

The New Tendencies of Black Theatre: Amiri Baraka's Critique of the Liberal Worldview of Art and Advocacy of Subversive Aesthetics

Samy Azouz

Introduction

During the troubled 1960s, Amiri Baraka¹ (LeRoi Jones) perceived a pressing need of an art that preaches action and agitation. His stage becomes the arena, where human action within theatrical proxemics is identified with those black men and women who resist political brutality, cultural hegemony, and racial transgression. It transpires that Baraka's dramatic art is the gospel of transformative action engrained in histories of subjugation and aspiration for justice. In the plays under examination, Baraka makes it clear that he is no longer interested in the artefact, but in the transformative and corrective value of artistic creation in the social and political sphere. Radical black art must be subversive, in order to tackle racial dilemmas, political disadvantage, and cultural defamation. It thus allows Blacks as well as Whites to seize the power of transformation and change and, more importantly, to realise that they possess that power so momentous in the combat for the inviolable rights. The playwright then embraces a functional and utile art capable of showing social woes and reflecting socio-racial dilemmas. In his dramatic works and theatre art, the dramatist addresses a harsh critique against the theory of pure art or art for itself, fuses art and agitation, and advocates human action.

Several art critics and theatre practitioners such as Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Ed Bullins, and Hoyt Fuller during the social unrest and the racial conflict of the 1960s in America questioned liberal art and its divorce

Samy Azouz is an Assistant Professor at Umm Al-Qura University and Kairouan University.

¹ Born Everett Leroy Jones, Baraka wrote under the names LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka, and changed his name to Amiri Baraka after the death of Malcolm X.

from any didactic, political, moral, or utilitarian function. They sensed a necessity to veer away from abstraction, cogitation, and contemplation. The urge was to redirect art generally and black art particularly toward serving pragmatic objectives and turn away from an effete and constricted liberal worldview. Here liberalism must primarily be understood as a political theory that has philosophical underpinnings. Although liberalism is primarily a political theory, it has often been associated with broader theories of ethics, value, society and aesthetics. It should be remembered that John Locke, one of the leading philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment, is credited with the philosophical foundations of liberalism. As Locke put it, “No one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”² John Rawls, one of the towering figures of modern political liberalism, argues that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive system of equal basic liberty compatible with a similar system for all.”³ It is conspicuous that eighteenth century and modernist philosophies center liberty and freedom and consider them as the fundament of liberal thought. Running within liberal political theory is an ideal of a free individual as one whose actions are in some sense his/her own. Such an individual is not subjected to intimidation, is not dependent on coercive customs or values, and recognises his/her long-term interests.

American liberalism can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence, which includes the words (echoing Locke), “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to insure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁴ In modern times and specifically in the 1960s, America witnessed an extension of liberalism to society’s rejects. American liberalism advocates civil rights for all citizens: the preservation and safeguard of individual liberty extended to all citizens equally by the law. This involves the equitable treatment of all citizens. Certain prominent black critics, literary figures, and political activists and artists argue that the civil rights rooted in the American liberal view are not extended to all citizens, but are limited to

² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London: A. & J. Churchill, 1690), p. 8.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 220.

⁴ ‘Declaration of Independence’, Library of Congress, at <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/>. Accessed 01/02/2021.

citizens of particular skin color and, by extension, of particular view as regards art and aesthetics.

This criticism was exemplified in the artistic trend that came to be known as the Black Arts Movement (BAM) which the Black Aesthetic best expounds. The movement advocates a harmonization of political ideology and artistic creation. This unification of the political and the aesthetic is not new in African American aesthetics. The Negro Renaissance of the 1920s, in a departure from white norms, stresses the viability of black culture with its distinctive canon and set of values. An all-embracing aesthetic, predicated on the fusion of political content and artistic design, is a momentous accomplishment of the Renaissance. The literary critic Alain Locke defends agitational art as it fosters public debate about political repression and serves certain social ends.⁵ Similarly, W. E. B. Du Bois, a cultural critic and one of the pioneers in the field of sociology, declared in 'Criteria of Negro Art': "I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk."⁶ Both critics highlight the propagandist element in literary and artistic creation. The Negritude movement of the 1930s is a sequel to the great Renaissance in erecting black cultural forms and styles and racial pride and betokening black beauty. Ever since, black writers and artists have had to scrutinise the problematic of the relation between aesthetic and politics. The aesthetic sensibilities and formulations of the Black Arts Movement are an echo of those of the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude ethos. Amiri Baraka, one of the prominent theorists of the Black Arts Movement, has perceived a pressing need for an aesthetic/art that stresses action. What Baraka espouses is nothing less than a liberatory aesthetic and a protestatory art grounded in the sole value of utility.

Baraka makes it clear that radical black art must embrace praxis, in order to tackle racial dilemmas, political disadvantage, and cultural abuse. He views the social and political worlds in their continuous change, and not in their latency. Black art thus allows Blacks to grab the power of transformation and change inherent in artistic creation, which is so crucial in the struggle for the inviolable rights. The art that Baraka champions is

⁵ Alain Locke, 'Art or Propaganda', in *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne, 1999), p. 50.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', quoted in *African American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne, 1999), p. 42.

functional; an art that divulges oppressiveness and praises values such as freedom and justice. Baraka then addresses an acerbic critique against the theory of pure art or art for itself, refutes the dichotomy of art and political agitation, and rejects “capitulationist aesthetics.”⁷ Baraka decidedly opposes the functionality⁸ of artistic design and content to the prevailing liberal vantagepoint.

Consequently, Baraka repudiates Western aesthetics/art, opting for an art that is functional and transformational instead. This article revolves around two major elements. First, it attempts to show the suspicious connections between Western art and the liberal worldview and the need to subvert the Eurocentric aesthetics. Second, it investigates the notion of the functionality of art, its viability, and its utility in the struggle for the basic civic and civil rights and entitlements. I will show how art becomes politicised, radicalised, and pragmatic. Art eventually has a social function and a crucial role to play in the sociopolitical sphere in an effort to transform gritty realities of racial bias and cultural transgression. My focus will be on several selected plays such as *Dutchman* (1964), *The Slave* (1964), *Madheart* (1971), *A Black Mass* (1971), and *Experimental Death Unit # 1* (1971).

Criticism of the Liberal Worldview: From Autotelic Art to Subversive Act

Baraka’s skepticism about Western aesthetics/art ingrained in liberalism begins with *Dutchman*. This play signals the first sparks of a serious interrogation of abstract knowledge. Baraka is dissatisfied and incisively critical regarding what he perceives as the cult of paralysis and imagination which Beat poets and writers indulge in. In Scene I of the play, Lula⁹ taunts

⁷ Amiri Baraka, *Daggers and Javelins* (New York: Quill, 1984), p. 332.

⁸ This idea of art’s functionality is basically African-derived. For more details, see Léopold Sédar Senghor, ‘African-Negro Aesthetics’, *Diogenes*, vol. 4, no. 16 (1956), pp. 23-38 (translated by Elaine P. Halperin). It is worth citing that Baraka uses functionality as diametrically opposed to the beautiful, decorative, and tasteful. This largely stems from the binaristic system built into Baraka’s dramatic works. Baraka’s dramaturgy includes an indulgence in the logic of radical binarism and duality. Manichaeism is thus a distinctive feature of Baraka’s dramatic writings.

⁹ It is very likely that Lula stands for white America. In this sense, Baraka asserts that “she is a real person, a real thing, in a real world.” Although Baraka states that she does not represent any thing, he confesses that “perhaps that thing is America, or at least its spirit” in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966), pp. 187-8. Werner Sollors, admitting that the play is partly an aesthetic protest, bluntly considers Lula as “white America.” For further details—see Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a Populist Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 128.

Clay accusing him of “reading Chinese poetry and drinking lukewarm sugarless tea.” She compares him to death, saying “You like death, eating a soda cracker.”¹⁰ With her hip talking, Lula scorns him for being a poet still tied to his mother. Explicitly, Lula addresses an invective against Clay who seems absorbed in abstract form of art (here poetry). Hidden behind his facade of a black complacent man, Clay’s submission to white notions is irrefutable. The assimilated Clay responds, “It’s none of your business,” accusing her of not knowing “anything except what’s there for you to see. An act. Lies. Device. Not the pure heart, the pumping black heart.”¹¹ Simply put, the white man cannot counsel the black man because he is utterly ignorant of his plight. As early as 1961, Baraka writes: “Liberals think that they are peculiarly qualified to tell American Negroes and the other oppressed peoples of the world how to wage their struggles.”¹²

Clay, the would-be poet, commands Lula to tell her liberal fathers “not to preach so much rationalism and cold logic” and prevent them from “talking too much about the advantages of Western rationalism, or the great intellectual legacy of the white man.”¹³ For Clay (and Baraka), the liberal theoretical framework is flawed and impotent to attain the accuracy and the consistency needed to evaluate black art/experience. In what would seem a contemplation of action, Clay, in introspection, reflects that instead of murdering white people, he would rather be an insane “safe with my words, and no deaths.”¹⁴ Clay seems to ponder over his writing of poetry as an act of disengagement. The safety of the words of Baraka’s academic poetry is no longer a warranty to best describe the black evolving militancy and inchoate consciousness. The emphasis now is on revelatory words and the translation of action in connection with these same words; a principled action to end oppression so that an aesthetic of liberation could flourish. In this context, Addison Gayle writes in *The Way of the New World*:

Man’s capacity to appreciate the beautiful, to cultivate a wholesome, healthy aesthetic sensibility, depends upon the security of the environment in which he lives, in the belief in his own self-worth, in an inner peace engendered by his freedom to develop to the extent of

¹⁰ Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman and the Slave* (New York: Morrow, 1964), p. 8.

¹¹ Baraka, *Dutchman*, p. 34.

¹² Quoted in Donald Costello, ‘The Black Man as Victim’, *Commonweal*, vol. 88 (1968), pp. 436-40.

¹³ Baraka, *Dutchman*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Baraka, *Dutchman*, p. 35.

his abilities. In order to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility, given an oppressive society, the prerequisite is that the oppression must end.¹⁵

Baraka effortfully casts doubts on the liberal aesthetics of inertia and passivity and moves in the direction of the aesthetics of act and activism. In the play *The Slave*, too, liberalism can translate or expound the theory of art for art's sake. Lula, Grace, and Easley can be said to stand for White liberal America, a token of the ethos of the era. They are the embodiment of the liberal thought and liberal engineering of society. Each of them attempts to prevent Clay and Walker from undertaking a liberatory action or staging a coalitional movement. Being two poets, the liberal establishment exerts a tremendous leverage within the academy. Liberals such as Easley and Grace rely on an exclusive body of canons and repressive knowledge in their exchanges with Walker. When Easley realises that Walker is willing to act virulently, Easley calls upon the repressive power of the state (soldiers and police of the state). Easley, as Walker alludes, acts from a purely liberal stance. Easley's liberal attitude turns out to be a major hurdle, threatening Walker's principled action.

While Walker strives to predicate a pattern of action, Easley endeavours to deter him and curb his aspirations to liberation through agitation and protestation. Echoing Lula's disdain of Clay's abstract poetry, Easley also decries its formlessness and absurdity. He qualifies it as "inept formless poetry," a doggerel designed to effect "ritual filth."¹⁶ He even doubts if it can serve any viable purpose or progressive plan of action. Walker, in reality, is split by his contradictions and his abiding allegiances to the white world. His very presence in the Easleys' home is a testimony to his nostalgic sickening desires. The real fight is truthfully within Walker himself; if he intends to act upon the politically ugly exterior world, his inner contradictions must be settled first. At any rate, Walker progresses toward the conclusions he must draw at the close of the play.

As the dialogue unfolds and the tension mounts, Walker seems intransigent as to his long-standing need to relinquish his conviction of a massive action to transform the equation of injustice. He toils to contrive a certain equilibrium between art as creation and agitational action. He is wedged between art as abstract activity and a concrete one rooted in reality. The idea of the use of art makes up the new equation. When Easley hears

¹⁵ Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 379.

¹⁶ Amiri Baraka, *The Slave* (New York: Morrow, 1964), pp. 55-56.

Walker talk about use, he mocks him because Walker is the black idealist *par excellence* according to Easley. Easley always views Walker from his liberal lens. His tactics is to keep Walker tied to Western formalistic norms and dominant standards. Easley and Grace are all that Walker is fighting against their corporate liberalism. Because both adhere to a liberal viewpoint that discards any human intervention in the course of events and denies agency, Walker decides to rid himself of past transcendent thought disguised in false progress. At stake is, in this critical moment, the idea of an art as a vector of agitation.

Baraka's critique of the liberal view of artistic creation that is steeped in the theoretical quagmire and immersed in the experimental quandary is furthered in his nationalist stage. The play *A Black Mass* is also one of the remarkable plays that investigates the notion of art for art's sake amidst the liberal upsurge. The play is an interrogation of art and creation that are pointless and empty from any constructive purpose. It is an art that is totally bereft of any clear teleology or good content. Its main characteristics are its lack of telos, usefulness, and direction. It is an art plunged in trite abstractions, which denote senseless experimentation and profitless pursuits. It is devoid of any humanist concerns, societal considerations or moral ideals. Besides, social or political content is completely blotted out in favour of a sheer speculative and theoretical reasoning.

The setting is a laboratory with a weird décor and outlandish furnishings. There are signs in Arabic and Swahili on the wall. Some odd drawings, bizarre diagrams, and strange machines fill the place. The three black magicians/scientists are oddly dressed. Strange sounds and motley lights flash from time to time as Yacub, the black scientist, is preparing an extraordinary experiment. Nasafi, Tanzil, and Yacub engage in a sparse dialogue, cataloguing the merits of the black art and the "beautiful reality."¹⁷ The triad discusses the notion of time, its linearity, and its mechanistic aspect. In the meantime, Yacub seems driven by an intelligible thrust of reason to carry on his experiments to create a creature in love with time.¹⁸

¹⁷ Amiri Baraka, *A Black Mass* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971), p. 25.

¹⁸ Baraka, *A Black Mass*, p. 27.

Although the Muslim myth of Yacub¹⁹ informs the play's plot and character type, Baraka does not follow the strict lines of the Black Muslim creed. In *A Black Mass*, Baraka uses the Islamic myth of Yacub to show that creation or art cannot ensure the advancement toward liberty as long as it is subjected to the contagion and imitation of mainstream paradigms. Artistic creation should not seek its own end rather than satisfy societal exigencies, social needs, and political requirements. The Muslim myth that informs the play exposes an instructional interpretation: that which addresses the black creator or the black artist generally. This interpretation postulates that, if the creative process is devoid of certain moral considerations and rational restrictions, disorder will ensue.

Creation generally and artistic invention specifically must issue from genuine human activity that is grounded in reality. This activity is responsible, moral, and teleological. It springs from true accounts of human actions, emotional responses and interplay, and physical interactions. To achieve creation or high art, Baraka writes in 'The Myth of a "Negro Literature,"' that the creator's or the artist's work must

reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man, as he exists, in the defined world of his being. It must be produced from the legitimate emotional responses of the soul in the world. It can never be produced by appropriating the withered emotional responses of some strictly social idea of humanity. It must issue from real categories of human activity, truthful accounts of human life, and not fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege by some willingly preposterous apologists for one social 'order' or another.²⁰

Obviously, artistic production has certain experiential, ontological, and psycho-social roots. The latter does not grow as mushroom do. Artistic creation is deeply ingrained in social reality and reflects its contradictions. The play's insistence can be summed up as follows: creators/artists who misdirect their talents severely err against the purpose and the potential of action present in artistic creation or work.

In his seminal essay titled 'Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life', Baraka declares: "Art does not create sickness, it reflects or

¹⁹ The myth stipulates that all people had once been black, then Yacub was born and wanted power. Exiled, he and his scientists spent six hundred years turning blacks into whites. White people tried to subdue blacks, and for this they were banished to Europe. They crushed blacks across the world. God would intervene and power would be restored to the original black people.

²⁰ Baraka, *Home*, pp. 105-15.

demonstrates sickness that already exist.”²¹ This is what Baraka depicts in *A Black Mass*. Yacub’s fateful art is more an initial sign than a major cause. In this respect, the alternative proposed by the proponents of the artistic countermovement of the Black Arts consists in a viable proximity to the actual life of Blacks; their experiences of suffering and prejudice are to be recorded and reported in the arts. This can be carried out only in the event of a final deliberation and decision vis-à-vis Americentric patterns, prevailing approaches, and official referentiality. That is to say, setting black formulations, measures, and criteria in order to optimise cultural worth, enhance self-affirmation, and forsake liberal generalizations. The reversal of this historic calvary and dire conditions necessitates a fresh view of art that stresses its social and political function. Art and theatre art are regarded from a novel standpoint, evoking their functional, utilitarian and committing dimensions. Art is also viewed from an angle of its active role, its societal mission and its potential of resistance.

Functional Art: Committed Theatre and the Chase of the Ghost of Cooptation

On the other side of the theoretical/exegetical axis of the liberal view of art is the view of art as functional, utile, and pragmatic. Black art, in a liberal and oppressive society, must be conceived of as instrumental, and not a means of entertainment or an object of contemplation. This is Baraka’s view of art as functionalism and utilitarianism. In view of what is shown above, it is obvious that Baraka embraces a committed art. It is not Easley or Yacub’s conception of art, but an art that poses its functionality as evidence. The dramatist acknowledges art as didactic, corrective, and constructive. This potential of correction and didacticism is predicated on its functionality and utility. It is a means to teach the black audience and to initiate black people. It is an institution of education in which the teachings are transmitted from a teaching black artist to a learning black audience.

Baraka’s turning away from Beat aesthetic and his embracement of Black Aesthetic later, underscore his impatience with abstract art and his espousal of an art that is highly connected to activism. Ron Karenga is a major influence on Baraka’s thought and intellectual evolution. Karenga, one of the theorists of black cultural nationalism, argues that art must be “functional, collective, and committing.”²² Baraka’s staunch belief in the

²¹ Baraka, ‘Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life’, p. 76.

²² Ron Karenga, *The Quotable Karenga* (Los Angeles: US, 1967), p. 22.

functionality of art pushes the latter to recognise art as having certain utility and practicality. For the playwright, artists who are involved in revolutionary activities are a potential “organic part of the community.”²³ The place for the uncommitted artist is outside the community. In Barakian terms, this is the discrepancy between those organic artists who are “art’ing” and who represent the power of “the ‘verb’” and not the stasis of the “noun”. Werner Sollors encapsulates and spells out Baraka’s notion of “art’ing”:

the priority of art as a ‘process’, a ‘verb’, over the ‘purely arbitrary’ art product, the ‘noun’. The verb-derived ‘ing’-form is on the side of ‘body’ and ‘reality’, whereas the ‘Nominative/name’ represents the reification, ‘Thing’, of the ‘hideous artifact’. In order to arrive at an art which would be relevant to its creators and faithful to the Blues tradition, Baraka suggests abandoning the notion of art as artifacts and trophies. The dynamic verb character of art is seen as a guarantee against uncommitted *art pour l’art*.²⁴

Such an organic artist has a role to play within the community. The artist, in this sense, is not isolated from the mass of his people; he is deeply attached to it because he is committed to change it. Thus, the artist and his art merge and become welded to the community. Interviewed by Saul Gottlieb, Baraka proclaims:

Art is supposed to be a part of a whole life of the community. Like, scholars are supposed to be a part of the community. A person who has trouble should walk across the street to a scholar, who’ll be the heaviest person in that vicinity on that subject, and ask about that. Art is to decorate people’s houses, their skin, their clothes, to make them expand their minds, and it’s supposed to be right in the community.²⁵

Echoing Du Bois’s conception of art, Baraka asserts that art must be amid the people, from the people, and close to the community. In the same interview, he emphasises the functional quality of art that is “supposed to be as essential as a grocery store.”²⁶ Thus, artists are the sage men of the community who work to raise the level of people, enhance their consciousness, and promote their self-esteem. It is a kind of intellectual nourishment, spiritual energizing, and psychic help to turn away from what

²³ Quoted in Michael Coleman, ‘What is Black Theater: Michael Coleman Questions Imamu Amiri Baraka’, *Black World*, vol. 20, no. 6 (1971), pp. 31-37.

²⁴ Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, p. 81.

²⁵ Saul Gottlieb, ‘They Think You’re an Airplane and You’re Really a Bird!’, *Evergreen Review*, vol. 12, no. 50 (1967), p. 53.

²⁶ Gottlieb, ‘They Think You’re an Airplane’, p. 53.

is perceived as a domineering white value system. Black Man's strivings in *Madheart* must be read in this way. He endeavours to dissuade Mother and Sister from impersonating others, and prompts them to value their black complexion, their physical make-up, and their inherent beauty. He urges them to ask for counselling from the institution of the "Black Art."²⁷ Black Man is the prototype of Baraka's committed artists. The recourse to the black arts and skills sums up the functionality of the committed art that Baraka intends to show on his stage. In this context, Addison Gayle comments on the black artist's role:

The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man? The black aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism and offering local, reasoned arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron.²⁸

During his relinquishment of bourgeois aesthetics, the dramatist increasingly corroborates his belief in the noble mission of art as transformative and corrective. Since *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, which portray men in transition, Baraka's nationalist stage is peopled with heroes/antiheroes who interrogate the validity and reliability of Western aesthetics/art and question the precepts of artistic creation. On stage, there can be sensed an antagonism between the word and the act. In the nationalist plays, the act eventually seems to be the victor. Regarding his mounting national and ethnic radicalism, Baraka opts for a nationalist/ethnic art designed to "de-brainwash"²⁹ black people against decommissioned art. From now on, black art is examined from an angle of its practicality and utility in relation to the black struggle.

What motivates Baraka (and Walker) is no longer the artifact, but the objective value and the potential of utility of artistic design. The objectivity of use (Walker's frame of reference) emphasises the necessary redirection of art toward praxis and coping with real socio-economic inequities and political disenfranchisement. But Easley never decodes the primordially to

²⁷ Amiri Baraka, *Madheart* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971), p. 63.

²⁸ Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company, Inc., 1971), p. xxii.

²⁹ I owe this word to Baraka's critic Werner Sollors. See Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*.

act on the static state of the world. He remains steadfast throughout on his position, for he sees reality not in its actual movement but in its immutability. Even if Blacks seize power, Easley opines, the face of ugliness will not change. Easley's deterministic thought views the world in its constituent categories that are universal and changeless. In denying human action, he believes in "the futility of modern society"³⁰ and the irrelevancy of social and political thought. For him, change is anarchic and unfruitful.

As the debate rages between the two men, blasts are heard as if Baraka parallels intellectual contestation with a physical struggle off stage. Easley continues to argue in favour of the impartiality of politics and the inconsequentiality of social life. Individuals, in his view, are impartial and unbiased. Easley acts as the mouthpiece of Western aesthetics/art, an aesthetic that excludes politics from its domain for aesthetic is the theoretical study of the values of taste, beauty, and these are its basic and unique constituents. Easley banishes politics and political content from aesthetics:

EASLEY. Failed? What are you talking about?

WALKER. [*Nodding*] Well, what do you think? You never did anything concrete to avoid what's going on now. Your sick liberal lip service to whatever was the least filth. Your high aesthetic disapproval of the political. Letting the sick ghosts of the thirties strangle whatever chance we had.

EASLEY. What are you talking about?

WALKER. What we argued about so many times ... befo'de wah.³¹

Easley's doctrinal thought and restrictive conception of reality staves off politics from the terrain of aesthetics/art. The intense dialogue shows the crux of the matter that divides both rivals. From a Western philosophical perspective, political action has nothing to do with aesthetics. Aesthetics and art are the cultivation of good taste and entertainment of the senses.³² They are the impression that results from contemplative and

³⁰ Baraka, *The Slave*, p. 73.

³¹ Baraka, *The Slave*, p. 74.

³² This is reminiscent of Schiller's 'grace', Burke's 'enjoyment', Shaftesbury's 'delight', Kant's 'gratification' of the senses. These philosophers, among many others, are the founders of canonical Western aesthetics. Although Baraka levels a scathing critique at western aesthetics along with its philosophical foundations, he remains very critical regarding the political liberal thought. For Baraka, Western aesthetics has its roots in the Enlightenment philosophy just like liberalism in politics. Both derive their legitimacy from

perceptive activity. They, thus, have nothing to do with praxis and political contestation. Conversely, Walker looks at aesthetics from a moving and dynamic point of view. In this sense, aesthetics becomes the locus where potential human act is lodged. It is the domicile of human purposeful action. Walker's novel equation, or the new Barakian formula is "right is in the act," which the Easleys consider as "the politics of self-pity."³³

Baraka's creed in art as a viable act of change, transformation and full adherence to social reality still resonates in his nationalist plays. Set on Third Avenue in the East Village of New York city in a late winter weather, Baraka's *Experimental Death Unit* is another meditation on the role of art not as abstraction but as a prospective action. The setting inspires cold, death and degeneracy. It indicates the moral decadence and the cultural vacuum. As in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the winter's weather draws some affinities with Baraka's vision of America. Baraka is aware of the moral decay that necessitates an intervention to erect a new moral order. The moral downfall implies decadent art. He demonstrates in this play that art without act is effete. The two white artists, Duff and Loco, set in motion the first movement. Their speech is an elegy about a sad but perplexing theme. It is a contemplation of human motives, motivation, and action.³⁴ Duff, openly but ruefully, expresses to Loco the sterility of his visions and the state of his impoverished being. His perception and his sensibility are neutralised in an icy world bereft of spiritual heat and devoid of sensual gratification. Loco contends that his existence is a kind of consensus with the universe. His is a shift from dancing, an act-provoking activity, to a kind of deep sleep attendant to lethargy and inaction. Loco's hibernation is an escape from the world. In so doing, he condones human sufferings and torments. Like the Easleys, Loco substitutes action for a brooding activity and flight from reality.

Markedly, Loco and Duff seem aware of their weakened abilities and faculties to sense the ambience of the milieu. Both, seemingly enough, lose sense and sensibility. Duff and Loco conceive of art as separate from social life and its complexities. This conception of art is, in Baraka's thought, narrow and asinine. Art, for Baraka, should come from the realities of human beings and their interactions in daily life. For him, to rid art from

the ethos of the Enlightenment. Becoming a Marxist, Baraka is seen to extend his critique to the capitalist economy and its mode of production.

³³ Baraka, *The Slave*, p. 77.

³⁴ Amiri Baraka, *Experimental Death Unit # 1* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971), p. 11.

reality is to commit an act of abstraction which is tantamount to the negation of human reality. In other words, art must depict reality as it is, or what Ralph Ellison calls “reality as it really is.”³⁵ Art, accordingly, must be grounded in reality with its myriad manifestations of subjugation, resistance, and longing for freedom and equity. In ‘Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life’, Baraka argues:

Black art tries to force consciousness on Black People. It is moral and political, but, if it is to be effective, it must come at us with more form and feeling than sociology statistics. It must be the actual life of the streets and our minds on those streets. Pictures of black reality and black theatre should be able to be exchanged easily as is shown here from stage to street without great disparity. The only difference must be the clarity and directness of the art.³⁶

True art then stems from and goes back to reality to honestly depict it in an effort to substantially change it. In Baraka’s vision, art and reality cannot be isolated. Consequently, the plays and poems must mirror this truth. Baraka advocates plays that “break heads, and tear down buildings.”³⁷ He also espouses poems “that kill. Assassin poems, poems that shoot guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons leaving them dead.”³⁸ Baraka’s firm belief in a functional art is beyond doubt. Essentially Du Boisian, Baraka strongly believes in art as a means to an end—the liberation of black people. During his development of black aesthetic, the dramatist is increasingly leaning toward artistic commitment and dissident politics. When questioned about the viability of Black Theatre, Baraka replies that showing “the lives of ‘Negroes’ doesn’t have anything to do with my definition of Black Theater. Black Theater has to be making a dynamic statement and be of itself an act of liberation.”³⁹ Baraka’s statement is an indictment of Western aesthetics/art, whose representatives are Duff and Loco and the Easleys.

The appearance of the black revolutionaries marks the last dramatic movement of the play. The death squad will restore order to the derelict

³⁵ Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 412.

³⁶ Amiri Baraka, ‘Black (Art) Drama is the Same as Black Life’, *Ebony*, vol. 26, no. 4, (1971), pp. 75-84.

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 34.

³⁸ Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), p. 219.

³⁹ Quoted in Coleman, ‘What is Black Theater’, p. 32.

environment. The squad halts the intercourse between Duff and Woman. The military cadence and the sparse dialogue are contrasted to the lyric lament and the elegiac pattern of the first two movements. The swift rhythm of the military music indicates that the black militants/artists are moving toward a more committed form of action. For these revolutionaries, transformative action is valued more than the contemplation of this state of decay. They immediately move to act upon the dissolute environment. Their act of killing the two artists is symbolic in that it means the eradication of Western aesthetics. Baraka charges the squad with a mission of paramount importance: the restoration of black dignity through the reclamation of the act of transformation.

Larry Neal, one of the prominent figures of the Black Arts movement, argues in his seminal essay 'And Shine Swam On' that "the artist and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality. Both understand and manipulate the collective myths of the race. Both are warriors, priests, lovers, and destroyers."⁴⁰ Baraka literally applies Neal's conception mainly from 1964 onwards. Art without act is null and void. Its terrain is the whole social and political reality. The black revolutionaries of *Death Unit* advance a new vision and a fresh conception of art. Actually, the revolutionary artists invert the obsolete belief in unpragmatic art. Jerry Gafio Watts writes:

The idea of 'art for art's sake' was invoked throughout the black Arts movement as a code word for decadent Western art. 'Art for art's sake' was supposed to represent the epitome of the narcissism and thus purposelessness that governed Western artists' creative sensibilities. While 'art for art's sake' certainly opposed the engaged political stance of the Black Arts, it had never been an uncontested norm in Western art worlds.⁴¹

Baraka, as a committed dramatist, opposes commitment to artistic apathy and irresponsibility. Commitment is that ethical and political responsibility needed to effect change. "Art, like the artist, is of and in the world. To ignore this basic truth is, in a world of political conflict, to be ineffectual as an artist and to emasculate art itself," Kimberly Benston comments, "For Baraka, then, engagement is necessary not only for social,

⁴⁰ Larry Neal, *And Shine Swam On* (New York: Morrow, 1968), p. 19.

⁴¹ Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 207.

political, and moral reasons; it is the very life blood of artistic endeavor.”⁴² Commitment to cleanse the world from fake artists such as Loco and Duff is an obligation. Visibly, Baraka’s characters are pointing to the espousal of a committed art in a committed theatre, vector of black liberation. Unlike the Western theatre, “committed theatre” and the committed art it promulgates accumulates and intensifies the indignity, the anger, and the rage of its audience to induce it to act. In the ‘The Delicate World of Reprobation’, Michael Kaufman asserts:

Black revolutionary drama portends radical revisions in our traditional idea of the theater. If Western theater performed any political act it was to conserve the status quo, not only by defending society’s values but by its very premises. The very notions of catharsis, an emotional purgation of the audience’s collective energies, means that theatre becomes society buffer sponging up all the moral indignities that if translated into action could effect substantial change.⁴³

Baraka’s ‘committed theatre’ aims at converting catharsis to pragmatic and continuing protestatory action. His conception of art generally, and dramatic art particularly, departs from traditionalist frames and classical paradigms.

The dramatist’s investigation of art as vector of change and rise above bias and prejudice is still palpable in his nationalist theatre. The play *A Black Mass* is also one play that investigates the notion of functional art. The play is a questioning of art or artistic/scientific design that are groundless and bereft of any purposes or scientific objectives. It is an art/creation that has neither teleology nor obvious rational tills. Its fundamental traits are dearth of direction and possibilities of pragmatic utilization. It is an art/creation that stands for futile experimentation, aimless exploration, and dismal discovery. This is the kind of artistic creation that disregards human preoccupations and social concerns. Yacub, the chief of the black scientists, is concocting a decisive experiment. The black panel debates the concept of temporality, its linearity, and its mechanistic aspect. In the meantime, it transpires that Yacub is guided by an odd thrust of reason to implement his weird experiments.

⁴² Kimberly Benston, *The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 46.

⁴³ Michael Kaufman, ‘The Delicate World of Reprobation’, *Educational Theater Journal*, vol. XXIII, no. 4 (1971), p. 459.

Yacub's stance is that of the unconcerned scientist who is not complacent with current truths. He even misreads the beauty, peace, and scientific/intellectual complacency of his associates. He contravenes the laws and rules of the visible world so that he can prove what has not yet been explored and tested. He posits that art/creation is an end in itself. Creativeness, under any heading, serves only creation. It is separated from certain social assumptions and cultural premises. Yacub, the capricious scientist/magician, vindicates that creation has no purposiveness but itself. Intellectual skill, knowledge, and inquisitiveness are legitimate rational pursuits which are basically beyond social confinements and scientific restrictions. The incentive is fundamentally rational and intellectual. Instead of orienting his reasoning powers and intellectual faculties to satisfy the needs of his associates and members of his community, Yacub is to be driven by vacuous discoveries and frivolous experimentations.

In *A Black Mass* Baraka employs the Islamic myth of Yacub in order to demonstrate that art/creation cannot realise the progression toward freedom as long as it is exposed to the negative transmission of "the white thing."⁴⁴ Art should by no means beseech itself or its proper end. Rather, art should fulfill social as well as psychological needs and political necessities. The Muslim myth of the play advances an informative construal: that which addresses the black working in the artistic and cultural field. This construal postulates that if the creative process is devoid of certain moral considerations and rational constraints, chaos will result. Generally speaking, artistic production must issue from authentic human activity that is rooted in the everyday reality, a prerequisite that cannot be overlooked. This activity is responsible and moral. It springs from true accounts of human actions, emotional responses and perceptions, and physical and mental interactions as well.

Undoubtedly, the production of art has certain social, psychological, and ontological basal parts. Art and artistic creativity do not grow out of naught. Artistic creation is embedded in the social reality with its ramifications and, consequently, it mirrors its antinomies, distortions, and complexities. In any case, *A Black Mass* exposes a highly identifiable moral. Its lesson, in short, is that black artists who wrongly direct their faculties and gifts commit an unforgivable sin and will be harshly chided. The didacticism of the play's moral testifies to Baraka's belief in functional

⁴⁴ Larry Neal, 'The Black Arts Movement', *Drama Review*, vol. 12 (1968), pp. 29-39.

art and the sanctity of the artist's words and messages. In 'Brief Reflection on Two Hot Shots', Baraka criticises James Baldwin and South African writer Peter Abrahams on the grounds that their works tend to describe the unreal, the abstract, and condone the bleak realities of humans:

We need not call to each other through the flames if we have nothing to say, or are merely diminishing the history of the world with descriptions of it that will show we are intelligent. Intelligence is only valuable when it is contained naturally in the matter we present as a result of the act (of writing... of feeling). A writer is committed to what is real and not to the sanctity of his feelings.⁴⁵

Moreover, in his second manifesto 'Black Art', a poem often quoted by artists, Baraka's stance regarding art appears to be the same. Conspicuously, Baraka envisions an art that derives from the concrete, the lived, and the immediate. Art is not lodged in the outer space; it is embedded in the principles of the earth. Or else, it is clogged in cogitation and stuck in speculation.

Nasafi and Tanzil's articulation of their dissension with Yacub's wasted genius and talent, translates Baraka's firm posture toward the futility of artistic creation and its inconsequence. Both scientists constitute the front of opposition to Yacub's disastrous intentions. They both emblematised discernment and discretion. Actually, the debate revolves around the moral and amoral aspects of human creation. Both scientists/magicians act from a human perspective interested in worldly well-being and security. With an eye on the primordial practicality of artistic creation, Baraka defends and adjures black artists to use their gifts in lauding and raising the level of black self-esteem and pride. The teaching of the play is communicated in the form of a serious caveat for black creators/artists who give up their heavy responsibility and disengage themselves by creating knowledge/art for pure scientific testing and artistic trial according to already set criteria.

Yacub's baneful art/creation is symptomatic more than causal. In this respect, the solution prescribed by advocates of the Black Arts movement seeks to nullify the source of this hemorrhage (the fact of neglecting reality and indulge in abstractions) by abandoning American standardization and its unique frames and founding new black models and values that foster cultural worth and promote communal autonomy. Yacub's art favours mayhem and sows fragmentation. It is inconsequential since not functional.

⁴⁵ Baraka, *Home*, p. 117.

His art lacks principles of solidarity, tenets of mutual help, and tills of empathy. It is eventually destructive and not transformative.

The Black Aesthetic, as embodied in the Black Arts Movement, does not remain without critique. This brand of aesthetic does not seem to originate from a universally accepted idea. It remains entangled in particularity, utility, and politicization of the black experience and black suffering. Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes repudiate the overemphasis on politics and the neglect of folk art or culture. Houston Baker argues that Black Aesthetic considerably suffers from a theoretical weakness, and that the consensus on culture is no more than “defensive chauvinism.”⁴⁶ He also states that the theorists of the Black Aesthetic, in attempting to convey the race *Geist*, settle for setting boundaries of race. In exposing the limitations of the Black Aesthetic, David Lionel Smith writes:

Again and again the inherent contradictions of racial essentialism undermined efforts to articulate a coherent Black Aesthetic theory. By remaining in essentialist conceptions of race, they [the movement’s theorists] bound themselves to a system that was designed explicitly to preclude the revolution they sought. Instead, they subscribed to an ideology of blackness that left them trapped in the fun house of racial essentialism.⁴⁷

Away from racial essentialism and cultural particularism, the Black Aesthetic negates individuality in favour of collectivity. In criticizing the norms and criteria set by the movement, Timothy Phoenix questions:

Does the artist have the right to, and absolute need for, individuality, creativeness and free expression, or doesn’t he? If he does, then there’s no honest way of making the whim or sociopolitical exaction or appeasement or standards of any particular group the first and last word, the criteria of worth or decisive factor in style and content in the artist’s creative life.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, Dudley Randall argues that the absence of the individual dimension in art seriously damages the artistic creation. He argues that “in the Black Aesthetic, individualism is frowned upon.”⁴⁹ Art, accordingly, must deal with probing of the self, exploring of the ego, and

⁴⁶ Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 85.

⁴⁷ David Lionel Smith, ‘Chicago Poets, OBAC, and the Black Arts Movement’ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 257-8.

⁴⁸ Timothy Phoenix, ‘Black Writers Must Be Free’, *Liberator*, vol. 7 (August 1967), p. 10.

⁴⁹ Dudley Randall, ‘The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, Fifties’ (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 213.

discovering of individuality amid the rabble of collectivity. In this context, Ralph Ellison argues that “art is a celebration of life even when life extends into death and [...] the sociological conditions which have made for so much misery in Negro life are not necessarily the only factors which make for the values which I feel endure and shall endure.”⁵⁰ These black critics assume that radical transformation can also be effected through radical visions without enmeshing aesthetic/art in ideology or politics. By and large, due to ensconced racial essentialism, manichaeism, neglect of individuality, fetishization of functionality “the Black Aesthetic produced preciously little ‘good art’ and is even less capable of lasting.”⁵¹

Conclusion

From what is noted above, Baraka is adamant in his criticism of political liberal thought and Western aesthetics. The dogmatism of political liberalism makes Baraka think that liberalism fails to acknowledge the presence, leverage, and importance of primordial attachments such as culture, ethnicity, and belongingness, and in so doing actually negates the prospects of erecting and sustaining a true society built on the values of justice, liberty, and autonomy. Moreover, Baraka believes that political liberalism fails to recognise the necessity of engagement and to advance appropriate solutions to the problems of justice, freedom, and civil rights confronting a modern liberal state such as America. What Baraka offers in the dramatic works we have analysed so far is a redefinition of Western conception of aesthetics/art embedded in a liberal perspective that is basically not amenable to the potential of transformation of artistic creation and not sensitive to political content and agitational politics.

Terry Eagleton writes in *The Ideology of The Aesthetic* that “an aesthetic society will be the fruit of the most resolutely instrumental political action.”⁵² The functionality of art is a response to the liberal reductionist view of art and a prompt reaction to the notional idea of the preservation of the autonomy of art. Art has direction and a role to play in the transformation of realities of bias, racial prejudice, and cultural hegemony. Art’s natural terrain is the entire social world with its myriad complications

⁵⁰ Ralph Ellison, ‘That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure’, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 22.

⁵¹ Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 120.

⁵² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of The Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), p. 206.

and intricacies. Acting upon dire conditions of unequal race relations, cultural aggression, and economic encroachment, art asserts agency and helps construct healthy subjectivity in an effort to radically reverse the doctrine of stasis and paralysis of the Easleys of the world.