

## “A [B]lack Baudelaire?”: Rereading French Symbolism and Amiri Baraka’s 1960s Life and Work

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In Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* (1964), the semi-autobiographical protagonist Clay admits “in college [he] thought [he] was Baudelaire,”<sup>1</sup> prompting Lula—the play’s succubus—to affectionately refer to her prey as “a [B]lack Baudelaire” multiple times.<sup>2</sup> This scene suggests a bibliographic genealogy between Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and the forefather of Symbolism. Before the end of the play, Baraka offers us a taste of his then forthcoming manifesto, “The Revolutionary Theatre” (1965), as Clay flirts with avant-garde anti-liberalism while he thrashes Lula about the train car, before reassuming his role in liberal society and discourse—only to be stabbed, murdered, and proverbially “tossed out” by Lula and the representatives of society themselves. By the end of 1967, Jones had divorced his (white) wife, Hettie Jones, developed ties to the Nation of Islam, renounced many of his earlier (white) friendships, changed his name to Amiri Baraka, and fully embodied the Blackness of his art and theory. Distancing himself from the protagonist of *Dutchman*, a “[B]lack Baudelaire,” and his fate, Baraka redefined himself over the following years, ultimately seizing Symbolist means of expression in *A Black Mass* (1966) before culminating his mid-1960s evolution into a fully-fledged Black Muslim. Clay’s Baudelairean aspirations were only one iteration of Baraka’s French Symbolist pedigree, a pedigree suggested by this literary reference and others and detailed in Véronique Lane’s recent monograph,<sup>3</sup> which begs the application of a French Symbolist paradigm (violence and void)<sup>4</sup> to Baraka’s theory, his works, and his lived experience—and vice versa. I have found applying Symbolism to Baraka and Baraka to Symbolism yields new

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<sup>1</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*, (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 13, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Véronique Lane, *The French Genealogy of the Beat Generation: Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac's Appropriations of Modern Literature, from Rimbaud to Michaux*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). Lane writes that Baraka (referenced in the book as LeRoi Jones) and the other Beatniks were “connected through the language of the literature that shaped the oeuvres of all three of its major writers [Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs]” (2). Per Lane’s monograph, Baraka has a “French genealogy”—an understanding of French literary history supported by his own personal references: Baraka references Stéphane Mallarmé and “avant-garde, surrealism and dada” in his autobiography (175, 232); and he referenced the “French Symbolists” specifically in a 2003 interview with Kalamu ya Salaam. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. (Chicago, Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 175, 232; Kalamu ya Salaam, “Amiri Baraka Analyzes How He Writes.” *African American Review*, vol. 37, no. 2/3, 2003, 211. Additionally, Baraka’s rhetoric often echoes (perhaps engages?) the Symbolists’ constant pursuit of purity: Baraka’s fascination with imagination in “The Revolutionary Theatre” resembles Valery Briusov’s in his literary plea, *Against Naturalism in the Theater*, arguably a Symbolist manifesto. Amiri Baraka, “The Revolutionary Theatre.” *Liberator*, no. 5 (1965): 4-6, at 5. Reprinted by National Humanities Center, 2007; Valery Briusov, “Against Naturalism in the Theater.” *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: a Critical Anthology*, eds Bert Curdullo and Robert Knopf. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 72-76, at 75.

<sup>4</sup> Re: Symbolism and the void, see Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 26, and Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Appraisal*. (New York, New York University Press, 1977), 124. This point is also addressed at-length later in this essay.

perspectives on Baraka's particular brand of embodied performance *and* retroactively catalyzes deeper understanding and further criticism of Symbolist theory and practice. In this essay, I undertake a structuralist close reading of both *Dutchman* and *A Black Mass* to suggest one narrative for understanding Baraka's transition from "[B]lack Baudelaire" to Black Muslim, inspired by the contemporaneous scholarship of Franz Fanon and Baraka's written take on the Civil Rights Movement. I look to add to the deep discourse on Baraka's life and art through a new lens and to lay bare the manners in which Baraka's understanding of and relationship to Symbolism offer further insight into his radical artistic practices and personal transformation.

### ***Dutchman* (1964)**

*Dutchman* opened in March 1964 at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City; Baraka coyishly describes the play in his autobiography as "essentially a confrontation between a slightly nutty (and wholly dangerous) white female bohemian and a young naive Black intellectual."<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the timeline of *Dutchman*'s production places it in direct conversation with another notable confrontation of the day: the civil rights movement—with *Dutchman* premiering between the iconic March on Washington on August 28, 1963, and the eventual enactment of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. For many Black Americans, this was the era of Martin Luther King Jr., of civil disobedience—the inspiration for Michelle Obama's now-famous plea, "when they go low, we go high"—and his other values that many Americans shared at the time. A prescriptive pamphlet, distributed to the attendees of the March on Washington rally and signed by leaders like King Jr. himself, succinctly outlined those values:

[The rally] will be orderly, but not subservient. It will be proud, but not arrogant. It will be non-violent, but not timid. It will be unified in purposes and behavior, not splintered into groups and individual competitors. It will be outspoken, but not raucous.<sup>6</sup>

Those who planned the rally foresaw potential violence during the event. Engaging Fanon's scholarship in *Wretched of the Earth*, which was published in English that same year, we can read the relationship between empowered white Americans and disenfranchised Black Americans, which foregrounded the rally, as one of inherent violence (a point considered at greater length later in this section).<sup>7</sup> The themes found within *Dutchman*, a product of its time,

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<sup>5</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 187.

<sup>6</sup> Mathew Ahmann, et al. "Lincoln Memorial Program," 2. Self-published handout for the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Hosted by the Civil Rights Movement Archive. <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/mowprog.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Fanon wasn't the first to discuss the violence of the Black embodied experience. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) infamously begins Douglass's life story with the moment of his Aunt Hester's graphic (and graphically retold) whipping. W.E.B. Du Bois, too, famously founds his theory of "double consciousness," applied later in this essay, in his experience of being gawked at and verbally accosted for his race as a child. The central subject of my dissertation, Charles Spurgeon Johnson (1893-1956), also recalls a similar othering moment from *his* childhood. Yet Fanon is a seminal touchstone in the development of decolonial theory, and his specific theory and rhetoric of colonial violence deeply influenced 1960s racial philosophy and (I argue) Baraka's individual theory and response. Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. First Avenue Editions Imprint, 2014, 20-21; W. E. B. Du Bois. "Strivings of the Negro People." *The Atlantic Monthly* (1857) 80, no. 478, 1897, p. 194; and

appear to resonate with these values of the era—until the final, crucial moment. I will now undertake a threefold semiotic reading of *Dutchman* in order to demonstrate the signifiers of its themes, which I have distilled to three points of examination: Lula’s entrance, the apple she eats during her entrance, and the ultimate climax of the play (Clay’s death and Lula’s unchallenged dominance). These recurring, emphasized themes within *Dutchman* welcome us into Baraka’s contemporaneous mental state and foreground his impending, enforced redefinition-of-self.

*Dutchman*’s initial impression is a full page of stage directions with a tone reminiscent of modern American realism. Stripped of their context, they almost read like Tennessee Williams, dripping with classic mid-century American dramatic detail: “Opening scene is a man sitting in a subway seat, holding a magazine but looking vacantly just above its writing pages. Occasionally he looks blankly toward the window on his right.”<sup>8</sup> After some choreographed waiting, the man eventually makes awkward eye contact with a woman outside before the train pulls away from the station. Surprisingly, almost supernaturally, the woman enters from the rear of the car a moment later. This progression is important: Lula enters Clay’s space. Semiotically, Lula’s entrance connotes colonization, a white aggressor entering and ultimately dominating a Black individual’s space. Her entrance also serves to welcome us into Baraka’s contemporaneous, newly inspired line of thinking and state of mind: an increasingly Marxist obsession with cultural, socio-political Fanonian violence, which Baraka details in his autobiography. About midway through, Baraka details his increasing Afrocentrism and his work with the Algerian magazine *African Revolution* during Ben Balla’s rule from 1963-1965. During this period, and specifically after “the Chinese exploded their first A-bomb,”<sup>9</sup> Baraka writes:

Frantz Fanon’s books were popular, Grove Press had brought out *The Wretched of the Earth* [in 1963]. My own reading was broad and wider than I knew. I was reading people like the right-wing Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* as well as the Italian Marxist Gramsci.<sup>10</sup>

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Charles S. Johnson. “A Spiritual Autobiography,” n.d. [1947], 3-4 (also quoted in Patrick J. Gilpin, and Marybeth Gasman. *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, 1). Saidiya Hartman references the first chapter of Douglass’s *Narrative* in introducing her monograph, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), to demonstrate that “to be [enslaved] is to be under the brutal power and authority of another.” Hartman’s scholarship reifies Fanon’s understanding of colonization as violence and evidences Fanon’s influence on contemporary scholarship. Saidiya V Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 271. The implications of his phrasing here are somewhat complicated: Baraka mentions Fanon chronologically in-parallel with the first Chinese atomic testing in October 1964 (after the premiere of *Dutchman*); however—as this reference is sandwiched within a general conversation concerning the years of Ben Balla’s rule, *The Wretched of the Earth* was available in English well before *Dutchman*’s premiere, and Baraka’s relationships with Francophiles may have made him aware of Fanon’s scholarship even earlier—it is likely Baraka was familiar with Fanon’s philosophy before *Dutchman* was written.

It is very possible, if not most likely (given the thematic similarities), that Baraka was influenced by Fanon's work while he concocted *Dutchman* during that single night in the middle of the nationwide battle for equality.<sup>11</sup> Fanon's influence can be seen in both *Dutchman* and Baraka's contemporaneous change-of-heart: *Dutchman* is filled with the violence of the colonizer, and Baraka would soon react violently *against* that violence at this defining moment in his life and career.

Fanon opens *The Wretched of the Earth* with the chapter, "Concerning Violence," grounding his body of work in a framework of colonial *violence*, "the exploitation of the native by the settler."<sup>12</sup> In a particularly powerful section, Fanon creates a bridge to Baraka's situation, his increasing recognition of white colonizing violence and the rising need to reclaim this violence to destroy these oppressive systems:

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. To wreck the colonial world...<sup>13</sup>

The colonial violence of Baraka's situation can be found in the repression of Blackness, of Black "customs of dress and external life," during his daily life. It is likely Baraka began to see the effects of the white-majority cultural hegemony<sup>14</sup> as a sort of violence while digesting *The Wretched of the Earth* during this period. As such, I read the semiotics of Lula's entrance as no simple accident. Baraka wanted to frame this as a decolonial drama, complete with every implication therein and the framework such a discourse provides.

For an audience familiar with Fanon's contemporaneous work, as Baraka was, the playwright foreshadowed a sort of Fanonian violence, a loaded "Chekhov's gun," by placing the conflict between Lula and Clay in this decolonial framework. In scene 2, we as audience are forced to watch every bit of that expected violence. After slurring him three times with increasingly more malicious intent, Lula begins to refer to Clay as an "Uncle Tom," letting the

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<sup>11</sup> Baraka writes in his autobiography that he composed the entirety of *Dutchman* in a single night while involved with a "drama/playwright's workshop initiated by Edward Albee." Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 275.

<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York, Grove Press, 1963), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> As Baraka was digesting both Frantz Fanon and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) concurrently, the themes of the two may have combined somewhat in his mind: Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony—the cultural dominance of the ruling class—resonates within Fanon's rhetoric of erasure, and, as such, Baraka likely linked the two theories ideologically. The hegemony Gramsci coined is a sort of violence to Fanon. See Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935) for additional information. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*. Translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

insults fly in a particularly nasty tirade that reeks of references to minstrelsy. This appears to push Clay over the edge. Baraka writes:

CLAY: Lula! Lula!

*[She is dancing and turning, still shouting as loud as she can. The drunk too is shouting, and waving his hands wildly]*

LULA: ... you dumb bitch. Why don't you stop it?

*[He rushes half stumbling from his seat, and grabs one of her flailing arms]*

LULA: Let me go! You [B]lack son of a bitch!

*[She struggles against him]*

Let me go! Help!

*[CLAY is dragging her towards her seat, and the drunk seeks to interfere. He grabs CLAY around the shoulders and begins wrestling with him. CLAY clubs the drunk to the floor without releasing LULA, who is still screaming. CLAY finally gets her to the seat and throws her into it]*

CLAY: Now you shut the hell up.

*[Grabbing her shoulders]*

Just shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know anything. So just keep your stupid mouth closed.

LULA: You're afraid of white people. And your father was. Uncle Tom Big Lip!

CLAY: *[Slaps her as hard as he can, across the mouth. LULA's head bangs against the back of the seat. When she raises it again, CLAY slaps her again]*

Now shut up and let me talk.<sup>15</sup>

Spurred by Lula's belligerent behavior and increasingly insulting verbiage, Clay finally engages in the physical violence he's been goaded toward since Lula's entrance. Enter the apple. The connotations here are biblical: Lula dangles the proverbial "forbidden fruit" of vengeful violence before Clay, evoking Eve and her apple. Again, it is likely Baraka was inspired by Fanon to acknowledge the violence of the colonial relationship as originating from the colonizer. Chewing her apple, Lula tempted Clay, luring him toward violence, staging the metaphorical temptation of many Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, those temptations the aforementioned Lincoln Memorial Program pamphlet sought to quell during the March on Washington—the temptation toward violence in response to such oppressive colonial violence. Marking the peak of her attempts at temptation, Lula once again leans on the symbol of the apple. As the pair get dangerously (sexually) close in a train seat at the top of scene 2 while dreaming up scenarios for their immediate future, with Clay kissing her neck, Lula teases, "Then? Well, then we'll go down the street, late night, eating apples and winding very deliberately toward my house."<sup>16</sup> Doubling down on earlier imagery, Baraka here reinforces the connection between apples and Lula's

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<sup>15</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 24-5.

<sup>16</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 17.

“path.” To eat apples is to take oneself closer to Lula’s domain, closer to the violence she as white colonizer embodies. All the while, Lula embodies a truly paradigm-shifting mistake.

The stage has been set, the trap has been laid, and Clay plays directly into Lula’s beckoning hands—at least momentarily. After roughhousing Lula and striking her twice, Clay delivers a gruesome, yet undeniably powerful monologue, finishing with one of the main quandaries of the piece:

CLAY: A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would begin to understand me. You understand? No. I guess not. If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. Just straight two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy [people] turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane.<sup>17</sup>

After what translates as a pause, Clay finds himself “suddenly weary” and with a change of heart. “Ahhh. Shit,” he starts, “Who needs it? I’d rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests.”<sup>18</sup> Starting to bite into the apple Lula’s been dangling before him throughout the play, Clay again engages the metaphorical debate then raging inside many Black Americans, Baraka himself included: essentially, that between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Baraka encapsulates this debate in his autobiography by summarizing each model’s response to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing on September 15, 1963:

King wanted to kneel in the streets and pray, but Malcolm talked bad about nonviolence, saying that all those people who had done such a thing... could only be reached if one spoke the same language that they spoke. That language was not peace and not love, said Malcolm.<sup>19</sup>

In practically the same words, Clay was weighing each option of this debate after he struck Lula in *Dutchman*—Clay, dramatically standing in for so many Black Americans. Ultimately, Clay sighs off the bloodlust and returns to rational discourse, once again encouraging comprehension and understanding on Lula’s part before ultimately moving to leave. Clay, in a sense, chooses the King Jr. route. Of course, Lula stabs and kills Clay four lines later as he attempts to walk out of

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<sup>17</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 186.

the train car, thinking himself victorious. Clay enacts and embodies a sober pacifism in the face of violent temptation; and Baraka kills him at the end of the play. Or, perhaps, Baraka simply demonstrates the fatal futility of such nonviolence. Semiotically, this reads as Baraka’s fierce dismissal of King Jr’s pacifist prescriptions for the decolonial struggle.

Baraka writes in his autobiography that he began to latch onto Malcolm X’s rhetoric around the time of President Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, months before the premiere of *Dutchman*; he writes simply and emphatically, “He *reached* me.”<sup>20</sup> Shortly thereafter, Baraka began bolstering his relationship with Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, traveling to watch him speak, making friends in the community, and ultimately becoming deeply connected to the man and his message. In all, I read *Dutchman* as Baraka’s 1964 love letter to Malcolm X’s brand of decoloniality, a mark of his willingness to claim the Fanonian violence of the colonizer, a precursor to the events of the following years in which everything became all too *real*. *Dutchman* tells the story of colonization, a white body enters a Black man’s space, kills him, then claims the space as a killing field for harvesting more Black bodies – a story Baraka was clearly all too sick of hearing, a story with a narrative he sought to change.

### Linguistic panic and the aporias of French Symbolism

Shortly after writing and premiering *Dutchman*, Baraka found himself deeply influenced by the Harlem riots of July 1964, the “Harlem Rebellion.” In his autobiography, he notes:

After the Harlem Rebellion it was a rush of events, confrontations, tempers, even histories that I witnessed and was a part of. For one thing, the sense of being more and more estranged from [Hettie Jones] was reaching a climax. We were seldom together now; I was hanging out and meeting with mostly young [B]lack dudes.<sup>21</sup>

Baraka goes on to describe some of the more notable confrontations, moments in which he would “put down ‘whitey,’” an act he committed “regularly.”<sup>22</sup> Hettie Jones, then Baraka’s wife, mentions in *her* autobiography that during this period, her husband did “a lot of snarling and cussing out of white folks, and punchin’ people in the mouths.”<sup>23</sup> Baraka began to claim the violence of the oppressor shortly after *Dutchman*, and this violent sentiment reached its boiling point when Baraka published “The Revolutionary Theatre” in July 1965’s edition of *Liberator*, five months after the death of Malcolm X<sup>24</sup> – an event that deeply revolutionized Baraka’s

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<sup>20</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 193.

<sup>23</sup> Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*. (New York, Dutton, 1990), 286.

<sup>24</sup> It’s worth noting that “The Revolutionary Theatre” was originally commissioned by the *New York Times* in December of the previous year, only to be denied publication; it’s almost fitting that the piece was published after Malcolm X’s death as a standard-bearer for Baraka’s ensuing actions.

sentiment and lived experience. Baraka recalls the moment vividly in his autobiography (even recalling his outfit and the attendees in the excised portion):

February 21, 1965, a Sunday, Nellie and I and the two girls were at the Eighth Street Bookstore... Suddenly, Leroy McLucas came in. He was weeping. "Malcolm is dead! Malcolm is dead! Malcolm's been killed!" He wept, repeating it over and over. I was stunned. I felt stupid, ugly, useless. Downtown in my mix-matched family and my maximum leader/teacher shot dead while we bullshitted and pretended.<sup>25</sup>

I find it powerful and noteworthy here that Baraka chooses to focus on the interracial nature of his activities at the time of his mentor's death. He seems to feel a tremendous amount of guilt in recollecting the event and acknowledging that truth. This bit of hindsight supplements the sentiment of "The Revolutionary Theatre," an incendiary and deeply racialized document, a true manifesto, which prescribes a theatre before which "white men will cower... because it hates them."<sup>26</sup> Violence continues throughout the manifesto, including cries to "teach [white men] their deaths" and to "crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor;"<sup>27</sup> the order to "Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked;"<sup>28</sup> and the mantra that "the Revolutionary Theatre... will be out to destroy [Americans] and whatever they believe is real."<sup>29</sup> "The Revolutionary Theatre" smoldered within the pages of *Liberator*, fueled by a bitter hatred of all things white. His rhetoric hated whiteness, raged against it, sought to destroy it. How could he love his white friends? Or fall asleep nightly, holding his white wife close, protecting her from any misfortune or harm? Jones reflects on this in his autobiography:

The Muslim example, particularly and most inspirationally the role of Malcolm X, supported my attack. But still I was married to a white woman; I still had many white friends. I still thought very highly of innumerable white intellectuals and artists...<sup>30</sup>

Shortly after the death of Malcolm X and the final publication of "The Revolutionary Theatre," Baraka began to struggle with the dissonance between his written word and his lived experience. Engaging the rhetoric of Fanon once more, Baraka's half-measures were insufficient tools for overthrowing the colonizing forces at large; or, in Fanon's words, "you do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside down... if you have not decided from the very beginning... to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing."<sup>31</sup> It's likely these words

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<sup>25</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 4.

<sup>27</sup> Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 4.

<sup>28</sup> Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 4.

<sup>29</sup> Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 6.

<sup>30</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 185.

<sup>31</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.



were burning in Baraka’s mind as he writhed with internal debate in the summer and fall of 1965.

I argue this moment of struggle constitutes what James Harding would label a *linguistic panic*. In coining the term in his text, *Cutting Performances*, Harding raises this defining question: “Of what value are words if they do not connect with a corresponding physical reality?”<sup>32</sup> A linguistic panic, then, is that felt experience when one’s words “do not connect with a corresponding physical reality.” Restating an earlier conclusion: Baraka’s words did not connect with his corresponding physical reality. Here, I find Pierre Quillard’s fin-du-siecle Symbolist play, *The Girl With Cut-Off Hands* (1891), offers a fascinating lens by which to examine Amiri Baraka’s lived experience during this radically recreative period from 1965-1967. Quillard’s short, six-page script is a bricolage of dialogue in verse and disembodied textual narration, in which a nameless and endlessly devout Girl succumbs to her greatest temptation. After praying to God and decrying her mortal coil, wishing instead for a purely formal existence, a knight (or “muffled crash of scattered armor”)<sup>33</sup> slips quietly into her chamber. The knight begins to “burn her hands with brutal and incestuous caresses” in a moment of forbidden bliss.<sup>34</sup> Immediately after preaching her ideals in the understood (omni)presence of the Father, the Girl commits sins of the flesh, receiving burning kisses from a nameless knight. Her words no longer correspond to her physical reality. The Girl is in crisis. She is experiencing linguistic panic. As linguistic panic breaks the liberal paradigm of language and supplants it with a vacuum of expression, it often catalyzes anti-liberal, avant-garde action. Almost unsurprisingly, then (truly only with this understanding), the Girl acts physically, *violently* against the sites of her sin: she approaches her Servant, who “polishes the large swords and the panoplies” and commands him, poetically:

Old man, I’ve my wits about me. Take the sword  
Of Justice – the infallible sword, cast  
Seven times into the Holy Oil and the baptismal fire,  
And which is not defiled, like man,  
By Original Sin. Seize the Purifier.  
“And if your arm is devoured by ulcers, may it perish,”  
Said the Master whose voice awaits me.  
Wash with a flow of crimson steel, slice off my hands!<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> James Harding, *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 132.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Quillard, “The Girl With Cut-Off Hands: A Passion Play,” translated by Jacques F. Hovis. *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1976): 123-128, at 125.

<sup>34</sup> Quillard, “The Girl With Cut-Off Hands,” 125.

<sup>35</sup> Quillard, “The Girl With Cut-Off Hands,” 125.

Working to restore a sense of balance between her spoken and embodied experience, the Girl severs the incompatible pieces of herself. So, too, did Amiri Baraka sever the incompatible pieces of himself after publishing “The Revolutionary Theatre.” Like the Girl in Quillard’s play, Baraka chose to sever the sites of his sin, to cut off any and all white appendages to bring linguistic balance back to his life. He hacked at this whiteness until none was left. In 1965, as Hettie Jones recalls in her memoir, Baraka arrived home one day and “handed [her] a piece of paper on which he’d typed, because he couldn’t say it: ‘I think we should talk about a divorce,’” and the two separated shortly thereafter.<sup>36</sup> In the coming months and years, Baraka denounced any and all white friendships that remained and continued to rage against white individuals and the white establishment. Additionally, Baraka began to embody and profess a certain Islamic facade, influenced greatly by his partnership with the late Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. This Islamic shift reified Baraka’s anti-whiteness by engaging the Christian-Muslim binary. As he writes in his autobiography, in 1967 Baraka was given the name “Ameer Barakat” (meaning “blessed prince”) by Hajj Heesham, a Black Muslim that had made the pilgrimage to Mecca; later that year, after further Muslim guidance, he finalized his transformation by changing his name, *becoming* Amiri Baraka.<sup>37</sup> This performative shift marked the end of his metamorphosis, the severance of the white sites of his sin.

During this liminal period, Baraka also wrote and produced *A Black Mass*, which premiered in May 1966—a play that marks the literary end of his metamorphosis, his transition from “[B]lack Baudelaire” to Black Muslim, a play, I argue, that demonstrates Baraka’s use and usurpation of the conventions and elements of French Symbolism, his forced occupation of the form, Baraka as *anti-colonizer*. Given how much this play *reads* like a Symbolist drama (with its erratic, dramaturgically impossible stage directions; rhetorical emphasis on purity, although intentionally inverted; and its deeply religious overtones), a Symbolist reading is appropriate and effective. Before continuing to apply Symbolism to aid our understanding of Baraka’s metamorphosis, Baraka here proverbially begs us to apply *him* to French Symbolism. Baraka’s reclamation of Symbolist means of expression draws our eyes to the “aporias” of the form, to borrow my phrasing from Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s *The Consciousness Industry* (1974).<sup>38</sup> The primary aporia of the form, as Baraka highlights in *A Black Mass*, is that Symbolism would not traditionally be allowed him as a form of expression or reception in its original paradigm. The Symbolists followed Baudelaire in their pursuit of a theatre that was what Roland Barthes called a “purely formal avatar,”<sup>39</sup> an art-form that would signify (semiotically) the essence of poetry to any receiver in both text and performance. Some playwrights like Alfred Jarry engaged this concept esoterically through thoroughly textual pieces. Others (including Jarry) achieved this via performance by using puppets in place of actors, or by placing their actors behind scrims (as

<sup>36</sup> Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones*, 225.

<sup>37</sup> Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 267.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry; on Literature, Politics and the Media*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 29.

was the case for Quillard’s production of *Girl With Cut-Off Hands*). Whatever the method, Symbolists worked to establish a direct line between their works and the imaginations of their audiences. However, with some critical reflection it becomes clear that the Symbolists, like many of the early avant-gardists, failed to consider the affect and embodied experience of race.

Engaging the written work of W.E.B. Du Bois, specifically his concept of *double consciousness*, it becomes clear that a purely poetic, aesthetic experience is theoretically impossible for any Black-bodied audience member or reader. After pondering the concept in an early essay, “The Strivings of the Negro People” (1896), very early in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois defines what he calls a double consciousness, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt.”<sup>40</sup> A Black American’s existence is duplicitous, Du Bois writes, for they are always considering their actions from two points of view. In applying Du Bois’s concept to Baraka and the Symbolists, I argue that double consciousness can be applied at least similarly to Black citizens of fin-du-siecle France and Europe at large, given the similar hegemonic societal frameworks. In light of Du Bois’s concept, Baraka and I ask the begging question: how could any Black-bodied audience member have a pure experience—poetic, aesthetic, or otherwise—when surrounded by white bodies in a French playing space? Although more distant, this question can be asked of any performance-based experience by a Black citizen: even if minoritarian members of a community were to separate themselves temporarily from the outside society to stage such a production, the inevitable double-consciousness inherent in the experience of producing a “white” play or any play with such overtly white genealogies would still be afflicting. Similarly, the concept applies even to Black-bodied readers. At no point is a Black citizen free of this double consciousness. As such, Baraka and his peers would not be allowed a Symbolist means of expression—not in the 1890s, not in the 1960s, not in any hegemonic world with our white, Christian, Eurocentric norms and mores. So, in a Promethean way, he stole it. Baraka appropriated the Symbolist form, and in *A Black Mass* he created a Black utopia, in which whiteness is flipped and toppled, a world in which his Symbolist experience is possible.

In her treatment of Symbolist drama, Anna Balakian emphasizes the form’s infatuation with nothingness. She describes the Symbolist author’s mood as “the artist’s confrontation of the void, ‘*le néant*,’ ‘nothingness,’ and of its accompanying themes of fear, solitude, the passage of time, the awaiting of death.”<sup>41</sup> In his treatment of Baudelaire’s theatre, Barthes writes of the proto-Symbolist’s relationship to the void as one of opportunity: eschewing theatricality, Baudelaire instead “substitute[d] concept for object, replace[d] the tavern of *L’Ivrogne* [an unfinished play] by the idea, the ‘atmosphere’ of the tavern, offer[ed] the pure concept of

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<sup>40</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903): 2. Hosted digitally by University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, <http://sites.middlebury.edu/soan105tiger/files/2014/08/Du-Bois-The-Souls-of-Black-Folks.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement*, 124.

military pomp instead of the materiality of flags or uniforms.”<sup>42</sup> Baudelaire engaged a sense of metaphysical internality, an endless “void” of something like nothingness, as the stage for his semiotic theatre. Following in Baudelaire’s footsteps, many Symbolist plays from the 1890s place their action in similar dramaturgically impossible voids or spaces of deep, nearly impenetrable darkness onstage to achieve theatrical or internal chiaroscuro, stark contrast with deep emotional affect.<sup>43</sup> During his occupation of the Symbolist form, Baraka engaged its elements and conventions through *A Black Mass* to usurp the binaries by which it defined itself. Whereas the Symbolists once used “nothingness” or “darkness” as the negative from which to separate a positive (white, Christian, Eurocentric) essence, Baraka replaced this happenstance nothingness, darkness with purposeful, intentional *Blackness*.

### ***A Black Mass (1966)***

Simplifying my earlier methodology somewhat, my treatment of *A Black Mass* is concerned singularly with its revolutionary representations of Blackness and whiteness, the manners in which Baraka upsets the traditional Symbolist hierarchy to replace whiteness’s connotations of purity and cleanliness and goodness and godliness during the play. The very first two words of the play’s stage directions are “Jet blackness.”<sup>44</sup> Recalling the Symbolist tradition, Baraka has placed us in the void. He notes that the jet blackness may have a red or blue glow, and that it is filled with “Soft peaceful music (Sun-Ra).”<sup>45</sup> This is not a cold nothingness. Baraka’s jet blackness is warm and welcoming, womblike with its nurturing support. The stage directions continue as three decidedly Black magicians begin to appear diffusely as the lights come up. The first uttered line of the play, delivered by Nasafi, opens “These are the beauties of creation... The beauties and strength of our [B]lackness, of our [B]lack arts.”<sup>46</sup> In this world of warm blackness, Baraka introduces the usurped binary: Blackness is immediately equated with strength and beauty, supplanting the hegemony of Baraka’s lived experience. This concept, now introduced, is only emboldened time and time again throughout the play. After Jacoub engages the Symbolist void in his descriptions of “black endless space” on pages 3-4, when he introduces his aspirations of creation to his peers, Nasafi gently rebukes him, praising him as “[B]lack and full of humanity,” but warning that his current actions are a move “into the emptiness of godlessness.”<sup>47</sup> Baraka’s phrasing here works doubly, both to reinforce the connection between Blackness and goodness, even godliness, and to remove any unspoken connection between the concepts of blackness and emptiness. Again, the “jet blackness,” the nebula spawning the actions of this play, is not an emptiness – it is a supportive blackness full of possibility.

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<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, See Rachilde’s *Madame la Mort* (1891) and *The Crystal Spider* (1892), as well as the entr’actes from Alfred Jarry’s *Caesar Antichrist* (1895).

<sup>44</sup> Amiri Baraka, *A Black Mass*, (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 5.

After Jacoub succeeds in his godless pursuits to create a being “in love with time,”<sup>48</sup> the audience is presented with the horrifying image of the grotesque beast. The stage directions that detail its appearance describe it as “absolutely cold white with red lizard-devil mask which covers the whole head.”<sup>49</sup> Disturbingly, after the creature appears, it mutters, “I white. White. White. White.”<sup>50</sup> From this point forward, the monster’s only utterances are guttural “whites” with the occasional pronoun. Extrapolating the binary Baraka proposes in the play’s opening lines, the monster’s appearance takes the inverted essence of whiteness to the extreme. Not only do its descriptions effectively emphasize the monster’s horrifying whiteness, convincing *me*, a white reader of its disgusting traits, but by speaking only through groans of its worst feature, the beast is forced to constantly reify its own horrible existence. The beast is monstrous whiteness made manifest, and it constantly calls attention to its grotesque qualities, reinforcing Baraka’s binary to an almost comical extent. A couple pages later, the monster infects Tiila with its whiteness, and she transforms into her own white monster onstage. The stage directions capture this moment thrillingly:

*[The WOMAN stumbles toward Jacoub, her face draining of color. Her voice grows coarse, she screams, covering herself with her robes. She emerges, slowly, from within the folds of the garment, her entire body shuddering, and beginning to do the small hop the beast did. Suddenly she throws back the robes, and she is white, or white blotches streak her face and hair. She laughs in a deadly cross between white and [B]lack. Her words have turned to grunts and she moves like an animal robot].*<sup>51</sup>

The moment reads like a black-and-white horror movie written for the stage. The usurping of whiteness with Blackness has become almost melodramatic – it is so accepted that we take it for granted and begin to point fun at it. Eventually, the two monsters kill or infect everyone in the scene as Jacoub tries to convert them, falling himself before the end of the play. The final lines of the play are attributed to a disembodied narrator, who reads:

And so Brothers and Sisters, these beasts are still loose in the world. Still, they spit their hideous cries. There are beasts in our world, Brothers and Sisters. There are beasts in our world. Let us find them and slay them. Let us lock them in their caves. Let us declare the Holy War. The Jihad. Or we cannot deserve to live. Izm-el-Azam. Izm-el Azam. Izm-el-Azam. Izm-el-Azam.

*[Repeated until all lights black]*  
*Black.*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Baraka, *A Black Mass*, 20.

This final narration shatters the distance between the world of the play and the world of the audience, collapsing them into one and calling for action in a very Brechtian manner. Additionally, the final line, “Black,” reads almost like an Austinian performative utterance, an attempt to will Baraka’s proposed binary into existence. Perhaps Baraka lacked the appropriate ethos required for such a speech act, but as the silence rings out in the void at the end of this play, the playwright ultimately, certainly comes up short. Baraka’s jet-[B/b]lack utopia and the world into which the audience or reader is hypothetically about to leave are decidedly not one-in-the-same. Outside the bindings of the text or the walls of the theatre, whiteness still topples Blackness in the hierarchy of purity. Whiteness is still goodness, and Baraka is far closer to the Beast in society’s eyes than a peer. However, I can’t help but think that Baraka found a certain sense of agency in willing his utopias into existence on the stage.

### ***Dutchman* (1967)**

Interestingly, Baraka’s *Dutchman* offers us a duplicitous case study, as it was remounted in 1967 as a film, directed by Anthony Harvey, with a screenplay written by Baraka himself. In concluding, I would like to call attention to two revisions in the later filmed edition: the expressionist moments of chiaroscuro in the opening and final moments of the piece, and the added physical violence in Clay’s iconic monologue. These formal differences between the original 1964 script and the film offer evidence to Baraka’s transition and transformation over the years detailed in this essay. Importantly, yet almost unnoticeable in its ubiquity, the filmed *Dutchman* fades in from black onto a highly contrasting subway scene, chiaroscuro in action. This ensuing footage of “the flying underbelly of the city”<sup>53</sup> is decidedly different from the starkly realist shots of the interior of the train car and Clay and Lula’s confrontation. The footage, what could almost be called B-roll, looks more like a German Expressionist film from the 1920s than a mid-century American drama. This apparent homage to German Expressionism continues in the film’s climax, as Lula stabs Clay in the gut with her hidden knife. As the two struggle, we see intense close-ups of the pair’s faces, with Lula looking almost exactly like the pale, wide-eyed Jane in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and Clay’s pained expressions recalling those of Freder in *Metropolis* (1927). After Lula enlists the help of her fellow passengers to dispose of Clay’s body, the camera cuts to more B-roll akin to those at the top of the film – except the earliest of these shots is off-kilter, with the action of the oncoming train presented at a strange, left-leaning angle. A few moments later, the film ends by fading to black, framing the piece within (intentional) blackness, much like *A Black Mass* the year before. Semiotically, I read this as Baraka’s metatheatrical usurpation of his own earlier narrative: although the story told is one of colonization, wherein the white woman conquers the Black man and his domain, Baraka frames this story within a realm of all-encompassing [B/b]lackness. Where the violence in his 1964 *Dutchman* was the colonizer’s, in the 1967 film, I argue Baraka

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<sup>53</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 1.

is signifying that *he* has the agency, *he* now commands the colonizer’s violence in an attempt to turn it against him.

Moreover, during Clay’s powerfully violent penultimate monologue, Baraka seems to have added additional moments of physical violence to the 1967 edition of the piece. In the 1964 script, aside from the moments in which Clay forces Lula into her seat or otherwise dictates her movements, there is only a singular moment of violence: that aforementioned moment in which Clay slaps Lula, then slaps her again as she turns to look at him.<sup>54</sup> In the filmed piece, Clay does slap her in these two moments, powerfully, with the full intent the script dictates—but he also acts violently in the moment earlier, during the line “I could rip that *Times* right out of his hand...”<sup>55</sup> In the filmed edition, Clay *does* rip the paper from the bystander’s hands: he tears it to shreds. Most shockingly, Clay slaps Lula a third, unexpected and shocking—perhaps unscripted—time during that violent monologue. If this *was* intentional, or called for in Baraka’s screenplay, it appears to be a powerful tool for dramatic irony. Baraka, the playwright, *knew* Clay’s impending fate. He knew Clay had only a few moments left and the power to toss in another blow; knowing Clay’s about to be stabbed and killed, *who wouldn’t* take the opportunity to briefly take vengeance in one’s final moments of agency? Again, this moment evidences Baraka’s newfound artistic agency and his ability to wield metatheatrical tools to support his intention. While these conclusions can’t be assumed applicable to the entirety of Baraka’s life, I believe these avant-garde close readings of *Dutchman* and *A Black Mass* clearly demonstrate Baraka’s development during his 1965-7 period of self-identification and creation, Baraka’s attempt to realize Fanon’s philosophy: “decolonization is the veritable creation of new man.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 30.

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