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The Paradox of Experience: Black Art and Black Idiom in the Work of Amiri Baraka

One of the perplexing ironies of recent theoretical work on ethnic writing and the ethnic self in Afro-American literature is that work's tendency to exclude any serious discussion of the writer who, perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, sought an art form that would express the radical, singular *ethnicity* of African American existence. Amiri Baraka, whose explorations and experiments as an avant-garde poet span more than three decades, had helped to establish the problematic of African American ethnicity and of a radical black subjectivity in his role as the organizer and leader of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and co-founder of the idea of a black aesthetic. This benign neglect, which usually confines itself to a few obligatory remarks on Baraka's lasting influence, is all the more perplexing when we consider that several new volumes of his work have been published in the last decade.¹

The reasons for the present neglect are several. Undoubtedly, Baraka's outspoken and uncompromising political commitment to black revolution from his earlier days as a cultural nationalist to his present affiliations with Third World Marxism renders him less than palatable to the now-institutionalized study of ethnic literature. However, political stance alone does not deny such a writer admission to the new canon. Of a more present concern are certain critiques, labeled as "postmodern," leveled against the Idea of "blackness" as a narrow metaphysical form of essentialism, which is said to uphold the political and aesthetic principles of the Black Power Movement and its artistic counterpart, the Black Arts Movement. Houston Baker serves as a prime example of this. Although he claims a lasting spiritual kinship based on his own involvement during the decade of the 1960s, in retrospect he finds BAM unable to properly theorize the culturally specific aspects of Afro-American literature and culture because the Movement's artistic aims rested on the assumption that there exist unique aspects of African American creative expression in the form of music and performance, aspects that "lay closest to the verifiable emotional referents and experiential categories of African American culture." Such an assumption led the members of BAM, including Baraka, to construct an aesthetic theory that was based on "cultural holism," which not only relies heavily on the Herderian and Romantic idea of the *Volk*, but implies an "impressionistic chauvinism" that in the final analysis represents a modified form of intuition; that is, a direct and immediate vision of the essence of *blackness*. Commenting upon Stephen Henderson's theory of black poetry, Baker finds that his idea of a unique and separate Black Aesthetic simply inverts the humanist principles of an integrationist poetics and then constructs an

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ontology of blackness that leads to the closure of meaning and, with it, the closure of culture: "For it is, finally, *only* the black imagination that can experience blackness, in poetry or in life" (Baker 74, 81).

Despite the validity of Baker's critique, what is disturbing about his treatment is the ease with which the BAM and Baraka are classified as an important though underdeveloped stage in the process of creating a black ethnic writing—a process that has reached fruition, we are led to believe, in recent postmodern fiction. Moreover, his and other "postmodern" critiques have a tendency to pass over certain radical artistic possibilities that Baraka had explored with an uncommon rigor, possibilities that have remained unthought and which may, ironically enough, represent a far more radical attempt to articulate a heterogeneous black self than more recent writing that favors the narrative deconstruction and reconstruction of identity in an often autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical style.²

This essay proposes to reexamine the central task of Amiri Baraka's poetry within both the period of the Black Arts Movement and beyond. This reexamination is necessary because Baraka had begun to explore the possibility for a *singular* and uncanny idea of African American ethnicity that could only be adequately expressed outside of the sociological and cultural-anthropological constructions of origin and identity. This singular, black ethnicity he describes as a boundary between two impossible cultural-ethical positions:

The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man's culture, yet he came to understand that culture as well as the white man. . . . It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, sub-cultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no-man's land that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America—

from that no-man's land outside the mainstream. A no-man's land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray. ("Myth" 114)

Neither inside nor outside, the African American encounters his authentic self on a boundary which is never a point or position of identity but an "in-between" which can only be conceptualized as a *movement* between two cultural limits, a movement that suspends both, and which displaces the possibility of establishing a self-identity by recourse to a founding myth—where, in short, the traditional notion of the ethnic as originary becomes impossible. Moreover, this "in-between" only comes to life aesthetically rather than as a representation, through a music whose beauty does not simply consist in mixing the sounds of two traditions, but in the disappropriation or *transgression* of each. What I propose to show is how Baraka's formulation of this impossible space of ethnicity at an early stage of his writing career—impossible *as* a space or place from which to define oneself—forces us to rethink prevailing notions of the relation between *ethnicity* and *marginality*: Not only is the opposition between the margin and the center unsuitable as a way of understanding Baraka's explorations, but he displaces its binary logic, a logic which continues to entrap certain postmodern ethnic theories in a traditional and all-too-Western ethics of Self-creation through Self-representation.

The ethics and ethnicity of the "no-man's land" repeat in a profound and searching way the basic condition of African American existence articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois as "double-consciousness." But unlike Du Bois, who sought to solve the problem by envisioning a dialectical *Aufhebung* of a divided self into the actual and concrete self-consciousness of universal humanity, Baraka finds this gray-stained landscape one that cannot be reconciled according to a dialectic that

raises to a higher truth the alienated consciousness, whereby the African-American is forced to see him/herself through the eyes of the other. Baraka's radical interrogation of the ethnic must be read through Du Bois's founding idea, but what Baraka encounters is the beauty of a music—a non-presentable trace that unworks the false reconciliation implicit in the very term *African American*—whose poetic Saying has defined his endeavors ever since.

In recent studies of Baraka's work, one of the few critics to undertake a sustained revaluation of the nature and function of ethnic writing has been William J. Harris.³ In his book *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*, Harris advances the provocative argument that Baraka liberated himself from the influence of the white avant-garde by creating a method of writing that both destroyed and transformed the aesthetic basis of that tradition, radical though it was, into a properly black idiom. Harris's argument constitutes an effective rejoinder to those critics who commonly assert that Baraka lost his initial brilliance and creative energy in his later "Marxist" phase. Drawing upon the rhetorical reading strategies of Henry Louis Gates, Harris identifies a distinct method in Baraka's work beginning with certain poems in *The Dead Lecturer* and steadily developing through *Black Magic Poetry* until it reaches its completion in improvisational poems such as *In the Tradition* and *Wise, Why's Y's*, a method that first inverts and parodies existing tropes, symbols, and poetic forms and then transforms them into a new aesthetic construction which he calls the "Jazz Aesthetic." This new aesthetic does not consist of a separate and separatist, essentially black sensibility; on the contrary, Harris insists that what is "properly" black is the linguistic structure of inversion, a process of creative destruction which he claims has operated in black value systems for

quite a long time—and the model for this process comes from the most indigenous of all the black arts, namely, music, and jazz in particular. Baraka's accomplishment, we are told, was to merge improvisational techniques with poetic composition so as to liberate words from their conventional significations—a symptom of the Western penchant for abstraction which freezes the moment and lifts the concrete thing into the bloodless realm of ideas—and to open language toward its true essence in the form of a creative play of the Word itself, a play of rhythm and harmony, association and combination from which "sense" first emerges. However improvisation is not a technique in the restricted sense of a formal method, but is rather an aesthetic and an ethic at the same time; the improvisational parody of motifs from the dominant Western tradition becomes a way of voiding them of their content in order to infuse them with values from a different world view, but this transmutation can *only* be accomplished through the process of inversion.

More specifically, Harris maintains that, through inversion, Baraka's poetics restructures black stereotypes and revalues these images, discovering a value independent of their original racist context. This inversion serves the further purpose of stripping white avant-garde poetry of its "ornateness," which for Baraka testifies to the fact that such poetry has become abstract, purely aesthetic, and therefore severed from life. Then as a final step, jazzification gives a new, black ornateness to his poetry, but this new style surpasses the abstract character of his forbears because jazz began as and has remained a communal practice. Harris's theory of the jazz aesthetic produces an overall interpretation of Baraka's poetic achievement that is highly impressive but equally problematic: "Through jazzification—the adaptation of jazz techniques and ideas to poetic forms—and avant-garde transformation—the adaptation of

avant-garde techniques and ideologies to black poetic forms and historical circumstances—Baraka has almost single-handedly created a new kind of American poem” (99).

There is more than ample evidence to support Harris’s claim. As a combination of popular black idiom with the American idiom of

William Carlos Williams, of signifyin’ black history with the epic impulse of Charles Olson’s

Maximus, written in the form of a jazz score so as not to establish a text but to introduce a set of motifs for oral improvisation, Baraka’s poetry revalues as it repeats, and re-forms as it deforms. Nevertheless, Harris runs afoul of his own attempt to keep the essentialist conception of ethnic writing at a distance. Comparing Baraka’s poetic idiom with that of his avant-garde predecessor he writes that William Carlos “Williams wrote American; Baraka wrote Afro-American. Consequently, for Baraka, the white avant-garde, in particular Williams, pointed a circuitous route back to blackness, back to *self*, back to a sense of individual and racial *identity*” (Harris 58; italics mine). This comparison between Williams’s famous explorations into an “American idiom” and Baraka’s “Black idiom” illuminates a formative influence while at the same time suggesting a radical break. Of present concern, however, is Harris’s choice of an odyssean rhetoric of “back of blackness” which, circuitous though it may be, indicates that he still believes in an Idea whose originary status determines the movement of return: From an initial existential state of alienation, the aesthetic of jazzification re-appropriates the estranged but enduring origin and raises it to a higher level of self-conscious art, changing the function of “black” from a linguistic destructor that negates the content of Western art to a world view that affirms a value system and an identity that was *always already there*. Rather than overcoming the metaphys-

Baraka conceptualizes Black selfhood as a transgression.

ical understanding of ethnicity as identity, Harris has reaffirmed it, seemingly unaware that his own elucidation of Baraka’s poetics of jazzification parodies any such gesture toward establishing a black self that is at one and the same time self-conscious, self-determining, and communal. Consequently,

Harris ends up sacrificing his most interesting insight—that “blackness” as a trope dismantles not only the lifeless concepts of

Western aesthetics and ethics but also the search for ultimate origins, and this constitutes its strength. “Blackness” once again results from the abstraction of a process or movement into an Idea, and once again becomes an ideology.

What is missing from Harris’s theory of jazzification is a further, necessary step that develops the implications of parody and improvisation as ways of suspending not only Western meaning, but the fundamental gesture of Western metaphysics that upholds it—the quest to uncover original and originary presence. If, as Harris maintains, destructive inversion voids the content of inherited relations between signifier and signified, it also calls into question the very idea of meaning itself—that there may be no *itself* of meaning, or “meaning of meaning” that transcends the text. Accordingly, neither *blackness* nor *whiteness* nor *African* nor *Western* can serve as a founding idea for a cultural and/or racial ideology.

However, it remains to be seen how we can extend Harris’s theory on the basis of Baraka’s own work. Fortunately, a recent article on the music of John Coltrane and the new black aesthetic by Kimberly Benston indicates such a possibility. Taking his cue from Baraka’s remarkable appraisal of the late jazz-master, Benston argues that the new black aesthetic overturns any attempt to make Blackness into a fixed signifier, thus overturning the metaphysical structure of meaning, insofar as it “begins by a

radical 'un-learning' of existent modes" of Euro-American culture and initiates the search for a heterogeneous grammar, a "post-Western form" of expression ("Late Coltrane" 415). Benston effectively employs Nietzsche's idea of the Dionysian in order to mark a contrast between the life-affirming will of the new black aesthetic, which speaks to the dynamism of Becoming, and the prejudices of Western art, which remain fixed on Being as permanence, Being as *Idea*. Immersed into the destructive-creative stream, the black artist strives for a "new syntax of desire," and it is no mistake, he argues, that the strongest impetus has come from music, and in particular the innovations in recent, post-bebop jazz. Benston's position represents a considerable contribution because he succeeds in showing that black music had assumed the lead in the quest for a post-Western syntax, and how BAM in general (and here he has Baraka very much in mind) had adopted as its guiding principle the belief that music is both the "ultimate lexicon" and essence of language.

When Benston transplants Nietzsche's ideas onto the scene of the new black aesthetic, his interpretation yields fruitful results. The "new syntax of desire" sought by the black artist is and can only be a musical one. That is to say, black poetry and black art of whatever medium necessarily tend toward music, for here the narcissism of the ego, the isolated individual artist is overcome in favor of an art that immediately unites its members into an essential—that is, *ecstatic*—community. Moreover, it would be an art community that fashions itself according to no fixed idea, no identifiable origin, and no preexisting identity as such. The new black aesthetic, that collective Dionysian force of creative destruction and destructive creation, would be abysally founded upon its own refusal to fix life into the strict limits of the secure and the stable, as Western thought and Western art have done. Instead, the musician, poet/musician,

painter/musician, and sculptor/musician participate together in an effort to make possible a black culture through the perpetual act of un-limiting or "il-limiting" fixed thoughts and forms, of letting language regain its essential fluidity as it passes over into music.

However, this explanation of a "post-Western" syntax also contains certain difficulties. True, the new black aesthetic moves away from the kind of logocentrism that searches for ultimate meanings; nonetheless, Benston fails to recognize how through Nietzsche, and specifically *The Birth of Tragedy*, that logic is both displaced and repeated in the form of a *melocentric* theory of language. If Benston is right, then the basis of the new black arts must also hold fast to those twin pillars of Western thinking, the value of truth and the value of origin.⁴

Moreover, if the supremacy of music offers black artists an opportunity to free themselves from Western forms and idioms of expression, and if black language is said to "pass into music," how can this perspective be distinguished from that original and originary melopoiesis prefigured by Nietzsche, who in fact advocates this "spirit of music" as the authentic form of Western art—i.e., of Greek tragedy? Melocentrism would thus be the hidden history of Western art and life, the repressed truth that forever haunts Socratic man, who can never quite do away with the tragic feeling he has fought so hard to banish. The clearest statement of the apriority of music, its originary truth occurs in Nietzsche's discussion of the lyric poet where he claims that "music itself in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept, but merely *endures* them as accompaniments." Thus, language itself is found lacking, since it symbolizes phenomena, whereas music symbolizes the "primordial contradiction and primordial pain at the heart of the primal unity" (Nietzsche 55). As a consequence, Nietzsche creates a hierarchy of truth with music at the apex, a truth that has to be rescued

and brought to light from out of the depths of history of the West. Moreover, the basis of the Apollonian-Dionysian opposition belongs squarely within the modern philosophy of the Subject. Dionysian ecstasy, however original it may be, and precisely *because* Nietzsche describes it as the more original art impulse, cannot be thought without the idea of the individual knowing subject, and thus reconfirms its legitimacy with all of the ontological, ethical, and political trappings.

So too does the new black aesthetic create a hierarchy of the truth of art and its proximity to Being. What is remarkable here is how Benston reinscribes Black Art back into Western art at the very point where it seems to have gained its independence. Black Art thus becomes the name for the true and authentic Western art, and since later civilizations moved steadily away from that authenticity, the history of the West appears as the history of an error. Thus, both Kimberly Benston and William J. Harris converge in the view that, as his artistic vision evolved, Baraka sought and indeed may have succeeded in creating an Orphic poetry that bridges the gap between a repressed origin and a present vision so as to create a melopoiesis that is at the same time a mythopoiesis, a mythopoiesis that at the same time speaks directly and in unadorned language to reality: "By restructuring white stereotypes, Baraka is trying to expose the hidden reality of black self-images and to create new images—postwhite—no longer dependent on white imagery and capable of communicating black realities without a mask" (Harris 93). The "postwhite" is, of course, equally the "prewhite," a language that speaks of and to reality not as representation, but as originally creative, essential language, *Music*.

In sum, what is troubling about Harris's notion of the jazz aesthetic and Benston's Orphic/Dionysian interpretation of the new black aesthetic is that both insist on the need to go beyond Western art, culture, and thought to

some "post-" condition. In so doing, they have not only stabilized the Western as a referent to which they remain ultimately bound, but have also assumed that the "Western" can be made into an object of study, its boundaries defined, and its limits transcended. On the contrary, wherever the ends, limits, borders, margins, and overcomings of Western culture are declared for the sake of creating a space for a marginalized or repressed culture is precisely the point where the dialectic of identity reappears, which requires the *present absence of the origin*. In this repetition of Western metaphysics, Black Art seeks the radical newness of the post-Western by redoubling the search for a more original origin, one that was present before the latecomers from Athens and their progeny arrived on the scene to usurp the stage.

The point then is to consider whether there is a way to re-think Baraka's Dionysian "dada act" of poetic destruction and his increasing move toward an ethnopoetics other than as a post-Western poetics of "back to blackness." My contention is that, in his description of Afro-American ethos as a "no-man's land," the black country so essential to white America that it stains it an "ominous gray," Baraka has revealed the condition for the creation of his and perhaps of *any* black art.

The history of Baraka's poetic production can be seen as the alternating push and pull of this central ambiguity, which at times may be thrust into the background in favor of a specific stance, be it nationalist or Marxist, but recurs as his real starting point, the "original" condition of in-betweenness. Beginning from the thought of this suspended existence, Baraka can re-pose the question of place in all its ambiguity as, "The place, and place / meant of / black people." This doubled place/me(a)nt, where the African American has been placed, as well as the place he projects, is answered almost immediately in the announce-

ment of the grand tradition of the poet as the one whose task it is to found the dwelling place of one's people, to let mortals appear together with the divine and with nature: "Can you sing / yourself, your life, your place / on the warm planet earth" ("Return of the Native," *Transbluesency* 140). This gesture, more Pindaric than Orphic, and mediated through the poetics of Eliot and Williams, takes on a very special character in Baraka's poetic thought, because he cannot forget that it is to the grayness, the no-man's land that the black man in America is consigned. However, if this condition makes the African American homeless, it also renders America the same. As a "pure product of America" the presence of the African American undoes the purification rituals enacted in the ideologies of racial superiority or its complement, homogenizing pluralism. Denied the possibility of completing its myth, America is released to a perpetual wandering. America is thus revealed as an ideological construct—or, better, an *invented* America—that substitutes fantasy after fantasy to hide from the fact of its own dispersal. And, of course, Afro-American literature suffers from this continual reinvention, most often in the form of the acceptable "Negro" writer.

For all of these reasons, Baraka cannot simply adopt the pose of the black Orpheus who will sing the new place and placing of the African American. On the contrary, he must place into question the very nature of poetry and the task of the poet, and this not simply because it belongs to the White tradition, but because the black poet must confront something prior to this, the fact that *neither* place *nor* self are grounded, and perhaps cannot be grounded, upon the peculiar conditions into which s/he has been thrown. Witness, for instance, the frequent outbursts against poetry:

My friend, the lyric poet,
who has never had an orgasm. ("Green
Lantern's Solo," *Transbluesency* 101)

Wasted lyricists, and men
who have seen their dreams come true,
only seconds
after they knew those dreams to be
horrible conceits
and plastic fantasies of gesture and
extension . . . ("Green Lantern's Solo,"
Transbluesency 127)

Not only is it the separation of art and life that brings such contempt, but the very suspicion that each and every lyrical impulse simply extends the appropriation of reality by fantasy, the fantasy of the invented America. Thus, the poet's visionary conceit implicates him in precisely that thing which is the very antithesis of an authentic art.

However, it is not only poetry but also the poetic self that proves a dead end:

I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes. Smell
what fouled tunes come in
to his breath . . . ("An Agony. As
Now," *Transbluesency* 60-61)

This other self appears as an exterior masque that can be distinguished from the inner self, an alien self that assumes a double aspect. On the one hand, the body has become something exterior. The eyes and flesh are disjoined from the soul, and this alien existence merges finally with the figure of the machine: "Slits in the metal, for sun. Where / my eyes sit turning, at the cool air." On the other, this alien voice is the *persona* of the poet himself, a persona that exhales a breath and a song that exudes the stench of death. Thus, the poetic persona does not let the divine or communal Word speak through the poet; rather, it attests all the more to the isolation of the inside from the outside. The voice that speaks dispossesses the "I" of its poetic utterance, and translates it into the fatal division of the self into subject and object: "This the enclosure (flesh, / where innocence is a weapon. An / abstraction. Touch . . ." (60). Abstraction, the sign of Western thinking, is the White Death that turns the body into mere flesh whose decay is all the more horrifying because it is scientific, the result of the

physical laws of nature *qua* object. Both the poem and the persona become signs of decadence, a death-mask through which there sounds the language of the individual self that confines the flux of the world into its own, orderly representations.

In this peculiar experience of imprisonment where poetic utterance itself is found to be complicit, the poem's persona is afflicted with an unbearable condition. The soul yearns to escape the corrupted existence of the flesh, and yet there is no way out. The Mallarmean gesture of transcendence from the world of "cold men" to pure beauty is denied:

You will, lost soul, say "beauty."
Beauty, practiced, as the tree. The
slow river. A white sun in its wet sentences.
Or, the cold men in their gale. Ecstasy. Flesh
or soul . . .

The quotation marks displace the word from the ideal to the rhetorical: Beauty as "beauty," *practiced* beauty turns art into artifice and technique. Thus what comes afterwards—erotic counter-images of movement and release—are no less rhetorical, no less artificial. One is left, finally, with three signs—ecstasy, flesh, soul—that in their juxtaposition do not create the kind of energy that might lead us away from the abstraction of the concept to the concrete, living experience of the image.

"An Agony. As Now" offers an example of the complex impasse at which Baraka finds himself. This alien self cannot be overcome either by appeal to the inner soul, to consciousness, or to the transcendent, be it in the form of Beauty, or human love. Each of these avenues suffers from its own decrepitude, worn-out words from a tradition that is unable to offer anything more: "It is a human love, I live inside. A bony skeleton / you recognize as words or simple feeling" (67). Thus the poet finds himself surrounded by a profound unreality. I say "profound" because it is a collective condition that speaks to the essential homelessness of an entire people.

In his collection of essays entitled *Home*, Baraka writes of Harlem as that place where a singular community grows out of the *unreal* condition of living in America: "an endless stream of Americans, whose singularity in America is that they are black and can never honestly enter into the lunatic asylum of white America" ("City of Harlem" 93). A singular existence, a singular subjectivity, a singular place—and it is through this singularity, this impossibility of assimilation into the fantastic homogeneity of American culture, which speaks endlessly of the individual only to conceal the fact that all its individuals are the same, that Baraka discovers a different task for poetic creation: The ethos of homelessness must be affirmed, not transcended, and the poet must reach into the abyss of this existence and make it his home.

In his essay "Cold, Hurt and Sorrow (Streets of Despair)," more of a poetic statement than an essay, and surely one of the most remarkable in the entire collection, Baraka draws out with crystal clarity the implications of such a stance:

In these places [the African American slum] life, and its possibility, has been distorted almost identically. And the distortion is as old as its sources: the fear, frustration, and hatred that Negroes have always been heir to in America. It is just that in the cities, which were once the black man's twentieth century "Jordan," *promise* is a dying bitch with rotting eyes. And the stink of her dying is a deadly killing fume. (95)

The phrase *life and its possibility* captures one of Baraka's central ideas through which our modern notion of human being is established: that reality does not consist of what one experiences as existing in the factual sense, but comes to be in the act of projecting oneself into and through possibilities for being. This implies that fantasy belongs to and is, in fact, the basis for the real. "Realities," he writes in the essay "Expressive Language," are "those fantasies that control your

immediate span of life." To which he adds, "Usually, they are not your own fantasies . . . The fantasy of America might hurt you, but it is what should be meant when one talks of 'reality' " (168). For Baraka, therefore, the idea of being human is made manifest as a kind of fiction that does more than pass itself off for an underlying reality; it becomes that reality. But here the fiction turns against itself, where the humanity of the African American appears as an *arrested* movement, a *dying bitch*. The figure of the dying bitch decouples the fantasy from the real; it reveals the real as an impossible set of possibilities that one must live out. This impossible life and the unreal reality it produces lead to the most incredible forms of social existence: "You can stick a needle in your arm four or five times a day, and bolster the economy" ("Cold" 95). Under these conditions, the fictions of human progress and human self-realization, indeed the entire ideology of humanism, reveals itself as a specific figural production that has not only become wafer-thin, but which calls attention to itself *as* something produced. Promise, in all its aspects, has been deployed as part of the very figure of America, and as long as its fictional status is passed over, it operates effectively. But when the "bitch" has to submit to the play of figures, when the *Idea* of promise is crossed through by its figural presentation, the fiction loses its capacity to stand for the real. It is, however, no less deadly for this reason: Fictions can kill, and perhaps they have always done so.

From within the singular ethos that emerges from the urban African American slum, the poet must be the one who grasps the figural essence of the social, who understands it as its *law*, and who engages in constant war as he aims to destroy the deadly figures of unreality through which black men and women live out their lives. The poet, therefore, is the true sociologist of the black ethos because the method of a more conventional, posi-

tivist sociology, the isolation of social facts, misses the point: "One can never talk about Harlem in purely social terms, though there are ghetto facts that make any honest man shudder. It is the tone, the quality of suffering each man knows as his own that finally must be important, but this is the most difficult thing to get to" ("Expressive Language" 169). Once again it is tone and quality, the musical and figural expression of what is, which constitute the singularity of that place—the *blues*. However, it is crucial to understand this blues expression of "what is" not as a representation of an objective condition, for objectivity is itself part of the more general fiction of reality as a stable field of referents. Nor does it simply rest on the naïve distinction between feeling and rational calculation. What I mean to suggest by the phrase *unreality of reality* is that Baraka's poetic understanding appropriates the metaphysics of Nietzsche, for whom life itself has the character of permanent becoming. Accordingly, life continually wills out beyond itself or *fictions* itself, rendering each instance of stability as yet another fiction which, insofar as it strives to remain fixed, will be overcome. In that way, reality reveals itself as groundless, and he who affirms this groundlessness will be prepared for the free creation of new fictions. In this, the free destruction and creation in the midst of the groundless ethos of the no-man's land, *Black Dada* and *Black Art* are about to be born.

The paradox of the Negro experience in America is that it is a separate experience, but inseparable from the complete fabric of American life. The history of Western culture begins for the Negro with the importation of the slaves. It is almost as if all Western history before that must be strictly a learned concept. It is only the American experience that can be a persistent cultural catalyst for the Negro. In a sense, history for the Negro, before America, must remain an emotional abstraction. The cultural memory of Africa informs the Negro's life in America, but it is impossible to separate it from its American transformation. Thus, the Negro writer if he wanted to tap his legitimate cultural tradition should

have done it by utilizing the entire spectrum of the American experience from the point of view of the emotional history of the black man in this country: as its victim and its chronicler. ("The Myth of a 'Negro Literature' " 111)

Throughout the prose writings, artistic manifestoes, poems, and plays that mark his move toward the Black Arts, Baraka consistently strives to express the paradoxical character of African American existence. Each of the various formulations—the “no-man’s land,” the community of non-conformity, the separate experience that is yet inseparable from American life and culture—emphasizes more than just marginalization by the dominant culture; the more important objective is to capture its singular facticity, which I have described as an *original homelessness*. This does not mean that Baraka seeks to redefine African American life as an ahistorical and purely existentialist condition. Just the reverse is true. However its historical character is such that the memory of a proper origin has been displaced and transformed into the unreality of an “emotional abstraction.” His choice of words is revealing: “Abstraction” is the sign of a Western art that seeks to escape from reality into the bloodless realm of Ideas. Accordingly, the concrete historical character of African American existence cannot be grasped by the simple substitution of an African pre-history for the founding myths of America. Insofar as it keeps the myth of origin intact, such a gesture leads to the same kind of escapism that is itself a prevailing feature of the American landscape. “The denial of reality,” writes Baraka, “has been institutionalized in America.” This in turn can only be combated effectively by the far more difficult task of finding one’s place: “An artist, any artist, must say where it is in the world that he actually is. And by doing this he will also say who he is” (“Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall” 182). At one level, this repeats a classic modernist gesture:

The self is an invention, an innovation rather than a derivation, stamped upon the chaos of Becoming. However, once Baraka links this gesture to the question of place and “place/meant,” the process of self-discovery becomes considerably more complicated because the intended place is neither present in the “here and now” nor concealed in the oblivion of a lost or fragmented tradition. Beyond the condition of impossibility, this “neither-nor” indicates that the question of place must be rethought outside of this binary opposition, and that therefore the modernist gesture must be repeated with a difference. Otherwise, the singular paradox of this in/separable experience that *places* African American existence at the limit of and beyond the borders of the Western-European and Euro-American, the African and Afro-American will be reduced to the same structure of identity that has, unsuccessfully, drawn its color lines.

If we therefore strive to free up the implicit tendencies within Baraka’s artistic development, one finds an anticipation of a Black self that transgresses the limits of these cultural spaces and opens itself to the play of their non-identity. What I am suggesting here is that Baraka conceptualizes Black selfhood as a transgression: The “Black self” is never an “itself”; it exceeds both the myth of the autonomous individual and the organic, collective unity. Transgression, therefore, is the *unthought* that animates Baraka’s thought without being named—except, perhaps, as poetry.

What needs to be shown, therefore, is the constitutive role that poetry plays not only in the unmasking of American hyper-reality, but also in the dismantling of the Western traditions of art and humanity, and the corresponding understanding of the self. On the one hand, Baraka’s destructive poetics adopts the visionary elements and rebel stance of his avant-garde predecessors, especially the Beats, in his endeavor to destroy and reinvent both the images and symbols of a White

(and Black) middle-class consumer culture as well as the rules of their production and validation. However, his attempt to “bring out a little American dada” must go beyond the anti-establishment iconoclasm of a Ginsberg potato salad and the neo-romantic posture of the outsider. American dada must become Black dada, and this passage signifies his desire to destroy the sacred cows that even the Beats could not relinquish—most notably the Whitmanesque persona who reconciles the teeming otherness of the American landscape into one grand Subject in a gesture of erotic embrace.

In what follows I attempt to explore the ways in which Baraka’s destructive poetics approaches the very limit—indeed, *illimits*—the various American modernist reincarnations of identity. When Baraka articulates the relation of the Black artist to the Western and American traditions through the metaphor of the “catalyst,” he indicates a technique of artistic production that both repeats and destroys the basis of the American experience, indeed destroying its very status as a universal basis. However, this gesture should not be interpreted as a simple negation. Baraka’s poetic destruction enacts a violent sacrifice of the tradition from within: The poet transforms his experience of the American tradition by dismantling its metaphysical and mythical basis, a coupling that both justifies and destabilizes its universal claims, and in so doing he forces it to yield to and yield up those possibilities that have been suppressed in its very construction *as* a foundation. This destruction consists therefore of a Saying that exceeds the boundaries of the American tradition and offers it to the play of differences—not simply in the form of plural voices and subjectivities, but outside of the Subject-centered bias, the imperative for secure and certain boundaries—and which therefore offers “itself” to the possibility of losing its foundation, of approaching the very edge of Saying which says something other than the

repressive and exclusionary logic of identity.

In what follows I will focus on several poems from the collections *The Dead Lecturer* and *Black Magic*, and particularly “Black Dada Nihilismus” (“BDN”), because so many of the motifs that are present in other writings are gathered here and given decisive expression, including Baraka’s confrontation with both the modernism of Eliot and Williams and the anti-art impulse of the European and American avant-gardes. What makes “Black Dada Nihilismus” so decisive is the way in which it dramatizes the tradition of Western art and thought as a series of masks that are repeated and emptied of their idealist prejudices in a ritualistic ecstasy. However, this ecstatic transport does not aim at a pure transcendence that would somehow give birth to an original self out of the unity of Being; rather, the movement leads nowhere, or, more precisely, to the suspension of the known and knowable ground—in other words, one’s *place* in some possible or existing cosmic and social order. In “Black Dada Nihilismus,” it is precisely the *who* of this black self and *blackness* itself that are in question. How will black writers place themselves vis-à-vis the cultural memory of Africa if this origin does not come to presence other than as a trace inscribed in the language of an “alien tribe”? And how will they exceed this other language when it has already positioned them, as victims and chroniclers?

In other words, the black self cannot be constructed out of a contradiction between two distinct heritages, the Western and the African, because they do not stand opposite one another, nor can the one be theorized as the negation of the other. Consequently, there can be no third term that mediates between the two, as for instance the universal idea of humanity has often been made to do. The cultural memory of Africa in-forms the African American’s life, but it is transformed by the American, implying that such

memory is neither original nor pristine; there is only that which recurs through the *repetition* of a trace, and that repetition brings forth a non-identical difference and presents the black poet with the task of creating new symbols and myths by appropriating this alien language in terms of what remains most alien to it—namely, Literature. Despite Baraka's rejection of the aestheticist character of Western Literature, the essays collected in *Home* demonstrate just how much the Black writer must remain within its domain, because literature is that very place where the trace of the alien has been preserved, guarded in its non-identity. Literature, to paraphrase Derrida, exceeds literature. Entering into this fractured and contested site, the Black writer must work through literature, but in such a way as to test its limits to see whether it can yield itself up to a new, radically different syntax and symbolism. In so doing, s/he remains ultimately faithful to literature's infidelity, whose "subversive juridicity requires that self-identity never be assured, nor reassuring" (Derrida 216).

In poetic terms, the paradox of African American experience is that the poet must work through the forms he has taken over from another heritage, and in so doing *unwork* the grounds and aims of that heritage by the violent assertion of a trace: "Black scream / and chant, scream, and dull, un / earthly / hollering" ("BDN" 98). Nonetheless, these howling exclamations, enunciated in a broken and strange idiom, are juxtaposed with the traces of a memory that gains its force from its intrusive silence. The "un/earthly hollering" is itself that which can hardly be said, or if it can, only with an unearthly—that is, *inhuman*—voice. This violence can certainly take the form of the sort of linguistic subversion elucidated in Gates's rhetorical theory—inversion, parody, and signifyin'—techniques that open Western discourses to the play of signifiers. However, it can also take the "form" of a silence that continues to

hold out, refusing to become a moment in the process of self-representation, hollowing out speech and afflicting memory with traces that are heard in a sense, but never quite recovered, whether it be in the poetry of high modernism, in the American idiom, or in those other poetic modes predicated on the desire to rediscover a principle of wholeness out of the experience of fragmentation. It is this second form which predominates in "Black Dada Nihilismus."

The first part of the poem proceeds in imagist fashion, juxtaposing fragments of esoterica, artistic catastrophe, backroom intrigue, genocide, and deicide, which create a complex feeling of dread, anticipation, and subterranean conspiracy. The apocalyptic tone invoked by the cryptic name of the daemonic force links this poem to the visionary tradition of Lautreamont and Rimbaud. Like the latter's gaze into the abyss, Baraka's poem carries out a symbolic destruction and ritual purification both of an idealized yet decrepit tradition and of the monadic self situated within. In "Black Dada Nihilismus," however, the attack is even more pronounced, more severe. The poem begins with a blank space, followed by a period.⁵

. Against what light

is false what breath
sucked, for deadness. (97)

This suggests more than just a rhythmic delay in the breath. It also complicates the very beginning of the poem as an absolute beginning, rendering it indistinguishable from an ending. What is it that inhabits this space, separated from the text of the poem by a period? It is a silence *outside* the text, a language beyond language, yet just as surely does it indicate a "pre-text" that is equally an "infra-text," the very text of the tradition and its Others, a tradition no longer governed by the law of identity, which is no longer *a* tradition. The poem marks itself off against this silent space in a gesture of opposition, yet it just as surely belongs to it:

Destruction cannot simply do away with this space, it owes something to this silence; and the ensuing poem, which lies on the *other* side of the period, is already spoken by it even as it strives to make that silence speak in a denaturing idiom.

The poem foregrounds the allegorical significance of light and breath, the very symbols of God and spirit, performing a mock Black Mass, which, rather than invoking the name of Satan or the anti-Christ, reveals the essential emptiness of the space they once inhabited: “. . . find the West / a grey hideous space” (98). Or, better to say, the Anti-Christ is Nietzschean, the principal member of the “*nihil German killers*” who philosophized with a hammer—that is, who “sounded out” the highest values of Western Man and found them hollow. This grey, lifeless space is revealed as empty, made hideous by the decaying death mask of God, who is, after all, the highest Idea, the Unity; but, on the other hand, the very collapse of the Ideal as such promises a metamorphosis or, better to say, a *transmutation* of the de-idealized self into a future one, invoked by the occult science of alchemy and its patron deity Hermes Trismegistus.

However, it is really in the second part of the poem that the idea of this future self, like the miraculous transmutation of lead to gold, is affirmed but at the same time abruptly broken off. Part 2 turns to the epic mode, and in a Fanon-like fashion, this new self will decide his existence in an act of violence: “*Plastique, we / do not have, only thin heroic blades. / The razor. Our flail against them . . .*” This act of violence becomes an act of symbolic murder committed against those very icons that express idealism and beauty and their complicity in the oppression of the black man: “*Come up, black dada / nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape / their fathers. Cut the mothers’ throats*” (98). However, this heroic self, this creator, destroyer, and self-definer, represents, in a sense, the last seduction of European humanism. Even

Sartre’s existentialist revolt, the “last breath” of this tradition, must be swept aside because no matter how strident his attack on humanism as an ideology of oppression may be, Sartre continues to espouse a much more rigorous form of humanism whose basis is thoroughly Cartesian.⁶ Consequently, the “last breath” of the tradition still speaks the language of the *cogito*, but the latter is no less implicated in the incessant need for modern Western man either to empower himself as a Subject or to search for an originality somewhere outside of his technical/rational world view. Witness, for instance, Sartre’s hope that the liberation of the colonized peoples will lead to the decolonization and renewal of Europe itself.⁷ The Sartrean type of man, perhaps the most revolutionary that Western culture has produced, must also be killed off in order for a radically heterogeneous Black self to come into being. Yet this must be accomplished without *authoring* it. For this very reason the poem re-crosses yet another revolutionary terrain, the vast pre-text of American Modernism in the persona of Williams and Olson, and displaces their poetic vision.

Halfway through part 2, the three-line stanzas with their fairly regular iambs are interrupted, and quite literally torn apart. What ensues, a fractured line with words often split into their elements, represents nothing less than the violent de-naturing of Olson’s Projective Verse. Rather than subordinating the line to the breath as Olson does, this “*Black scream / and chant, scream, / and dull, un / earthly / hollering*” forces the voice beyond its conventional rhythms. It is a parodic anarchy, out of tune and out of step, which interrupts the flow of the voice, like the honk of the jazz saxophone. The analogy should not be taken as coincidence. In Baraka’s short story “*The Screamers*,” written during this same period of time, he identifies the honk as the basic element of a black world view: “*The repeated rhythmic figure, a*

screamed riff, pushed it insistence past music" (174). At once both musical figure and stance, an aesthetics that posits its own world view, the honk becomes the figure for Baraka's search for his own poetic idiom beyond any and all existing forms. Jazz music forms the inspiration for Baraka's poetics not only because it is an indigenous Afro-American cultural form of expression, but also because it transgresses the rules of sensibility that govern other musical forms, even to the point of transgressing the very rules of rhythm and harmony themselves.

It is not only Olson, however, but Williams's experimentations with his American Idiom that are repeated and expended:

(I call them sinned
or lost
burned masters
 of the lost
 nihil German killers
 all our
 learned
 art... (99)

This parodic miming of the variable foot no longer simply consummates a marriage between a language and a people within a particular locale, be it Paterson, Gloucester, or America. It exaggerates it, and in so doing interrupts the myth-making and epic orientation of these two great American modernists.

The final section of the poem returns to and repeats one of the crucial aspects of epic performance, the act of naming. Here, however, this gesture does not allow the heroes to appear before a community, recalled from oblivion by the poet's inspired words; on the contrary, the names and signatures of the rebels, heroes, and victims do not speak, but are rather *spoken for* in a gesture of dedication:

"For tambo, willie best, dubois, patrice,
mantan, the
bronze buckaroos.

For Jack Johnson, asbestos,
tonto, buckwheat
billie holiday.

For tom russ, l'overture,
vesey, beau jack" (99-100)

This list of names parodies Whitman's gesture of cataloguing and incorporating the alien into an ever-enlarging Self because they are *ex-corporal*: Rather than establishing a community within the continuity of a tradition, they mark its absence, and their mute resistance bears witness to the nameless others who are consigned to the other side of the initial period. Yet, it is precisely because the nameless cannot stay in its proper place, but rather insinuates itself into the universe of names constituting the outward aspect of the dominant tradition, that this very tradition is denied the possibility for self-identity.⁸ Through the ruse of a technique, Baraka names the nameless, which creates an aporia that interrupts the functioning of the proper name. They represent *improper* names to the extent that their presence marks a lacuna within the tradition that is always already there. Thus, the "grey hideous space" of the poem expresses not only the historicist logic of decline, but also the very impossibility of this historical space/time called the West—impossible as an identity realized in a movement of self-becoming, impossible as an "I/We-here-now" that guarantees the presence-to-itself of the universe of names out of which its reality is constructed.

If, however, the names fail to satisfy the criteria for the proper name, still they do function and do in fact bring something into presence. Of course, it is possible to re-situate them within the existing universe of proper names through historiographical research and narrative strategies; nonetheless what is *there* first of all in this instance of poetic presentation is silence, an ominous silence whose very presence presents an obstacle to ordinary discourse because it cannot be properly phrased according to its rules. To adopt a term from Lyotard, such a situation constitutes a *differend*, where "something 'asks' to be put into phrases and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away." What is

most important about Lyotard's idea for our purposes here is the way in which he translates the possibility of communication into a question of an "impossible" responsibility, for through the inability to phrase, human beings "are summoned by language . . . to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist" (Lyotard 13).

On the basis of Lyotard's concept of the differend, we can interpret "Black Dada Nihilismus" as a poem that indicates a new idiom in a negative fashion. This new "black" idiom insinuates itself into the space left vacant by the collapse of Western values, and the value of Humanity in particular, yet it seeks to transvalue that space by reappropriating the "black scream / and chant," this elemental language that has always been under erasure but never annihilated. According to this reading, Baraka's poetics of the black idiom cannot be properly understood as an act of negating an ideological content through formal inversion.⁹ Here it is the Saying and not the Said that is emphasized: The murderous, nihilating gestures of the poem, its evocation of clandestine subversion mark the language as performative, thereby displacing the signifying functions. In keeping with the Dada aesthetic invoked in the poem's title, such language aims at provocation. However, just as with the Dadaists themselves, so too with Baraka, the performative gesture negates all fixed and reified forms and affirms an absolute freedom as the necessary precondition for a new art. Yet this freedom is itself ambiguous. Rather than leading to a new art, it can also end in nothing. Perhaps for this reason the poem does not reach for the extreme. Rather than degenerating into free-floating signs, the names preserve the secret, the unrepresentability of the new genre of discourse, and in so doing they preserve it as a possibility. Words and names become cabalistic; they dissolve back into ciphers of an "unearthly hollering" and of a "lost

god damballah," whose name bears witness to the fragmentation of a language that, after the middle passage, survives only as an unrecognizable trace.

Because of its hermeticism however, "Black Dada Nihilismus" cannot present its own promise of a new *epos* other than as a retrieval of a repressed origin. Within the hermeneutic framework that structures the poem, the forces of oppression are allegorized as "the West," which in turn becomes the sign of a desire for a destiny that has collapsed and been revealed as "a grey hideous space." But if its ideals have been deprived of their semantic value and effective world-sustaining force, overcoming this emptied space is a possibility that remains outside the poem. The desire for a transmutation, "from lead to burning looting," that would dissolve the hardened, lifeless forms of Western culture is expressed through the invocation of an anterior destiny that is placed in opposition: "Against what light / is false what breath / sucked, for deadness . . . gainst God . . ." (97). However, the direct expression of this anterior destiny embodied in the "black scream / and chant" reproduces the same structure of desire that sees in the complete realization of an original presence the hope for redemption. It is also therefore subject to the same endless deferral and, perhaps, the same failure. Neither the invocation of the primal destructive/creative force nor the recalling of the names of those victimized allows the poetic persona to find his proper identity; rather, it forces him to recognize the distance between himself and this anterior, "non-Western" space with which he can never coincide. Thus the present self exists in error. In its desire to be other than itself it must acknowledge its own inauthenticity.¹⁰

"Black Dada Nihilismus" represents a decisive turning point insofar as it makes manifest the central project of Baraka's poetry while at the

same time revealing the major obstacle to its realization. This obstacle is removed when Baraka succeeds, as I believe he does in much of his later poetry, in overturning the structure of desire that organizes the search for a black idiom around a repressed origin. In the attempt to make this step clear, I have made use of Lyotard's theory of the differend in order to conceptualize Baraka's poetics of the black idiom as a new genre of discourse. The connection is justified because, on the one hand, Lyotard uses the differend to deconstruct those "Grand Narratives," including and especially Humanism, that submit all heterogeneous phrasings to a single finality, the full presence of Man to himself. Likewise, Baraka's desire for a truly heterogeneous poetic idiom becomes possible when the temporal orientation of the names and phrasings is no longer retrospective but projective. That is to say, when the Willie Bests and Buckwheats cease to function as figures of mourning and loss, becoming instead concrete instances of projected memory, a *different* black tradition becomes possible, one that affirms its own difference by continually recreating itself in being projected anew.

Baraka's later poem *In the Tradition* illustrates the development of his poetic practice in this direction. Here the naming gesture reappears in grand epic style. However, this is no epic of memory or memorializing. Rather than designating a fixed and dated past, the names embody concrete instances of a continuous, life-affirming movement:

In the tradition of
all of us, in an unending every-
where at the same time
line
in motion forever
like the hip Chicago poet Amus Mor . . .
(205)

To be *in* the tradition, an unending everywhere, in motion forever, is to affirm its powers of transformation, which in human terms is expressed as the constant projection of memory:

in the tradition thank you
arthur for playing & saying
reminding us how deep how old how
black how sweet how
we is and bees
when we remember
when we are our memory as the projection
of what it is evolving
in struggle
in passion and pain
we become our sweet black
selves (208)

If an identity emerges here, it does not come from a direct intuition of blackness, as in Henderson's theory of black poetry. Rather, it happens as a performative act, and as such the "essence" of this tradition—if such terms still apply—is revealed *as* performance: Constantly repeated, the tradition is renewed and recreated, but never through the repetition of a fixed idea. Accordingly, what one can say about the performers of this tradition—for they are performers rather than "authors"—is that they possess a certain competence, a capacity to enter into the play of signifyin', verbal and aural improvisation . . . in short, the art of transformation. Although these are in some sense learned techniques gained through cultural practice, this capacity more essentially stems from an affirmation that releases the performer from the prison-house of identity. To remember who we are in and through the projection of memory makes possible a distinct black identity, but at the same time it opens that identity to something beyond. It breaks with its own stability, and therein lies the tradition's strength and vitality.

The central emphasis on performance in Baraka's poetry must be understood in this way. It is an inaugural repetition that consistently breaks with and recreates identity, and as such it does not directly oppose Western art so much as release the latter from its metaphysical desire to stabilize objects of taste that in turn leads to the idealization of culture. Although William Harris makes a significant contribution to the understanding of performance in Baraka, he misses its more radical implications when, in his reading of the same poem, he interprets the naming process in terms of

the creation of a counter-tradition: "As if it is a magic formula, he names the people in *his* tradition to counter those in the *other*: 'the tradition of slavemasters' that wants to dominate the world" (Harris 115). For Harris, the naming process still serves as an act of identification that expresses a separate and distinct world view. However, if indeed the black tradition has grown strong through struggle—if, as Baraka says, "our fingerprints are everywhere"—this also makes present its essential openness: Its relationship to other traditions is characterized by repetition, appropriation, and, yes, even miscegenation as the very expressions of the creative process:

... Cesaire told
 you
 that, our family strewn around the
 world has made more parts of
 that world
 blue and funky, cooler, flashier, hotter,
 afro-cuban james
 brownier
 a wide panafrican
 world (203)

As a repetition that transgresses the boundaries of its own tradition as well as other traditions, Baraka's black art represents the highest and most complete form of affirmation. Here, the artistic process of creation and the political process of struggle coincide, because the struggle against the oppressive traditions of the slavemasters is itself a creative process. In that sense, the classic relationship between art and revolution is reversed; rather than serving as an ideological weapon in the struggle for change, revolution can only be justified by art—that is, as a creative act.

As such, the aesthetic of Baraka's earlier nationalist writings, where he at times opposed an essential Blackness against the Western world view, is pushed to its own limits and exceeded. Ironically, it is the "tradition of the slavemasters" that fails as a tradition, or it is at best a "rump" tradition, because insofar as it tries to *preserve* a certain state of affairs, it has no choice but to arrest the process of change, rather than offering itself to the play of

difference. Conversely, the black poet, in the process of discovering his own idiom, discloses in a way superior to his counterparts what is *originally* American:

get out of europe
 come out of europe if you can
 cancel on the english depts this is
 america

Here Baraka repeats the Emersonian desire to poetize American with new signs, but his appropriation shows how at the same time American's own sons were incapable of the project.

say something american if you dare
 if you
 can
 where's yr american
 music
 Nigger music? (206)

The phrase *say something american* recalls the Emersonian tradition in an extraordinary way. Emerson embodies his desire in the ideal of the self-reliant man whose distinctly "american" quality is his self-engendering. This new self, *gendered* as male, is a Subject that remains within the orbit of the Cartesian *cogito*: "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 270). That male virility should be identical with a conscious ego that usurps the power to found itself upon itself shows to what extent this distinctly American man remains so decisively European despite himself. Yet Emerson extends his idea of freedom as self-reliance much further, transforming it into a principle of power. "The life of man," he writes, "is a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" ("Circles" 404). Self-reliant man seizes upon the outside, which is never truly other but only a counterpoint and occasion for him to raise himself above himself, and makes it into a moment of his own self-realization.

Baraka answers this tradition with an unanswerable question, a "where is?" that remains unanswerable

because unthought. The question not only testifies to the absence of the "major man," as Wallace Stevens would say, but to the very refusal of the tradition to open itself to the other as the source of its originality. It is the constant and willed forgetting of this condition that it is not through an appropriation of the other but in a *becoming other* that renders it *unheimlich* 'not-at-home,' which threatens to ruin the Emersonian tradition even at its inauguration. The answer to the question, "where's yr american music" is: Where the other is, present in the strains of "Nigger music," yet whose otherness resists the subject-centered bias of self-reliant man. Here and elsewhere, Baraka poetically shows the tradition as incomparable to the space of inclusion that defines citizenship, nationality, or land—all limiting spaces that project their inside and outside. To be *in* tradition is to affirm its porousness, its openness to an outside toward which it is always already turned.

Within the Emersonian tradition, the genre for saying this movement was lacking. The possibility of its formation would have first required a rupture with the grammar of the Author/Subject as self-reliant man; it would have required a search for a new idiom that would be commensurate with the movement of transgression, an idiom that would come as a gift from the other, a *black idiom*.

Baraka's search for a black idiom, translated into an artistic principle, requires that he displace and transform the aesthetic figuration of this Author/Subject. "The black writer," writes Baraka, "never moved into the position where he could propose his own symbols, erect his own personal myths, as any great literature must" ("Myth" 112). This act requires more than just a substitution of the new for the traditional. The black artist must displace the site which allows this kind of symbolization to occur; that is to say, the "great literature" of the African American will not be analogous to the Euro-American literary traditions either formally or thematically;

it will be a "vicious modernism," an art of community that embodies a creative and destructive force, "so violent and transforming" ("Return of the Native"). However, in order for this link between the community and art to be actual, the community itself must exist in a state of continual transformation. The "place, and place / meant of / black people" is located at the site which exceeds itself in a creative projection of itself as a community based on art: "Can you sing / yourself, your life, your place / on the warm planet earth."

Baraka's conception hearkens back to Nietzsche's aesthetic principle that art is in essence a form-creating force and as such the highest expression of the will to power, but only if we interpret this principle in a radical way. What is meant by this precisely becomes clear if we follow the explanation of Gilles Deleuze, who argues that Nietzsche's will to power expresses that highest principle of creation insofar as it de-authorizes previous values, ideas, and principles—i.e., frees them from the organizing center, the Author/Subject, that stabilizes becoming and turns it into Being. However, free creation also de-authorizes the self, the creator, forcing him/her to relinquish the principle of the truth-as-subject. Free creation would therefore correspond to un-authorized creation, but once the idea of the Author as origin is relinquished, then thought becomes powerless and yet bases itself upon that fact: "Contrary to what is stated by the banal propositions of consciousness," writes Deleuze, "thought thinks only on the basis of an unconscious, and thinks that unconscious in transcendent exercise." The unconscious, the unthought, what thought is powerless to think but which comes to it, must nonetheless take the form of a question or problem, and this impossible movement is itself the meaning of the will to power, "that imperative transmutation which takes powerlessness itself as an object" (Deleuze 199-200). As such, the will to power must affirm its own lack of a ground and

fashion it into the necessity of a question and a project.

When Deleuze's insight is applied to Baraka's poetics, his "vicious modernism" is seen to consist of a double project. First, it de-authorizes the American tradition insofar as it exposes its inability to reflect upon its "unthought"; that is, the ungrounded character of its foundation. The discourse of American democracy proceeds wholly in an "as if" mode—as if democracy *works*, there is progress, and the African American will eventually be, if not today, equal to any other American in all essential respects. Second, it de-authorizes by opening that tradition up, releasing it *from* its own fixity and *to* the possibility for creating new forms, which can come only when the powerlessness of that tradition is affirmed, and a new possibility is disclosed through a question about its own destiny. In this instance, however, the *posing* of the question comes from outside, from that no-man's land that belongs to the tradition but is at the same time "other."

This interpretation of Baraka's notions of Black Art and Black idiom allows us to understand that the essential task for black artists is to strike out into the region where no phrase regimen as yet exists, so that they may encounter the silence of that which, unrepresented and unrepresentable, awaits phrasing. Accordingly, we can understand Baraka's various experimentations with form and words, his use of street talk, jazz, and the blues, of all the linguistic flotsam that black history has thrown out onto American waters as the projection of a communal art and a poetic language that is always in excess of itself. In that sense, we can say that there is no Black Art and no Black idiom in Baraka's work, for they "are" only in the movement of transgression.

A poem from his collection *Black Magic* gives expression to this negative definition—negative only in the sense that it is not an existent, a linguistic

phenomenon, or idea, but rather, a movement of surpassing:

Breach, bridge, and reach, to where all
talk is energy. And there's
enough, for anything singular. All our
lean prophets and rhythms.
Entire
we arrive and set up shacks, hole
cards, Western hearts at the edge
of saying ("Three Modes of History
and Culture," *Transbluesency* 117-18)

Breach, a mode of saying that breaks through words and rends language open to its poetic essence, commits a transgression against the law of proper language; that is, it occurs as an unsaying that deprives the very site of presentation of its rules, its logic, its "truth." But this unsaying occurs at the edge, where words become both "bridge and reach," where they transcend toward what is unsaid in the act of saying. "Western hearts at the edge of saying" is a phrase that hints at the complex nature of this movement: Western, and not simply Black, hearts, because the latter category belongs to the former, but in the singular manner of those who aim for the unthought and unsaid that lies both within and outside of the Western proper. At the edge of saying, the Western/Black writer, the *Afro-American*, forces the inherited tradition to its very limits with all the violence of black dada, unlimits it, and carries it beyond itself to the outside.

If the objective of this study has been to rethink the paradox of Baraka's ideas on black art and the black idiom, what it reveals is the extent to which Afro-American culture expresses a perpetual transgression. If Baraka envisions black art as the highest possibility for a culture of continual transformation, then it must affirm the suspension of the two traditions between which it is situated and, by suspending them, open the possibility for them *not* to be themselves, to disclose a possibility for difference that can only arrive when "homelessness"—an uprootedness without ground and without limits—is affirmed as a fundamental experience.

Notes

1. The poetic texts include *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995)* and *Funk Lore: Poems 1981-1994*. In addition, Baraka has published a considerable number of essays and other political material over the last decade.

2. bell hooks represents another instance of a postmodern critique, but hers is more specifically focused on the problem of the subject. According to her reading, the Black Power Movement and its corresponding aesthetic ended up constructing a universal and static (male) subject, which made them unwitting accomplices of the dominant order whose symbols they sought to overthrow: "During the sixties, [the] black power movement was influenced by perspectives that could easily be labeled modernist. Certainly many of the ways black folks addressed issues of identity conformed to a modernist universalizing agenda. There was little critique of patriarchy as a master narrative among black militants" ("Postmodern Blackness" 512). The problem with her critique is that it posits a strict dichotomy between black modernism and postmodernism and that she identifies Black Power and Black Arts with the former and tends to reduce them to a straw man.

3. I should also mention the 1987 book of Robert Elliot Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Samuel R. Delany*. Although Fox's assessment of Baraka's later writings differs from that of Harris—Fox criticizes Baraka for confining his literary work to the ideological straightjacket of Third World Marxism—his overall interpretation is similar. Like Harris, he describes Baraka as a postmodernist insofar as his fiction performs a "radical inversion of Western systems of belief and order," which "opens a space for blackness" (1). As I will show, the problem with both critics inheres in the notion of blackness, which is ambiguously deployed both as an ideological concept and as a performative trope that enacts difference. Another very important book that has recently appeared is Kimberly Benston's *Performing Blackness*. Unfortunately, this text was not available to me during the writing of this essay, because I find myself in agreement with Benston on very many points indeed, some of which I indicate in passing.

4. Space limitations do not allow me to develop the Nietzschean context, except to say that, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Dionysian ecstasy, symbolized through music, annihilates individual consciousness and reveals the inner truth of the world as primordial Will. As such, music assumes a superior metaphysical status over other forms of knowledge.

5. In the Harris edition of Baraka's poems, this period is missing; in both the Vangelisti and Benston editions, it is included. The reading that follows stresses how this punctuation mark divides the poem from a universe of pre-texts, Baraka's own American and European influences, while at the same time incorporating their traces in the poem in the form of an ominous silence.

6. Sartre makes it very clear in his essay "The Humanism of Existentialism" that his humanism has no relation to the "cult of mankind" (286), which leads ultimately to fascism. It simply means that human subjectivity constitutes the sole universe in which the concrete individual exists authentically insofar as s/he decides his/her own existence and takes responsibility for such without recourse to a guiding idea or essence.

7. See in particular his Introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

8. Jean Lyotard points out the peculiar linguistic character of names in his book *The Differend* by focusing on the fictional status of their deictic function. A name designates some thing by bringing that thing into the space/time of the present place, the "I-here-now," such that the name Rome, for example, situates the referent, addressor, and addressee in relation to an "as-if right here." The name thus acquires its reality insofar as it is taken as a given, but this is only possible through the *as if*. In relation to "Black Dada Nihilismus," my point is that it is precisely the "I-here-now" that is missing; however, this absence does not constitute a deficiency, but the very condition for resistance to the fixed universe of reference of the proper name.

9. Cf. Harris's jazz aesthetic, which involves two operations. "In the first, Baraka inverts uncongenial bourgeois forms and ideas, making them black by turning them into their opposites" (91).

10. I find that my reading closely resembles that by Kimberly Benston on several points. See his *Performing Blackness* 217-22. Likewise focusing on the unnameable, Benston argues that "Black Dada Nihilismus" "can only be read as a double movement, as catachretic end and apocalyptic beginning." One difference between us is that for Benston the "onomastic inventory" that ends the poem still reclaims, although negatively, the presence of a tradition out of oblivion, but does so only through monstrous refiguration. I believe this needs to be pushed further, and that what is in question here is the *space* of presentation that would make it possible for a transvalued blackness to appear.

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