw and rectifying them within himself . Insofar as form and content are concerned he was rigidly disciplined in the Euro-American tradition (59).*

Equally Denise Levertov observed that Baraka's ***Preface*** established the poet within the tradition of modern American poetry :

*... [he is] . among the inheritors of a usable tradition , and [has] as ground under [his] feet all that Williams and Pound have given us... influenced in double strength, as it were; both from [his] reading of older poets and through what Charles Olson and Robert Creeley have made of it ...(251)*

In his comment on the form and content of Baraka's first volume of poetry, Roland L. Reed argues that Baraka's poetry in **Preface** "is highly complex in both form and meaning" (2). Roland Reed implies that Baraka's poems in **Preface** are written in free forms and printed with striking "graphic and orthographic peculiarities" among them capitals, italics and abbreviations "such as (yr, sez, wd, ed, sd, tho ... etc)" suggestive of Olson's poetry. In addition to what Reed mentions, Baraka's poems in **Preface** also contain names of places, streets and cities, names of poets, friends, politicians and relatives, and even names of commercial goods and brands. Moreover, in his poems, Baraka usually contrasts traditional poetic moods (love, loneliness, suicidal feelings, seasonal changes, or artistic creation) which are often expressed in a highly modernist idiom with sudden flashes of low street language, jargon, black ghetto idiom or colloquialisms, usually without achieving a ridiculous or destructive effect. Carrying on with Baraka's poetic techniques in **Preface**, Sollors also says:

*Among Baraka's own specific and distinguishing qualities are not only name-dropping and abundant literary allusions, but also an associative speed which drives his poems at a great acceleration away from frequently enigmatic, sometimes apparently unrelated titles, through fragmentary or incomplete thoughts, images, quotations, imaginary soliloquies and reflections, into continually new and occasionally quite surprising situations, considerations, puns, or observations, and toward frequently strong, occasionally even harshly abrupt endings (36).*

None of the previous critical approaches to **Preface** provides us with a comprehensive view of the nature of the book's poetry—its themes, its imagery, allusions, forms ... etc. On this basis, the researcher in his critical contribution to Baraka's **Preface**, divides the poems of the book into five categories according to their subject matters in order to throw light upon Baraka's themes and explore areas of research ignored by the previously mentioned critics.

### **The Poems Of Preface** **The First Category : Suicide and Death**

The first category of poems in **Preface** includes poetic pieces such as the title poem "***A Preface to Twenty Volume Suicide Note***", "***Way out West***", "***The Bridge***" and "***Turncoat***". These egocentric poems reflect the poets' sense of despair and virtual paralysis which are enhanced through allusions to Eliot's "***The Waste Land***". The poet's sense of alienation and agony as well as his impotency lead to suicide by drowning—in an Eliotite manner—in order to release himself from what amounts to be a death in life. Death and suicide, in the poems, comes as a result of a state of moral and cultural paralysis; the inability to remember, to connect to a past, either individual or collective. The suicidal and agonistic poems in this category as well as their "nihilistic tone" reveal the influence of that Beat / Bohemian poets on Baraka.

Edward Margolies argues that the poems in Baraka's **Preface** are "hipster-zestful irreverent but often sensitive, introspective and melancholy" (193). Margolies adds that Baraka "has mistrusted poetry / possibly hated it (as an expression of white civilization) and that he has devoted his career to purging himself of his poetic sensibilities. Self-hate and self-destruction appear ironically in the titles of his works" (194). Baraka's title poem

**"Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"** ironically carries the sense of "self-destruction" which Margolies mentioned. The poem seems to be a romantic, nostalgic lyric in which the poet laments the shabbiness of his adult life in which "nobody sings anymore" in contrast to the idealism of his young daughter Kellie to whom the poem is dedicated. The poem's tone is nihilistic because the poet's child prays to a god who has removed himself from the world. Written in 1957, the poem adheres to a strict stanzaic structure lacking in most of the other poems in the collection:

*Lately, I've become accustomed to the way  
The ground opens up and envelops me  
Each time I go out to walk the dog  
Or the broad edged silly music the wind  
Makes when I run for a bus ...  
Things have come to that  
And now, each night I count the stars,  
And each night I get the same number.  
And when they will not come to be counted,  
I count the holes they leave.  
Nobody sings anymore.  
And then last night, I tiptoed up  
To my daughter's room and heard her  
Talking to someone, and when I opened  
The door, there was no one there ...  
Only she on her knees, speaking into  
Her own clasped hands (5).*

In his comment on the poem Sollors makes the following analysis:

*The title poem elaborates the contrast between the poet's nihilistic ways and his young daughter's understand religious faith. For this modern Hamlet "Things have come to that"; and "the broad edged silly music the wind / Makes when I run for a bus ..." has replaced the songs of his childhood: "Nobody sings anymore". The difference in the perspectives of father and daughter is most clearly articulated in their relationship to God, who is very real for the praying daughter, but only an absence, a "no one", for the poet (59).*

Sollors adds:

*The recurrence of Baraka's themes and motifs unifies Preface, but the playfulness and the nostalgia increasingly give way to a sense of suicidal despair. Baraka's suicidal and agonistic poetry reflects the death of the "Anglo shell", which at times appears like the death of the poet himself. The writer who is almost "suicide" by the cultural dead weight of "objective" art, often doubts whether he can extricate himself from the decline of the West (59).*

The title poem of Preface reflects the voice of "the American existential", Norman Mailer's term for the possessor of the Beat attitude. The speaker in the poem, in Mailer's words is:

*... the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war , relatively quick death by the State as I'...universe concentrationnaire , or with a show death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled ... why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger , to divorce oneself form society , to exist without roots , to set out on that uncharted journey to the rebellious imperatives of the self (399) .*

In Baraka's poem , the speaker accepts the threatening nature of the modern world . It is a world in which the urban dweller is prepared to meet lurking death on every street corner : "Lately , I've become accustomed to the way / the ground opens up and envelops me" . The poet as hipster feels the pressures of his conventional life . There is the recurring impatience with those forces that paralyze his movement . Dissatisfied with the powers of a competitive materialistically oriented society , he is left with one refuge , the imagination. But his imagination does not help him to transcend the ugly surroundings of his world . The final lines of the poem deepen the speaker's sense of alienation and despair .

The title poem of *Preface* reveals the poet's vision of life as a kind of death , as a slow but inexorable process of dying that is both physical and spiritual . The adult persona of the poem goes mechanically through the repetitions of living (running for a bus ,walking the dog, watching the night sky , and so forth) , and this very repetitiveness encourages a sense of spiritual death in the poet's world , a world in which no one signs anymore . In the poem , the childhood image is invested with a finely developed sense of ironic ambiguity that undercuts the initial image of the well-known contrasts between adult decay and childhood innocence as Sollors mentioned .On the one hand , the image of the praying child is reminder of that spiritual vitality and that imaginative power which allow the child to transform the image of God – that is invisible to the morbid imagination of the adult-into a playmate and confidante . On this basis , prayer itself has become an intimate exchange between the child and the world of her imagination . On the other hand , the child's "peeking" suggests a deliberate game of make-believe , one calculated to relieve the monotony of bedtime prayers which have become the child's counterpart to the adult's world of mechanical repetition and despair . In this sense the childhood image is associated with misery and death . The impression of genuine innocence is undermined by the awareness that the process of life-as-death will inevitably transform the praying child from imaginative spirit into the unseeing adulthood of her father's world . The notion that the bedtime prayer may already be a repetitive childhood ritual confirms that the child's existence has already been shaped by the process of life-as-death dominating the suicidal existence in the wasteland world of her father .

The title poem of *Preface* achieves much of its poetic effect through the employment of certain structural and aural devices. First , the poem employs a logical , sequential movement , the three major stanzas beginning "*Lately*" , "*And Now*" , "*And Then*" . Moreover , there is an effective progression in the visual imagery of the stanzas. Finally , the concluding lines play a number of variations on the mournful "O" sound as in "tiptoed" , "room" , "opened" , "door" , "no one" , "only" , "own" with profoundly appropriate effect .

"*Way Out West*" , a poem dedicated to the Bohemian poet Gary Snyder , like title poem of *Preface* , reflects the poet's sense of despair which characterizes the poet's miserable life in the modern city :

*As simple an act*

*As opening the eyes . Merely  
 Coming into things by degrees .  
 Morning : some tear is broken  
 On the wooden stairs  
 Of my lady's eyes . Profusions  
 Of green . The leaves . Their  
 Constant prehensions . like old  
 Junkies on Sheridan Square , eyes  
 Cold and round , There is a song  
 Nat Cole sings ... This city  
 & the intricate disorder  
 of the seasons (24) .*

The speaker heard in this poem is in a state of virtual paralysis and from this comes the fixation upon death which the very title of the volume evokes . In this poem . like the other poems in *Preface* , there is a spin toward suicide in the speaker's voice :

*Unable to mention  
 Something as abstract as time .  
 Even so , (bowing low in thick  
 Smoke from cheap incense ; all  
 Kinds questions filings the mouth ,  
 Till you suffocate & fall dead  
 To opulent carpet) . Even so ,  
 shadows will creep over your flesh  
 & hide your disorder , your lies .  
 There are unattractive wild ferns  
 Outside the window  
 Where the cats hide . They yowl  
 From there at night , In heat  
 & bleeding on my tulips .  
 Steel bells , like the evil  
 Unwashed Sphinx , towing in the twilight.  
 Childless old murderess , for centuries  
 With musty eyes . I am distressed . Thinking  
 Of the seasons , how they pass ,  
 How I pass , my very youth , the  
 Ripe sweet of my life ; drained off  
 Like giant rhesus monkeys ;  
 Picking their skulls ,  
 With ingenious cruelty  
 Sucking out the brains (24-25) .*

The speaker's despair and agony are enhanced through allusions to Eliot's "*The Waste Land*" ; "Tiresias' weathered cock". Baraka's speaker like Eliot's male characters in "*The Waste Land*" , suffers from sexual impotency :

*No use for beauty  
 Collapsed , with moldy breath  
 Done in . Insidious weight*

*Of cankered dreams . Tiresias'  
 Weathered cock .  
 Walking into the sea , shells  
 Caught in the hair . Coarse  
 Waves tearing the tongue .  
 Closing the eyes .As  
 Simple an act . You float ...*

Between the simple blink of an eye , a whole lifetime passes , "coming into things by degrees" , the sweetness of youth swept away amid lies , and under the "insidious weight of cankered dreams" . In Baraka's city , the life that lies "outside the window" is wild and default . Houston A . Baker Jr. argues that Baraka's despair in "**Way Out West**" may "derive from a definition of writing"<sup>(9)</sup> that sees the poem as :

*A  
 Turning away  
 from that  
 it was  
 had moves us  
 A  
 Madness*

The pessimistic atmosphere in "**Way Out West**" is reinforced by Baraka's choice of words and images. For example , through the image of his "lady's" pain the reader gets one of the many recurring images of the failure of love and the difficulty of maintaining an equilibrium in domestic affairs . The landscape , "profusions / of green , the leaves" , only serves the mock his decadence . The seasons , using Eliot's "**Waste Land**" terms , are "disordered" because they do not perpetually reflect the wintry nature of his inner being. The poet equally broods about the passage of time and his loss of innocence : "I am distressed . Thinking of the seasons , how they pass , how I pass , my very youth , the ripe sweet of my life , drained off" . This lament for the bygone days of adolescence recurs frequently in the confessional poetry of the Beats . It is also a central concern in the extremely personal poems of *Preface* . The speaker in Baraka's poems can not completely reject the symbolic weight of his youthful days . Gene Feldman explains the meaning of adolescence in the Beat mentality as follows : "In stepping out of the competitive area which custom has marked as the proving ground of manhood [the Beatnik] is forced back into the marginal existence of the adolescent" (10) . The days of adolescence not only bring memories of freedom from the paralyzing pressures of adult convention but they also project images of certitude and the possibility of belief , (the main concerns in poems such as "**In Memory of Radio**" and "**Look For You Yesterday , Here You Come Today**" ) .

The speaker in "**Way Out West**" is not only aware of the meaning of his adolescence , but he also knows the pain and agony of taking on the role the prophet in a soulless society . Hence , his identification with the impotent seer , Tiresias , is significant . With this grim realization , the speaker turns to suicide , a major theme in *Preface* . He imagines himself ending his life , in an Eliotite manner , by drowning . The last two lines of the poem balance the first two , brining the poem full circle . Beginning with the death-in-life of another waking day in the city , the poem ends with the projection of release through the actuality of death .

William C. Fischer in his analysis of "*The Bridge*" poem reveals remarkable appreciation of musical underpinning of this poem but his insistence on seeing it simply as a "sharp message"<sup>(10)</sup> of rejection to his fellow poets (The Beats) is too narrow a reading. The poem "*The Bridge*", which is dedicated to Wieners and McClure, is not merely a rejection of the poetic art and values of Wieners and McClure but it is the anguished cry of a man who has lost control of his life; symbolically, the speaker in the poem is a musician who has lost control in the middle of a musical improvisation:

*I have forgotten the head  
Of where I am . Here at the bridge .  
2 Bars , down the street , seeming  
To wrap themselves around my fingers , the day,  
Screams in me ; pitiful like a little girl  
You sense will be dead before the winter  
Is over (25) .*

As in "*Way Out West*", the speaker in "*The Bridge*" also ends with a projected suicidal release. Suicide by drowning becomes a common motif in the poems of Preface :

*When you touch the water, & it closes , slowly , around your head .The  
bridge will be behind you, that music you know , that place , you feel  
when you look up to say, it is me (26) .*

Suicide comes as result of a state of moral / cultural paralysis; the inability to remember, to connect to past, either individual or collective :

*I have forgotten , all the things , you told me to love , to try to  
understand , the bridge will stand, high up in the clouds & the light , &  
you , (when you have let the song run out) will be sliding through  
unmentionable black (26) .*

The suicide urge in "*The Bridge*" is a major motif that pervades other poems in preface. Impatient with a world devoid of moral traditions and human values and tormented by the feeling that he can effect no change in such a world, the poet is frequently obsessed with the idea that actual death will release him from what amounts to a death in life.

The poems in Preface that do not end in death reveal extreme self-loathing as in "*Turncoat*" :

*I am alone & brooding , locked in with dull memories & self-hate ,& the  
terrible disorder of a young man . I move slowly . My cape spread stiff &  
pressing cautiously in the first night wind off the Hudson . I glide down  
onto my own roof , peering in at the pitiful Shadow of myself (36) .*

As the poet attempts to connect to his past, the ghosts of "its now-dead forms tauntingly"<sup>(11)</sup> pass before him, and time indifferently ravishes on :

*How can it mean anything? The stop& spout , the Wind's dumb shift  
.Creak of the house & wet smells  
Coming in. Night forms on my left. The blind still.  
Up to admit a son that no longer exists. Sea move.*



*I dream long bays & towers ...& soft steps moist sand .  
I become them ,sometimes . Pure flight . Pure fantasy . Lean (36) .*

"*The Turncoat*" is a poem of withdrawal that recaptures the child's mentality ; it is hard and sinewy and in tone firmly sardonic , expressing the bitterness and illusion of one who has struggled and been defeated . The word "disorder" which appears in "*Way Out West*" and "*The Bridge*" is invoked once again in "*The Turncoat*" . The word "disorder" which is extensively used in Preface underscores the spiritual torpor of Baraka's persona as he struggles for release from ennui and purposelessness . In this sense Preface must be read as a desperate attempt on the part of the poet to impose some order on his personal life and that of the anarchic world in which he lives .

### The Second Category : The Popular Heroes

Baraka's poems in Preface that deal with the popular culture myths and comic-strip heroes in America are highly complicated poems which have more than one meaning . These poems as a whole include two groups of popular heroes . The first group includes figures such as Nick Charles , Lament Cranston and others who are preoccupied with their search for a moral order . These figures , according to Lacey symbolize "the certitude and righteous commitment the bored poet finds so lacking his own life" (11). The figures in this group are also associated with the poet's childhood / adolescence memories and his Beat mentality. The second group contains racial figures which represent destructive images , images that justify a long history of racial injustice , violence , corruption and evil . This group includes figures such as the American cowboy , Mandrake the magician and others . For example , the American cowboy personifies the brutality of the white man whereas Mandrake the magician is an embodiment of the falsehood and irrationality of modern American technology . The poet rejects the myths of popular culture heroes such as the Shadow , the Lone Ranger and Green Lantern who act individually to impose a strong moral order on a disordered world . Baraka rejects these false images of heroism –images which are created and made popular through the America media . Moreover , the comic-strip and popular culture heroes in Baraka's poetry have represented a fixation in violence and death and the myth of lost innocence . In Preface , Baraka views them as both reflectors of America's unhealthy cultural tradition and symbols of lost youth . Thus Lament Cranston is lauded because he sparkled the childhood imagination : "who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lament *Cranston* ? / Conly Jack Kerouac .." (Preface 12) . But Captain Midnight and Superman , comic-strip heroes , with their dehumanizing technological wizardry , and the Long Ranger , with his red slave , Tonto , are represented as symptoms of the social malaise .

Critics such as Denise Levertov argued that Baraka was interested in the popular culture heroes in poems such as "In Memory of Radio" , "The Death of Nick Charles" , "Look For You Yesterday , Here You Come Today" and others because the popular culture heroes in these poems are associated with the poet's childhood and his Beat aesthetic in the late fifties .

Denise Levertov . in her review of Preface in 1961 , said that Baraka had the "kind of childhood in which the old comic-strips-Moon Mullins , Krazy Kate , etc., - gave to the imagination ,for which no other place was provided , a space in which to grow , Jazz , too has been for [the poet and his contemporaries] , and remains (one can hear it is the movement of [his] lines) a taken-for-granted and essential part of the world, an air to breathe when otherwise they would have stifled" (251) . Levertov's argument reveals an understanding of

the meaning of popular myths as it appears to the Beats (Jack Kerouac , the Beat thinker , when asked to define the Beat Generation , once said , "Being Beat goes back to my ancestors , to the rebellious , the weird , the mad . To Laurel and Hardy , to Popeye , to Lament Cranston , the Shadow , with his insane heh-heh-heh laugh "<sup>(12)</sup> .It is a relevant connection to argue that the popular culture figures who appear in Baraka's early poetry are constantly linked with the search for a moral order . Therefore , a careful examination of poems such as *"Memory of Radio"* , *"The Death Of Nick Charles"* and others will illustrate Baraka's manipulation of the popular culture heroes as they occur in white American media and myths . Furthermore, Fischer sees the poet's rejection of the popular heroes of the American movies as expression of the angry black poet's "acrid satire on various aspects of American culture during the years of the Second World War and after .(265)

In the opening lines of *"In Memory of Radio"*, Baraka refers to Jack Kerouac's reverence for Lament Cranston , also known as "the Shadow" , who is a popular character from the days of radio drama in America . The poem's beginning is an invocation of the invisible crime fighter and popular radio hero , "The Shadow" .

*Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lament Cranston?  
(Only Jack Kerouac , that I know of : & me.  
The rest of you probably had on WCBS and Kate Smith, Or something  
equally unattractive).  
What can I say ?  
It is better to have loved and lost  
Than to put linoleum in your living rooms ? (12)*

The sanctity of Cranston is opposed to the spiritual failure of Kate Smith who makes a career of singing the false and hypocritical song "God Bless America" . According to Baraka , the life and career of Kate Smith is dedicated to the perpetuation of a blind super-patriotism <sup>(13)</sup> or at least , a moral laxity which approves even the most destructive powers of "Moloch" – the Jewish God , that is associated with modern American industrialized culture in Ginsberg's poem *"Howl"* . Along with Kate Smith , Baraka recalls other radio and early television personalities such as Oral Roberts , F.J. Sheen and Mandrake , the magician , figures who are primarily remembered for their programs in television , the medium that brought an end to the completely imaginative response elicited by the American radio:

*Am I a sage or something ?  
Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week ?  
(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of oral Roberts ...  
I cannot , like F.J. Sheen , tell you how to get saved & rich !  
I cannot even order you to gas-chamber satori like Hitler or  
Goody Knight (12) .*

The failure of Roberts and Sheen , according to Lacey , is twofold – by confusing the spiritual the material and by encouraging false hope , they have abused the holy imaginative medium of the American Radio (12) .If these two figures are the spiritual leaders of American people , it is no wonder , then , that in such a society all human values have been inverted <sup>(14)</sup>:

*& love is an evil word  
Turn it backwards / see , see what I mean ?*

*An evil word . & besides  
 Who understands it ?  
 I certainly wouldn't like to go out on that kind of limb .  
 Saturday mornings we listened to Red Lantern& his undersea folk .  
 At II, Let's Pretend & we did & I , the poet , still do , Thank God (12).*

Baraka argues that Americans can overcome this perversion "love is an evil word" through immersion in the sacred realm of the imagination , the spirit . This , according to Lacy , was possible through the liberating powers of programs such as "*Red Lantern*" and "*Let's Pretend*". By the end of the poem we have references to the divinity of "Lament Cranston", who in this context , is a supernaturally gifted force for goodness and law in a spiritually paralyzed society :

*What was it he used to say (after the transformation , when he was safe  
 & invisible & the unbelievers couldn't throw  
 Stones ?) "Heh , heh , heh ,  
 Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?  
 the Shadow Knows ."  
 O, yes he does  
 O, yes he does.  
 An evil word it is ,  
 This love (12-13) .*

In his comment on the poem Lacey says :

*In "Memory of Radio" the poet juxtaposes the very real weight of his  
 despair with the "dopey mythic worlds" of his youth . The result is a  
 tragicomic effect akin to that elicited by the blues. With this in mind , we  
 see that the poet did not haphazardly choose the title of this poem. The  
 poet , like the blues-man , laughs to keep from crying (14) .*

Like Lament Cranston , Nick Charles , Dashiell Hammett's cool detective , is in Lacey's views , a figure of purpose and moral direction (14) . In the poem , Baraka through the implication of the title , equates the death of love with the invalidation of belief in Nick Charles' heroism :

*... And how much of this  
 do you understand ? I hide  
 my face , my voice twisted  
 in the heavy winter fog . If I  
 came to you , left this wet island  
 & came to you : now , when I am young ,  
 & have strength in my fingers . To say ,  
 I love you , & cannot even recognize  
 You . How much of me  
 Could you understand ? (Only  
 That I love color , motion , thin high air  
 At night ? The recognizable parts  
 Of yourself ?  
 We love only heroes . Glorious  
 Death in battle . Scaling walls ,*

*Burning bridges behind us , destroying  
All ways back . All retreat . As if  
Some things were fixed . As if the moon  
Would come to us each night (&  
We could watch  
From the battlements) . As if  
There were anything certain  
Or lovely  
In our lives (31) .*

There is no explicit reference to Charles in the poem but the poem is concerned with a dying or dead love affair . Just as the poet equates Lament Cranston with the now lost imaginative response , he equates Nick Charles , the hero of Dashiell Hammett's detective novel *The Thin Man* which became a radio series , with love . The poet refers to the failure of this particular love affair with images from music and the dance . Like the speaker of the title poem in *Preface* , the speaker here equates loss of love to the absence of music . The speaker's lament "Nobody sings anymore" in the title poem , is identical to the concern of "*The Death of Nick Charles*" . The poet realize however , that his self-deprecating and death-haunted poetry will , in no way serve as music . It will not facilitate the dance of consummation . In Eliotite manner , Baraka says :

*I am thinking  
Of a dance . One I could  
Invent , if there  
Were music . If you  
Would play for me , some  
Light music . Couperin  
With yellow hillsides . Ravel  
As I kiss your hair . Lotions  
Of Debussy .  
I am moved by what ? Angered at this whine ;  
The quiet delicacy of my sad ness .The elements.  
My face torn by wind , faces , desire , lovely  
Chinese ladies  
Sweeping the sidewalks . (And this is not  
What I mean . Not the thing I wanted for you .  
Not , finally.  
Music , only terror at this lightly scribbled day .  
Emotion . Words .  
Waste . No clear delight .  
No light under my fingers . The room , the  
Walls , silent & deadly . Not  
Music .  
If there were  
A dance . For us  
To make ; your fingers  
On my face , your face wet  
With tears (or silence . For us  
To form upon this heavy air . Tearing  
The silence , hurting the darkness*

*With the color of our movement ! Nakedness?  
Great leaps  
Into the air? Huge pirouettes ; the moon blurred  
On ancient lakes . Thin horn  
And laughter (32-33) .*

The grating and insufficient sounds of "words" come also from the beloved one .Addressing her , the speaker says :

*Can you hear this ? Do you know  
who speaks to you ? Do you  
know me ? (Not even  
your lover . Afraid of you , your sudden  
disorder . Your ringless  
hands . Your hair  
disguised . Your voice  
not even real . Or  
beautiful .  
(What we had  
I cannot even say . Something  
like loathing  
covers your words (33) .*

The world of these lovers is one in which consummation, as symbolized by the dance and music , is no longer possible :

*It grows dark  
Around you . And these words  
Are not music . They make no motions  
for a dance . (Standing awkwardly  
before the window , watching  
the moon . The ragged smoke  
lifting against  
grey sheaths  
of night .  
you shimmer like words  
I barely hear . Your face  
twisted into words . "Love . Oh,  
Love me" . The window facing night , always .  
when we cannot speak.  
What shapes stream through the glass ?  
Only shadows  
on the wall . Under  
my fingers , trailing me  
with a sound like  
glass on slate . You cry out  
in the night ,  
& only the moon  
answers (34) .*

**"The Death of Nick Charles"** not only deals with the death motif but it also develops the suicidal theme which is very common in **Preface** :

*Sad  
long  
motion of air  
pushing in my face . Lies  
weakness , hatred  
of myself . of you  
for not understanding  
this . Or not  
despising me  
for the right causes . I am  
sick as , OH  
the night is , As  
cold days are ,  
when we must watch them  
grow old  
& dark (32).*

The poem which focuses on the pessimistic considerations of love and loneliness ends with oblique reference to darkness and blackness and a suicidal sleep , from which there is no awakening . The "Glorious death in battle"<sup>(15)</sup> of the beloved popular heroes seems to have been taken literally :

*The house sits  
between red buildings . And a bell  
rock against the night air . The moon  
sits over the North river , underneath  
a blue bridge . Boats & old men  
move through the darkness . Needing  
no eyes . Moving slowly  
towards the long black line  
of horizon . Footfalls , the  
twisting dirty surf . Sea birds  
scalding the blackness  
I sit inside alone , without  
thoughts . I cannot lie  
& say I think of you . I merely sit  
& grow weary , not even watching  
the sky lighten with morning  
& now  
I am sleeping  
& you will not be able  
to wake me (34) .*

These suicidal lines correspond to the serious meaning of the bizarre title of the collection , ***Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*** , and affirms the significance of the suicide motif as a recurrent theme in Baraka's first volume of poetry .

Harris , in his comment on Baraka's poem "***Look For Yesterday, Here You Come Today***" , argues that " the blues song not only furnishes the title for the poem but also supports the blues mood" (61) . Equally , Fischer points out that "black music is a loose point of reference for several of the poems in ***Preface*** , especially blues – related poems like "***Look For You Yesterday ...***" (279) . Fischer adds that the poem ...

*is a sardonic literary blues lament for the way that both the fine arts ("Great Poets dying / with their strophes on") and the "dopey mythic worlds" of radio celebrities like Jack Benny leave the once-deluded poet with no cultural sustenance at all . The great popular myths , particularly the animated cowboys and the zappy urban super-heroes that proliferate in the collective American imagination , such symbols as Tom Mix , Dickie Dare , Captain Midnight, Superman , and the Lone Ranger , crowd out whatever forms the black American might project in his own particular voice (264-65).*

Fischer maintains that " While Ginsberg would rant against the dehumanizing forces of Moloch , Jones's [Baraka's] poetry has that durable edge so representative of the black voice" (265) .

Distinguishing between Baraka and Ginsberg , between white and black , Fischer goes with his argument :

*It is mythic posturing of the sort Jones / Baraka deals with , destructive enough for the average white American , that kills the mind and spirit of the unsuspecting black poet . Such myths occupy black and white psyche alike by a thousand easy paths of intrusion long before one is able to erect defensive cognitive barriers . The victim , at first against his will , is driven to suicide –is suicided (to use Antonin Artaud's term) –by the smothering forces of the culture. For the black poet who initially works within a European- American literary frame of reference, the process of exorcising the myths of that culture will be debilitating in the toll of emotional energy is exacts . For as he calls the culture into question , so must he question the legitimate art forms of that culture – the same forms he uses in the questioning process . Without a new cultural and artistic frame of reference to replace them , the culmination could be self-destruction , although clearly the culture is responsible for the suicide and not the victim himself . The difference between Jones / Baraka and his white literary counterparts is that they ultimately accepted literary statement as a valid weapon against the culture. Jones / Baraka, from his black vantage point , did not see it working so much in his favor" (265) .*

Baraka's poem "***Look for You Yesterday , Here You Come Today***" invokes the blues spirit in its opening lines :

***Part of my charm :***

*envious blues feeling  
 separation of church and state  
 grim calls from drunk debutantes  
 Morning never aids me in my quest .  
 I have to trim my bread in a solitude .  
 I try to bum lines from "The Poet in New York".  
 People saw metal all around the house on Saturdays . The Phone rings .  
 terrible poems come in the mail . Descriptions of celibate parties  
 torn trousers : Great Poet dying  
 with their strophes on & me  
 incapable of a simple straightforward anger  
 It's so diffuse  
 being alive . Suddenly one is aware  
 that nobody really gives a damn .  
 My wife is pregnant with her child.  
 "It means nothing to me" , sez Strindberg . (15)*

Then , the speaker in the poem recalls some of his adolescent memories . There are reference to "James Karolis" and "Ora Matthews" , two of Baraka's friends who also appear in Baraka's play *The Toilet* :

*An avalanche of words  
 could cheer me up . Words from Great Sages  
 Was James Karolis a great sage ??  
 Why did I let Ora Matthews beat him up  
 in the bathroom ? Haven't I learnt my lesson .  
 I would take up painting  
 if I ed think of a way to do it  
 better than Leonardo . Then Bosch.  
 Than Hogarth . Than Kline .  
 Frank walked off the stage , singing  
 "My silence is as important as Jack's incessant  
 yatter".  
 I am a mean hungry sorehead .  
 Do I have the capacity for grace ?? (15)*

The poet's adolescent memories are not always about favorable things . In Baraka's poem . *"Look For You Yesterday ..."*, the poet recalls memories of the Second World War experience :

*To arise one smoking spring  
 & find one's youth has taken off  
 for greener parts .  
 A sudden blackness in the day  
 as if there were no afternoon .  
 & all my piddling joys retreated  
 to their own dopey mythic worlds.  
 The hours of the atmosphere  
 grind their teeth like hags.  
 (When will world two be over ?)*



*I stood up on a mailbox  
 waving my yellow tee-shirt  
 watching the grey tanks  
 stream up Central Ave .  
 All these thots  
 are Flowers of Evil  
 cold & lifeless  
 as subway rails  
 the sun like a huge cobblestone  
 flaking its brown slow rays  
 primititi  
 once , twice , My life  
 seems over & done with .  
 Each morning I rise  
 Like a sleep walker  
 &rot little more . (16)*

The central theme of the poem according to Benston's view in *The Renegade and the Mask* is the poet's "maudlin nostalgia" for the popular culture of his adolescence (102) during the Second World War : "When will world war two be over ?" In fact, Baraka's interest in America's modern mythology amounts to an obsession with comic-book heroes and code words , with radio programs and Hollywood movies since what is best in popular culture , as Baraka claims , is ready what is strongest in American society .

Critics argue that *"Look for You Yesterday..."* appeared at a time during which Baraka discarded the popular culture heroes . For example , Lloyd Brown in *"Comic Strip Heroes : Le Roi Jones and the Myth of American Innocence"* says that Baraka's use of popular culture essentially demonstrates the struggle of the black poet with the American myth of innocence, against which the concept of "soul" is putted (191) . Brown's interpretation , though relevant , does not go far enough in explaining Baraka's use of popular mythology in this poem . According to Baraka *"Look for You Yesterday ..."* is about his own vision of his childhood . In the poem , he describes "some of the things" that have stayed with him and how he used "these things to show that he is gradually getting older" . The process of aging that commands the author each morning to rise and "rot a little more" , as well as the "terrible thoughts about death" are contrasted with a nostalgic attempt to reach out for his lost childhood :

*All the lovely things I've known have disappeared .  
 I have all my public hair & am lonely .  
 There is probably no such place as Battle Creek, Michigan !  
 Tom Mix dead in a Boston Nightclub  
 before I realized what happened .  
 People laugh when I tell them about Dickie Dare !  
 What is one to do in an alien planet  
 where the people breath New Ports?  
 Where is my space helmet , I sent for it  
 3 lives ago ... when there were box tops .  
 What has happened to box tops ??  
 O God ... I must have a belt that glows green  
 in the dark . Where is my Captain Midnight*

*decoder ??  
 I can't understand what Superman is saying !  
 THERE MUST BE A LONE RANGER !!!  
 but this also  
 is part of my charm .  
 A maudlin nostalgia  
 that comes on  
 like terrible thoughts about death.  
 How dumb to be sentimental about anything  
 To call it love  
 & cry pathetically  
 into the long black handkerchief  
 of the years (16-17) .*

The function of popular culture in the poem is significant Baraka's popular heroes help the poet in search of a lost past and take him back "3 lives" to his childhood . But the poet's loneliness , the fact that people laughed at his nostalgia and the doubtful tone of his questions indicate that the popular culture of the poet's adolescence has been consumed and forgotten by the people and that he is now one of the few witnesses who remember that it ever existed . What was one culture for the millions has now . in an ironically elitist turn , become a secret password ; a code understood only by those few visionaries who are "dumb" enough "to be sentimental about anything" (*Preface* 17) . Thus , the speaker in the poem comes to the conclusion that the innocence of his adolescent days has disappeared forever . This is made obvious in his appropriation of the blues lyric that gives the poem its title as well as its sense of irretrievable loss :

*"Look for you yesterday  
 Here you come today  
 Your mouth wide open  
 But what you got to say?"*  
 - *Part of my charm  
 old envious                blues feelings  
 ticking like                a big cobblestone clock.  
 I hear the reel running out ...  
 the spectators are impatient for popcorn :  
 It was only a selected short subject  
 F. Scott Charon  
 will soon be glad-handing me  
 like a legionnaire (17) .*

The poem ends with a final reference to the disarmed poet who is incapable of moral action or a "simple straightforward anger". His loss of belief is underlined through references to the more identifiable<sup>(16)</sup> accoutrements of the comic book "hero" . The blues tone, concretely establishing the sense of loss, is reemphasized in the concluding lines of the poem . In this sense, the tragic and comic (the blues spirit) are finally and most effectively manipulated in the final lines of the poem :

*My silver bullets all gone  
 My black mask trampled in the dust*

***& Tonto way off in the hills  
moaning like Bessie Smith (18) .***

In the previous poems which deal with the American popular culture myths , Baraka throws a collage of mythic elements drawn principally from the popular media of comics , radio drama and the Hollywood hero cults remembered from the late **1930's** and early **1940's** and ironically mourns its de-fabrication . The Shadow , Kate Smith , Tarzan , Superman , the Lene Ranger – all are rounded together by a "maudlin nostalgia" and are mockingly simpered over.<sup>(17)</sup>

The critical views of Fischer and Brown come much closer to the meaning which Baraka wants to convey in ***Preface***. Baraka's pervasive manipulation of popular culture heroes in the poems of ***Preface*** (that have more than one meaning) affirms the poet's rejection of the moral values , deceptive innocence and false heroism represented by those immoral heroes who survive in a sterile and corrupted culture . An attentive critical readings of Baraka's poems which deal with the popular myths shows the black poet's hostile attitude toward the popular culture heroes in America and provides a deeper understanding of Baraka's poems in ***Preface*** . When Baraka examines the "all American" innocence , represented by comic-strip heroes , he argues that the image of American innocence is false and deceptive . The image of American innocence often masks emotional unfulfillment and the kind of destructiveness that is symptomized by racial injustice . In ***"To a Publisher"*** , for example , the Peanuts child-heroes incarnate this emotional sterility .The are grown-ups in juvenile disguises that fail to conceal the analogy with the adult world . Thus , they will "turn out bad" , will be inane disc jockeys , beatniks or typical city-slickers . And Charlie Brown's love-hate relationships reflect the emotional sterility in the adult American society :

***The blight rests in your face  
For your unknown musiks , The care & trust  
Un-deliberate . Like an ax-murder  
Or flat pancake . The night cold & asexual  
A long sterile moon lapping at the dark Huston .  
The end of a star . The water more than any  
Other thing . We are dibbled here . Seurats  
Madness . That kind of joke . Isolate  
Land creatures in a wet unfriendly world .  
We must be strong . (smoke Balkan Sobranie)  
People will think you have the taste  
In this hyar family .Some will stroke your face .  
Better posture is another thing . Watch out for  
Peanuts .  
he's gonna turn out bad . A.J.D./A Beatnik /A  
Typical wise-ass N.Y kid "X" wanted to bet me  
that Charlie Brown spent most of his time  
whacking his doodle , or having weird relations  
with that dopey hound of his (though that's  
a definite improvement over "Arf Arf" & that  
filthy little lesbian has hung up with) (18-19).***

In this context , violence and death rather love , have been sanctioned by the American culture as forms of growth and awareness . In American culture , the realization of violence as manhood , for example , reflects a widespread approach to life as a kind of death . This is the kind of approach that Baraka perceives beneath the innocent veneer of comic-strip innocence . Consequently , to yearn for the comic-strip world of cowboys and space-age heroes , as the hero does in "***Look for You Yesterday , Here You Come Today***" , is really to long for death itself : "what is one do in an alien planet / where people beneath New Ports? " (17) .

In Baraka's comic-strip America the corruption of love is due to the culture's destructive dichotomies between reason and feeling. Baraka , in his poem , "***In Memory of Radio***" explores this dichotomy . The poem , on one level , is study in contrasts , parodying the American culture's antithesis between reason and feeling, between a limited mathematical rationalism and emotional involvement . The rationalistic archetype in the poem is Mandrake , the magician , from whom the poet dissociates himself by disclaiming powers of hypnosis : "Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week ?" (12) The choice of Mandrake as symbol of rationalism is a striking one because the culture usually associates "magic" with the "occult" and other suspect modes for non-rational perception . But such a choice is effective precisely because it emphasizes the degree to which the obsession with a narrow rationalism has had the effect of surrounding "reason" with all the primitive mystique that the culture itself usually attributes to magic : in Western culture reason has become sacrosanct , a "sacred cow" that is defended by its worshippers with an irrational fervor . Thus , the "magic" of radio technology connotes the impressive nature of the technology in its own right ; but , turning the culture's pejorative use of the term "magic" against itself .Baraka's poem defines the "magic" of radio as a symptom of the irrational basis on which the American culture perceives the achievements of technological reason .

Radio , therefore , represents a pretended involvement and intimacy . The pretence is the more incongruous because the scientific rationalism that made radio a possibility has contributed to the inhibition of emotional experience in the culture . Accordingly love has been transformed , becoming an evil rather than creative experience . The transformation has all the connotations of the evil "magic" which the culture abhors : the "magical" reversal of the spelling ("evol") reflects the real evil of dying love (***Preface 12***) .

In Baraka's poetry , the American society's sterility and lack of emotional experience encourages a certain need for heroes , for heroic archetypes with whom the individual comic-strip fan can establish a make-believe intimacy that substitutes for the absence of love in the American culture . Americans are only capable of loving only heroes who can scale the walls of social division –in their imagination at least . And because this kind of hero-worship is a self-protective , compensatory defence in a corrupted , soulless world , then it evokes a sense of sympathy in "***The Death Of Nick Charles***" and "***Look for You Yesterday***" and other poems dealing with the same motif .

As long as this hero-worship is a collective pretence it really belongs to what Baraka perceives as the destructively false myths of American innocence .R.W.B Lewis in his book , ***The American Adam*** has accounted for the tradition of American innocence in his analysis of what he calls the American Adam , a new kind of hero who personifies a new set of human values and ideals in America , According to Lewis , The American Adam represents a vision of innocence that is really illusory but "without the illusion , we are conscious , no longer of tradition , but simply and coldly of the burden of history" (9) . But while Lewis is ready to accept the illusions that are inherent in this tradition of American innocence Baraka sees

those illusions as symptoms of deep flaws in the idea of American innocence itself. Consequently, the attack on comic-strip images of innocence in Baraka's poems springs from the belief that the myths and images of American innocence have never been devoted, in the American culture's history, to the propagation of ideals, however illusory these might be. Baraka's comic-strip heroes are not idealistic images opposed to the "burden of history" but they embody the real corruptions –stunned emotions, violence, deep-rooted habits of deception and brutality that are endemic to America as wasteland. Thus, the interest of Lewis in the cowboy archetype and its literary counterparts (104) is turned down by Baraka's attack against this comic-strip archetype precisely because he is repelled by this kind of equation between violence, manhood and sexuality. Baraka perceives such an equation as a moral and emotional perversion that is confirmed rather than transcended by the "innocent" archetypes of America's cultural myths. Thus, what Lewis sees as an innocent transcendence strikes Baraka simply as an embodiment of a death-like tradition and corrupted society. Within this critical perspective, the connotations of innocence in *"Look for You Yesterday"* are undermined by the historical brutality (cowboys, for example) of the comic-strip archetype. To yearn for the comic-book world of youthful idealism is, therefore, to long for an innocent heroism that never existed:

***Where is my space helmet, I sent for it 3 lives ago ...when there were box tops. What has happened to box tops ?? O, God...I must have a belt that glows green in the dark. Where is my Captain Midnight decoder ?? I can't understand what Superman is saying! THERE MUST BE A LONE RANGER !!! (17)***

Superman is the mythic symbol of that invincible goodness which the persona associates with the innocent myths of comic-strip childhood. But the figure is also the stereotype of (white) racial supremacy here, a being whose distinctively Caucasian virility enforces traditional equations of purity with whites. His unintelligibility in this context, therefore, reflects the persona's growing awareness of the non-communication between black and white in the real, as opposed to the mythically innocent, America. And ethnic barriers like these are part of an emotional wasteland in which emotional fulfillment amounts to nothing more than a "maudlin nostalgia" for figures of violence and death. Hence, the disillusioned persona thinks of Tom Mix as a depressingly real social archetype, "dead in a Boston Nightclub / before I realized what happened" (16). In more personal terms, the death of Tom Mix represents the death of that childhood innocence which allowed the cowboy archetype to exist as a positive image of goodness in the persona's consciousness. The dead Tom Mix and the dead innocence of the narrator are one and the same. As for the Lone Ranger, he is also a symptom of the narrator's cultural milieu and subjective experience. And he is moribund:

***My silver bullets all gone  
My black mask trampled in the dust  
& Tonto way off the hills  
Moaning like Bessie Smith (18).***

As another white Superman the Lone Ranger is linked here with the traditional victims of white supremacy. His personality is defined in relation to the non-white's humiliation. The trampled black mask (the black American) is crucial to the Lone Ranger's identity. So is Tonto, the "good Injun". Indeed, without these the Lone Ranger is unrecognizable. And in this regard he emphasizes the degree to which American culture as a whole, and the white American in particular, owe their very identity to a certain interaction with non-white groups

that are traditionally brutalized or ignored by the American society . However , at this time Baraka perceives the Lone Ranger and his kind as figures of decay , not simply because of the moral corruption that they embody , but also because of the exposure of those racist traditions which spawned them . Time , in a Western movie is running out , and the dispossessed are no longer quiescent : "I hear the reel running out ... / the spectators are impatient for popcorn" . The new impatience will not be fooled by the traditional façade of mythic innocence . Tonto and his back counterparts have deserted , and , in the language of the blues , their anger heightens the impression that time is running out for the Lone Ranger : "old envious blues feeling / ticking like a big cobblestone clock" (17).

These racial conflicts are not simply allegories of America's moral wasteland , although they do serve an allegorical function in Preface as a whole . They are also significant , in their own right , as reflections of Baraka's racial perception in this early collection of poetry . Non-whites are therefore not simply victims of America's social system as a whole . They are also accessories to their own victimization by participating , as the narrator has done in his youth , in the myths of American innocence . Accordingly , the ethnic tensions of "**Look for You Yesterday** " are not simply external . They also represent , on an internal level , the black American's double consciousness , the contradictions between a non-white ethnicity and the acceptance of white cultural myths . Conversely , the demise of the Lone Ranger heralds a cultural awakening and the distraction of white cultural values within the black psyche . The ethnic and cultural changes seen in "**Look for You Yesterday** " and similar poems are not on the scale of Baraka's themes of rebellion and revolution in the poetry of the late 1960's. As in much of his earlier work these poems envision black ethnicity within rather than in opposition to the idea of American culture as a whole .

### **The Third Category : The Black Middle Class**

In this category of poems , Baraka criticizes the black middle class people who are seduced by the dream of integration with a society which has brutalized them . The poet criticizes the black church which encourages assimilation . To him the black middle class members –by ignoring their history of slavery and by forgetting white oppression – have separated themselves from other groups living in the black ghetto . Being deceived by the false promises of integration the black middle class ignores black identity and seeks to learn white culture , and in doing so , the middle class blacks are cut off from their racial roots . Baraka's attack against the black middle class occurs in many poems in Preface but reaches a climax in the poem sequence , "**Hymn for Lanie Poo**".

"**Hymn for Lanie Poo**" is a poem sequence which derives its title from the nickname of Baraka's sister , Elaine , who belongs to the black middle class that is severely criticized in Baraka's prose books Home and Blues People . The poem which is a long , episodic piece in a prologue and seven sections , starts with an epigraph from Rimbaud which establishes its major theme. In this poem , Baraka presents several damning images of assimilationist blacks , i.e. blacks who , in their own way, are driven by a death wish toward integration . Baraka argues that the poem is "about what E. Franklin Frazier called the Black Bourgeoisie . It tries to equate modern life , modern Negro life in America with the life in some unknown African tribe"<sup>(18)</sup>. The poem denounces the poet's sister in the final section , thus we assume that the "young beautiful woman" of the poem's prologue is indeed the same person .The poem starts as follows :

O,  
these wild trees

*will make charming wicker baskets,  
 the young woman  
 the young black woman  
 the young black beautiful woman  
 said.  
 These wild-assed trees  
 will make charming  
 wicker baskets  
 (now , I'm putting words in her mouth...tch ) (6).*

In the poem's opening lines , the speaker and his sister are in some imaginary primitive setting . The scene opens with the sister's "proper" remark on the idyllic scene . The speaker , then, attribute a more earthy or "hip" response to the sister but quickly rejects it as a possibility for her . This "young black beautiful woman" so unwrapped up in hatred of things black , most assuredly hates the vitality of the black street idiom . In the first section of the poem , still in the imaginative setting , the poet says :

*All afternoon  
 we watched the cranes  
 humping each other  
 dropped  
 our shadows  
 onto the beach  
 and covered them over with sand (6) .*

Nevertheless , the poet hears the following warning , presumably from his sister :

*Beware the evil sun ...  
 Turn you black  
 Turn your hair  
 Crawl your eyeballs  
 Rot your teeth .  
 All afternoon  
 We sit around  
 Near the edge of the city  
 hacking open  
 crocodile skulls  
 sharpening our teeth (6) .*

Nevertheless , The warnings mean nothing to the speaker of the poem . He says :

*The god I pray to  
 get black boobies  
 got steatopygia  
 make faces in the moon  
 make me a green purple &  
 maroon winding sheet .  
 I wobble out to  
 the edge of the water  
 give my horny yell*

***& 24 elephants  
stomp out of the subway  
with consecrated hardons (7) .***

While the young lady hates her blackness "watch out for that evil sun / turn you black / My fireface" , the speaker embraces his blackness with a religious fervor . The lady receives more condemnation in the description of her coming out party :

***She had her coming out party  
with 3000 guests  
from all parts of the country .  
Queens , Richmond Togoland , the Cameroons  
A white hunter , very unkempt ,  
with long hair ,  
whizzed in on the end of a vine .  
(spoke perfect English too ) .  
"Throw on another goddamned Phoenecian"  
I yelled , really getting with it .  
John Coltrane arrived with an Egyptian lady .  
he played very well .  
"Throw on another goddamned Phoenecian"  
We got so drunk (Hulan Jack  
brought hits bottle of Thunderbird) ,  
nobody went hunting  
the next morning (7) .***

Baraka's poetic montage ironically contrasts images of urban America with Tarzan-like , exotic notions of Africa as existed in the imagination of the Bohemian poet . The references to "Queens , Richmond , Togoland , the Cameroons" is reminiscent of Eliot's lists of cities in ***"The Waste Land"*** . Baraka , equally creates a fantasy setting combining New York boroughs with West African nations from which many black Americans originally came and a New York subway with identifiably male elephants which are stomping through the cities . Among the party guests are Hulan Jack <sup>(19)</sup> , Tarzan and others .

In this poem , Baraka criticizes the black debutante's ball which is frequently satirized in literature written by black Americans . The roots of this particular treatment of the debutante's ball are found in E. Franklin Frazier's study , ***Black Bourgeoisie*** (1957).

Speaking about the party in the poem , Baraka uses elements from popular culture for humorous effect . This affair looks like a production of a "Tarzan" or "Jungle Jim" movie . Even the John Coltrane recording , the classic ballad "Naima" (Egyptian Lady) is used simply for its appropriateness as mood music . This is surely , for Baraka , the ultimate blasphemy<sup>(20)</sup> . Moreover , Hulan Jack , a former president of the Borough of Manhattan (New York) , and a prime example of the black assimilationists , epitomizes the theme of "four Negers" . Hulan Jack should know that as a rich man and a member of the black middle class , he is not supposed to drink "Thunderbird Wine" , the favorite drink of the poor ghetto inhabitants during the late 1950's and early 1960's . In the terms of the poem , Hulan Jack makes the unforgivable slip in bringing , to the party , his bottle of "Thunderbird" . But in doing so , he acknowledged his black roots , his kinship with even the lowest dregs of the



black ghetto . The ghetto inhabitants share a common taste and a common destiny that Jack is driven to deny .

The poet regrets that Africans and blacks are "civilized" ; they are "wild-assed trees" who have been transformed under the spell of the Western , American civilization into "charming / wicker baskets" . Baraka , however , negates this metamorphosis and envisions black self-liberation through inversion and re-creation . In the beginning of part two , he says :

*O ,  
don't be shy honey .  
we all know  
these wicker baskets  
would make wild-assed trees (8) .*

However , in part one and during the party , the speaker connects Eliot's "Phoenician" from "The Burial of the Dead" section in "*The Waste Land*" – with the American ritual of the burger cooked<sup>(21)</sup> out and yells cannibalistically : "Throw on another goddamned Phoenician / we got drunk" . After the speaker's communion with cheap wine , Thunderbird , he spends a week in a fantasy land somewhere while his activities range from gulping down monkey foreskins to trying to get some sculpting , from watching television to catching a **600** -pound ape. He records this experience in the second part of the poem :

*Monday , I spent most of the day hunting.  
Knocked off about six , gulped down a couple  
of monkey foreskins , then took in a flick.  
Got to bed early .  
Tuesday , same thing all day . ( Caught a  
mangy lioness with one tit ) . Ate .  
Watched television for a while . Read the  
paper , then hit the sack .  
Wednesday , took the day off .  
Took the wife and kids to the games .  
Read Garmanda's book , "14 Tribes of  
Ambiguity" , didn't like it .  
Thursday , we caught a goddamn ape .  
Must've weighed about 600 pounds .  
We'll probably eat ape meat for the  
rest of the month . Christ , I hate  
ape meat .  
Friday , I stayed home with a supposed  
cold . Goofed the whole day trying to  
re-thatch the roof . Had run in with  
the landlord .  
We spent the weekend at home .  
I tried to get some sculpting done ,  
but nothing came of it . It's impossible  
to be an artist and a bread  
winner at the same time .  
Sometimes I think I oughta chuck  
the whole business (8) .*

The third section introduces attacks on black groups motivated by the assimilationist dream . The "fire-masons" , a black middle class organization evidently based on the principles of white Masonic orders , and primarily concerned with appearance , parades and regalia are condemned as follows :

*The fireasons parade .  
( The sun is using this country  
as a commode .  
Beware the sun , my love . )  
The fireasons are very square.  
They are supposed to be a civic  
and fraternal organization , but  
all they do is have parades and  
stay high . They also wear funny  
looking black hats , which are  
round and have brims . The fire-  
asons are cornballs (9) .*

In section four , Baraka says :

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

Here , Baraka immerses himself into his specific New York locale in order to create a Whitmanesque cosmic genealogy for himself . Here the rising horizon , the sun itself , becomes a father image for the alienated poet who is thus metaphorically elevated to a son of the sun . The black poet's elevation to cosmic origins is not only a source of strength but also is a social liability in the racial society in America which assigns a quality of "evil" to the sun . "Beware the evil sun ... turn you black" . In a parallel passage in *Blues People* , Baraka explains this correlation of sun and blackness . He argues:

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

In section five , Baraka criticizes the hypocritical black church which encourages blacks to seek integration with a white society which has brutalized them :

*We came into the  
silly little church  
shaking our wet raincoats  
on the floor .  
It wasn't water ,  
that made the raincoats wet  
The preacher's  
conning eyes  
fired when he saw  
the way I walked towards  
him ; almost  
throwing my hips out  
of whack .  
He screamed ,  
He's wet with blood of the lamb !!  
And everybody  
got real happy (9-10) .*

The poet ridicules the black Christians in the "silly little church" who allow an assimilationist preacher with "coming eyes" to trick them into accepting the idea integration .

In section six , Baraka criticizes the black middle class people whom he calls , in German / Yiddish , "die Schwartze Bohemian" . Middle class blacks are not depicted as a pioneer class on the road to true black identity but they lack any kind of meaningful connection with their own people and with black communities , e.g. Harlem "uptown" . Baraka says :

*They laugh ,  
 and religion was something  
 he fount in coffee shops , by God .  
 It's not that I got anything  
 against cotton , nosiree , by God  
 It's just that ...*

*Man look at that blonde  
 whewee!*

*I think they are not treating us like  
 Mr . Lincun said they should  
 or Mr. Gandhi*

*For that matter . By God .  
 ZEN  
 is a bitch ! like "Bird" was ,  
 Café Olay  
 for me , Miss .*

*But white can't swing ...  
 Or the way this guy kept patronizing me –  
 Like he was Bach or somebody*

*Oh, I knew  
 John Kasper when he hung around with sha  
 She's a painter , Man .  
 It's just that it's such a drag to go  
 Way uptown for Bar B Cue ,  
 By God ...*

***How much ? (10-11)***

Here Baraka criticizes the black bourgeoisie who have lost faith in their blackness , thus , they lost faith in God : "They laughed / and religion was something ... fount in coffee shops . By God" . The black Middle Class citizens equally ignore their history of slavery - pay no attention to the struggles of other blacks in the American South – particularly during the slavery era : "It's not that I got anything / against cotton , nosiree by God" . They have no connections with black people in the Harlem ghetto : "It's just that it's such a drag to go / way uptown [Harlem] for Bar B Cue". The middle class black , while ignoring his blackness , talks about Zen , Gandhi and "Mr. Lincun" retaining so little of his own cultural identity as a black man . Even his drink "Café Olay" reveals his integrationist attitude .

The final section of the poem , starts with a litany dedicated to the Middle class blacks who are deceived by the false promises of integration and are trapped in the worship of whiteness Baraka's sister is one of them :

***About my sister .  
( O, generation revered  
above all others .  
O, generation of fictitious  
Ofays  
I revere you ...  
You are all so beautiful (11) .***

In a Whitmanesque fashion , the poet continues to catalogue the flaws of his materialistically oriented self-hating sister , a representative of Negro Middle class mentality , who worships appearances :

***my sister drives a green jaguar  
my sister has her hair done twice a month  
my sister is school teacher  
my sister took ballet lessons  
my sister has a fine figure : never diets  
my sister doesn't like to teach in Newark  
because there are too many colored  
in her classes  
my sister hates loud shades  
my sister's boy friend is a faggot music teacher  
who digs Tschaikovsky  
my sister digs Tschaikovsky also (11) .***

Like the white people ,the poet's sister is a rich woman driving a very experience car : "my sister drives a green jaguar" . Like the Middle class blacks , she hates her Negro appearance and seeks to change the nature of her Negro / African hair by going frequently to the hair dresser : "my sister has her hair done twice a month" . She attempts to be integrated into the mainstream culture through learning white arts : "my sister took ballet lessons" . Because she hates blacks , she "doesn't like to each" in black ghettoes such as Newark "because there are too many colored [students] in her classes" . Even the boy friend of the poet's sister is a

member of the black Middle class . Both of them are interested in white culture , art and music : "my sister's boy friend is a faggot music teacher who digs Tschaikovsky / my sister digs Tschaikovsky also" . The poet adds : "it is because of this similarity of interests / that they will probably get married" .These "*faux Negres*" are imitation of imitations of whiteness and by losing their identity , they become characterless :

*Smiling & glad / in  
the huge & loveless  
white-anglo sun / of  
benevolent step  
mother America (12) .*

Huston A. Baker , in "*Generational Shifts And the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature*", argues that "Baraka inverts the literary-critical optimism and axiology of an earlier generation , rejecting entirely the notion that 'Negro Literature' should not stand apart as a unique body of expression" (5) . Speaking of symbol inversion in "*Hymn For Lanie Poo*" , Fischer in "*Amiri Baraka*" argues : "By inverting this traditional giving life symbol [the sun] , Jones (Baraka) practices a strategy common to the black perspective : reversing the destructive meanings and values projected by the white world in order to buffer the besieged black psyche" (31) . In "*Hymn for Lanie Poo*" , Baraka abuses the sun as a universal symbol by inverting the image throughout most of the poem . First , Baraka introduces the sun as a traditional white misconception , one distortedly transformed into the urban jungle delusion that ugly black features are the result of one's prior evolutionary adjustment to the African tropics : "Beware the evil sun / turn you black / turn your hair / crawl your eye balls / rot your teeth / all afternoon / we sit round / near the edge of the city / hacking open / crocodile skulls / sharpening our teeth" . In part three , the sun has impregnated so far as to generate the "firemasons" black men belonging to the Middle class , who build false self-images by imitating white fraternal organizations . Part four represents the ultimate deception , the temptation of viewing the sun as one's symbolic genealogical source . The poet , feigning a lyric mood , relates the sun to his genesis . He says : "each morning / I go down / to Gansevoort / and stand on the docks / I stare out / at the horizon / until it gets up/ and comes to embrace me / I make believe / it is my father / this is know / as genealogy" . Then , in section five , there is a parody on the theological paradigm of this false emotionalism mentioned in the previous stanzas . The poet refers to the "silly little church" of the "conning" black preacher who embraces the white man's religion . It is probably a Baptist church , but the poet is wearing his "raincoat" and so remains impervious to the redeeming baptismal waters . In section six and seven , the poet takes us through two more white-imposed identities , one of the black Middle class , the poet's sister, masquerading as a hip intellectual . She is criticized because her mind has been so deeply penetrated by the sun's rays that she has been seduced into a "generation of fictitious Ofays" . Within this context , this ironic hymn sets the tone for *Preface* by stressing that the sun – culture has begot an insinuating American life style , murdering the black poet and his people .

#### ***The Fourth Category :The Cuban Poems***

Baraka's visit to Cuba in the early 1960's totally altered his attitude and concept toward literature and politics . The poetic argument in "One Night Stand" and "Betancourt" reflects Baraka's evolving position as a politically oriented poet . Although not ready to become a fully committed political poet at this stage , the Cuban experience paved the way for Baraka

to change his concept of poetry which was inspired by his Beat / Bohemian milieu in Greenwich Village , New York . Moreover , Baraka seemed to be ready to accept such change which reached its climax in the poet's revolutionary poetry during the late **1960's** and the early **1970's** . The poet's awareness of the debilitating influence of his milieu , the Beat culture , encouraged him to look for a new moral order . The path Baraka was to take in directing his own moral energies is evident in the poems inspired by his urban experience . This attempt to establish a new moral order , contrary to that inspired by the white Beat culture , reveals the growing of the poet's racial consciousness at this stage . Like the ethnic motifs in the popular culture poems , the political motifs in the urban poems portray the black poet's political revolt within rather than in opposition to the idea of American culture as a whole . Being not fully ready to be an ethnic black poet at this stage , Baraka deals with the urban revolution not as a militant black poet but rather as an American poet who seeks an alternative for the Beat aesthetic .

In 1961 , Baraka visited Cuba and he called the trip a turning point in his life . Visiting this new world in the Caribbean radically changed Baraka's orientation toward art and politics . After the trip , Baraka began his long voyage toward a politically committed art and not coincidentally , a movement toward blackness and a Third World perspective . The artist he encountered in Cuba showed him the importance of politically engaged art , the brand he had been practicing as a member of the *avant-garde* movement in Greenwich Village .

Baraka's encounter with a vital and functioning revolution began the season of his discontent , a discontent that ended in disillusionment with his white American compatriots' revolt . He said in *Home* : " the rebels [ meaning his bohemian contemporaries ] have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics . Drugs , Juvenile delinquency , complete isolation from vapid mores of the country , a few current ways out . But name an alternative" (61) . The Cuban alternative that attracted Baraka called for young intellectuals to invest their energies in creating a new and more humane society . In *Preface* , there are two poems , "*One Night Stand*" and "*Betancourt*" which come from the poet's Cuban experience and which will be analyzed in this section .

In an interview with Kimberly Benston Baraka spoke about his experience in Cuba :

*Benston : Did the poem "Betancourt" and thr "Cuba Libre" essay - the works that grew directly from your Cuba experience - effect a self - conscious turning point ?*

*Baraka : Yes . See , when I went to Cuba it was like a revelation to me . Suddenly , there I was in Cuba and , at first , I didn't understand that that was real stuff , that people actually could make a revolution , that you could actually seize countries . There I was down there with a whole lot of young dudes my own age who were walking around with guns – they just did it . It blew my mind ; I was never the same . Then, when I came back to the States , I wrote the "Betancourt" poem . It was written to a woman whom I'd met down there who was a Mexican Communist . She had berated me constantly about being a petit bourgeois poet . When I came back , all the arguments about national oppression that I had felt before became intensified . I wasn't just going on half perception . I had seen people taking over big aristocrats' houses and turning private beaches into public beaches , etc. For example , I saw them take over the Hilton Hotel and change its name from Havana Hilton to Havana Libre . As a matter of fact , I was trying to call home*

*one time and the American operator said , "Is this the Havana Hilton ?" And the Cuban operator said , "No , this is the Havana Libre ." And so the American woman says , "Havana Libre – what's that ?" And the Cuban woman just said , "You better get used to it . This is the Havana Libre !" (Laughter) That was really a great thing . I was down there with Robert Williams , Julian Mayfield, Harold Cruse, Richard Gibson , a lot of folks , and we actually were right there in the beginning of that . So when I came back I was turned completely around and began to go on a really aggressive attack as far as politics was concerned (307) .*

After his visit to Cuba Baraka was also astounded by the disparity of the idea of revolution in both America and Cuba . He wrote in Home :

*The idea of "a revolution" had been foreign to me ... inconceivably "romantic" and/or hopeless idea ... cold light of "reason"... name an alternative here . Something not inextricably bound up in a lie ... not part of liberal stupidity or the actual filth of vested interest .There is none . It's much too late (61-62) .*

"*One Night Stand*" is one of the poems that grew out of the poet's visit to Cuba in 1961. In the beginning of the poem which is dedicated to Allen Ginsberg , Baraka visualizes a part of his experience in Cuba :

*We entered the city at noon ! High bells .The radio on . Some kind of Prokofieff ; snaring the violent remains of the day in sharp webs of dissonance .*

*We roared through the old gates .Iron doors hanging all grey , with bricks mossed over and gone into chips dogs walked through .*

*The river also roared . And what sun we had disappeared into the water , or buried itself in the badly pitched tents of the wounded soldiers .*

*There , also , at the river , blue steel hats glinted on the sparse grass , and brown showed through where the grass was trampled (21) .*

Then , he speaks about the purpose of the Cuban visit –the poet and his black American friends come from the North to witness the celebrations of the Cuban revolution:

*We came in , with our incredulousness , from the north. On steely highways from the marble entrails of noon . We had olives , and the green buds locked on our lutes .*

*Twisted albion-horns , rusted in warm rain , peasant carts , loud black bond-servants dazed and out of their wool heads , wild shrubs impecuniously sheltered along the concrete , Rumble of the wheels over cobblestones , the green knocked out .The old houses dusty seeming & old men watching us slyly as we come in ; all of us laughing too loud .*

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

In "*One Night Stand*" , Baraka praises Castro's Cuban revolution .The bells , the radio and the sounds of the Prokofieff all destroy the old harmonies . In the second stanza , there are more images of the erosion of an older way of life . Here , the images are visual "old gates" , "iron doors ...all grey" , "Bricks mossed over" . Besides , the third stanza which combines

auditory and visual images , is concerned with apocalyptic images suggesting the destruction or purgation that must occur before the new order can be built . It is not until the fifth stanza that we see direct reference to the poet's attitude toward the new regime in Cuba : "we come in , with our uncredulousness from the north / on steely highways from the marble entrails of noon / we had olives , and the green buds locked our lutes" . In the sixth stanza , the poet refers to the impact of the Cuban revolution on "loud black bond servants , dazed and out of their wool heads". The poem also reveals the troubled American poet's perspective on his relationship , as black man , to the Cubans , particularly the black Cubans . In the final stanza , Baraka refers to himself and his fellow black visitors saying : "we are foreign seeming persons ... we have come a long way & are uncertain which of the masks is cool" .

In "*Cuba Libre*" , Baraka spoke about his trip to Cuba where he had other black writers were invited to observe the effective results of the Cuban revolution and to attend the celebration at Sierra Maestra in commemoration of the rebel attack on the Moncada Barracks that opened the struggle against Batista . On the train to Sierra Maestra Baraka met Senora Betancourt , a Mexican delegate from the Latin-American Youth Congress . Senora Betancourt , a graduate student in economics , is described in *Home* as "very short , very blonde and very pretty" (42) , discussed with Baraka at some length the ugliness and irrationality of life in the United States and the role of the United States in Third World countries . In response to one of her attacks against the U.S. government and politics Baraka was unwittingly defensive , making excuses for his own lack of political activism on the grounds of being a poet . He describes this situation in *Home* :

*I tried to defend myself, 'Look , why jump on me ? I understand what you're saying . I'm in complete agreement with you . I'm a poet ... what can I do ? I write , that's all , I'm not even interested in politics' . She jumped on me with both feet as did a group of Mexican poets later in Habana . She called me a 'cowardly bourgeois individualist' .The poets , or at least one young wild-eyed Mexican poet , Jaime Shelly , almost left me in tears , stomping his foot on the floor , screaming : ' You want to cultivate your soul ? In that ugliness you live in , you want to cultivate your soul ? Well , we've got millions of starving people to feed , and that moves me enough to make poems out of (42) .*

"*Betancourt*" ,like "*One Night Stand*" , comes from the poet's Cuban experience . This longer poem is even more important in assessing Baraka's evolving position as a politically oriented poet . In the opening stanza of the poem he describes the beginning of the fourteen hour journey during which Baraka discussed many issues with Senora Betancourt :

*What are  
influences ?  
A green truck  
wet & glowing , séance  
of ourselves , elegy for the sea  
at night , my flesh  
a woman's , at the fingertips  
soft white increased coolness  
from the dark  
Sea (36) .*



Baraka's description becomes more vivid as he pictures Cuba as a revolutionary paradise :

*We sat  
with our backs  
to the sea . Not  
in the gardens  
of Spain , but some  
new greenness , birds  
scorching the yellow  
rocks at the foot  
of the sea's wall . A barrier  
of rock , tilting backwards , damp ,  
thrown up against  
a floating dreary  
disgust . Even fear  
without that self possession . The  
night's defection . Walking All night  
entwined inside , I mean .  
I tasted you , your real & fleshy  
voice  
inside my head  
& chocked  
as if some primitive  
corruption re-sat  
itself in full view  
of a puritan flame . And flame  
in the mind , the wet hands  
mark on strange islands  
of warmth (37) .*

Then , Baraka goes on to speak specifically of the Senora's assault on his deathly Americanness :

*Big stone nose , nigger  
lips , the entire head  
thrust from  
a serpents snout . Idle  
somehow , fire scorching  
the plain earth we pulled  
up around thinking  
to limit its violence . To  
contain even that  
madness (within  
some thrown wall  
of words ) .  
Our gestures  
are silence . The sea's  
wet feathers slowly  
black . (You die*

*from mornings , looking down  
from that silence  
at the silence  
of roofs . Disconnected  
flesh . Not even cars  
from this distance  
are real .*

Baraka is shaken by his conversation with Senora Betancourt and he appears sexually and politically impotent . His American impotency is described in sexual terms through the image of a penis that never erects :

*This  
is slower . Infused (somehow)  
with sound  
& distance . Slow  
the rock  
flat  
on skin  
like  
a dead  
insect . A  
bee , with  
crushed  
antlers ,  
sprawled  
on its side  
And last night , taking to ourselves , except  
when some wildness  
cut us , ripped impossibly  
deep beneath black  
flesh  
to black bone (38) .*

Under the influence of the views of Senora Betancourt and those of other Latin American intellectuals , Baraka struggles to reach a point of departure from the identity of an American *avant-garde* writer to that of a politically and ethnically committed poet who has a new consciousness . The poet does not only admire the views of Senora Betancourt but he fails in love with her :

*Then  
we loved each other . Understood  
the mils of dead air  
between our  
softest parts . Fresh girl  
from the desert . Desert man ,  
whose mind is some rotting  
country of snow .  
There is more  
underneath . Rotted , green*

*beneath hands making  
their deadly wishes  
show . La casa . El edifice . La  
Mar . El hombre . Without seething  
tin braziers , no , those weird cups  
in novels : chalices .*

*I was reading  
some old man's poem  
this morning . A lover  
hid himself under  
the stink of low trailing  
see birds , heavy sun , pure  
distance . He had to go away ,  
I mean , form all of us , even  
you , marvelous person  
at the sea's edge . Even you  
Sra . do Jiminez . Rubi .*

*And  
I think he knew  
all this would happen , that  
when I dropped the book  
the sky would have already  
moved , turned black , and  
wet grey air  
would mark the windows .*

*That  
there are fools  
who hang close  
to their original  
through . Elementals  
of motion ( Not , again ,  
that garden ) but some  
slightness  
of feeling  
they think is sweet  
and long to die  
inside (39) .*

The poem shows that the Western girl , the Senora , has embraced an essentially non-western life style while the transplanted Africa , the poet , with perhaps more cause for radical thought has embraced Western ideology . "French girl / from the desert / Desert man / whose mind is some rotting country of snow"

Although not ready to become the fully committed political poet at this point of his career , Baraka has been sufficiently moved to change his definition of his own poetry :

*Think  
about it ! As even  
this , now , a turning  
away , (I mean I think*

*I know now  
 what a poem  
 is ) A  
 turning away ...  
 from what  
 it was  
 had moved  
 us ...*

A

*madness .  
 Looking at the sea . And some  
 white fast boat (39-40) .*

In this context the poem is not merely the instrument of change . But it is change itself , the very principle of revolution . Thus Baraka's poetry in the late sixties , crystallizes this attitude and his Cuban poems characterize the beginning of his development of a politically oriented poetry .

### **The Fifth Category : Baraka's Waste Land**

Baraka's poems in *Preface* , through greatly influenced by Eliot , reveal a specific moral order which Baraka creates for himself and in his own terms . Baraka's moral order is a counterpart – almost a rejection of Eliot's moral order as expressed in "*The Waste Land*". Using Eliot's themes , techniques and imagery to subvert Eliot's moral vision , Baraka attempts to develop his own moral perception . At the same time the poet questions the cultural relevance and the white moral order of Eliot :

In Baraka's wasteland poems such as "*From the Almanac*" , he does not renounce his faith in God but examines in painful details his relation to Eliot's God . In most of the poems in *Preface* , particularly the wasteland poems , there is no great difference between Baraka's God and Eliot's God . For example, the images Baraka uses correspond closely enough to Eliot's in order to convince the readers that the Gods are one and the same, the hanged man – Christ . But Baraka examines the nature of God in the sense that he tries to see himself in relation to Eliot's vision of God . Thus , he renounces Eliot's God on the grounds that the moral order is inverted because of the nature of the white God himself . If Baraka wants to set things straight , he must give up the white Christian God and find his own God . But at this stage of his poetic development , Baraka is not ready to take this step . Instead Baraka in *Preface* , struggles to understand the moral dilemma of his own position – not as a militant / revolutionary poet , But as a black man in a white society, oppressed and displaced in the American city – in relation to Eliot's mythic terms , religion and moral order.

While Eliot's "*Waste Land*" derives much of its emotional impact from the fact that it is always being contrasted with an ideal moral order to which the poet is still committed , Baraka's vision is intensified by his questioning – even rejecting – the traditional Christian idealism to which Eliot appeals . Instead , Baraka offers no salvation from the wasteland except in individually defined terms such as those that are represented by the self-affirmative quality of the Blues tradition .

Nevertheless ,in *Preface* ,Baraka's black consciousness as represented by the Blues tradition is overshadowed by the wasteland images which he borrows from Eliot . The failure

of Baraka's black self and ethnic consciousness to dominate the poems , in **Preface** , affirm the triumph of the white Christian tradition of Eliot's "**Wasteland**" over the poet's black identity . Thus , the fate of the persona in the title poem of **Preface** and other poems as well is controlled by the wasteland morality .

Quite apart from the shared vision of experience as a wasteland , Baraka , in some poems , displays a profound skepticism about the kind of Christian idealism which Eliot opposes to the wasteland reality . Baraka rejects the white Western Christianity of Eliot's moral vision as much as he rejects the waste land which both poets denounce . Baraka's ambivalence about a Western model, like Eliot , enables him to criticize Eliot's vision in order to establish his own moral order . At the same time , he questions Eliot's Western idealism . In this context , Eliot's Anglo-Catholic idealism is the symptom of an alien tradition from which - critics claim - Baraka finds himself detached . Nevertheless Baraka's poetry with its language , themes , techniques and imagery in **Preface** emphasizes that he is closer to the philosophical ideals of Western culture than he seems to recognize . At first sight , **Preface** seems to be a white man's book , written by a white man and addressed to white people . On a conscious level , Baraka's **Preface** rejects both the philosophical idealism and realities of the West in general and of America in particular . It is this rejection which moves Baraka to leave his milieu , the Beat / *avant-garde* friends in Greenwich Village and begin a new phase of his career as a black poet .

Examining the poems of **Preface** , one cannot miss the influence of Eliot . It operates on many levels simultaneously . For example the fragmented structure of the wasteland occurs in many poems , the vision of the world as wasted and infertile , the vision of a world having turned its back on God , and the vision of rat's feet through the ruined city . Eliot's influence occurs in "**The Almanac Poems**" where Baraka speaks about winter , winds , bones and drowning . Moreover , the connection with Eliot's God appears through references to Eliot's hanged man who appears in many of Baraka's poems . Here , Baraka describes a cruel moral season battering man with cruel winds . Eliot's influence , in short , occurs in terms of themes , techniques and imagery particularly the overview of moral decay, images of social fragmentation , the use of seasons as symptoms of moral disruption , the dance motifs (**Four Quartets**) and the general search for a regenerative idealism in both poets .

In an interview with Benston , Baraka refers to the poets who seem to have an influence on his early poetry particularly his poems in **Preface** :

*Baraka : There was always a dichotomy between my natured feelings and the idea I acquired and learned . But the early moderns were definite influences which I acquired quite consciously , Eliot especially was a heavy influence in the beginning .*

*Benston : What about Eliot in particular?*

*Baraka : Not precisely what he said so much as the tone of it - the complete cynicism and detachment , and the sophisticated , urban voice (particularly in "Prufrock"- more so than even "The Waste Land") . Experience hadn't mashed him completely . He had survived his experience , it seemed to me (307) .*

Speaking about the early influences on Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry , Sollors makes the following argument :

*Baraka's wide reading is reflected in his poetry . But it is the struggle between the formal demands of the Eliot tradition and the free-verse "local" sense of Williams' poetry which shapes Baraka's own struggle for a poetic idiom . Baraka's affinities to Williams are pervasive ; and more than once Baraka explained that he learned from Williams "how to write the way I speak rather than the way I think a poem ought to be written" or , in other words , how to achieve the freedom of his expressive aesthetic. In contrast to Williams , T.S. Eliot represented for Baraka an objective art of structural containment and tight aesthetic control .It is therefore not surprising that Baraka referred to his "earlier" "Eliot Period" as a "shell" which he had to break out of since Eliotic "rhetoric can be so lovely for a time ... but only remains so for the rhetorician". Allusions to Eliot , whom Baraka later calls "the Missouri lad who wishes himself into a Saville [sic] Row funeral" . The American who buttons himself up in an English suit , and thus choose an English death , are plentiful throughout Baraka's writings , and especially striking in Preface (42) .*

In Preface there are many allusions to Eliot and a quick look at the following lines reveals the extend of Eliot's sway over Baraka during the late fifties and early sixties . For example , in his poetry , Eliot says "winter kept us warm" and Baraka echoes - him "winter kept us in " . Eliot line "the evening is spread out against the sky" is echoed in Baraka's "the evening / spread against the window" . Equally Eliot's statement "I Tiresias , old man with wrinkled dugs" is turned by Baraka into "Tiresias , weathered cock" . Moreover , Eliot says : "that is not what I mean at all / that is at all" and Baraka follows Eliot's model saying : "And this is not / what I mean . / Not the thing I wanted for you " . Equally Eliot's famous lines "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / the rattle of the bones" –which are originally inspired by lines from Andrew Marvell's poem "*To His Coy Mistress*" [But at my black I always hear / time's winged chariot hurrying near] – are echoed by Baraka in "Respect the season / and dance to the rattle of its bones". Finally Eliot's famous line "I do not find the hanged man" is echoed by Baraka's "winter rattles like the throat of the hanged man" .

Baraka recognizes the following influences in his own poetry – Creeley , Olson , Ginsberg and others . He also says that "Eliot was a heavy influence in the beginning" . In fact , Eliot's influence is pervasive – it operates on many levels simultaneously .The fragmented structure of "*The Waste Land*" figures in many of Baraka's poems in Preface . Equally , the vision of the world as wasted and infertile ; the vision of a world having turned its back on God as well as the vision of rat's feet through the ruined city all seem as much a part of Baraka's poetry in Preface as of Eliot's "*Waste Land*".

Eliot's influence obviously appears in a poem sequence called "*Form an Almanac*" in Preface where Baraka speaks about winter , winds , bones , drowning and words drowned in the wind , words at the mercy of the "clown gods" . Baraka says :

*In the nature  
of flesh , these clown gods  
are words , blown  
in the winters , thru  
windows , lacking  
sun .*

*In the nature ,*

*of ideas , in the nature of  
 words , these  
 clown gods are  
 winter .Are blown  
 thru our windows .*  
*The flesh*  
*& bone*  
*of the seasons . Each*  
*dead thing*  
*hustled*  
*across the pavement . Each*  
*dead word*  
*drowned*  
*in a winter wind . Are*  
*in the nature*  
*of flesh .These*  
*liars , clown*  
*gods (43) .*

The connection with Eliot's God appears in the second *Almanac* poem through references to Eliot's hanged man . Baraka says :

*Respect the season*  
*and dance to the rattle*  
*of its bones .*  
*The flesh*  
*hung*  
*from trees . Blown*  
*down . A cold*  
*music . A colder*  
*hand , will grip*  
*you . Your bare*  
*soul . (Where is the soul's place . What is*  
*its nature ?) Winter rattles*  
*like the throat*  
*of the hanged man . Swung*  
*against our window .*  
*As bleak*  
*as our thots . As wild*  
*as that wind*  
*we make (between us) .*  
*can you dance ? Shall*  
*you ? (43-44)*

Here , we observe Baraka's effort to describe a moral season , the cruelest season in Baraka's terms , of nature battering man with cruel winds – with the hanged man himself "swung against our windows" . Moreover , Eliot's lines "But at my back in a cold blast I hear / the rattle of bones" from "*The Waste Land*" are echoed in Baraka's poem : "respect the season / and dance to the rattle / of its bones" . Equally Baraka's lines "winter rattles like the throat of

the hanged man" echo the following lines from Eliot's "*Waste Land*" : "I do not find the Hanged Man" .

In his critical account of the interplay between Baraka's poems in **Preface** and Eliot's poetry , Sollors points out :

*Baraka's poetry often expresses the agony of "old Anglos dying in commercials" , of Eliot's impersonal art under the onslaught of Baraka's self-centered voice, which defines itself as American against the English tradition , and as commercial and popular against the academies . Baraka sees his struggle for the destruction of Eliot's temple as a personal and a national affair , fought in the name of the Bohemian self against the academies and in the name of the Whitman's America against the "Colonial School" . the "new American poetry" of Baraka attempts to continue the tradition of Williams , Pound , Lorca , and the French Symbolists to restore American poetry to the mainstream of modern poetry after it had been cut off from that tradition by the Anglo-Eliotic domination of the academies (43) .*

Baraka's "New American" poetry in ***Preface*** even if it "attempts to continue the tradition of Williams , Pound , Lorca , and the French Symbolists" – as Sollors claims –is still influenced by Eliot . In the third section of ***"From an Almanac"*** which is dedicated to C.O., which means the American poet Charles Olson , reveals the influence of Eliot and Olson as well . In this section , Baraka discusses the dancing motif which fascinated Olson and Eliot . Baraka says :

*This bizness , of dancing , how  
can it suit us ? Old men , naked  
sterile women .  
(our time,  
a cruel one . Our soul's warmth  
left out . Little match children ,  
dance  
against the weather ) .  
The souls'  
warmth  
is how  
shall I say  
it ,  
Its own . A place  
of warmth , for children  
wd dance there ,  
if they cd . If they  
left their brittle selves behind (our time's  
a cruel one .  
Children  
of winter . ( I cross myself  
like religion  
Children  
of a cruel time . ( the wind  
stirs the bones*



*& they drag clumsily  
thru the cold) .  
These children  
are older  
than their world and  
cannot dance (44-45) .*

The images here are similar to "*The Waste Land*" imagery where "old men" and "naked sterile women" live in sin . Eliot's opening line "April is the cruelest month" in the beginning of the first part of "*The Waste Land*" is echoed in Baraka's poem as follows : "our time , a cruel one .Our soul's warmth left out" . The invocation of winter in "children of winter" and the reference to the bones in "the wind stirs the bones & they drag clumsily through the cold" are reminiscent of "*The Waste Land*". The themes in Baraka's poems are equally reminiscent of Eliot's poem "*Four Quartets*" – the seasons , the children and the dance are all important in Eliot's poem . While Baraka talks about "old men , naked / sterile women" as he asks whether dancing is possible , Eliot sees a vision of a sacrament .In his poetry , Eliot sees dancing specifically as metaphor for matrimony . Eliot says : "from wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / proceeds , unless restored by that refining fire / where you must move in measure like a dancer" . For Baraka , the season is winter ; his children are aged and infertile ; and the only source of warmth is the soul , which is "Its own , a place" isolated and by no means a "refining fire". Here , the children cannot dance . Their chances of taking part in "A dignified and commodious sacrament" are very limited . Thus , Baraka's almanac is a moral almanac – like Eliot's record of the seasons . Eliot's record of the seasons . Eliot's view is that there is a moral order in the nature of things which man has somehow lost the key to . But Baraka's almanac poems , however , suggest a picture of despair . Here , the winds are cutting, the people infertile and the children impossibly aged .

The question of religion figures strongly in the *Almanac* sequence as it does in other poems in *Preface* . Baraka , here , does not renounce his faith in God , but he examines in painful detail his relation to Eliot's God . In most of the poems in *Preface* , there is no great difference between Baraka's God and Eliot's God . For example , the images Baraka uses correspond closely enough to Eliot's to convince the readers that they [ the Gods ] are one and the same , the hanged man – Jesus Christ . But it seems that Baraka , at times , examines , in *Preface* , the nature of God , that he tries to see himself in relation to Christ and Eliot's vision and that the ultimately renounces Eliot's God on the grounds that the moral order is inverted because of the nature of the white God himself . If Baraka wants to set things straight for himself , he must give up the white , Christian God and find his own black God .

This critical reading of Baraka's poems illuminates his indebtedness to Eliot's wasteland themes , techniques and imagery – particularly the overview of moral decay , images of social fragmentation , the use of seasons as symptoms of moral disruption and the general search for a regenerative idealism in both poets . The death figures of the hanged man appears in Baraka's second *Almanac* poem as it does it in "*The Waste Land*" . In "*Roi's New Blues*" , Baraka echoes the opening lines of "*The Waste Land*" by emphasizing the morally symbolic ravages of winter and the subsequent promise of renewed life in spring :

*The spoils of winter  
ring in the blue house . Like  
the gigantic bosoms  
of a season . Lost minutes*

*wander thru warmer airs . trees  
 turn their branches newly  
 for the warm shower of light  
 passing thru their leaves .  
 Winter locked us in . On  
 The floor , at midnight  
 we turned in blind  
 embrace . The wind beat  
 the door as if it were  
 dreaming , and our fingers  
 knew each slippery pore  
 of darkness , of silence ... those  
 mad doilies of circus , with  
 the tents shut down  
 and the performers  
 wandering stupidly home  
 thru the cold .  
 her eyes burnet completely  
 the dark . Flashed noise  
 in the quiet hose , and the house  
 moaned . The walls shifting  
 against a high wind  
 from the projects .  
 of reason  
 is meat  
 for the season's  
 madness . Coldness will be  
 stamped out , when those grey horsemen  
 with sunny faces  
 ride thru our town . O , God  
 we've waited for them . Stood  
 for years with our eyes full  
 of a violent wind . A violent time . For  
 those cowboys of love to gallop thru . And  
 they'll come one day , now  
 the circus is closed , open some brash  
 rodeo ( among the new trees  
 of the seasons , among the new spring  
 flowers of my thinking ) .  
 And each of our ladies  
 will rise from our beds each night  
 and walk slowly thru this new spring town  
 drawn by whatever melodies  
 those horsemen bring & the delicate tap  
 of their horses' hooves (45-46) .*

While none of Baraka's lines are as elaborately subtle as Eliot's his poems go considerably farther in reflecting nervous disintegration . Eliot's vision in "*The Waste Land*" may be a despairing , but the "*For Quartets*" , however , demonstrate that his ultimate faith survives.

Nevertheless , in Baraka's "*Almanac Poems*" there is no resolution . In Baraka's poetry , the winds are cutting , the people are infertile , words are at the mercy of the "clown gods" , the hanged man , Christ , is "swung / against our windows" , and the children are aged . Eliot writes in "*For Quartets*" : "From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / proceeds , unless restored by the refining fire / where you must move in measure . like a dancer" (142) . Baraka's season is endless winter , the only warmth is the soul , isolated and deserted . Whereas Eliot in "*East Coker*" affirms "A dignified and commodious sacrament" , concretized in the image of dancing , Baraka's children 'cannot dance" .

In *Preface* there are some poems that do not directly quote Eliot , and they carry the overtones of Eliot's poetry as in "*The Clearing*" where Baraka echoes the dialogue between male and female speakers in the first part of "*The Waste Land*" :

*I love you ( & you be  
quiet , & feel my wet mouth  
on your finger , I  
Love you  
& bring you fish  
& oranges . (Before the light fails  
we should move to a dryer place ,  
but not too far from water) . I  
Love you &  
you are singing . What song  
is that ? (The blinds held up  
by s wind , tearing  
the shadows . I  
Love you  
& you hide yourself  
in the shadows . The forest is huge  
around us . The night  
clings to our cries . ( I hear  
your voice  
down the hall , through the window , above  
all those trees , a light  
it seems  
& you are singing .What song  
Is that ? The words  
are beautiful (30-31) .*

Moreover , Baraka in his poem "*Vice*" speaks about the theme of disorder as he refers to the "Mosaic of disorder I owe but cannot recognize" (28) . Equally , the disorder of the seasons in the "*Almanac Poems*" is taken up in "the intricate disorder of the seasons" in "*Way Out West*" . In the jazz-poem "*The Bridge*", "the chords / of your disorder meddle with your would be disguises" and in "*The Turncoat*" , Baraka echoes Eliot as he speaks of the "dull memories & self hate , & the terrible disorder/ of a young man" . In "*Roi's New Blues*" , the forces of redemption that would rescue the poet from a winter that "locked us in" are epitomized in the following image : "coldness will be / stamped out , when those gray horsemen / with sunny faces / ride through our town .O, God / we're wanted for them . Stood / for years with our eyes full / of a violent wind" (46) . It is clear now that Eliot has a

tremendous influence on Baraka in *Preface* which emphasizes the notion that Baraka at that time was not able to liberate his art completely from the influence of white poets .

It is also relevant to mention that white Eliot's "*Waste Land*" derives much of its emotional impact from the fact that it is always being contrasted with an ideal moral order to which the poet is still committed ; Baraka's social vision is intensified by his rejection of the traditional , Christian idealism to which Eliot appeals . Moreover , Baraka offers no salvation from the wasteland except in individually defined terms such as those that are represented by the self-affirmative quality of the blues tradition . Thus , it is clear in "*Roi's New Blues*" that the very act of confronting and exploring the horrors of one's existence – the moral death and social decay of the poet's world – inspires and strengthens the individual capacity to transcend those horrors .

Nevertheless, in *Preface*, Baraka's black consciousness as represented by the blues tradition is overshadowed by the wasteland images which he borrowed from Eliot . The failure of Baraka's black self and ethnic consciousness to dominate the poems of *Preface* affirmed the triumph of the wasteland over the poet's black identity . Thus , the fate of the adult persona in the title poem of *Preface* and the fate of the speaker in "*The Death of Nick Charles*" , a work that is modeled on Eliot's "*The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock*" , are both controlled by the wasteland morality . In "*The Death of Nick Charles*", the echoes of Eliot's works are obvious in the images of winter fog , in the protagonist's deep sense of alienation and importance and in the inability of others to love and understand him .

The poems in *Preface* affirm that Baraka's references to Eliot's work are more than imitations . Quite apart from the shared vision of experience as a wasteland , Baraka displays a profound skepticism about the kind of Christian idealism which Eliot opposes to the wasteland reality . In Baraka's work , we notice that the poet rejects the white Western Christianity of Eliot's moral vision as much as he rejects the wasteland which both poets denounce . Baraka's ambivalence toward a Western model like Eliot allows him to utilize Eliot's vision and image in order to develop his own moral perception , at the same time that he questions the cultural relevance and moral persuasiveness of Eliot's white model . On this basis Eliot's Anglo-Catholic idealism is the symptom of an alien tradition from which Baraka increasingly finds himself detached .As in so much of Baraka's work , the issue in *Preface* is not simply one of the conflict between the Western reality and the Western ideal . As it is noted in his essays , Baraka as Greenwich Village radical and as a black nationalist is often closer to the philosophical ideals of Western culture than he seems ready to acknowledge , but on a conscious level at any rate Baraka's *Preface* rejects both the philosophical idealism and the realities of the West in general and the United States in particular .The rejection of the Western reality pushed Baraka to break away with the *avant-garde* / Beat movement in Greenwich Village. Baraka , in 1959 , wrote a letter to one of his friends in which he revealed that he began to get tired of his literary milieu , the Beat / Bohemian poets :

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

This dissatisfaction with the Beat / Bohemian poets is recorded in his correspondence with intimate friends .He had defined his *ennui* in a letter to Ron Loewinsohn in the following striking manner :

***I want to get the fuck out of all of it. This fucking city. The goddamn editor publisher shit ... every every fucking thing that's keeping me from writing , from thinking , from even taking a leisurely shit in peace . I can't do all this much longer ... & I DAMN SURE WONT<sup>(22)</sup>.***

Baraka was not the only Bohemian writer who wanted to break away the Beat movement . In 1960 , John Fles, one of the "beatniks" wrote an article after the suicide of a close friend which is indicative of the mood at that time :

***... the revolution which started with "Howl" in 1956 and "On The Road" in 1957 is ending ... The old idols – insanity (Artaud) , junk (Burroughs ...) , homosexuality and crime (Genet) – are fast crumbling , i.e. , worth questioning seriously . But the old social – consciousness routine , as Ginsberg et al. Have shown us , is dangerous to literature – the desert of the 30's –and absurd as commitment . The commitment still essentially has to remain romantic , i.e. , to ourselves , to our art and to what values we can make ... maybe the reality we think we see is different than it seems ; maybe it calls for different involvements than the reality of the late 40's and early 50's when the Beat Generation , as a literary fact , came into being . Maybe there is a middle ground between the opportunistic and philistine Pollyana-ism of Henry Luce and , oppositely , suicide : and that this is the role of the committed artist .<sup>(23)</sup>***

By the end of **Preface** , the era of "pure" Bohemianism was coming to an end and Baraka was struggling for a new role , which will be explored in the next chapter .

## Chapter Two Notes

1. Owen Edward Bradley . "This Consciousness Epic : Le Roi Jones's Use Of American Myth and Ritual in **The Baptism , The Toilet , Dutchman , The Slave and A Recent Killing**. Diss.: , p.1.
2. Benston's "Introduction" .**Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays**,p.2.
3. Donald Allen , ed. **New American Poetry 1945-1960** . New York : Grove Press , 1960 p. 425 .
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6. William C. Fischer. "The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka". **Massachusetts Review** 14 (1973), p 259-305 .
7. Kimberly W. Benston . **Baraka : The Renegade and the Mask**. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976, p. 7 .
8. Langston Hughes . **Selected Poems** . New York : Vintage Books , 1974 , p.85 .
9. Houston A. Baker, Jr. "These Are Songs If You Have The / Music : An Essay on Imamu Baraka" . **Minority Voices** 1 (1977) , p . 4 .
10. Fischer , p . 270 .
11. Benston. **Baraka: The Renegade And The Mask** ,p. 103 .
12. Jack Newfield. "The Beat Generation and The Un-Generation". **America Changing**. Columbus , Ohio : Merril , 1968 , p . 268 .

13. Henry C. Lacey. **To Raise, Destroy and Create: The Poetry, Drama and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones)**. New York :The Whitston Publishing Co., 1981, p. 11.
14. Henry Lacey , p . 12.
15. Baraka. **Preface To a Twenty–Volume Suicide Note** . New York : Totem press , 31 .
16. Henry lacy , p .14.
17. Benston. **Baraka: The Renegade and The, Mask** ,p.102.
18. Quoted in Werner Sollors , p . 45 .
19. Hulan Jack was a black New York Borough president who was convicted of conflict of interest and conspiracy to obstruct justice in December , 1960 .
20. Henry Lacey , p . 22 .
21. Sollors , p. 46.
22. Letter to Ron Loewinsohn ,October 26 ,1959 , James Weldon Collection .
23. John Fles . **"The Press of Freedom : The End of The Affair ,or Beyond The Beat Generation"**. **Village Voice** , December 15 , 1960, p . 4 .

## Chapter Three

### ***The Search For a Black Voice In The Dead Lecturer***

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#### Introduction

By the end of Baraka's first volume of poetry, *Preface*, the poet reveals that the white Beat Poet's manner of writing is inhospitable to his creative needs as a black man. Baraka's conflict with the Beat poets is due to his disinterest in their escapist literary theory which separates poetry from society. In *the Dead Lecturer (1964)*, Baraka was in the process of seeking a new poetic alternative which would connect art with society. He was looking for a kind of poetry which would free him from confinement in his Beat temperaments, one in which his rebellious vigor would appropriate society and politics. Baraka's growing awareness of the need for a new kind of poetry which embodies his developing social consciousness, his increasing social involvement and his concept of blackness is fulfilled in his *Black Magic* poetry in the late sixties. Baraka's poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* however paves the way for the poet's militant phase of his poetic development in the late 1960's. Thus, Baraka, in *The Dead Lecturer*, was in the process of dissociating himself from the white mainstream culture which coincided with his breakaway form methods of writing adopted by the white Beat writers: "I am inside someone / who hates me"<sup>(1)</sup>. In spite of the influence of white poets – Eliot, Yeats and others – and white dadaist writers on Baraka's poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* in terms of theme, form, imagery and techniques, the poet succeeds in developing the anti-formal techniques of the dadaists and the white imagistic structures into a coherent body and adapting them to the oral modes of black culture with its speech, music and songs.

Baraka's revulsion against the white American culture in *The Dead Lecturer* spring from the poet's growing awareness of his racial roots. Within this context, the poems of *The Dead Lecturer* are considered as Baraka's first attempt to touch the emotional and historical traditions of the black people in America. Such an attempt helps the poet to create new poetry with new myths and symbols inspired by the black culture and traditions. Nevertheless, the growing of Baraka's racial consciousness leads to an identity problem on the part of the poet. As a black man, Baraka realizes that he is locked in a limbo between two cultures. He is an American by birth, yet, the poet feels that he is trapped and lured into the traditions of the white man with whom he has no blood ties and thereby he is cut off from his racial origins in Africa. The poet's identity crisis and fear of white racial violence from a yearning for a black political force and separatism. Thus, Baraka, in *The Dead Lecture*, attacks the political and economic systems of the white man illustrating their damaging influence on human beings. The white economic system- capitalism – like its political counterpart, is a death-machine victimizing the working class: "The old man dead in his tired factory". By the end of *The Dead Lecture*, Baraka calls for protest and rebellion against white exploitation initiating a violent dynamic which affirms that the poet becomes fully aware of his aesthetic and racial attitudes which are going to be crystallized in his revolutionary / militant poetry in the late 1960's. It is obvious that by the end of *The Dead Lecture*, Le Roi Jones, the white Beat-oriented poet is dead and Imamu Amiri Baraka the black conscious poet is born. This issue is recorded in "The Liar", the last poem in this collection. In the last three lines of "The Liar", Jones / Baraka says:

*When they say, "It is Roi*

*who is dead ?" I wonder  
who will they mean ? (79) .*

When he is asked about this poem , in an interview with William Harris , Baraka responds :

*Well , it is simply like a lot of times knowing what is true but not being willing to face it either in oneself or in other people or the world and acting like one did not know the truth about certain things , oneself even –saying things which are not true when one knows the truth about relationships with people certainly or things that are happening in the world . At the particular time that that poem came out , it was in The Dead Lecturer that whole struggle was one of schizophrenia, trying to puncture fake social relationships and gain some clarity about what I really felt about things .<sup>(2)</sup>*

In the following part of this chapter the researcher will revise the recent critical views on Baraka's The Dead Lecturer in order to explore the various critical perspectives adopted by white and black critics in their analysis of the collection . Taking this critical revision as a point of departure the researcher will explore neglected areas of research in Baraka's second poetry collection . In his critical contribution to Baraka's poetry the researcher will divide the poems of the collection into various categories dealing with social , political and ethnic themes (...etc.) in order to underline Baraka's poetic innovation .

### The Dead Lecturer

#### *A Critical Review*

Critics have dealt with The Dead Lecturer from different approaches , revealing a variety of critical standpoints . For example , Sollors argues that the poetry of this collection "appears strikingly similar to Preface"<sup>(3)</sup> . Then Sollors adds that despite the similarity "a significant development has taken place from Preface to Lecturer ... the poems in Lecturer do move away from the playfulness and spontaneity of Preface : from solipsism toward a new consciousness of the people ; from soliloquy to direct address with an increase in 'volume' until rage and anger are vocally affirmed"(83) . C.L. Munro points out that The Dead Lecturer represented no major shift in Baraka's work . According to Munro , Baraka had gained more mastery of his form , a shift in tone and content had most certainly occurred in the sense that his bitterness was more marked and his poems more overly social in focus . Moreover , Baraka extended the scope of his artistic vision to include the total society but he still viewed it in largely personal terms rather than abstractions"<sup>(4)</sup> . On the other hand , Harris states that in The Dead Lecturer , Baraka , the post-Beat poet "moved from a symbolist stance under the influence of Eliot and Yeats to an objectivist-imagist one under the influence of Pound and Williams and became both a didactic and a political poet"<sup>(5)</sup> .

According to Harris , Baraka's early poetry in Preface is highly "symbolic and political" but The Dead Lecturer poems struggle "to escape symbolism and become political" (64) . Moreover , Henry Lacy argues that in the poetry of The Dead Lecturer , Baraka "solidifies his commitment to revolutionary action and chides his literary peers for what he sees as their apolitical decadence . The poems of The Dead Lecturer are marked by an ever-increasing



use Afro-American allusions as well . In this manner , Baraka tells his former associates that he has different ideals and speaks from a different frame of reference . His concerns are largely racial and he sees himself as the last moral voice in America and accepts this role as through it were divinely ordained"<sup>(6)</sup> . Houston Baker in "*These Are Songs If You Have the Music : An Essay On Imamu Baraka*" illustrates that the individual poems in *The Dead Lecturer* "are concerned with the poet's loss of feeling and the tortures brought on by his severance from his old life"<sup>(7)</sup> .

Interpreting *The Dead Lecturer* poetry in his own terms Houston Baker claims that these poems reveal the poet's "painful condition" because "the attractive world of his bohemian days has disappeared"<sup>(8)</sup> . Baker claims that Baraka's attempts to break away from his Beat / bohemian life in Greenwich Village and become a black poet is a painful experience for the poet . Baker points out that Baraka's poem "*Green Lantern's Solo*" in *The Dead Lecturer* reflects "both the motives for the poet's move to a separate Black way of life in Harlem and the immediate anguish that accompanied it" (11) . Baker's critical reading of the poems in *The Dead Lecturer* is misleading because Baraka's moving out of the white Beat poetry circle was a voluntary process as he became conscious of his racial roots and became painfully aware of politics and black suffering and wanted an art that would be immersed in the real world . At that time Baraka turned against what he termed "the Beat predilection for fantasy , for dream and chimera" . Furthermore , in an essay called "*Poem and Karma*" immediately written after the publication of *The Dead Lecturer* , Baraka rejects the poetry of his Beat friends such as Creeley and Olson . Baraka argues : "white poetry is like white music . The death more subtly or more openly longed for . Creeley's black box , Olson's revivification of the dead , Ginsberg's screams at his own shadowy races or the creepier elements completely covered up with silver rubied garbage artifacts and paintings and manners and ideas , my god , they got a bunch of ideas , and really horrible crap between them and anything meaningful . They probably belch without feeling" <sup>(9)</sup> .

Edward Margolies in "*Prospects : Le Roi Jones ?* ", attacks Baraka's poem "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" one of the major poems in *The Dead Lecturer* that calls for using violence against white people in America . Margolies comments on the poem regretting Baraka's artistic deterioration : "what was once a source of strength , an energizing force in Baraka / Jones' poetry –his rage , his contempt – has lately become a monomaniacal obsession , and his recent poems are fragments of fantasy feeling and ideas tossed together in a whirlpool of hysteria"<sup>(10)</sup> .

Although many critics such as Margolies reacted negatively to *The Dead Lecturer* and claimed that Baraka was sacrificing his art for his political and ethnic beliefs , the criticism was largely unwarranted . The fact that Margolies cited a selection from "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" to support his contention that Baraka's poetry deteriorated because he transformed himself from a serious artist to a fiercely active nationalist and that this writing has lost its depth and sensitivity in a fretful hysteria is particularly significant in this respect . Upon reading the *Black Dada* poem sequence it becomes clear that it is anything but an attempt to radicalize and activate the black community . Its entire style precludes Margolies' interpretation . Its form is tight filled with esoteric allusions and quite well within in the classical tradition . If Margolies is arguing against anything , it is Baraka's political stance not his artistic method .

The poem in *The Dead Lecturer* are not directed at the masses but they are , rather , very definitely addressed to the black literati . If Baraka actually subverted his poetry for political purposes , as Margolis argues , it would seem reasonable to expect his form to change . His

poetry would break away from the formalistic tradition and be oriented more toward the black masses . His poetry would become less ambiguous, less literary , less personal and more conducive to the oral tradition of the chant as executed by later black such as Don L. Lee and Sonia Sanchez .At this stage of his poetic development , however , Baraka's poetry was introspective and intellectually oriented just as the poetry of his anthology , Preface .

When Baraka urges artists to adopt a new artistic theory as he does in his poem "*Short Speech to My Friends*" he is defining his role in the Beat movement not as a model or innovator but rather as an ideological spokesman . The following poem affirms that Baraka's audience at this stage remains largely academic . His role, in some of The Dead Lecturer poems , is to indicate to black artist not the means of achieving a political art but rather the necessity for this achievement :

*A political art , let it be*

*tenderness , low strings the fingers*

*touch , or the width of autumn*

*climbing wider avenues , among the virtue*

*and dignity of knowing what city*

*you're in , who to talk to , what clothes*

*even what buttons –to wear . I address*

*/ the society*

*the image , of*

*common utopia.*

*/ The perversity*

*of separation , isolation,*

*after so many years of trying to enter their kingdoms ,*

*now they suffer in tears , these others , saxophones whining*

*through the wooden doors of their less than gracious homes .*

*The poor have become our creators . The black .*

*The thoroughly*

*ignorant .*

*Let the combination of morality*

*and inhumanity*

*begin .*

*Is power , the enemy ? (Destroyer*

*Of dawns , cool flesh of valentines , among*

*the radio , pauses , drunks*

*of the 19<sup>th</sup> century . I see it ,*

*as any man's single history . All the possible*

*heroes*

*dead from heat exhaustion*

*at the beach,*

*or hiding for years from cameras*

*only to die cheaply in the pages*

*of our daily lie .*

*One hero*

*has pretensions toward literature*

*one toward the cultivation of errors, arrogance ,*

*and constantly changing disguises, as trucker, boxer,*

*valet , barkeep , in the aging taverns of memory .*

*Making love*

*to those speedy heroines of masturbation . Or kicking literal evil*

*continually down filmy public stairs .*

*A compromise*

*Would be silence. To shut up , even such risk*

*as the proper placement*

*of verbs and nouns .To freeze the spit*

*in mid-air , as it aims itself*  
*at some valiant intellectual's face .*  
*There would be someone*  
*who would understand , for whatever*  
*fancy reason . Dead , lying , Roi , as your children*  
*came up , would also rise . As George Armstrong*  
*Custer*  
*these 100 years , has never made*  
*a mistake (29-30) .*

Despite Baraka's formalism , however the content of *The Dead Lecturer* indicates a definite shift in his sensibility. His concern is less private and more social in nature . He portrays society – in some poems – not simply as a void but rather as a constant tension between competing thesis and antithesis such as in "Dictung" :

*A torn body , correspondent*  
*of extreme cold . Altitude*  
*or thought , colliding as an image*  
*of moving water , time , the slip*  
*of simple life . It is matter , after all ,*  
*that is corrupted , not*  
*spirit . After all , it is spirit*  
*that is corrupted*  
*not matter .*  
*The role given ,*  
*mashed into protein*  
*grace .A lifted arm*  
*in shadow . A lifted thinking*  
*banging silently*  
*in the darkness .*  
*I fondle what*  
*I find*  
*of myself . Of you*  
*what I understand .*  
*Trumpets of slow weather .*  
*Love blends*  
*In season (77) .*

The major image which pervades society and frustrates man's actualization is that of loneliness and lovelessness of the modern industrial society :

*Practices*

*silence, the way of wind  
bursting  
its early lull . Cold morning  
to night , we go so  
slowly , without  
thought  
to ourselves . (Enough  
to have thought  
tonight , nothing  
finishes it . What  
you are , will have  
no certainty , or  
end . That you will  
stay , where you are ,  
a human gentle wisp  
of life . Ah ...)*

*practices  
loneliness ,  
as a virtue . A single  
specious need  
to keep  
what you have  
never really  
had (9) .*

Ultimately the all-consummating futility and purposelessness of human endeavor leads Baraka – in some poems – to existentialism and nihilism as the only possible responses to life :

*The battle waxed (battle wax , good night !  
Sleep tumors of the sea's energy  
Shells , shells , gold lights under the tree's  
cover) .  
In spring the days explode  
In Spain old cuckolds watch their wives  
and send their money to America .  
Straw roofs , birds , any thing we have not  
got . Destroyed before it got here . Battle ,  
an old dead flower she put on her breast .  
Shells crush the beach . Are crushed  
beneath her feet . Wait for night ,  
and the one soldier will not mind us  
sitting here , listening to the familiar  
water , scatter in the shadows (73) .*

Despite this shift in emphasis and the increasing interest in the social structure , society is still viewed in terms of the poet's personal encounter with it , rather than in socio-cultural terms . His work in *The Dead Lecturer* is still anything but propagandistic or radical . He is still primarily concerned with discovering his relationship to society .

### The Love Lyric and Social Poems

In *The Dead Lecturer*, the poet has become surer of his poetic voice and the lyrical poems in this collection show Baraka seeking a definite form, The lines are short, the parentheses closed, and the sentences complete or at least understandable as in "*The Pressures*":

(Love twists  
the young man, Having seen it  
only once. He expected it  
to be, as the orange flower  
leather of the poet's book.  
He expected  
less hurt, a lyric. And not  
the slow effortless pin  
as a new dripping sun pushes  
up out of our river) (17).

Many of the lyrics in *The Dead Lecturer* focus on love or, rather, the loss of love. Their tone is not optimistic. They are introspective poems clogged with images of tears, fog, and rain. Earth is not the right place for love and it is not likely to get better. The poet addresses a departing lover in "*Audubon, Drafted*":

It does not happen. That love, removes  
itself. (I am leaving, Goodbye!  
Removes  
itself, as rain, hard iron rain  
comes down, then stops. All those  
eyes opened for morning, close with  
what few hours given them. With tears,  
or at a stone wall, shadows drag down.  
I am what I think I am. You are what  
I think you are. The world is the  
one thing, that will not move. It is  
made of stone, round, and very ugly (56).

Still the poet cries out for love, if not from a known person then from the anonymous reader:

And let me once, create  
myself. And let you, whoever  
sits now breathing on my words  
create a self of your own. One  
that will love me (72).

Baraka's growing social consciousness is reflected in several poems dealing directly with the political scene: "*The Politics of Rich Painters*", "*A Poem For Democrats*", "*Short Speech To My Friends*", and "*Political Poem*" among them. Unlike the lyrics, the

political poems are not tightly constructed and their technical devices often blur their content—single parentheses , slash lines , phonetic spellings , Poundian contractions , aberrant punctuation , broken lines , and the absence of any formality beyond the decorum of arrangement on the page and breath pattern . Calling for "A political art" , the poet warns the reader : "I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again sing your quiet / verse . I have lost / even the art of poetry" (47) . The Statue of Liberty becomes "the French whore / who wades slowly in the narrows , waving her burnt out / touch" . And "the pity of democracy" is that "we must sit here / and listen to how he made his money" (32) .

Luxury , a special bug of Baraka , is the main vice which he ascribes to American society : "Luxury , then , is a way of / being ignorant , comfortably / an approach to the open market of least information" (74) . Refusing to compromise himself by remaining silent , the poet rejects the empty words of the intellectual and the liberal to throw his lot with the poor and the black :

*The perversity  
of separation , isolation  
after so many years of trying to enter their kingdoms ,  
now they suffer in tears , these others , saxophones whining  
through the wooden doors of their less than gracious homes .  
The poor have become our creators . The black . The thoroughly  
ignorant .  
Let the combination of morality and inhumanity begin (29) .*

### The Ethnic and Aesthetic Motifs

The themes of ethnic identity are progressively more intense in the poetry of *The Dead Lecturer* if compared with Baraka's poetry in *Preface* . In Baraka's first anthology , there are scattered remarks and allusions which indicate that the poet might be back or have a particular interest in black people . However , it is only with the final poem in *Preface* , "*Notes For a Speech*" that Baraka comes to terms with his isolation and despair as a specially black individual . The poem is a beginning of an attempt to deal with his relation to and alienation from his roots in the African and American aspects of his blackness . The poem opens with an explicit rejection of African identity , one that Baraka sees as intolerably foreign :

*African blues  
does not know me . Their steps , in sands  
of their own  
land . A country  
in black & white , newspapers  
blown down pavements  
of the world : Does  
not feel  
what I am (47) .*

If the African spirit is no more for him than for any literate Westerner , what of the specific black souls whom Baraka self-consciously calls "my people" :

*(And who are they . People .To concern  
myself , ugly man ...*

***My color  
is not theirs . Lighter , white man  
talk .They shy away . My own  
dead souls , my , so-called  
people (47) .***

The distance established here between Baraka and his "people" is significant : he is not even of their color , his language is of another culture – the white man's . He is in limbo between cultures , lured into the language and fantasies of a people from whom he is alien by birth and thereby severed from his racial roots .Finally with the possibility of linkage to Africa a vain illusion , he remains , perforce , among the tragic figures of his native landscape :

***Africa  
is a foreign place . You are  
as any other sad man here  
American (47) .***

In ***The Dead Lecturer*** , Baraka becomes fully aware of his racial roots and , consequently , themes of ethnic identity together with the poet's satire on the white American culture and art dominate the poems in this collection . In ***"Green Lantern's Solo"***, Baraka attacks his fellows , the Beat poets and "chides himself and his peers for the exclusive or inbred nature of their verse" (**Lacey 51**) . The poem describes the futility of ego-directed poets talking only to themselves and to their fellow artists pursuing a closed-circuit anatomy of sensibility that finally avoids any sane wholeness or strength of vision .The poetry of the Beats , according to Lacey , is in direct contrast to the explicit verse of black poets such as Ted Joans and David Henderson who were "concerned with communicating with the poor and the black" . Baraka criticizes himself and his peers who reveal no such desire:

***What we have created , is ourselves as heroes , as lovers, as disgustingly  
evil . As dialogues with the soul , with the self , selves, screaming  
furiously to each other. As the same fingers touch the same faces , as  
the same mouths close on each other .The killed is the killer , the loved  
the lover and the islands of mankind have grown huge to include all life  
, all lust , all commerce and beauty . Each idea a reflection of itself and  
all the ideas men have ever had . Truth , lie , so close they defy  
inspection , and are built into autonomy by naïve fools , who have no  
wish for wholeness or strength . Who cannot but yearn for the One  
Mind , or Right , or call it some God , thing beyond themselves , some  
thing toward which all life is fixed , some static , irreducible , constantly  
correcting , dogmatic economy of the soul (69-70) .***

***"Green Lantern's Solo"*** , which is quoted above , is a poem in which the institutions of white America represent intellectual and racial attitudes that have traditionally contributed to the brutalization of black America .The poem's setting is a world without passion , one that is symbolized by urine which "scatters / as steel". It is a world of incongruities where lyric poets are so divorced from feeling that they have never had orgasms , where social critics are detached from society itself , and where supposedly human institutions are really dehumanizing . Religion is a mere abstraction , an "irreducible , constantly correcting , dogmatic economy / of the soul" . The poem reveals Baraka's rejection of the Beat aesthetic:



*A deep echo , of open fear : the field drawn in  
 as if to close , and die , in the old man's eyes  
 as if to shut itself , as the withered mouth of  
 righteousness beats its gums on the cooling day .  
 As if to die  
 without knowing life .  
 Having lived , when  
 he did (an old stout God  
 in the spent bones  
 of his dignity . No screams  
 break his wooden lips  
 His urine scatters  
 as steel , which sill fall  
 on any soft thing  
 you have . Murder  
 is speaking of us .  
 I break and run , or hang back and hide  
 having been killed by wild beasts in my young wife's  
 sleep . Having been torn into small echoes of lie , or surrounded  
 in dim rooms by the smelly ghosts of wounded intellectuals : Old science  
 majors  
 whose mothers were brilliant understudys  
 or the famous mistress of a benevolent gangster.  
 Some mysterious comment on the world at the birth  
 of the word . Some mysterious jangle of intellects  
 bent on the  
 crudeness  
 of any death so perfectly ignorant as ours .  
 My friend , the lyric poet ,  
 who has never had an orgasm . My friend ,  
 the social critic , who has never known society ,  
 or read the great Italian liars , except his father  
 who calls the white house nightly , asking for  
 hideous assignments (67) .*

The white system also has disturbed ethnic implications for Baraka , both because it victimizes the black outsider and because it represents the limited humanity that blacks inherit when they choose to be integrated with such a system . On the whole the ethnic themes of *The Dead Lecturer* represent a growing resistance to Western intellectualism as the instrument of white racism and the source of a destructive pattern of black self-hatred . Hence the persona of "*I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer*" admits that in accepting rigidly intellectual norms he has destroyed his racial integrity and , in the process , his humanity .In recognizing the limitations of this intelligence he admits that he has become a mere death-figure-a "steward black skull / an empty cage of failure" (60) . In this poem Baraka says :

*What is most precious , because  
 it is lost . What is lost ,  
 because it is most  
 precious .  
 They have turned , and say that I am dying . that I*

*have thrown  
 my life  
 away . They  
 have left me alone , where  
 there is no one , nothing  
 save who I am . Not a note  
 nor a word .  
 Cold air batters  
 the poor (and their minds  
 turn open  
 like sores) . What kindness  
 What wealth  
 can I offer ? Except  
 what is , for . me,  
 ugliest. What is  
 for me , shadows , shrieking  
 phantoms . Except  
 they have need  
 of life . Flesh  
 at least ,  
 should be theirs .  
 The Lord has saved me  
 to do this . The Lord  
 has made me strong . I  
 am as I must have  
 myself . Against all  
 thought , all music , all  
 my soft lovers .  
 For all these wan roads  
 I am pushed to follow , are  
 my own conceit . A simple muttering  
 elegance , slipped in my head  
 Pressed on my soul , is my heart's  
 worth . And I am frightened  
 that the flame of my sickness  
 will burn off my face . And leave  
 the bones , my stewed black skull ,  
 an empty cage of failure (59-60).*

The painful recognition at the end of the poem marks the beginning of the persona's return to human and ethnic integrity .

There is the kind of return that is underway in "*Green Lantern's Solo*" where the narrator is in full flight from his self-hatred : "I break and run" after having lived a life surrounded by "the smelling ghosts of wounded intellectuals" (67) . Similarly in "*Rhythm & Blues*" – a poem dedicated to Robert Williams , U.S. Marine veteran from North Carolina who became a militant self-defense exponent in 1959 and was finally forced into Cuban exile - the intellectually emancipated black sees the "rational" systems of his society as they really affect human beings . Economics kill human beings . The idea of "technological progress is a scam because new creations are really extensions of the old malaise" (Brown 115) . And the

political system is merely a death-machine , like the economic system : "The old man dead in his tired factory ; election machines chime quietly his fraudulent faith" :

*An incorrigible motive .  
 An action so secret it creates.  
 Men dancing on a beach .  
 Disappeared laughter erupting as the sea  
 erupts .  
 Controlled eyes seeing now all  
 there is  
 Ears that have gown  
 to hold their new maps  
 Enemies that grow  
 in silence  
 Empty white fingers  
 against the keys (a drunken foolish stupor  
 to kill these men  
 and scream "Economics" my God , "Economics"  
 for all the screaming women drunker still , laid  
 out to rest  
 under the tables of nightclubs  
 under the thin trees of expensive forests  
 informed of nothing save the think of their failure  
 the peacock insolence of zombie regimes  
 the diaphanous silence of empty churches  
 the mock solitude of a spastic's art .  
 "Love" . My God , (after they  
 scream "Economics" , these shabby personalities  
 the pederast anarchist chants against millions of  
 Elk-Sundays in towns quieter than his . lunches . Smells  
 the sidewalk invents , and the crystal music even  
 dumb niggers  
 hate .They scream it down . They will not hear  
 your jazz . Or  
 let me tell of the delicate colors of the flag , the  
 graphic blouse  
 of the beautiful Italian maiden . Afternoon spas  
 with telephone booths , Butter fingers , gray-haired anonymous trustees  
 dying with the afternoon . The people of my life  
 caressed with a silence that only they understand .  
 Let their sons  
 make wild sounds of their mothers for your  
 pleasure . Or  
 drive deep wedges in flesh / screaming birds of  
 morning , at  
 their own . The invisible mountains of New Jersey ,  
 linger  
 where I was born . And the wind on that stone  
 (44-45) .*

In "*Rhythm & Blues*", Baraka relates black music to the core of black feeling. The style of "*Rhythm & Blues*" is not an aesthetic model for poetic form, but the force it represents is central to the meaning of the poem. As black music it conveys "a legitimacy of emotional concern"<sup>(11)</sup> in a way that written verse can not. As Robert Williams moved to act in North Carolina out of a heightened consciousness of the hostile white forces working against him, the intensity of black music should also function to create a sharper social awareness that will move black people to action, Baraka illustrates this ideal, but is less certain that his poetic art, at this stage, has the power to move blacks against the conditions that oppress and brutalize them:

*I give you now, to love me, if I spare what flesh  
of yours  
is left. If I see past what I feel, and call music  
simply "Art" and will  
not take it to its logical end. For the death by  
hanging, for  
the death by the hooded political murder, for  
the old man dead in his  
tired factory; election machines chime quietly his fraudulent faith.  
For the well that marks the burned stores. for the deadly idiot of  
compromise  
who shrieks compassion, and bids me love my neighbor. Even beyond  
the meaning  
of such act as would give all my father's dead ash to fertilize their  
bilious  
land. Such act as would give me legend, "This is  
the man who saved us  
Spared us from the disappearance of the sixteenth  
note, the destruction  
of the scale. The is the man who against the  
black pits of despairing genius  
cried, "Save the People Song". For them who  
pat me in the huddle and do not  
argue at the plays. For them who finish second  
and are happy they are Chinese,  
and need not run those 13 blocks (46).*

Music is not merely a static form of art, but an immediate extension of the processes of actual feeling—and so potential step closer to social reaction. And it issues directly out of tensions created by all the external pressures endured by the black American:

*I am not moved. I will not move to save them.  
There is no  
"melody". Only the fool stomped, the roaring  
harmonies of need.  
The hand banged on the table, waved in the air.  
The teeth pushed  
Against the lip. The face and fingers sweating.  
"Let me alone", is praise enough for these  
musicians (46-47).*

Affirming the primacy of music for the black voice , Baraka begins to evolve a new metaphor – one related to music – for verbalizing a fundamental quality of the collective black feeling : the scream . He begins by associating it in one of his poems in *The Dead Lecturer*, "*An Agony As Now*" , with the suppression of positive impulses within himself , of human love turned into inarticulate rage and hate :

*Cold air blown through narrow blind eyes . flesh ,  
white hot metal . Glows as the day with its sun .  
It is a human love , I live inside . A bony skeleton  
you recognize as words or simple feeling .  
But it has no feeling . As the metal , is hot , it is  
not,  
given to love .  
It burns the thing  
Inside it . And that thing  
screams (16) .*

In *The Dead Lecturer* , Baraka also experiments with methods of destroying and rebuilding language . He ventures into the communicative extremes of silence and screaming and he makes the words of the Newark ghetto a part of his poetry . Silence appears in *The Dead Lecturer* in poems such as "*Short Speech to My Friends*":

*A compromise  
would be silence ,To shut up , even such risk  
as the proper placement  
of verbs and nouns . To freeze the spilt  
in mid-air , as it aims itself  
at some valiant intellectual's face (30) .*

The other poetic speech-extreme , the scream , appears in poems such as "*An Agony As Now*" where it functions as the scream of the oppressed and the scream of political anger and artistic rebellion . It is obvious that the growing of Baraka's racial consciousness is intimately linked with the poet's development of a black voice , with his use of black speech as a reference to a culture that "does not speak proper or is not fluent with the terms of social strength" (Home 171) . Only by reconstructing his personal and collective voice can Baraka avoid the fate of disembodied , clowning black entertainers : "the face sings alone / at the top / of the body" (DL 18) .The scream , in this context , merges the aesthetic and the ethnic reference and becomes in "*Rhythm & Blues*" the rebellious act of "the dozens , the razor , the cloth , the sheen" that "unfinished cathedrals tremble with" (DL 46). In black music , in the "roaring harmonies of need" is the jewel center of inspiration for Baraka's poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* .

In "*The End of Man is His Beauty*", the scream is still more or less confined in the poet's personal anguish but it now represents an assertive antidote to silence :

*And silence  
which proves / but  
a referent  
to my disorder .  
Your world shakes*

*cities die  
beneath your shape .  
The single shadow  
at noon  
like a live tree  
whose leaves  
are like clouds  
Weightless soul  
at whose love faith moves  
as a dark and  
withered day (31) .*

The scream is equally the poet's frustrated masturbatory response to the false music - possibly the music of his Beat poet friends – foisted upon him by the dominating culture :

*They speak of singing who  
have never heard song ; of living  
whose deaths are legends  
for their kind .  
A scream  
gathered in wet fingers ,  
at the top of its stalk .  
-They have passed  
and gone  
whom you thot your lovers  
In this perfect quiet , my friend,  
their shapes  
are not unlike  
night's (31) .*

The scream is not just personal , but collective , the poet trying to speak the voice of the people for the people .It is , ironically , a metaphor that deifies accurate transposition into written form , which is precisely the point as far as Baraka is concerned . Its kinship is instead to the very quality and purport of black music itself , to "the roaring harmonies of need" . As the highest pitched form of shouting and yelling , it is not a randomly chosen image appropriate only to the private feelings of the poet. It is a fundamental stylistic and generic mode in black music , beginning with the work songs , field hollers , shouts , and yells to which Baraka refers constantly in the early chapters of *Blues People* . It survives as a unique stylistic element in twentieth-century forms of black music , from the lyric strides of the blues through the gospel shouts to the yelled interjections . This shouting tradition is pushed to the extreme in the post-World War II era , a time , as the poem clearly indicates , of threatening technological madness that excluded black Americans from its economic benefits while at the same time deeply affecting the tenor of their lives . "Rhythm & Blues Singers" , Baraka explains in *Blues People* , "literally had to shout to be heard above the clanging and strumming of the various electrified instruments and the churning rhythm sections and the more harshly screamed the singing , the more expressive the music was now the human voice itself had to struggle , to scream , to be heard" (171-172) .

This screaming is the antithesis of the silent passivity of poetry –" I have lost / even the act of poetry" , he says –and "*Rhythm & Blues*" takes on references to vocal and collective extra-literary forms toward the end : "The act so far beyond / itself , meaning all forms , all modes ,

all voices , chanting for safety". Through the elision of black voice and black music the scream becomes an inherent part of the amplified movement of rhythm and blues that will transcend the ineffectual singular voice of the poet :

*The shake and chant , bulled electric motion,  
figure of what there will be  
As it sits beside me waiting to live past my own meekness ...(47)*

It is obvious that "*Rhythm & Blues*" portrays the *avant-garde* poetics and world view as inadequate for the black artist :

*Such act as world give us legend , "this is the man  
who saved us  
Spared us from disappearance of the sixteenth  
note , the destruction  
of the scale . This is the man who against the  
black pits of despairing genius  
cried , "Save the Popular Song" (46) .*

As this poem declares , Baraka does not want to be remembered as the black man who saved the West . Here, the "sixteenth note" and the "scale" symbolize Western art ; metaphorically , Baraka wants to create a new black music rather than save the old white one . When Baraka lauded John Coltrane's "murder" of the popular song he implied his own aesthetic : John Coltrane is a great and beautiful philosopher because he destroys Western forms .Coltrane , the black musician , changes the white popular tune by repeating it and then transforming it . For Baraka , the white *avant-garde* artist came to represent the antithesis of what Coltrane represented , for the white artist – no matter how rebellious – implicitly affirmed the Western tradition . Consequently , in an act of poetic parricide Baraka emulated Coltrane to escape his white role . In "*Rhythm & Blues*", he declares :

*I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again  
sing your  
quiet verse . I have lost  
even the act of poetry , and writhe now for cool horizonless  
down (47) .*

These lines describe a time of spiritual crisis , when Baraka felt that he had lost his moorings in the white world . Finding white poetry , "quiet verse" , totally inadequate for his poetic needs , he desperately sought new forms :

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

For Baraka to sing again he would have to take on black forms such as the "shake and chant" , which would require him to be brave , to live past his meekness into a new artistic

role that declared and affirmed his ethnicity . The poem continues seeking mighty and vital black creations :

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

The rising bull of this passage is a recurring symbol for the black , the ethnic self . The bull suggests the spirit of a new black art , an art that black people –"there will be those" – would find beautiful because it would be an ethnic art , a post-white form . In this context , the poem reflects the post-Cuban spirit and the poet articulates a poetic death revealing that these may be poetry which will not be "quiet verse" but one which will transcend the limitations of Preface .

Baraka's poems "*Footnote To A pretentious Book*" is harshly critical of Preface and its portrait of the artist as a suicide man : "You could say of me / that I was truly / simple-minded" (Dead Lecturer 43) . There is then a dead lecturer who once composed that quiet suicide note, and a new poet of politics , war , and rhythm and blues . Equally , in "*Political Poem*", Baraka mocks his former self : "a dead lecturer / lamenting through gypsies his fast suicide" (74) . The association with gypsies implies a critique of Bohemianism and the poet is depicted : "in black the / gypsy whore , sprawled , across a field" . The poem "*An Agony As Now*" continues this struggle within the poet as a creative but nearly lethal confrontation between lively , suffering inside and metallic , deadly outside which affects the very eye of poetic vision :

*I am inside someone  
who hates me . I look  
out from his eyes . Smell  
what fouled tunes come in  
to his breath . Love his  
wretched women .  
Slits in the metal , for sun . Where  
my eyes sit turning , at the cool air  
the glance of light , or hard flesh  
rubbed against me , a woman , a man ,  
without shadow , or voice , or meaning .  
The is the enclosure flesh ,  
where innocence is a weapon . An  
abstraction .Touch . Not mine .  
Or yours , if you are the soul I had  
and abandoned when I was blind and had  
my enemies carry me as a dead man  
if he is beautiful , or pitied (15) .*

The "enclosure" of "white hot metal" is the composite image of artistic reification and alienation , political confinement , and ethnic masquerade . This gives the poem "a sense of an inimical racial encounter"<sup>(12)</sup> .



Abandoning the "quiet verse of *Preface* , Baraka lets "the thing inside" scream as it is being scorched black by the white hot metal .This image is emblematic of the poetry of *The Dead Lecturer* , wrested from the unbearable pressures and frictions of iron body masks .It is the scream of pain and feeling , flesh and soul , of ethnic and political suffering and it is the dada scream which annihilates the "withered yellow flowers" of "Western poetry" from Joyce . Kilmer's trees to Eliot's hollow men . The victim of the hot metal arises from the ashes as the victor of this poetic suicide ; and the "Killed is the Killer" , as Baraka states in "*Green Lantern's Solo*"(69) . What is being killed in "*An Agony As Now*" is the poet's past ; and after the "old Anglos" are dead , the poetic imagery may become activist , ethnic ,and full of a new sense of selfhood . A new poetic "I" may , indeed , "substitute" for *The Dead Lecturer* .

The process of birth in death , of the phoenix-like emergence of a new poet from an old shell is crucial to Baraka's poetry . A visionary , descended from cosmic sun-rays , razes old Western conceptions in order to raise new race-conscious ones : this is the verbal strategy which remained with Baraka through the essays of *Raise Race Rays Raze*. The first comprehensive poetic statement of this process is made in "A contract For the Destruction and Rebuilding of Paterson" ( *Dead Lecturer* 11) , which locates the conflict of "*An Agony As Now*" not merely in the self , but in "society" , in the dismal urban environment of William Carlos Williams' Paterson, New Jersey :

*Flesh , and cars , tar , dug holes beneath stone  
a rude hierarchy of money , band saws cross out  
music , feeling . Even speech , corrodes  
I came here  
from where I sat boiling in my veins , cold fear  
at the death of men , the death of learning , in  
cold fear , at my own . Romantic vests of same  
death  
blank at the corner , blank when they raise their  
fingers  
Criss the hearts , in dark flesh staggered so  
marvelous  
are their lies . So complete , their mastery , of  
these  
stupid niggers . Loud spics kill each other , and  
will not  
make the simple trip to Tiffany's . Will not smash  
their stainless  
heads , against the simpler effrontery of so callous  
a code as gain .  
You are no brothers , dirty woogies , dying under  
dried rinds , in massa's  
droopy tuxedos . Cab Calloways of the soul , at the soul's juncture ,  
a music , they think will save them from our eyes .  
(In back of the terminal  
where the circus will not go . At the backs of  
crowds , stooped and vulgar  
breathing hate syllables , unintelligible rapes of all  
that linger in*

*our new world . Killed in white fedora hats , they  
stand so mute at what  
whiter slaves did to my fathers . They muster  
silence . They pray at the  
steps of abstract prisons , to be kings , when all is  
silence , when all  
is stone . When even the stupid fruit of their loins  
is gold , or something  
else they cannot eat (11)*

In *The Dead Lecturer* one of Baraka's goals is a poetic inversion of the semantic rituals of power . The struggle for a new poetic voice has become a battle for the oppressed of society , a fulfillment of an old Bohemian dream . It is important that the struggle is acted out with the rhetorical help of William Carlos Williams ; as Allen Ginsberg observed , it was Williams' influence which tended to bring Baraka "back home to his own speech and to his own soul and to his own body and to his own color and to his own town .<sup>(13)</sup> The emergence of Baraka's black voice is linked with the Eliot-Williams controversy.

Moreover , taking Green Lantern's stance against those "who worship evil's might" (*Dead Lecturer* 8), Baraka suggests that Blacks and Puerto Ricans take this oath literally and give up non-violence :

*So complete , their mastery , of these  
stupid niggers . Loud spics kill each other , and  
will not  
make the simple trip to Tiffany's . Will not smash  
their stainless  
heads , against the simpler effrontery of so callous  
a code as gain (11) .*

This early poetic advocacy of counter-violence is formulated as an externalization of a psychic drama . However , Baraka does address his next lines to the black bourgeoisie which shares responsibility for oppression as repression .

*You are no brothers , dirty woogies , dying under  
dried rinds , in  
massa's  
droopy tuxedo . Cab Calloways of the soul , at the  
soul's juncture , a  
music , they think , will save them from our  
eyes (11) .*

The black middle class is here seen as an accomplice in the attempt to petrify the status quo and to silence the oppressed , at the price of giving up its own "life" and memory of history . The rape of Africa has become "unintelligible" , and the life force of the black bourgeoisie has been extinguished with the memory of the African past : "killed in white fedora hats ,they stand so mute / at what / whiter slaves did not to my fathers" .

In its poetically unresolved expression of violence, "*A Contract*" is an interesting step toward Baraka's more political and ethnic art . The title illustrates the process from drama of self to social statement and makes the poem Baraka's specific application of William Carlos

Williams' idea "that a man himself is a city , beginning , seeking , achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody .<sup>(14)</sup> The meaning of the "destruction and rebuilding" , the razing and raising of Williams' *Paterson* is thus twofold : on the one hand , it is the violent destruction of "abstract prisons" , petrified city structures of oppression , and the rebuilding of a new life , free of the rude hierarchy of money ; and , on the other hand , it is the transformation of "speech" – as Williams' legacy to art-ing-to an anti-Eliotic aesthetic that would allow expression of the "boiling in my veins" , and would make this new poetry impervious to "corrosion" . This definition gives the oral performance of increasingly committed poems a life of its own which soon beings to supersede the versions on the printed page .

## The Black Stereotypes

Baraka's poem "A Contract" chastises blacks who persist in their loyalties to the white system . They are uncle Toms whose racial self-hatred involves a self-destructive psychic violence : They have been killed "in white phedora hats" (11) . The violent connotations of the Uncle Tom figure are striking because Baraka perceives the figure as a stereotype that has been perpetuated by white society to destroy black humanity –with the complicity of blacks . In "A Poem For Willie Best" , a black actor whose Hollywood name was "sleep'n eat", Baraka dejects the contradiction between Best's happy-go-lucky shuffling pose and his tightly wound inner life as the inevitable result of a cultural crucifixion . The poet appears to feel strongly the torment of the actor , seeing 'no doubts' an ironic minstrel analogy in his own disembodied poetic song – and –dance routines :

*The face sings , alone  
at the top  
of the body . All  
flesh , all song , aligned . For hell  
is silent , at those cracked lips  
flakes of skin and mind  
twist and whistle softly  
as they fall .*

*it was your own death  
you saw . Your own face , stiff  
and raw . This  
without sound , or  
movement . Sweet aften , the  
dead beggar bleeds  
yet . Hit blood , for a time  
alive , and huddled in a door  
way , struggling to sing . Rain  
washes it into cracks . Pits  
whose bottoms are famous . Whose sides  
are innocent broadcasts  
of another life (18) .*

In the poetry of *The Dead Lecturer* , Baraka attacks white bourgeois images and stereotypes of blacks<sup>(15)</sup>. Assuming that popular culture shapes black reality and reflecting white middle-class reality , Baraka often inverts bourgeois forms taken from the world of popular culture . Contemplating images of blacks created by the white imagination has

become a way for him to penetrate black reality because he can articulate the way blacks have responded to the roles whites have imposed on them . In this poem Baraka mediates on the image of the popular film character actor Willie Best (1916-1962) who is featured in a number of Hollywood movies of the 1930's and 1940's as a black buffoon / Sleep'n Eat character . This black stereotype is created by the white imagination . He is :

*Lazy  
Frightened  
Thieving  
Very potent sexually  
Scars  
Generally inferior  
but natural  
rhythms .  
His head is  
at the window . The only  
part  
that sing .  
The world he used  
(we are passing St . Mark's place  
and those crazy jews who fuck)  
to provoke  
in neon , still useful  
in the rain ,  
to provoke  
some meaning , where before  
there was only hell . I said  
silence at his huddled blood (26) .*

In the poem , Baraka presents the actor as a rebel against his role . Best is more than a figment of the white imagination . He is actually a flesh-and-blood actor behind the white images who has extended his role beyond its white creators' intentions . The black actor , the man , has seized the symbol and reinterpreted it , and Baraka both articulates Best's interpretations and furthers the actor's task through reinterpretations of his own . In an interview with Harris Baraka says :

*Let me see , the Willie Best poem is again the whole question of how does one relate realistically to one's environment if one feels estranged from one's environment and especially a black person in a white situation . And Especially a person who is growing more and more political , and that politics is showing up his closest friends in a negative light but yet having to relate to those friends . Willie Best presents the black as the minstrel – the black as the bizarre funny person , yet the black as victim , and this black minstrel victim having to come to grips with that – with his victim- hood , with his minstrelsy in order to change that . I think one interesting thing in The Slave is that I had the army , Walker Vessels' army , wear revolutionary patches with minstrels on them . Grinning minstrels . What that meant to me was that would turn that very symbol which had been a degrading symbol for blacks into something of terror for whites . That grinning uncle Sambo , with red*

*lips and the white teeth would strike fear in their hearts . The terror groups , bearing these patches , would make revolution . So that's my version (145) .*

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

*A cross . The gesture , symbol , line  
arms held stiff , nailed stiff , with  
no sign , of what gave them strength .  
The point , become a line , a cross , or  
the man , and his material , driven in  
the ground . If the head rolls back  
and the mouth opens , screamed into  
existence , there will be perhaps  
only the slightest hint of movement –  
a smear ; no help will come . No one  
will turn to that station again (19) .*

White writers have seen degraded blacks as Christ symbols stressing their passivity while suffering . In contrast Baraka's black Christ is not impotent , rather , he seeks revenge for his wrongs . The troubled actor cries out "I'm tired / of losing . / got ta cut' cha" . Baraka says :

*He was tired of losing . (And  
his walking buddies tired  
of walking .  
Bent slightly,  
at the waste . Left hand low , to flick  
quick showy jabs ala Sugar .The right  
cocked , to complete ,  
any combination .  
He was  
tired of losing , but he was fighting  
a big dumb "farmer" .  
Such a blue bright  
afternoon , and only a few hundred yards  
from the beach . He said , I'm tired  
of losing .  
"I got ta cut' cha" (25) .*

The inversion of the role of the black actor as a buffoon provides an escape from minstrelsy and the black who is forbidden to express his pain becomes a potential killer . For Baraka , the black actor becomes :

*A renegade  
behind the mask . And even  
the mask , a renegade  
disguise . Black skin  
and hanging lips (26) .*

Willie Best who appears in the beginning of the poem as the archetypal black victim suffering and chronicling his woe "the ace sings alone / at the top of the body" is transformed into a hero who challenges his oppressors, in defense of his dignity and in so doing, he reveals the grace in violence that characterizes all Baraka's heroes:

*And he sits  
wet at the crossroads, remembering distinctly  
each weightless face that eases by. Sun at  
the back door, and that hideous mindless grin.  
Hear? (27)*

The inversion of Baraka's art, from *The Dead Lecturer* on, are aimed at awakening the political killer, the revolutionary black hero, in the submissive black. Inverting popular images of blacks is important to Baraka because he believes these images exercise tremendous power over the behavior of blacks by providing negative role models. Thus, in his poetry, images of docile blacks, of Uncle Toms are replaced by images of heroic blacks because heroic images will inspire heroic behavior. Moreover, by restructuring white stereotypes, Baraka is trying to expose the hidden reality of black self-images and to create new images-post-white-no longer dependent on white imagery and capable of communicating black realities without a mask. Baraka wants a black poetry of hard facts that would expose the evils of American culture and would drive the black sane, that is, into political action that would aid in the destruction of America. Consequently, in "*A Poem For Willie Best*" the black actor, "Sleep'n Eat", is linked with violence. He is the victim of violence, one who has been crucified by the stereotypes of society, but who is now screaming "into existence" (19). The Uncle Tom's scream introduces another dimension of the figure as it is handled by Baraka in this poem and is *The Dead Lecturer* as a whole. It is a scream of agony by the black victim of racism, and it is simultaneously a violent affirmation of a new sense of self. This ambiguity emphasizes the degree to which the violent rhetoric and postures of black self-discovery are themselves responding to the psychic violence of white racism (and acquiescent Uncle Tomism). Here Baraka's Uncle Tom is no longer a one-dimensional figure of acquiescence. He is breaking out of the subhuman criteria through which he and others have defined his identity. As a result of this self-affirmation the "renegade" (i.e., anti-black) posture of the Uncle Tom is becoming a mask rather than a reality. And that mask conceals a different kind of "renegade", the black whose uncompromising racial pride earns him that title from reactionary whites.

### **The Revolt Against Western Culture and Art**

In *The Dead Lecturer*, Baraka revolts against Western rationalism and this involves the poet's increasing preoccupation with the nature of his art. Baraka associates with limited rationalism those aesthetic norms which he perceives as the dominant factors in art and criticism in Western culture. In "*The Politics of Rich Painters*" these norms are integral parts of limited social systems in the American culture as a whole. The art of rich painters is bloodless. It caters to a narrow notion of taste that excludes emotional response. And since it fails to be fully human such art is merely "another name for liar". This limited art is intimately involved with the dominant socio-economic system—with the "commerce" of a "decadent economy". In this poem, Baraka addresses the painters from a non-Western vantage point, depicting them as artists who assume to convey the best that is thought and felt in the West, but who actually represent the height of deception. like his own Western-

derived poetry , their art, from the ironic perspective of the presumably uncivilized man , tells lies . Baraka states :

*And there are people in these savage geographies  
use your name in other contexts  
think , perhaps , the title of your latest painting  
another name for lair (33) .*

In "*A Guerrilla Handbook*" , Baraka also argues that traditional literary art has no positive function . Self-concerned poets see only their egos they are ...

*Convinced*

*of the lyric . Convinced  
of the man's image since  
he will not look at substance  
other than his ego . Flowers , grapes  
the shadows of weeds , as the weather  
is colder , and women walk  
with their heads down .*

*Silent political rain*

*against the speech  
of friends . We love them  
trapped in life , knowing no way out  
except description . Or black soil  
flooding in the arm (66) .*

The proper subversive act for the guerrilla poet , in this context , is to demythicize literature for those who would count themselves among "the living" to persuade those of a radical political consciousness that the lyric is defunct :

*We must convince the living  
that the dead  
cannot sing (66).*

The politics of Baraka at this point anyway , mainly consist of devaluing the significance of poetry – because its aesthetic concerns gloss over racial truths – by using the form against itself . In "*Political Poem*" , the dead lecturer , knowing full well the dead cannot sing , sees himself on the suicidal poetic mission of undoing the poem . Baraka says :

*... the poem undone  
undone by my station , by my station ,  
and the bad words of Newark ...*

...

*Undone by the logic of any specific death . Old gentlemen  
who still follow fires , tho are quieter  
and less punctual . It is a polite truth  
we are left with . Who are you ? What are you  
saying ? Something to be dealt with , as easily .  
The noxious game of reason , saying , "No, No,*

***you cannot fell" , like my dead lecturer  
lamenting thru gypsies his fast suicide (74) .***

The poem also takes up the attack on commercially attractive but spiritually limited art . Poetry , in the poet's society , is simply another symptom of the American culture's negation of feeling . The standard acceptable poetry is therefore the "noxious game of reason , saying No , No , you cannot fell " .

### **The "Crow Jane" Poems**

Baraka's emotionalized political awareness in *The Dead Lecturer* is one important aspect of his rejection of the old tradition of poetry and even more crucial element in his repudiation of the symbolic figure of the white woman . In *Preface* there are hints at the beginning of this revolt as presented in Baraka's ambivalent feelings expressed in the Hettie poems – poems written for his white Jewish wife , Hettie Chon – most noticeably in the implied revulsion at his and Hettie's biracial procreativity. Baraka sees his literary creativity standing in the same sham relation to white culture as he did to Hettie – his first white wife . As he was attracted into a racially mixed marriage , so had he been inseparably seduced by the literary art of the enemy culture which his first wife represents (see the Hettie poems pp. 13 & 14 *Preface* ) . In an essay called *"American Sexual reference : Black Male"*, collected in *Home :Social Essays* , Baraka makes the symbolic and actual connections between the white woman and white culture explicit . Miss America is the lowest common dominator of the symbol , and for Baraka this version of "American White Ladies" typifies a contagious prostitution which blurs into an affliction of serious art :

***The image I get is of a dumpy , but somehow seductive , strong whore  
who waddles around the house in expensive cosmetics . Ask somebody  
what are all those coats of paint and powder for , and they will tell you  
to make them beautiful , which is what they will tell you about , say ,  
their serious literature , i.e. , all those layers of fake artifice are for the  
beauty that is to keep the thing away from them ...(222-23) .***

The white woman is certainly in many respects an art symbol – or so the male-dominated culture conceives of her – "an aesthetic unto herself" whose symbolic surface so often shimmers at a distance from flesh and feeling . In the same way the black man is tempted by racial taboos to achieve position of this distant and forbidding symbol , he is enticed by a similarly dehumanized literary aesthetic . The underlying motivations are perfectly obvious : "Mixed marriages", like the liaison with Western literature , give him "some special power within white society" . Western art and the white woman function hand in hand to undermine the black man's sense of himself , removing him from the personal and cultural experiences that constitute his reality .

In *The Dead Lecturer* Baraka is still in the process of drawing away from these influences , from the shadow of Hettie and the Greenwich Village literati . The five *"Crow Jane"* poems stand as the poet's indictment of the psychically pervasive white woman and her spurious seduction of the black artist . The title is taken from a blues verse attributed to Mississippi Joe Williams and used as the epigraph for the poem . But an oblique parody of Yeats' *"Crazy Jane"* poems is probably intended as well . Typically , Baraka turns Yeats' intentions around : instead of validating the physical and emotional fidelity to life that Yeats



attributes to Crazy Jane, Baraka's Crow Jane represents the destructive and sterile established order of things that Crazy Jane's commonplace wisdom would protest against. In a more specific non-literary American sense, Crow Jane is the female counterpart of a racial attitude that goes by the name Crow Jim. Baraka elsewhere defines this inverted term as a "reverse patronization" by white critics towards black art, a warning over of the old abused images of black character in an ostensibly complementary fashion. Singling out well-intentioned jazz critics, Baraka, in *Black Music* says, "The disparag...g" all you folks got rhythm' is no less a stereotype, simply because it is proposed as a positive trait" (13). Crow Jane is her siren who lures the black poet by praising his supposedly Westernized qualities – his intellect, his poetic gift – encouraging him to transform his blackness into the terms of white art. In a word, the Crow Jane culture effectively emasculates him by seeming to promise artistic fecundity when in fact she can only offer up her barrenness:

*For drawn, wind  
off the river. Wind  
and light, from  
the lady's hand. Cold  
stuff, placed against  
strong man's lips. Young gigolo's  
of the 3<sup>rd</sup> estate. Young ruffians  
without no homes. The wealth  
is translate, corrected, a  
dark process, like thought, tho  
it provide a landscape  
with golden domes.*

*'Your people  
without love'. And life  
rots them. Makes a silence  
blankness in very space  
flesh thought to be. First light,  
is drawn. Cold stuff  
to tempt a lover. Old lady  
of flaking eyes. Moon lady  
of useless thighs (49).*

Baraka sees her "manner" for what it is: the style of the arty Beat intellectual summoning him on some illusory "...pilgrimage / to thought. Where she goes, in fairness, / 'nobody knows'..." . Although dead to the poet's spirit now, her destructiveness consciously identified in his mind, the degree to which the former infatuation might have impaired his communal black relationships, the kinship with "my / other boys", still weighs heavily:

*Is some pilgrimage  
to thought. Where she goes, in fairness,  
"nobody knows". And then, without love,  
returns to those wrinkled stomachs  
ragged bellies / of young ladies  
gone with seed. Crow  
will not have. Dead virgin  
of the mind's echo. Dead lady  
of thinking, black now, without*

*the creek of memory .*  
*Field is yellow . Fils dead*  
*( Me , the last ... black lip hung*  
*in dawn's gray wind .The last,*  
*for love , a taker , took my kin .*  
*Crow . Crow . Where*  
*you leave my*  
*other boys ? (50)*

The final appeal in the last of the "*Crow Jane*" poems is to an entirely different creative spirit , to the African god of fertility , Damballah , who must stop off the white female procreative organ . No longer must she be allowed to function as the medium of incubation and delivery for his seminal black energies :

*The dead lady canonized .*  
*A thread*  
*of meaning . Meaning light . The quick*  
*response .To breath , or the virgins*  
*sick odor against the night .*  
*A trial*  
*of objects . Dead nouns , rotted faces*  
*propose the night's image . Erect*  
*for the lady , a grave of her own .*  
*The stem*  
*of the morning , sets itself , on*  
*each window (of thought , where it*  
*goes . The lady is dead , may the Gods ,*  
*those others*  
*beg our forgiveness . And Damballah , kind*  
*father ,*  
*sew up*  
*her bleeding hole (53) .*

Damballah is not only an ironically "kind father" but of the several facets of a powerful black antagonist emerging in Baraka's poems . He is a male counter-force to the deathly love-grasp of the white woman , a vengeful black father with the will and strength to destroy the "gray hideous space" that is the West .

The "*Crow Jane*" poem sequence is not only about the white woman's destruction of the black poet but is also about the black poet's transformation of "The Western Muse" in order to put his own black vision . Speaking about Crow Jane as the muse of Western poetry , Baraka tells William J. Harris about his own transformation of the white muse – using the blues aesthetic – into black experience . Baraka's interview with Harris is as follows :

**WJH** : What does Crow Jane represent

**AB** : The Muse really , the Muse as seen as seen as the Muse in the traditional sense but then transformed through the blues – like "Crow Jane" is really a blues song but I also got it from Crazy Jane , Yeats , and I thought of Crazy Jane as really the Muse of Western poetry .

**WJH** : OK . So she is the Western Muse ?

**AB** : The Western Muse . Crazy Jane . Right .

**WJH : And Crow Jane ?**

**AB : Crow Jane then is like that Muse transformed by the black experience .**

**WJH : OK . So she is a positive image .**

**AB : Yes , she's positive in that she ... see it's a Schizoid thing . See because in some ways it relates to the Crazy Jane-Western aesthetic – the parts of it that are not are the parts I can drag out of it ... that I think I can use .**

**WJH : Some readings of the poem make Crow Jane white Western civilization .**

**AB : That's true . Except when she is Crow Jane She obviously has a black exterior even through the interior is still linked to the Western ... it's a question of what can you get out of it ; is there anything you can save out of that ?**

**WJH : You have her die .**

**AB : The Western aesthetic dies ... at least my use for it . That whole book , *The Dead Lecturer*, is really about that : The moving away from the whole Western aesthetic.**

**WJH : So she is that Muse which is essentially a Western Muse but she has some sort of Afro- American aspect ?**

**AB : She has been used by an Afro-American , i.e. , me. And I know she has got to be killed off because there is no further use – I can't get anything else from her . Crow Jane is a white Muse appropriated by the black experience (145-146) .**

In the "*Crow Jane*" poems , Baraka – due to the failure of Western rationalism – adopts dada violence and seeks an art that could absorb black radical politics .To achieve this new black art he attempts to murder Crow Jane , the white muse that he created from the suggestiveness of Yeats' Crazy Jane : "Crow Jane , Crow Jane , don't hold your head so high / you realize , baby , you got to lay down and die" (48) .

In the fifth movement of the poem sequence , Baraka kills Crow Jane , the white muse : "for that lady , a grave of her own ... the lady is dead" (53) . Crow Jane is an archetypal temptress . Like the character of Lula in Baraka's play *Dutchman* , Crow Jane is also a symbol of white America seducing "young gigolo's / of the 3<sup>rd</sup> estate" into believing that she has great wealth to offer them . The poet , once entranced by her himself , now warns others of her siren call : "Crow Jane in High Society" looks for "openings / where she can lay all / this greasy talk / on somebody . Me , once . Now / Jane her teller" . In this section of the poem , Baraka explains :

***Crow Jane In High Society .***

***Wipes***

***her nose***

***on the draperies . Spills drinks***

***fondles another man's***

***life . She is looking***

***for alternatives .Openings***

***where she can lay all***

***this greasy talk***

*on somebody . Me , once . Now  
I am her teller .*

*And I tell  
her symbols , as the grey movement  
of clouds . Leave  
grey movements  
of clouds . Leaver , always ,  
more .*

*Where is she ? That she  
moves without light . Even  
in our halls . Even with  
our laughter , lies , dead drunk  
in a slouch hat famous king .*

*Where ?*

*To come on so (51) .*

The "**Crow Jane**" poem sequence is considered as Baraka's most extravagantly complex creation in *The Dead Lecturer* . Henry Lacey argues that the "**Crow Jane**" poem reflect Baraka's primary concern at that time of his poetic development in the early sixties . Lacey points out that Baraka "wants desperately to leave those sterile literary movements more and more associated with the general moral failure of white liberalism . This failure , he feels , is most glaringly present in the literary coterie of which he is a part . The cloud imagery underscores their separation from real human concerns (56) .

In fact , the "**Crow Jane**" poems , in a sense , are subtle essays on tradition and influence . Their primary subject – which exists as sub-text to the surface development of Crow Jane's character – is the relation of Baraka's poetic voice to the competing forces of Western and black American cultures . The former authority is represented by Yeats , specially the Yeats of the "**Crow Jane**" poems; the latter is evinced in the epigram to Baraka's Crow Jane verses which is taken from a Blues song by Mississippi Joe Williams : Crow Jane , Crow Jane , don't hold your head so high , you realize , baby , you got to lay down and die . In Mississippi (Big Joe) Williams' blues poem "**Pallet On The Floor**" – from which Baraka is quoting – crow Jane appears simultaneously as a cleverly veiled personification of Southern racism's Jim Crow and as the typical faithless woman of the blues lament whose cruelty drives her man away ("I'm going pretty woman . May get lonesome here / I got nobody , you don't relieve my cares") . Baraka also allegorizes civilization , modeled in every significant detail on Yeats', not Williams' , Jane . Indeed , until the Crow Jane series is understood as a totality , Williams' figure merely casts an ominous black American shadow over an essentially mock-Yeatsian landscape . Baraka's poems thus sequentially explore the character of Western literature before specifically including non-Western elements in a final assessment of poetic influence .

Yeats' "**Crow Jane**" poems exploited violent , sexual , and scatological imagery in an attempt to forge an uncompromising resolution of opposites , of what Yeats elsewhere called "all those antinomies / Of day and night". Crazy Jane , like Yeats' Old Tom , presses the common claims of body , soul , and heart ("love") as she celebrates natural processes . Baraka borrows Yeats's language and intonation but he deliberately inverts or creatively misreads Yeats' theme . The opening verse , "For Crow Jane" , is cast in the hunting idiom of "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman" , as Jane is introduced in all of her Yeatsian grotesquerie : "Cold / stuff , placed against /strong man's lips" . Baraka then explicitly

identifies Jane with Yeats by associating her creations with the Byzantium poems' golden artifices . Moreover , he invokes her career as a precedent for reshaping tradition , while reducing that career's accomplishment to the status of a lifeless , if glittering , artifact :

*The wealth  
is translated , corrected , a  
dark process , like thought , tho  
it provide a landscape  
with golden domes .  
'Your people  
without love' . And life  
rots them (49) .*

Flux , mutability , process – those forces with which Yeats' genius grappled and which later invigorated Baraka's spiritual transformation – are depicted as putrefying agents in Yeats' stilled that world . Warmth , love , and life itself are incompatible with that world. Crow Jane – like Crazy Jane , an "Old lady of useless thighs" ("***For Crow Jane***") – represents all Yeats' "people" ; in Baraka's second poem , "***Crow Jane's Manner***", she alone is "without love" and , elevated beyond personality to a principle of being , she is described as the "dead virgin / of the mind's echo . Dead lady / of thinking" . In a rather sharp swerve from Yeats' true sensibility , Crow Jane's haggard infertility is identified with the worst aspects of Western rationalism as set forth in ***Blues People*** . Appropriately , in the final poem , "***The Dead Lady Canonized***", Crow Jane's (again , Western culture's) legacy is pictured as a heap of artifacts , those sterile products of the Western imagination delineated in ***Blues People*** : "A trail /of objects . Dead nouns propose the night's images . Erect a grave of her own" .

The specific quality of Baraka's revision of Yeats is clearly seen in two particular paraphrases of the Crazy Jane poems that occur in "*The Dead Lady Canonized*". The poem begins , "A thread / of meaning . Meaning light" – a direct reference to the lines intoned by Yeats' Jane in "Crazy Jane and Jack the journeyman" :

*For love is but a skein unwound  
Between the dark and dawn ...  
I – love's skein upon the ground ,  
My body in the tomb –  
Shall leap into the light lost  
In my mother's womb .*

Yeats' poem developed from his quasi-mystical notion of "the black mass of Eden" ; and his Jane rejects her notion of utopia for the double-edged reward of sexuality , accepting ghostly isolation as the price for rapture . Baraka now claims the power of revolutionary vision for himself , ironically performing a black mass around Yeats' figure . Crow Jane's "thread" unwinds , not to the intense experience of night , but to the "meaning" of dawn , or rather to the emptiness of "light" which , in Baraka's poems , is identified with disease , futurity , and cold sterility . As in "State / meant" , Baraka here rejects the West as "death / ly white" and asserts of the true black magicians , "we own / the night". (*Home* 252)

Yet Baraka does not stop here ; recasting these lines from *"Crazy Jane with the Bishop"*

***But love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement ;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent – (679) .***

Baraka seeks to kill forever his loveless , infertile Jane and to propose his own image of the (black owned) night:

***may [.../ Damballah , kind father,  
sew up  
her bleeding hole (53) .***

Yeats' lines , with their equivocations "sole" (or soul) and "whole" (or hole) , weld body and soul in a vision of "antinomian" frenzy producing ecstatic wholeness . Baraka violently inverts this purpose , conjuring the African gods in an effort to repair what is "rent" , to close the womb – the creative fount – of his Western protagonist . The "grave" (Yeats' "Tomb") of Baraka's Jane is not a door leading toward a pure , illuminated ancestral womb , but a grim end to the "dark process" of her tradition's continuity . Baraka divests Crazy Jane of her sublime madness , leaving only the literal "excrementitious" mansion of her dead and deadening "images" .

Yet this is not all ; Baraka does not simply transform –or rather , bomb – the Yeatsian landscape . He is , in fact, a crucial player in this new black mass . He enters the scene in "*Crow Jane's Manner*" : "Me , the last ...black lip hung / in dawn's gray wind" ; and in "*Crow Jane in High Society*" he attacks himself as Crow Jane's poetic lackey: "And I tell / her symbols ,as the grey movement / of clouds " . Like Walker Vessels , the "grey" hero of *The Slave* , Baraka's persona is here venerating Yeats' symbols , thereby investing them with authority and power . He performs for her like a Willie Best ; yet (like both Willie Best and Walker Vessels) , he is a renegade entertainer ("black lip hung ... "is an explicit link to this aspect of the Willie Best figure) . "*Tell*" means , of course, "relate" ; bit it may also mean "understand" or , more radically , "discover" . And , indeed , Baraka , as author of the "*Cow Jane*" poems , is discovering his image of Western culture . His struggling voice within these poems is a prisoner of a foreign language ; yet he may say , with King Lear's Fool , "I can tell what I can tell" . Ultimately , Baraka-the-author and Baraka-the-persona merge and pronounce Crow Jane's death-sentence in unison .

This complete rejection of Crow Jane joins the end of the series with its opening epigram , forming an African / black American frame to the examination of Western tradition . For , like Williams , the blues singer , Baraka tells Crow Jane , "I'm going ...you don't relieve my cares" . The sequence as a whole is entirely characteristic of Baraka's most revolutionary works : it appropriates a classic Euro-American form , inverts its imagery and themes , and moulds it into a new structure by weeding furious critique to traditional black American expressions and the language of Pan-African mythologies . The result is an intriguing paradox , for the product of such rebellion is at once startlingly innovative and thoroughly inextricable from Western tradition itself .

### ***Baraka's Search For a Black Alternative***

In *The Dead Lecturer* , Yeats is not the only influence . As in *Preface* these are occasional nods to Eliot but the poet is no longer learning so heavily upon Eliot . Baraka seems sure of his own poetic diction that he has little need to borrow phrases from his predecessors .

Nevertheless the ***Dead Lecturer*** reveals a more detailed search for God than ***Preface***. In ***The Dead Lecturer*** Baraka worries himself directly about Eliot's God. In ***Preface*** he is more concerned with what he calls the "Mosaic of disorder I own but cannot recognize" (***Preface*** 28). The word "disorder" appears frequently in the middle of ***Preface***: in the musical poem for Billy Holiday called "Bridge"; in ***"Way Out West"***, in "the intricate disorder / of the seasons"; and in "The Turncoat", in a mixing of memory and desire: "with dull memories & self-hate & the terrible disorder / of a young man". Of course, self-hatred figures in other poems of this collection and it seems to be connected with disorder. The disorder of the seasons is reflected upon in the ***Almanac*** poems and becomes ultimately apocalyptic in ***"Roi's New Blues"*** (45) when the poet offers us an abrupt shift in address in the middle of the poem – recalling "Winter kept us warm" – in "Winter locked us in. (On / the floor, at midnight / we turned in blind / embrace". He says, "Coldness will be / stamped out, when those grey horsemen / with sunny faces / ride through our town. O, God / we've waited for them. Stood / for years with our eyes full / of a violent wind". Through they have grey faces – "grey" becomes synonymous with "white" later, just as the sun is sometimes linked with white dominance – they are the horsemen of the apocalypse, and Baraka somehow causes himself to feel that they will ride and revenge. They will set right the wrongs.

***The Dead Lecturer*** is a more detailed search for God than ***Preface***. Baraka is more explicit, as if he was taking more seriously the message he himself sends us: "Let my poems be a graph / of me" (10). In ***"A Poem for Willie Best"***, Section VII, Jones complains that he is treating of "no God / but what is given. Give me. / Something more / than what is here. I must tell you / my body hurts" (24). His need is clear, his pain is somehow embedded in the pain of Willie Best, an actor whose degradation is shared by Baraka. In his search for something more, Baraka dredges up several images from ***"The Waste Land"*** in the ending of ***"A Poem for Democrats"***. The hanged man merges with the Phoenician merchant to share a death by drowning, an ironic Mafia-style death with cement overshoes:

( transporting your loved one  
across the line is death  
by drowning .  
Drowned love  
hanged man ,swung , cement on his feet .)  
But  
the small filth of the small mind  
short structures of  
newark , baltimore , cincinnati , omaha . Distress , europe has passed  
we are alone . Europe  
frail woman , dead , we are alone (39) .

The echo of "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" is unmistakable, and the ironies in the poem are not confined to the substitution of these middle-sized cities we now associate with black unrest, if not despair. The chief irony is that the hanged man is drowned in a manner which suggests the Mafia – new Romans, doing what old Romans did, but with the modern twist of premixed, quick-drying over shoes.

Baraka describes "a week of spirit, / a heap of broken feeling", in ***"Duncan spoke of a process"*** (54), and talks of feeling that he must cling to "what futile lies / I have, though he begins to recognize them as lies. Perhaps the beginning of the rejection of Eliot's concept of God most clearly comes in the two ***"Black Dada Nihilismus"*** poems. They are remarkable in

their clarity- once the trend of Baraka's thinking and feeling is seen . What Baraka sees is history and the sins committed in the name of Christ . He says , "God , if they bring him / bleeding , I would not / forgive , or even call him / black dada nihilismus" (61) . Baraka speaks of "the umbrella'd Jesus" , as if he had mixed him with the image of Gandhi, but he links Jesus with the alchemy of conquest : converting flesh , not to bread , but to wealth :

*Trismegistus , have  
them , in their transmutation , from stone  
to bleeding pearl , from lead to burning  
looting , dead Moctezuma , find the West (62) .*

Then , in the second , and much more brutally forceful poem , Baraka speaks almost as if he were nostalgic for a Mau-Mau revolt : "Plastique ,we / do not have , only thin heroic blades" .Then , "Rape the white girls . Rape / their fathers .Cut the mothers' throats . / Black dad nihilismus , choke my friends" . And the poem ends with as clear a call for revenge – or what some call justice – as Baraka is capable of at this time :

*art , 'member  
what you said  
money , God , power ,  
a moral code , as cruel  
it destroyed Pyzantium ,Tenochtitlan ,  
Commanch ,  
got it , Baby !  
For tambo , willie best , dubois , patrice , mantan ,  
the  
bronze buckaroos .  
For Jack Johnson , asbestos , tonto , buckwheat ,  
billie holiday.  
For tom russ , I 'overture , vesey , beau jack ,  
(may a lost god damballah , rest or save us  
against the murders we intend  
against his lost white children  
black dada nihilismus (64) .*

The moral code is "So cruel" – a phrase Baraka uses several times in his early poetry to refer to something which in him – because it destroys not just men or races but entire empires and civilizations . it is no wonder that Baraka renounces the white moral order but he does not renounce God nor does he seem to slacken his quest . In "*Green Lantern's Solo*" , Baraka points out :

*Who cannot but yearn  
for the one Mind , or Right , or call it some God ,  
a thing beyond  
themselves , something toward which all life is  
fixed , some static ,  
irreducible , constantly correcting , dogmatic  
economy of the soul (70) .*



Critics , such as Margolis , who have seen nihilism and nothing more in such poems are wrong . Baraka looks for a God and a moral order – unlike the Western moral order – which will not destroy empires of him . he is not afraid of violence or destruction so long as it produces the destruction of the code that destroyed Moctezuma .

### ***The "Black Dada Nihilismus" Poem Sequence***

Approaching the "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" poem sequence , from a perspective other than the one discussed above , it is relevant to say that the double-edged meaning in the title of the poem "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" conveys both the disintegrating absurdity of the dominating culture (the dada strain of its life and art) and the black man-daddy who will help to hasten the destruction : (" ... Come up , black dada , nihilismus . Rape the white girls . Rape / their fathers . Cut the mother's throats") . The calculated appeal here is to the most leaden and virulent of white taboos – black man-beasts despoiling white maidenhead and motherhood . The reliable inversion process is at work again , turning nihilistic fantasies against the very people who dreamed them , inverting the paranoid symbols of whites into black assertions of the most logical sort . As the original Dadaists themselves set out to ridicule and pervert serious art , so Baraka gives another twist by showing how (from a particular black point of view ) the absurd is perfectly logical , how white aesthetic surrealism is in effect perilously close to a functioning black reality . Beyond the clear-cut literal message , a colloquial force spurts out from the ironic black sense of such words as "dada" (ready daddy , the black father , lover , man in the street ) and "mothers" , razor words which cut through sexual and familial lines to touch the deepest nerve of racial animosity . There is an intermittent but increasing use of black phrases here . This is a flagrant new voice for Baraka still with his attention very much keyed to the white enemy , but nevertheless a separate and distinct voice as opposed to the more delicate self-probing and properly distant satire of much of his preceding work .

At the same time he nurtures his sexual-cultural symbols , he also attempts to bring his voice into closer alignment with a sense of black American form as represented by the chant . Drawn out of black music , this element of style is a vocal form into which all the screaming force in "***Rhythm & Blues***" is described as flowing , and the extended phrases of that poem indeed have a chant-like quality . The assaulting verses in "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" are shaped into a more controlled incantation , as with the surge of naming that closes the poem . Baraka invokes both the soldiers and victims of New World black history as the ultimate antidote to the "bilious" and "ugly" Western art he had himself once "learned" :

***For tambo , willie best , dubois , Patrice , mantan ,  
the  
bronze buckaroos .  
For Jack Johnson , asbestos , tonto , buckwheat ,  
billie holiday .  
For tom russ , I'veture , vesey , beau jack , (64)***

The collective memory of these black figures provides the new inspiration for Baraka's poetic voice – his and their black voices taken together . The ultimate Black Dada will be this collective voice , not the strain of nihilism imposed by the West ; the voice whose origin is the spirit of black fertility and creation (although still riddled with a concern for with death ) , the voice of Damballah . the African God :

***may a lost god damballah , rest or save us***

*against the murders we intend  
against .... lost white children  
black dada nihilismus (64) .*

It will remain finally for Baraka to turn his antagonist into protagonist . That accomplishment is fulfilled in the late 1960's . For the moment he can give only a glimpse in his poetry of the functional possibilities of neo-African style defined so carefully in *Blues People* . In fact the influences from this source on the late poems in *The Dead Lecturer* , although perceptible , are still primarily inspirational – the changing , the appeals to Damballah . But the content and thrust of the poems , especially through the conspicuous metaphor of the scream long with the occasional ability to shuck off his lyric individualism for a communal voicing , have changed significantly from *Preface* . Baraka may still be lecturing from a death-like trance , but there are audible ramblings of a new spirit , a new sense of genealogy delimited with increasing clarity from black point of view .

Lacey points out that in "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" the concerns of Baraka "and those of the Dadaists were extremely similar , indeed , identical" (58) . It is clear that the poem demonstrates the influence of the dadaist movement in Baraka's poetry , especially to the degree that such a movement encouraged a certain sense of unorthodoxy in the approach to structure and use of language . Thus the Dadaist emphasis on formlessness amounts to a rebellion against overly formalized approaches to art : and this is clearly a precursor to the criteria of the projective school that included Baraka and other "Beat" poets in its numbers during the 1950's . But as usual , Baraka does not simply borrow these techniques . The inherited forms and approaches to poetry are integrated , over the years , with the changes in his style and political ideology . The colloquial format and imagistic structures which he has developed as a member of the projective school easily adapted themselves to the oral modes of black American culture (the speech and the songs) and to the improvisational "free" forms of contemporary jazz . Similarly , the deliberately anti-formal or "formless" poems that are encouraged by the dadaist heritage are comparable with those later works in which Baraka's aesthetic and social rebellion , as black nationalist , express itself .

But despite the consistency with which he successfully adapts inherited forms , Baraka's achievement as a poet on one level is uneven . The effects of what critics call his "associationist" images are often brilliant , the use of sounds and rhythm is frequently innovative ; but despite this his style can be surprisingly monotonous . The monotony results , paradoxically , from the poet's excessive reliance on the kind of images that his poem "*Turncoat*" exemplifies . What is basically a stimulating approach to the writing of poetry sometimes bogs down because of lack of control. And as a result of this excess some of Baraka's early poetry reads like an extended an extended version of "*Turncoat*" .

Lawrence P. Neal in "*The Development of Le Roi Jones*" argues that "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" is an attack on "the decadence of Western art which is displaced for the black art" (26) . In fact , "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" on one level is an attack on Western art and its limited aesthetics of excessive rationalism . The poem succeeds in part because Baraka blends his aesthetic revolt so well with this themes of ethnic rebellion . Black violence considered , in this sense , either as reprehensible and criminal (rape and murder) or as calculated rebellion still amounts to retaliation against an established order that prizes its own rational norms above the feelings of its victims . But black dada's criminality is disturbing in a deep sense because it is the symptom and product of a racial caste system that is secured by political and socio-economic systems . With telling irony Baraka manages to argue , in effect

, that the emotionally limited sense of order that is so prized by the established systems has actually been the direct cause of psychic and social disorder .

But black dada's violence is not perceived in exclusively criminal terms . It also smacks of heroism , a deliberate rebelliousness that links Baraka with long history of covert and overt resistance to racial injustice. In turn this kind of creative resistance is linked with the prevailing aesthetic issue of the poem . Black dada's name obviously recalls the dadaist revolt in art . Black dada's ethnic rebellion is the political counterpart of the dadaists' calculated use of "formlessness" as a means of revolting against excessive , rationalistically defined formalism . And , by extension , the black poet who combines the rebellious ethnic prospective with the aesthetic criteria of the dadaists is engaged in his art as a total experience – art as an act of rebellion against limiting social systems and against limited notions of artistic creativity . The "nihilism" of ethnic violence and dadaist outrage alike has become a creative process . At this point "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" reflects Baraka's skill in blending archetypes within the persona of the poet himself . The poet is black dada . His art embodies aesthetic and social concerns . And in the very process of synthesizing the aesthetic and the social in the person of the poet , the poem rejects those intellectual standards which insist upon keeping such concerns separate . Considered in these terms black dada represents a certain self- consciousness on Baraka's part about the role of the poet and the significance of his art . This self-awareness allow Baraka to deal with the poet-persona as social archetype .

Henry Lacey , in his comments on the poem , argues that Baraka , like the Dadaists "proposes an art that is consciously in revolt against the complacency of convention" (58) . Baraka not only "develops an art in revolt against convention" but also he develops the black scream as the heart of his revolutionary aesthetic and a vengeful racial violence . These elements reveal the development of Baraka's poetics in the mid 1960's and become a touchstone of the distance he traveled since *Preface* 1961 . The first part of the poem forcefully rejects the culture of the powerful – its life-sucking deadness , its Christian façade , its assimilationist and genocidal minority politics . Against the murderous hypocrisy of the oppressors , however , Baraka posits no working-class-conscious vision of liberation , but only the lumpenproletarian gesture of sanctified and self-gratifying violence :

*Against what light  
is false what breath  
sucked , for deadness .  
Murder , the cleansed  
purpose , frail , against  
God , it they bring him  
bleeding , I would not  
forgive , or even call him  
black dada nihilismus (61) .*

Afterwards , Baraka speaks about Jewish assimilation in the harsh and puzzling image of the "ugly silent deaths of Jews under the surgeon's knife" :

*The protestant love , wide window ,  
color blocked to Mondrian , and the  
ugly silent deaths of Jews under  
the surgeon's knife . To awake on  
69<sup>th</sup> street with money and a hip*

*nose . Black dada nihilismus , for  
the umbrella'd Jesus . Trilby intrigue  
movey house presidents sticky the floor .  
B.D.N , for the secret men , Hermes , the  
blacker art .Thievery (ahh , they return  
those secret gold killers . Inquisitors  
of the cocktail hour .Trismegistus , have  
them , in their transmutation , from stone  
to bleeding pearl , from lead to burning  
looting dead Moctezuma , find the West  
a grey hideous space (62) .*

According to Lacey , the Jews in Baraka's poem "have gotten rid of all Jewish trails" (59) in order to be assimilated into the mainstream white culture . In *Home* , Baraka affirms that the Jews who seek assimilation have to pay a price in return : "the price the immigrants paid to get into America was that they had to become Americans" (196) .The Jews in Baraka's poem – like the middle class blacks – have to give up all their characteristics as Jews "to the extent of plastic surgery" (Lacey 59) .

Despite what appear to be anti-semitic overtones in the poem , the thrust of baraka's argument is still an expression of his wish for a retention of ethnic identity. Plastic surgery is seen as a self-deceptive acceptance of the beauty ideal of the oppressive culture , a middle-class gesture of ethnic betrayal . At this point , Baraka sees other ethnic groups , and especially Jews , as a metaphoric extension of blacks . In a parallel argument in *Home* , Baraka holds up the fate of German middle-class Jews (who "believed that it was only the poor Jews ,who, perhaps righty so , would suffer") in order to criticize the Black middle class :

*Like these unfortunate Jews the middle – class Negro has no real  
program of rebellion against the status quo ... because he believes he is  
pretty well off . The blatant cultural assassination , and the social and  
economic exploitation of most Negroes in this society , does not really  
impress him . The middle-class Negro's goal ... is to be ignorant  
comfortably (149-150) .*

The middle-class black appears as an "umbrella'd Jesus", shielded from the revelatory waters of rain , and hypnotized by Gandhi's non-violence and the gold fetishism of the acquisitive bourgeoisie .He has no voice of his own , but is instead mesmerized by the Svengali-like<sup>(16)</sup> powers of American popular culture . Baraka here opposes what he sees as a white-oriented living death , ad his "program of rebellion" aims at uprooting both the "comfortably ignorance" of the black middle class and the faith in the supposed rationality of the West .

The vehicle for Baraka's critique of reason is alchemy , the "black art" taken from the Egyptain god Thoth , whose Greek name Hermes Trismegistos , is invoked in the poem . His name suggests what is called "The Egyptain theme" in Baraka's poetry and summons up the memory of "pre-Western" Hermetic cults ; in this tradition , Baraka writers "hermetic" poetry . Baraka's Egyptian theme , strengthened by the etymological link from Bohemians to Gypsies to Egypt as the supposed land of origin of Gypsies , implies a cyclical view of

history , a black parallel to the notion of the "Westward course of empires" .Baraka clarifies this theme in later essay , *"The Campaign"* .

*Study the history of ancient Egypt . The move from Black to white .  
Reversed is the story of America . America who always (secretly)  
patterned herself after Egypt . Because she was so influenced by the  
sons and daughters of the ancient Egyptians (35) .*

Part two of *"Black Dada Nihilismus"* carries this identification of "black art" as an "alchemistic" concept and as a vehicle for ethnic upheaval to its frightening end as an irrational counter-image to the bourgeoisie , black and white . Baraka embraces Egyptain astrology and medieval alchemy no to find gold , but to initiate the victims of the West , that "grey and hideous space" , into the "blacker art" which will lead to rebellion : "from stone / to bleeding pearl , from lead to burning / looting". At the end of the path is the screaming incitement to rape and murder . Baraka is in love with racial violence as a means to exorcise the middle-class Negro's "cultivated" complicity with oppression . *"Black Dada Nihilismus"* is Baraka's negation of his middle-class background : but the poem had a very real appeal to readers who , like Eldridge Cleaver , indentified with Baraka's deification of the criminality of the young Black lumpenproletarian male<sup>(17)</sup> .

In *"Black Dada Nihilismus"* , Baraka reveals himself – through his references to Sartre – as suffering an existential transformation . In one sense , Baraka seems to pass , at the end of *The Dead Lecturer* , through a dark existential night of the soul out of which an entire reordering must result . Baraka attempts to reorder himself in relation to God , his soul , his art and his morality :

*From Sartre , a white man , it gave  
the last breath . And we beg him die ,  
before he is killed . Plasique , we  
do not have , only thin heroic blades .  
The razor . Our flail against them , why  
you carry knives ? Or brutaed lumps of  
heart ? Why you stay where they can  
reach ? Why you sit , or stand , or walk  
in this place , a window on a dark  
warehouse . Where the the minds packed in  
straw . New homes , these towers , for those  
lacking money or art . A cult of death ,  
need of the simple striking arm under  
the streetlamp . The cutters , from under  
their rented earth . Come up , black dada  
nihilismus . Rape the white girls . Rape  
their fathers . Cut the mothers' throats .  
Black dada nihilismus , choke my friends  
in their bedrooms with their drinks spilling  
and restless for tilting hips or dark liver  
lips sucking splinters from the master's thigh .  
Black scream  
and chant , scream ,  
and dull , un  
earthily . (63) .*

Nevertheless the description of a bankrupt Western civilization ("From Sartre , a white man . It gave / the last breath") and the invocation of rape and murder as antidotes are presented with a stark horrifying clarity and a nihilist joy . Moreover the black scream is a victorious "hollering" :

*Black scream  
and chant , scream ,  
and dull , un  
earthily  
hollering (63-64) .*

To legitimize the argument for violence and revenge, Baraka invokes victims of the moral code of the West , "so cruel / it destroyed Byzantium , Tenochtitlan , Commanch / got it , Baby !" In an attempt to "blacken" the reference system of victims of Western culture , the poem which begins with a period ends with a dedication (another inversion) to black rebels such as Denmark Vesey , Toussaint L'overture , Patrice Lumunba , and W.E.B. Dubois ; to minstrels and stereotyped entertainers, Tambo , Willie Best, Mantan Moreland , Buck Wheat , The Bronze Buckaroos<sup>(18)</sup> ; to boxer Jack Johnson and blues singer Billie Holiday , who are all , Baraka says , "secret murderers" under the masks imposed upon them ; and to Baraka's own grandfather , Tom Russ .

*hollering .Dada , bilious  
what ugliness , learned  
in the dome , colored holy  
shit ( i call them sinned  
or lost  
burned masters  
of the lost  
nihil German killers  
all our learned  
art , 'member  
what you said  
money , God , power ,  
a moral code , so cruel  
it destroyed Byzantium , Tenochtitlan ,  
Commanch  
got it , Baby !  
For tambo , willie best , dubois , Patrice , maintain ,  
the  
bronze bucharoos .  
For Jack Johnson , asbestos , tonto , buckwheat ,  
billie holiday .  
For tom russ , I'verture , vesey , beau jack (64) .*

The poem ends with a prayer to an African god , Damballah :

*may a lost god damballah , rest or save us  
against the murders we intend  
against his lost white children*

***black dada nihilismus (64) .***

Damballah , in mythology is a Voodoo God originally from Dahomey , who may appear in the shape of a snake that makes people "hiss" , but he is also the incorporation of fertility , associated with the cult of the rainbow , the snake of heaven .<sup>(19)</sup> . In Voodoo rites observed in New Orleans :

***The two ministers of the serpent god – the king and queen , ... or papa  
and mama – communicated the will of the sacred serpent .***<sup>(20)</sup>

The "papa" who transmits the will of Danh-gbi , or Damballah , a god who never demands human sacrifice, is implied in the "black dada" addressed by the poem . The "nihilismus" , both as an outcome of Western philosophy and as an attitude of the genocidal Nazi killers , gives the dada priest , who is essentially friendly in Voodoo , a new function in a "cult of death".

Baraka , who has pursued this dada element as the spontaneous eruption of "craziness" and of "surrealist" violence in black America in many of his works , so in this concept a true possibility for literary modernity and political liberation . In Home , Baraka offers an explanation for the "program of rebellion" advocated in "***Black Dada Nihilisms***" :

***Something else I spire to is the craziness of all honest men . (And as an  
... aside : one way Negroes could force this institutionalized dishonesty  
to crumble and its apologizers to break and run even faster than they  
are now would be to turn crazy , to bring out a little American dada ,  
Ornette Coleman style , and chase these perverts into the ocean , where  
they belong (183) .***

This political message shows its Bohemian roots in the omnipresent identification of the "crazy" artist with the violence of the oppressed . The poem is , of course , not addressed to "people" , but to an emanation , a principle , an "aestheticization" ; and the "Weltgeist of surrealism" remains at the center of Baraka's art . Baraka's poetry in the first half of the 1960's reflects the transposition of the struggle between "literature" and "life" from the "inside" of the poet's consciousness to the "outside" of American political and ethnic reality . In this process , the expressive elements of aesthetic protest confront the demands of the political and ethnic protest . This dramatic conflict , more than any explicitly political statement , is a major source of Baraka's dynamics in the poetry of The Dead Lecturer . The new tensions lend themselves to new forms , and Baraka turns toward revolutionary poetry , drama and prose fiction in order to respond artistically to the felt pressures .

Lacey argues that Baraka uses the word "friends" in "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" to refer to his "artistic friends" (59) , the bohemian poets . It is true that one sign of Baraka's metamorphosis – and distress – at this stage of his poetic development is that he begins to use the word "friends" which refers to his white *avant-garde* associates , both ironically and ambiguously .The most shocking use of the term is in the section where he commands the black emanation to

***Rape the white girls . Rape  
their fathers .Cut the mothers throats .  
Black dada nihilismus , choke my friends (62) .***

The source of Baraka's ambivalence was his recognition that to be a useful black political artist he had to escape the white world view and poetics ; yet he still felt drawn to this white bohemian world and the great ideas of the Western humanist tradition in some poems in *The Dead Lecturer*. His ambivalence is reflected in his meditation on Sartre , who had represented everything that he saw as good in the West :

*From Sartre , a white man , it [the West] gives the last breath . And we  
beg him die ,  
before he is killed (63) .*

Taken from another perspective Baraka's ambivalence about the philosopher stems from their similarities , ironically but not surprisingly . their evaluations of the West differ only in perspective . That is , Sartre's indictment of the West reflects a white perspective , Baraka's black . Keeping that difference in mind , it is easy to see how their ideas are interchangeable ; in his most militant black nationalist state , Baraka could have written the following passage which comes from Sartre :

*Let us look at ourselves , if we can bear to , and see what is becoming of  
us . First , we must face that unexpected revelation ,the strip-tease of  
our humanism. there you can see it , quite naked , and it's not a pretty  
sight . It was nothing but an ideology of lies , a perfect justification for  
pillage ; its honeyed words , its affectation of sensibility where only  
alibis for our aggressions ... you can see it's the end ; Europe is  
springing leaks everywhere . What then has happened ? It simply is that  
in the past we made history and now it is being made of us .The ratio of  
forces has been inverted ; decolonisation has begun ; all that our hired  
soldiers can do is to delay its completion .<sup>(21)</sup>*

Enamored of the Western tradition , Baraka struggled to tear himself from a love that he felt paralyzed him .In fact , paralysis is a major theme of much of his pre-black nationalist poetry .To escape it he had to act :

*Let the combination of morality  
and inhumanity  
begin (29) .*

Here Baraka brutalized himself to achieve the higher goal of black liberation .<sup>(22)</sup> He had to harden himself to the white *avant-garde* to become a black revolutionary artist . That this was not an easy task is attested to in much of the poetry in the volumes between *The Dead Lecturer* (1974) and *Black Art* (1969) ; these are poems of struggle and pain that exhibit the self-dehumanization demanded of one who seeks to destroy an old order of which he is a part . It is increasingly clear that all groups who have been oppressed by the society in which they have found themselves must go through some kind of self-brutalizing process before they can find a voice of their own . Unlike parricide , where they kill the father , here they must murder the image that the father / society has implanted within their own psyches . For instance , "Virginia Woolf confessed that to be a writer she had to begin by killing that part of herself which put a man's views before her own " . In *The Death of The Moth* (1942) , Woolf asserts :



*Had I not killed her she would have killed me . She would have plucked the heart out of my writing . For , as I found , directly I put pen to paper , you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations , morality , sex .*<sup>(23)</sup>

The part that Woolf is killing corresponds to the Victorian idealization of the angel in the house , the woman too good , too selfless , to confront the world on its own terms . Similarly , in selfless , to confront the world on its own terms .Similarly , in Baraka's play *The Slave* (1964) , the hero Walker Vessels , must kill the love of whites in himself before he can become a black revolutionary<sup>(24)</sup> .

For Baraka to escape his own guilt about the black masses he had to find another mode of art more appropriate for the black masses . In the poetry of the early period (1954-1964) we see Baraka's desperate attempt to exorcise the white world from himself . He starts this process in *The Dead Lecturer* poetry and continues it in his poetry in the mid 1960's :

*I don't love you . Who is to say what that will mean .  
I don't  
love you , expressed the train , moves , and  
uptown , days  
later  
we lookup you and breathe much easier  
I don't love you (*Black Magic Poetry* 55) .*

Here Baraka tries the magic spell of "I don't love you" to tear himself from his white friends downtown in Greenwich Village .

The subway express movement , movement away from his psychic paralysis , uptown to Harlem to his active , revolutionary black self . In "*Citizen Cain*" Baraka also explores the need to escape his old life and find a new one :

*Roi , finish this poem , someone's about to need you , Roi , dial the  
mystic number , ask for holy beads ...*

.....

*Work out your problems  
like your friends on some nice guy's couch .Get up and hit someone like  
you useta . Don't sit here trembling under the hammer . Fate like a  
season of abstract reference . Like an abstract execution where only  
ideas are shut full of holes . Don't sit there drowned in your own bad  
writing . Get up and throw that ball . Move your hips , cut , like the  
white boys , for ten more yards.....*

.....

*Ask the white man  
to your passport and quit it , little Jesus .Your time is up in this  
particular feeling . In this particular throb of meaning . Roi , baby , you  
blew the whole thing ( *Black Magic* 8) .*

The poem presents Baraka's realization that if he is going to be a black revolutionary artist he cannot be like his white friends . Unlike them , he cannot work out his problems on a psychiatrist's couch because his problems are more than personal in nature – they are political and , therefore , communal . Strongly feeling this , he can no longer escape the world by writing bad poetry – that is , poetry defined by his evolving black standards , subjective poetry not committed to political action . He must move to action and out of the world of mere abstract ideas , the bohemian world , "where only ideas are shut full of holes" . In the closing lines Baraka prepares to leave the white world and its vision of reality.

In *Preface* (1961) Baraka did not question his affiliation with the white *avant-garde* ; rather , as a racial outsider he indentified with those socially outside the American mainstream . However , by the time of *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) , he had found that the *avant-garde* was politically not extreme enough ; hence his characterization of them as liberals . In *Home* , Baraka clarified what he meant by liberal :

*The review or chronicle might be my last liberal , or not literal , act , unless quite soon there busts within me an enormous gland of misplaced and not holy unsentimental regard for the social malaise that so willingly shapes (and has for the last thirty years shaped) the flexibly official political / cultural tone of this society's complete retreat into fantasy and self-destruction . I mean I hope it is my last personal gesture of "adjustmen" in the direction of a burning building ..... So let this also serve as a loud cry for the firemen , or whatever other realists there may be in the area . Possibly the fire is real (121) .*

Baraka's definition of "liberal" action as a "non-literal act" implies that it is action manifested only in words . By this time – the mid and late 1960's – Baraka wanted poems to act directly in the world . In *"A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand"* , Baraka explains :

*We have awaited the coming of a natural  
phenomenon. Mystics and romantics ,  
knowledgeable  
workers  
of the Land .  
But non has come .  
(Repeat)  
but non has come .  
Will the machine gunners please step forward ?  
( *Black Magic* 6)*

In this poem the "people who would have to understand" are the white liberals , Baraka's old "friends" ; they would have to understand that violence would occur because the usual liberal channels had not effected any change in the condition of black people . In fact , the liberals are ironically labeled mystics and romantics to emphasize their ineffectualness in the social realm . Finally , it is clear , the only avenue left for Baraka was violence : "Let the dada machine gunner step forward !" , an issue which will be fully fulfilled in his militant / revolutionary poetry in the late sixties and early 1970's .

***From Le Roi Jones To Imamu Amiri Baraka :  
The Poetic Metamorphosis***

**The Dead Lecturer** , on one level , is a direct view of the moral and ideological impulses which are to shape Baraka's revolutionary / militant poetry in the late sixties. In an interview with Kimberly Benston , Baraka comments on **The Dead Lecturer** poetry :

*I think a lot of the poetry in the that period , like the political poem ,  
"Short Speech to My Friends" , is talking to those people and to that  
particular sensibility that was denying the idea that politics could in fact  
be incorporated into poetry (306) .*

**The Dead Lecturer** presents the agonized poems of a man writing to save his skin , or at least in it . Baraka later explained them in the preface to his third verse collection , **Black Magic Poetry** : "You notice the preoccupation with death , suicide , in the early works . Always my own caught up in the death-urge of this twisted society . The work a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness , that was just whiteness" . Indeed , the war in these poems is an internal one , the one being waged in Baraka's mind .The last three lines of the last poem is **The Dead Lecturer** books pose the question :

*When they say , " It is Roi  
who is dead ? " I wonder  
who will they mean ? (79)*

Even the poet's creative power undergoes a kind of metamorphosis – it is perverted and aborted . Western art is dying : "From Sartre , a white man , it gave / the last breath . And we beg him die / Before he is killed" .

Benston in his introduction to **Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) : A Collection of Critical Essays** , discusses the changes which characterize the development of poetic techniques in his journey from **Preface** to **The Dead Lecturer** . Benston argues :

*Baraka creates for himself a voice that does not remain with the speaker  
but is collective , striving to make the communal audience speakers too ,  
in an imaginative pattern of call-and-response . Where in the early  
poetry, in Preface , such visual notations as the open parenthesis signify  
a turning inward that reduces the poet to an isolated observer who looks  
and marks but does not touch or speak , the spacing , punctuation ,  
lineation , and other typographical devices employed in later verse guide  
the "reader's" hearing of the poem whether he or she reads it silently or  
aloud . Indeed , Baraka has striven increasingly for a printed form that  
directs the poem's oral expression ; that , in fact , negates the poem as  
written text , as memorial , and affirms it as a score for performance  
(13-14) .*

In **The Dead Lecturer** , Baraka does not only develop new poetic techniques but also he attempts to escape from the Beat-oriented poetry of **Preface** which is similar to that poetry of his bohemian friends in Greenwich Village . Baraka in **Tales** points out "and reality was the feeling I wanted , and escaped to , from a fantasy world" (93) .

The major reason Baraka sought to exorcise his commitments to the "fantasy world" of the Beat poets was that during and mid 1960's he was forced to come to terms with the reality of contemporary black protest. In his interview with Harris, Baraka declares: "But I know a lot of what had moved me to make political statements were things in the real world, including poetry that I read, but obviously the civil rights movement upsurge, the whole struggle in the South, Doctor King, SNCC, the Cuban Revolution – all those things had a great deal of influence on me in the late 50's and early 60's" (146). The historical struggle of black people forced Baraka out of his imaginative refuge and catapulted him into the realm of economics, politics, and race. In *The Dead Lecturer* Baraka declares in "Short Speech to My Friends".

*The poor have become our creators .  
The black .The thoroughly  
ignorant (29) .*

In this poem Baraka describes how the struggle of the black masses compelled him to re-create himself as a politically engaged artist who had to renounce his apolitical bohemian self. Guilt about the black masses made him rethink his ideas about poetry and the world. In "Rhythms & Blues" he says:

*My own made of conscience . And guilt , always  
the obvious connection .  
They [the whites] spread you in the sun , and  
leave you there one of a kind , who  
has no sons to tell this to (47) .*

An *avant-garde* artist Baraka felt he was a freak, a black who had cut himself off from the black tradition. Moreover, he felt guilty because he had always been a moral being. Thus, in the protest poems of *The Dead Lecturer*, Baraka seeks to liberate himself from the influence and power of his *avant-garde* friends. In order to do this he summons up the demon of blackness to "choke my [white] friends" (63) – to kill his white friends who happen to be also his literary fathers. The patricide here is of the person of the father absorbed in the son, that is, of the white images that Baraka, the young black poet has absorbed through his immersion in the dominant culture. While Baraka's poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* is about freeing the black masses from the shackles of white images, it is also about liberating himself from the images, and ideologies that he learned from his *avant-garde* friends at Greenwich Village.

Baraka radically changes – or adapts – the *avant garde* because it fails to provide a poetics flexible enough to include black language and culture. He extends *avant-garde* poetics to reflect black ethnic and political realities. In essence, ethnicity was excluded from the post World War II poem. In this respect it is obvious to argue that the language of the majority culture dominated the *avant-garde* poem the 1960's. From a minority perspective, it was written in the language of another tribe and, furthermore, was larded with that tribe's values and assumptions about reality. In short, the white *avant-garde* failed to provide a ready-made medium for Baraka's emerging ethnic experience. Baraka comments: "I was consciously striving for a post-bourgeois / Western form, even before the cultural nationalist period. Now, Creeley, Olson, et al. were themselves post-bourgeois / academic poets, and that was valuable for me. But they were also, in some ways, an extension of Western art" <sup>(25)</sup>.

More bluntly , Baraka asserts : "The Village was frustrating because these people could not do what I wanted ; they could not create a black literature . It had nothing to do with them" .

Baraka's black minority poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* in one level starts a kind of struggle with the majority culture of white America .This connects Baraka with other minority literature writers . For example , James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Points out :

*I think it would be instructive to quote the following "cultural nationalist" statement without first identifying the militant author :*  
*The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine . How different are the words home , Christ , ale , master , on his lips and mine ! I cannot peak or write these words without unrest of spirit . His language , so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech . I have not made or accepted its words . My voice holds them at bay . My soul frets in the shadow of his language (189) .*

The passage in its militant tone , illustrates the universal nature of minority artist' struggle with majority cultures . The Irish must speak English because the English are the masters . Even though the young hero , Stephen Dedalus, is fluent in English , it remains a foreign and uncomfortable tongue for him because it is the language of the colonizer of his people . For Joyce , to speak this foreign language is to betray one's own tongue , culture , and values . In light of the above , it is not surprising that Baraka often uses the Irish example when he is discussing ethnic expression . In *Anger and Beyond* : Baraka says :

*"If you think about Irish literature from Wilde on and if you think of Wilde , Shaw , Yeats , Joyce , Synge , O'Casey , Beckett – if you think about this , those people are Irish , they are not English ; and those men have been the strength of English literature for a long time" (61) .*

Frantz Fanon , too , recognized in *Black Skins , White Masks* the significance of language for a colonized people :

*To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax , to grasp the morphology of this or that language , but it means above all to assume a culture , to support the weight of a civilization ... The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is , he will become closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language . Every colonized people ... finds itself face to face with the language of the civilization nation ; that is , with the culture of the mother country (18) .*

In America black culture is a subculture , and Baraka , like Joyce's protagonist , tried to escape the influence of the ruling culture . Contending that the dominant culture controls the lives of the minority , Baraka took the idea of the black-Americans as a colonized people seriously. During the late 1950's and early 1960's , he assumed that an unmodified white *avant-garde* would provide forms and methods that would free him from the colonizer's language and ideas , but by the mid sixties he had come to realize that the *avant-garde* shared ideas and values with the colonizer and that the only way the *avant-garde* could be useful to him was if he himself took its forms of revolt and adapted them to the black situation .

Moreover, he came to see white *avant-garde* culture as dangerous to the ethnic artist . Baraka states , "The culture of the powerful is very infections for the sophisticated , and strongly addictive . To be any kind of "success" on must be fluent in this culture . Know the words of the users , the semantic rituals of power . This is a way into wherever it is you are not now , but wish , very desperately , to get into" (*Home* 169) . With his middle-class speech and background , Baraka found it easy to write white verse that exhibited white assumptions as in *Preface* but in doing so he risked the total loss of ethnic identity in the act of becoming an artist . In 1966 Baraka confessed , "Having read all of white's books , I wanted to be an authority on them . Having been taught that art was what white men did almost became one , to have a go that art was that white men did almost became one , to have a go at it (*Home* 10) .

In the mid sixties , Baraka conceived that in order to be a writer was to be white , to be cut off from ethnicity . To write was to be universal which , for him as for other minority artist , also meant to be white . Dudley Randall amusingly illustrates this theme in "Black Poet , White Critic" :

*A critic advises  
Not to write on controversial subject  
Like freedom or murder ,  
But to treat universal themes  
And timeless symbols  
Like the white unicorn .  
A white unicorn ?<sup>(26)</sup>*

For Baraka , as for Randall , the white critic's preoccupation with the universal and the timeless was irrelevant to black art . A white unicorn , a symbol of white presumption , is simply extraneous to either black life or black art . In 1965 , the *avant-garde* critic Kenneth Rexroth spoke about Baraka . He Affirmed :

*For a number of years Le Roi Jones was the most significant Negro poet to come up since Jean Toomer . His first two books contain poetry which is moving , penetrating and independent of race , except as a given factor of the poet's situation . In recent years he has succumbed to the temptation to become a professional Race Man of the most irresponsible sort . Coming as he does from middle-class suburbia , his attitude is indistinguishable from Senator Eastland's image of the Negro , and differs only in that he approves enthusiastically of this artifact . His loss to literature is more serious than any literary casualty of the Second War , a particularly tragic loss to the tradition of Daddy Grace , essentially a White Man's Negro , a kind of Tom Uncle-ism , a hot commodity for with masochists (77) .*

Rexroth saw Baraka's taking on of racist stereotypes but did not understand either his intention or his need to break away from the white world to become himself . And it is strange that Rexroth could read and approve of *Dead Lecturer* without seeing Baraka struggling to find his black self and a new black art .

Similarly , Charles Olson , Baraka's spiritual father , showed a surprising blindness to Baraka's racial imperatives in a letter to Baraka probably written in 1963:

*O.K Simply thoughts on your own position (speaking for the Negro , and being struck all over the place , both in Blues People and in the Midstream piece ["What Does Nonviolence Mean?"] , on how much you speak of as Negro has been only my own experience likewise – so I am solely persuaded that your position that the Negro solely ought to act as an end and change of what is manifestly no good is in fact any man's who wishes to have had a life in society which was more legitimate.<sup>(27)</sup>*

Olson would not allow a unique role for the black ; rather, he insisted that all good men are alike . Refuting such critics in "*Philistinism and the Negro Writer*" (1966) , Baraka argued for ethnic diversity :

*I found myself publishing the writing which I thought was the most valuable . Not the writing that reflected those tired white lives again , but necessarily those people , those white and black people who were talking about a side of America that was more valuable because it hadn't been talked about . Allen Ginsberg , who gives the Jewish memory of dissent in this culture , since this culture asks and has asked all immigrants to strip themselves asks themselves of the very things that would make their own culture valuable , so that the Italian who comes to America becomes an American and the Italian thing is lost . The Jew who gets into America is an American and the Jewishness is lost , and o now they want to break your back , too , Negro , so that when you go into that place , there will be no dissent , there will be faceless , too , and your literature will reflect some kind of tired thirst for , perhaps , luxury and comfortable ignorance (Anger and Beyond 61) .*

Baraka did not want to lose his ethnicity , did not want to become refined like the nineteenth-century black novelist Charles Chesnutt , who represents for him , washed-out middle-class black writing . Like the black dada musicians , Baraka wanted to keep his art crude and real. At first Baraka thought he had found himself in the revolutionary white *avant-garde* tradition , but in the end that tradition turned out not to be "funky" enough . He had to radically alter – even apparently reject – the white *avant-garde* tradition to find himself . Thus , the call for evolutionary action , inscribed in the protest poems of *The Dead Lecturer* , not only affirms Baraka's rejection of the *avant-garde* aesthetic and its "integrationist poetic, which aimed at bringing black literature in line with the American mainstream" (Aithal 36) but it also characterizes the poet's movement toward a black aesthetic which "demands a rethinking of both the American social system and the ways that it is typically examined in the generally critical discourses of the predominantly white academy (Piggford 74) . In this context , it is obvious that the *avant-garde* tradition from Ezra Pound to Allen Ginsberg has provided the ideas , themes , imagery and poetic techniques which enabled Baraka – more than he seems to recognize – to transcend that tradition and become a black poet . Thus by the end of *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) Le Roi Jones , the *avant-garde* poet is dead and Imamu Amiri Baraka , the ethnic black poet is born to continue his poetic development as a poet and his revolutionary struggle as a black activist .

### Chapter three Notes

1. Le Roi Jones. *The Dead Lecturer* . New York : William Morrow , 1964 ,p . 15 .
2. Baraka's interview William J. Harris , p. 144 .
3. Werner Sollors . *Amiri Baraka / Le Roi Jones : The Quest For a Populist Modernism* , p . 83 .
4. C. Lynn Munro ."Le Roi Jones : A Man in Transition".
5. William J. Harris . *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka :The Jazz Aesthetic* , p. 64 .
6. Henry C. Lacey . *To Raise , Destroy and Create : The Poetry , Drama and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones)*, p . 46 .
7. Houston A. Baker. "These Are Songs If You Have The Music : An Essay on Imamu Baraka" . *Minority Voices I* (1977) , p. 10 .
8. Houston A. Baker , p . 11.
9. Baraka . "Poetry and Karma" in *Raise Race Rays Raze : Essays Since 1965* . New York : Random House , 1971, p. 23 .
10. Edward Margolis ."Prospects : Le Roi Jones" : *Native Sons* . Philadelphia : J.B. Lippincott Company , 1968 ,p . 195 .
11. Quoted in William C. Fischer ."the Pre-revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka" *Massachusetts Review* 14 (1973) , p . 283 .
12. Werner Sollors . p . 86 .
13. Quoted in Werner Sollors , p . 88 .
14. William Carlos Williams . *Paterson* . New York : New Directions , 1948 . Author's note p . (I) .
15. Le Roi Jones . *The Dead Lecturer* , the poet's note , p . 18 .
16. Edgar Rosenberg. *From Shylock To Svengali : Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* . Stanford : Stanford Univ . Press , 1960 , p . 261. In George du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894) , the English / Irish heroine is hypnotized by the demonic Austrian Jew , Svengali .Trilby becomes a singer but she remains Svengali instrument all the time . the "Trilby Intrigue" in *The Dead Lecturer* , p . 62 , is an appropriate popular pattern for the black poet who tries to extricate himself from white hip notization .
17. Eldridge Cleaver . *Soul on Ice* . New York : Rampart Books , 1968 , p . 15 .
18. Donald Bogle . *Toms , Coons , Mulattoes , Mammies and Bucks : An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* . New York : Bantam , 1974 , p . 44 . The Bronze Buckaroons or Herbert Jeffrey and Artie Young who appear , as singing black cowboys , in a 1938 Western , which imitated "the expected Tex Ritter-Gene Autry heroics and exploits" (Bogle 152). In *Home* , Baraka articulates this strategy of inversion by which the underdog of popular culture becomes the hero .
19. Janheinz Jahn .*Muntu : The New African Culture* . New York : Grove press , 1961 , p . 4 . According to Jahn , the name Damballah "is compounded from Dan (snake) or "Dangle" , the cult of the snake in heaven , that is the rainbow , and "Allada" , the name of that kingdom in South Dahomey from which came the dynasty of Abomey, founders of the kingdom of Dahomey ...Damballah is identified with St. Peter or St. Patrick . His symbols are the snake and the egg .
20. Newbell Nils Puckett . *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. New York : Dover , 1969 , p . 178 .



21. Jean-Paul Sartre. "Introduction". **The Wretched of the Earth**. Frantz Fanon . New York : Grove press , **1966** , p . **21** .
22. Werner Sollors , p . **198** . Sollors discusses Baraka's anti-semitism saying that "Baraka's anti-semitism was an intensely personal exorcism of his own past , and his anti-semetic references included his former Jewish wife and literary milieu in New York" (**199**).
23. Virginia Woolf . **The Death of the Moth and Other Essays** New York : Harcourt , Brace Jovanovich , **1970** , p. **238**.
24. Le Roi Jones . **Dutchman and the Slave** . New York : William Morrow , **1964** , p . **66** .
25. Kimberly W. Benston's interview with Baraka. "Amiri Baraka : An Interview" . **Boundary** **26** (**1978**) , p . **308** .
26. Dudley Randall , ed . **The Black Poets** . New York : Bantam Books , **1971** , p . **33** .
27. Olson to Baraka , n. d.(Simon Frazer University press) .

## Conclusion

Roland Lee Reed, in his comment on Baraka's development, argues that the poet "seems to have moved through stages of black self-awareness from an essentially Westernized world view to militancy against blacks and white enemies, to a committed programming of socio-political advancement of black people"<sup>(1)</sup>. It is true that Baraka has changed his aesthetic and ideological commitments many times, first as an *avant-garde* "essentially Westernized" writer (1954-1964), then as a black, militant with tendencies "against blacks and white enemies" (1965-1975) and finally as a revolutionary socialist committed to the "socio-political advancement of black people". Within this context, the first chapter of this critical book, which is a comprehensive review of Baraka's autobiography and literary essays, traces the different stages of the poet's development from the fifties up to the late eighties and provides a significant background for his poetic career as a whole. The following chapters, however, are mainly concerned with Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry. Thus, Baraka's early anthologies, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and *The Dead Lecturer*, which constitute the first phase of his poetic development, are critically explored in order to reveal the poet's artistic contributions and place him in his appropriate position as one of the most significant poets in the history of modern American poetry.

As a whole, the critical argument in the book, affirms, through evidences, that Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry is not only an extension or an inversion of the poetic traditions of the contemporary / *avant-garde* American poets, but it is also a precedent for Baraka's ethnic / militant poetry in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry is characterized by the emergence of some patterns of ethnic motifs which occur in different shapes and reflect the development of the poet's ethnic identity and the growing of his racial consciousness at such an early period of his career as a poet. Baraka's ethnic motifs, which appear in the form of scattered allusions and gestures in *Preface*, grow progressively and significantly in *The Dead Lecturer* poetry which, in its turn, paves the way for Baraka's revolutionary/militant phase of the Black Arts Movement and his new life of political adventures, brutal beatings, jail sentences and revolutionary activities in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Nevertheless, the critical argument of the book emphasizes Baraka's indebtedness to the white *avant-garde* poets in the 1950's who influenced him particularly in the poetry of *Preface*. On one level, *Preface* in this book is explored as an expression of the pathos and enervation of a generation dissatisfied by utilitarianism and horrified by the possibility of mass destruction in the cold war era. From an *avant-garde* perspective, the poetry of *Preface*, as this book indicates, is characterized by a sense of withdrawal from the external world into a state of egocentricity and solipsism which inevitably leads the poet to concentrate on the theme of suicide / death which the title of the volume provokes. In this sense, the suicide / death motif in *Preface* becomes a basic metaphor which reveals the influence of the white American *avant-garde* poets on Baraka and signifies the moral decay and the cultural wasteland of the American society as well. In *Preface*, the poet also rejects the material values of modern American culture and the moral deterioration of the American society. Moreover, Baraka's major speaker, in the poems of *Preface*, suffers from a sense of alienation and despair because he / she lives in a materialistically oriented society. The speaker is always in a state of moral / virtual paralysis, tormented by his miserable life in an alien society.

However, the poetry of Preface, though profoundly influenced by the white *avant-garde* traditions in the 1950's and early 1960's is also considered as a background or a precedent for Baraka's ethno-political poetry in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In this context, Baraka's rejection of the white American culture and his denunciation of its moral codes can be taken as a symbol of his growing ethnicity at that time of his poetic career. The poet's ethnic identity which appears in Preface in terms of poetic allusions and as an undercurrent of opposition to the mainstream American culture reaches a climax in the ethnic / violent poems of The Dead Lecturer. In Preface, Baraka criticizes the myths of the American culture dismissing them as symbols of racism, evil corruption, false heroism and violence. Baraka also rejects the popular heroes of white America denouncing them as representatives of deception and racial corruption. The poet, as well, attacks the middle class Negroes and the Jewish minority for their participation in the cultural myths of white America. All these are indications of Baraka's growing consciousness as an ethnic / black poet. Baraka also manipulates the blues lyrics and tones, as a poetic technique in the poems associated with the popular culture figures and the comic-strip heroes of the American television / radio drama. The appropriation of the blues lyrics and tones in Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry, in Preface, are also indications of his growing consciousness as a black poet in the process of evolution.

Nevertheless, the ethnic motifs in Preface are completely different from their counterparts in Baraka's militant poetry in the late 1960's, in the sense that the *avant-garde* poetry of Baraka depicts black ethnicity within rather than in opposition to the idea of the American culture as a whole. In other words, Baraka's ethnicity, in this context, is a part of the *avant-garde* rejection of particular aspects of the American culture. In spite of rejecting to find an alternative to the *avant-garde* ethnics and aesthetics, Baraka, in Preface, still considers himself as a part of the mainstream American culture. Moreover, Baraka's rejection of Eliot's moral order, his search for an alternative to the white moral code represented by the popular culture heroes and his creation of new black heroes, in Preface, should not be taken as attempts to establish a racial ethnic or express a separatist black aesthetic similar to the one which characterizes his revolutionary and ethno-political poetry in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In spite of indicating his inevitable emergence as an ethnic poet, Baraka's poetry at this stage, is still an expression of the tendencies of a black poet within the white oriented *avant-garde* movement. For example, Baraka, in Preface, inverts Eliot's religious myths and moral order in an attempt to express himself as a black poet. Baraka's inversion of Eliot's religious vision is enhanced by his rejection of the traditional Western / Christian idealism to which Eliot appeals. Baraka does not offer salvation in religious terms as Eliot does in his poetry but he seeks salvation in the blues traditions, black folklore and rituals. All these elements indicate the inevitable emergence of Baraka as an ethnic black poet.

In The Dead Lecturer, Baraka's ethnic identity as a black poet is reflected in his struggle to liberate himself from the poetic standards advocated by the white *avant-garde* poets. Thus, Baraka attempts to purge himself from the feelings of nostalgia, remorse and egocentricity which characterize, to some extent, the poetry of his first volume, Preface. Throughout The Dead Lecturer, Baraka does not only invert the poetic criteria of contemporary / *avant-garde* poets in America, but he also attempts to develop new techniques and forms which would suit his new role as an emerging black poet. In other words, Baraka struggles to seek as alternative to "the fantasy world" of the white *avant-garde* poets.

The critical argument of the book illustrates that Baraka, in The Dead Lecturer, becomes aware of his ethnic roots. His Dead Lecturer poetry reveals an attempt to liberate

himself from the *avant-garde* aesthetics which fail to provide flexible poetics to include the black experience and liberate the black people as well from the shackles of white racism . In *The Dead Lecturer* poetry , and due to the racial turmoil at that time , Baraka reveals a feelings of guilt toward the black masses . The racial situation in America ; during the sixties , forced Baraka to come to terms with the reality of contemporary white racism and the inevitability of black struggle . His ethnic poems in *The Dead Lecturer* characterize the beginning of the poet's shift from the non-ethnic white aesthetic of the *avant-garde* poetry to the ethno-political poetry of the mid-sixties when Baraka started to see his poetry as a weapon aiming at social / political change .

Moreover , the critical argument of the book illustrates that Baraka's ethnic-oriented poems in *The Dead Lecturer* reveal the beginning of the poet's formulation of a new theory of art , an antithesis of the *avant-garde* literary theory which Baraka advocates in the beginning of his career as a Writer . In "*How You Sound ?*" , Baraka expresses the egocentric *avant-garde* theory which ignores society and politics , rejects the socio-political function of poetry and affirms that writing should be an "honest" expression of its author or as Baraka says : "My poetry is whatever I think I am ... I can be anything I can" . In *The Dead Lecturer* , particularly in the ethnic poems Baraka begins to reject the *avant-garde* literary theory and formulates a theory of art which emphasizes the social / political function of poetry . Thus , the functional , socially committed poetry of *The Dead Lecturer* which is motivated by Baraka's visit to Cuba and the racial situation in the 1960's , enables him to arrive at his new theory of a socially committed poetry which reaches its climax in the militant poetry of the late 1960's and early 1970's . Moreover , in his attempt to find an alternative to the *avant-garde* poetic theory , Baraka incorporates elements of black dialect and music into his poems . He also manipulates aspects of the oral and ritualistic black culture . For example , Baraka uses African deities and gods that are inspired by black folklore , mythology and rituals .

The critical argument of the book also illustrates that Baraka's growing identity as an ethnic black poet is enhanced in *The Dead Lecturer* through his rejection of black stereotypes which are created by the white imagination and become an integral part of the racial memory of America . Baraka inverts these black images which depict blacks as submissive and passive victims turning them into heroes . Baraka also inverts white poetic forms in order to put his own purposes . For example , Baraka inverts Yeats' poetic vision expressed in the "*Crazy Jane*" series to suit his black intentions . In this context , Baraka fashions five poems around "Crow Jane" , a heroine of several blues ballads who is the classic temptress . Like Lula , the whit protagonist in Baraka's play *Dutchman* who represents American corruption , deception , racism and violence , Crow Jane becomes a symbol of America seducing "young gigolo's / of the 3<sup>rd</sup> estate" into believing that she has great wealth to offer them . The poet , once taken in by her himself , seeks to warn others of her evil : "Crow Jane in High Society looks for openings / where she can lay all / this greasy talk / on somebody . Me , once , now / I am her teller" (*The Dead Lecturer* 51) . The fact that Baraka at this stage of his development considers himself the bard or "teller" of American history is probably a clear evidence that Baraka , in spite of his growing identity as a black poet , still considers himself as an American citizen not a separatist black poet .

The critical argument of this book also traces the emergence of violence in Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry , particularly in *The Dead Lecturer* , a book which is considered as a precedent for Baraka's militant poetry in the late 1960's and early 1970's . In *The Dead Lecturer* Baraka's violence is used against white racism and groups such as the middle class

Negroes and the Jews who participate in maintaining the status quo and ignore white racial policies and victimization of blacks . Baraka's violence does not appear in the form of a gradual process in his *avant-garde* poetry , but it suddenly erupts as a volcano at the end of *The Dead Lecturer* in his famous poem sequence "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" .

Unlike "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" the other ethnic poems in *The Dead Lecturer* which reveal Baraka's commitment to blackness are written in a non-violence tone . Even when Baraka speaks about the history of slavery he does not do this in a violent way . Instead , the history of slavery in America is invoked in lyrical tones :

*The story is along one . Why  
I am here like this . Why you  
should listen , now , so late , and  
weary at the night . Its  
heavy rain  
pushing  
the grass flat (28) .*

Moreover , when Baraka remembers his ancestors , he does not reveal any sense of anger or violent but he says : "that force is lost / which shaped me , spent / in its image , battered , an old brown thing / swept off the streets / where it sucked its / gentle living" (75) . But due to the increasing violence of white racism against blacks, Baraka begins to reveal his ethnic identity which appears in the "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" poems . Baraka's manipulation of dada violence in this poem sequence affirms his impatience with America's racial policies in the 1960's . Thus , he starts to reject the passive resistance policy of Martin Luther King as a means of social change . He also becomes convinced that white racism cannot be approached through speeches , Church sermons , moral suasion or peaceful demonstrations . Equally , Baraka starts to maintain that poetry should be used as a substitute for literal violence . In other words , poetry should be used as a weapon of social change , equality and freedom . Poems , according to Baraka , should be like "fists" , "wrestlers" , "daggers" and "guns". In the "*Black Dada Nihilismus*" poems , Baraka speaks longingly of "A cult of death / need of the simple striking arm under / the street-lamp ... come up , black dada nihilismus . Rape the white girls" (63) . What animates the kingdoms of the West , according to Baraka, is "money , God , power / a moral code , so cruel/ it destroyed Byzantium ..." Only "the murders we intend / against his lost white children" , Baraka asserts , will ever make the black man sane . The new Black heroes here are "Tambo , Willie Best , Duboi ....etc" . In this poem , Baraka seems to warn the white society of the dangers of maintaining racism and oppression against blacks . White racism will inevitably lead to the "craziness" of "black madness" and the violence of racial anarchists . The poem , on one level , is certainly a purgative outburst of an agony of fury and frustration , the unleashing of a dark and brutal energy .

Nevertheless , the poem , on another level , is more than mere revenge fantasies and it goes beyond mere nihilism . For example , the language of fragments , violence and exasperation registers a despair of black and human society . In the poem , Baraka seems to be in the process of exorcising his white past . He also searches the darkness of a terrible freedom for a new principle of order , a new black God and a more humane moral code which is the antithesis of the cruel moral code of the white West <sup>(2)</sup> . Moreover , the poem , on the technical level , characterizes Baraka's search for a style which could give poetic shape to a seething mass of sensations , of randomness and ugliness .

The "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" poem sequence is also an attack on Western art and the limited aesthetics of its excessive rationalism. Here, Baraka blends his ethnic revolt with the theme of aesthetic rebellion "the artistic anarchy of the dadaists" in order to emphasize that the white racial system has actually been the direct cause of psychic and social disorder. Within this context, the violence of Baraka's poem becomes a kind of resistance to racial injustice. Furthermore, by merging / blending the ethnic and aesthetic revolt, Baraka in "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" reveals an evolutionary aesthetic and his poetry becomes an act of rebellion against racial or social systems and limited notions of artistic creativity represented by the Western *avant-garde* movement. Since Baraka's ethnic revolt is the political counterpart of the dadaist revolt in art, both the nihilism of ethnic violence and the dadaist revolt in art, both the nihilism of ethnic violence and the dadaist outrage become, on one level, a creative process. These elements reveal the development of strong racial motifs in ***The Dead Lecturer*** which become a touchstone of the distance Baraka traveled since his poetry in ***Preface***, his first volume of poetry. The critical argument of the book equally refers to Baraka's development of the black music aesthetic of inversion. He turns the disintegrating absurdity of the white dominating culture, the dada strain of its life and art into a positive black art.

Baraka also develops the black scream as the heart of his revolutionary aesthetics and a symbol of the vengeful ethnic violence. In Baraka's poetry, the black scream and the collective memory of heroic black figures such as Tambo and Duboi provide new inspiration for his poetic voice. The ultimate black dada will be this collective voice, not the strain of nihilism represented by the white dada. In this context, Baraka in "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" rejects the white moral order of Eliot. He sees the white Western history, from a specific perspective, in terms of the sins committed in the name of Christ. The poem sequence calls for a moral code which, unlike the white / Western code, does not destroy empires or civilization. The poem sequence is not only a bitter indictment of Western civilization whose moral code, according to Baraka, has been so cruel as to destroy whole empires but it is also an attack against the Jews who play a major role in sustaining the brutal moral code of the West. Baraka's anti-semitic attitude which occurs when he refers to the "ugly silent deaths of Jews under / the surgeon's knife. To awaken on/ 69<sup>th</sup> street with money and a hip / nose" (62) is considered, by Werner Sollors, as an indication of Baraka's exorcism of his past including his marriage from the white / Jewish lady Hettie Chon.

Taken from a technical perspective the "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" poem sequence as well as all the other poems in ***Preface To a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*** and ***The Dead Lecturer*** affirm that Baraka is a poet superior talents who possess the ability to suggest a multiplicity of meanings in a subtle way.<sup>(3)</sup> In ***Soul On Ice***, Eldridge Cleaver, in his comment on Baraka's *avant-garde* poetry, argues that he and many other blacks "have lived these lines" and that Baraka in these poems, particularly the ethnic oriented pieces, is expressing perfectly the facts of black life in the sixties or in Cleaver's own words "the funky facts of life" (41). Moreover, the "***Black Dada Nihilismus***" poem sequence as it ends with a call for revenge – or what black critics call justice – against all forms of white racism becomes a poem of finality. It characterizes a point of departure in Baraka's poetic career and personal life. This is the poem which turns Le Roi Jones into Imamu Amiri Baraka and turns the white *avant-garde* oriented poet into ethnic black poet of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

## **Conclusion**

### **Notes**

1. Roland Lee Reed . *"From and Meaning in Some Plays By Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones)"* . Unpublished Dissertation : The University of Nebraska , **1972** .
2. Henry C. Lacey , **p. 59** .
3. S. M. Gohar . *"Le Roi Jones' Dutchman and The Black Theatre of Resistance"* , **p.94** .

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" Cubs Libre " .  
" Hunting is Not Those Heads on The Wall " .  
" Last Days of the American Empire " .  
" Letter to Jules Feiffer " .



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- " State / Meant " .
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