

# Queering the Politics of Black Respectability in Plays of the Black Revolutionary Theatre

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## Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, few African American theatre plays overtly featured Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or other Queer or Questioning characters. Since then, queer representations in theatre and performance (and more so in film and television) have become more visible as American society becomes more diverse and therefore open to and accepting of queer(er) Black narratives. For example, contemporary playwrights such as Shirlene Holmes, Sharon Bridgforth, Robert O’Hara, Donnetta Lavinia Grays, Tarell Alvin McCraney, Djola Branner, and others delimit their narratives by resisting the constraints of heterocentric notions of who their Black characters can be in terms of gender and sexuality. But what of the plays of the most significant Black arts movement second only to the Harlem Renaissance? Are there dramatic narratives of the Black Arts Movement, and more specifically The Black Revolutionary Theatre, that include LGBTQ+ characters? If so, what are the limitations and possibilities of the extant representations of Black queerness in a 1960s Black revolutionary context? In this article, I apply a Black queer feminist lens to analyze two plays that best answer these historical questions. In doing so, I evince the ways in which the Black Revolutionary Theatre illustrates what I term a *conditional embrace* of Black queerness, thereby cementing historical markers of a Black queer theatre chronology, if not a proper genealogy.

First, I am compelled to address the inherent homophobia that ensured the general absence of Black queer characters in narratives during a time of immense creativity and productivity in Black Theatre. Clearly, this absence reflects the limits of representing racial, gender, and sexual identities in African American Theatre without considering the many possibilities and intersections of Black personhood. For example, Ed Bullins (1935-2021) represented the Black urban working-class experience because he wanted those narratives to be seen and heard as opposed to the more “respectable” Black intellectual experience. Similarly, in his early plays, Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) elucidated the conflict of the Black intellectual, cisgender, heterosexual male living between two worlds: Black and white. Both of these identities of study, if you will, are valid, necessary, and interesting; they are worthy of theatrical representation. Black queer identities are also worthy of study.

In his 1964 play *The Baptism*—a one-act first produced at the Writers’ Stage Theatre in New York City—Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) positions Black straight bodies and Black queer bodies within one of the most recognizable African American cultural spaces—the Black

Christian church. In a sense, a cross-cultural exchange occurs through this encounter, and a narrative imbued with what Harold Cruse calls Baraka's "shock-symbolism", arises as the playwright interrogates the religiosity of the Black church.<sup>1</sup> Bullins's 1965 play *Clara's Ole Man*, a one-act set in a lower-class neighborhood in a home in Pittsburgh, is an exposé of Black straight bodies and Black queer bodies as they inhabit a space of economic poverty and moral bankruptcy. Neither play has received extensive study in terms of queer identity and representation as the playwrights' intent was not necessarily to validate the presence of Black lesbian and gay people.

Playwrights like Baraka and Bullins used theatre to illustrate what it meant psychologically, economically, and emotionally to be a Black American during the Black Freedom Movement and the Vietnam War. As is often the case in playwriting, they drew characters in their own image and riffed on characters who were dissimilar to them, using queer characters to further their mission to produce art by, about, and for Black people. The problem is that while Black queer characters are featured in works such as Bullins's *Clara's Ole Man* and Baraka's *The Toilet* and *The Baptism*, these plays do not treat queer characters as if they were productive, useful citizens in the Black community. Instead, they are presented as plot devices to shock the audience into listening to their message. While one could easily argue that these representations are one-dimensional stereotypes, they are also two of the few theatrical representations of the existence of Black queer people in Black communities in the 1960s. The respectability politics of the time within and outside of the Black Revolutionary Theatre movement would not allow space for queer(er) stories.

## The Black Revolutionary Theatre

Playwrights of the Black Arts Movement, and more specifically, the Black Revolutionary Theatre movement—which spanned from 1965 to 1975—had a significant impact on African American Theatre.<sup>2</sup> In his thesis, Mikell Pinkney rightly observes that the Harlem Renaissance was the progenitor to the Black Revolutionary Theatre movement. He writes: "The concept of Revolution has certain similarities to the concept of Renaissance" with "protest and revolt" being key elements of the movement.<sup>3</sup> Pinkney makes clear that the plays written and produced during this time were not the first to incorporate protest and revolt: "This practice can be traced back to the first known plays written and performed by African-Americans."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 1967), 69. Cruse, here, is referring to Baraka's acclaimed *Dutchman* (1964), yet said "shock symbolism" is present in most of his plays.

<sup>2</sup> See Mikell Pinkney's "Recovering Dramatic Losses: Reading Ntozake Shange's *Spell #7* Through African-American Dramatic Traditions" (Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1992), 88. Pinkney writes: "An estimated four hundred plays were produced by nearly two hundred playwrights. The overwhelming majority of these plays were unashamedly propaganda for the large cause of the Black Arts – Black Power alliance" (88).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

A movement whose overarching social intent was to cultivate and inspire Black agency and power through an artistic vision, the Black Arts Movement “[proposed] a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic... [and proposed] a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” to the dominant Eurocentric theatre art.<sup>5</sup> Despite this “radical reordering”—a feat the movement achieved—Black queer voices were few and far in between, if present at all. To better understand the lack of Black queer stories during this movement, homophobia—that is, the fear of gays and lesbians, is a key premise of the masculinist, heterocentric movement. Generally, there appears to be an absence of Black and queer representations during this time of artistic productivity, but, upon closer observation, Black queer stories are present, however limited in depth. These narratives and characters, by simply existing, resist the rhetoric and politics of respectability of both the Black bourgeoisie, which the movement, itself, was talking back to, *as well as* the Black Revolutionary Theatre Movement.

The kinds of lesbian and gay narratives and representations that emerged during the Black Arts Movement seem to situate queerness as “unBlack” and destructive to the stability of Black communities. Homophobia is not uncommon in Black communities and it is not hard to believe that Black Revolutionary Theatre leaders held anti-queer views<sup>6</sup>; still, Black gay and lesbian characters play significant roles in Black Revolutionary Theatre plays. More often caricatures than realistic representations of Black queer people, their inclusion in stories of Black life, and, more notably, stories of Black empowerment speak to a recognition of their existence, a recognition which is implicitly stated in Bullins’s realistic and brutal play *Clara’s Ole Man* and Amiri Baraka’s absurdist read of the Black church, *The Baptism*.

When reading these plays, messages of inclusion and exclusion are evident, the result of which is a warring dialectic between what Black is and what Black ain’t.<sup>7</sup> By featuring characters who are lesbian and gay, despite the inaccuracy of their depictions and the costs of those representations, these plays and playwrights, intentionally or unintentionally, support the fact that queerness is as endemic to Blackness as straightness is. The failure to explicitly establish this fact is a result of a temporal conservatism that permeated even the radical Black Theatre and, perhaps, resulted in its demise. It is my view that when queer Black people’s voices

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement” in *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1968), 28.

<sup>6</sup> See E. Patrick Johnson’s “Manifest Faggotry: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture” (48-75) in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003). In this chapter, Johnson unpacks the homophobic sentiments of Eldridge Cleaver, Imamu Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, and Eddie Murphy to illustrate that “[i]n all of their performances these men’s target of ridicule is the effete Black gay man” (51). He writes further, “The representation of effeminate homosexuality as disempowering is at the heart of the politics of hegemonic Blackness. For to be ineffectual is the most damaging thing one can be in the fight against oppression” (Ibid).

<sup>7</sup> Here, I am invoking Marlon Riggs’s documentary film “Black Is...Black Ain’t” (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1995). In it, Riggs engages with the challenges and of being Black and queer in the African American community. Although the context is the 1990s, the challenges of acceptance still exist.

and experiences are omitted from Black cultural production, be it theatre, literature, politics, or otherwise, the product, itself, loses the potential participation of the very people it claims to represent. All Black spectators, queer and straight, are needed to sustain a radical Black Theatre, then and now. When one feels excluded from their own culture, why would they opt in to bear witness to it without resentment? Why would they bear witness at all? Why would they support a theatre that misrepresents them? Throughout this article, I assert that *Clara's Ole Man* and *The Baptism* show characters whose race and sexuality cross boundaries of Black identity leaving the very notion of Black community at a crossroads.

### **The Politics of Black Respectability**

The Black Revolutionary Theatre movement positioned homosexuality on the bottommost rung of its value system and in direct opposition to its politics of Black respectability. In *Clara's Ole Man* and *The Baptism*, Black queer characters reside materially, intellectually, and morally in the lowest class; they are represented as undesirables. Though Bullins and Jones/Baraka rightly complicate a Black middle-class politics of Black respectability, they depict lesbian and gay characters with little care or respect.

The politics of Black respectability can be defined as the understood rules of deportment that dictate Black American identity, social behavior, and collective consciousness. According to Kali Gross, this notion of respectability became important to Black Americans after the emancipation of slavery to counter stereotypical images and conceptions of Black people as ignorant, ill cultured, and immoral.<sup>8</sup> In *Righteous Discontent* (1993), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham historicizes Black women's contributions to social movement in and through the Black church in the late 19<sup>th</sup> thru the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Higginbotham argues that Black women in the church had to balance their conservatism and radicalism by espousing a politics of respectability that paralleled that of the "virtuous" white American woman in order to encourage and demonstrate (to the dominant white culture) the "progress" of Black American communities. Dwight McBride (reading Gross) writes "[t]he politics of Black respectability can be seen as laying the foundation for the necessary disavowal of Black queers in dominant representations of the African American community, of African American history, and of African American studies."<sup>9</sup>

The disavowal of Black queers and Black respectability politics are connected. Cultural historian Tavia Nyong'o relates the disavowal of queerness in Black American society to

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<sup>8</sup> Kali N. Gross, "Examining the Politics of Black Respectability in African American Studies" in *Almanac* 43, no. 28 (University of Pennsylvania, April 1, 1997), 1. <http://www.upenn.edu/almanac/v43/n28/benchmrk.html> Accessed December 31, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Dwight McBride, "Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 71.

bourgeois respectability politics “which censure minstrel buffoonery on the one hand [and] on the other now reprimand hip hop and baggy jeans, Black English and ghetto fabulousness, and in general place Black working-class culture beneath its contempt.”<sup>10</sup> For Nyong’o, Black respectability is a concept of the bourgeoisie, an elite collective that adheres to value systems that promote class distinctions. Therefore, queer identity and behavior, from a bourgeois perspective, exemplify a lower class, or “Black working-class culture.”<sup>11</sup> The term bourgeoisie—as I understand it—includes people with the most influence on (and power in) revolutionary movements.

### *Clara’s Ole Man*

Ed Bullins’s *Clara’s Ole Man* premiered in 1965 at Firehouse Repertory Theater in San Francisco, California.<sup>12</sup> For it, he earned a Vernon Rice Drama Desk Award. Scholar Henry D. Miller observes that the play is wrought with “dramatic figures” that “seem to have stunted perceptions that are related to the insular nature of their world”<sup>13</sup> which, in this play, is “the kitchen of a South Philadelphia slum apartment” in a poor Black community.<sup>14</sup> The play centers on a dysfunctional lesbian couple comprised of Big Girl and Clara. Baby Girl, Big Girl’s mentally-challenged sister, also resides in the space and makes her presence known through unintelligible, but meaning-filled utterances.

Big Girl hovers over the play, even by way of the title; *she* is Clara’s “ole man.” Her gender expression is masculine and her depiction in the play as hard drinking, controlling, aggressive, and mannish are characteristics of a Black butch stereotype—a common misrepresentation of Black lesbian womanhood. By stamping Big Girl as Clara’s “ole man”, the playwright tells us how we should view her—as like a man or mannish in character. Lisa M. Anderson writes, “Lesbian visibility has largely been the visibility of the butch, who is seen because she does not embody the cultural standard of female position. In this, the butch identity is transgressive; it defies the cultural construction of ‘woman’ in dress, manner,

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<sup>10</sup> Tavia Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 114-15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* For Nyong’o, the lack of inclusion of queer people in African American history is a continuation of a legacy of exclusion. To illustrate this, *The Amalgamation Waltz* highlights a case study of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century queer figure, Peter Sewally, a Black man who posed/passed as a female prostitute on the streets of New York City. Soliciting sexual encounters with a man assumed to be a biological female named Mary Jones, men would often engage in sexual acts with Sewally who, in the act, stole their wallets—an offense for which he was imprisoned. Nyong’o writes, “Clearly, a historiographical preference for depicting the Black community as unified in struggle, normative in sexuality, and steadfastly pursuing the social respectability unfairly denied them by white racism has made little space for stories like Sewally’s.”

<sup>12</sup> In 1969, he co-founded The New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. *Clara’s Ole Man* was one of three plays produced there that year; the others were *How Do You Do?* and *Dialect Determinism (or The Rally)*.

<sup>13</sup> Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 215.

<sup>14</sup> Kimberley Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54.

work...”<sup>15</sup> In one sense, *Big Girl* is a different kind of female representation of Black womanhood pervasive in the theatre of the time. In another sense, she represents one kind of Black lesbian, one who is poor, uneducated, and violent when her property and territory (read Clara) are under threat. Bullins’s specificity in depicting the physical space of the home speaks to his concern about the impact of poverty as a byproduct of systemic racism, but he paints *Big Girl* into a corner to make his point and misses the opportunity to represent a nuanced Black lesbian character who is a product of poverty and violence. That said, *Big Girl* did not have to be a woman, the character could have been a man. However, that choice would dampen the shocking reveal that Clara is in a relationship with another woman.

Cultural theorists, such as K. Anthony Appiah, have argued that culture determines values and practices held by societies, especially in of-color communities. He suggests that there are often shared beliefs that shape the culture of communities and determine what it values and devalues, what it avows and disavows. Miller rightly asserts that “[the 1960s] was a period when homosexuality was not a frequent topic of discussion in Negro life. Bullins subtitled this work *A Play of Lost Innocence*, and when it was first presented, the revelation of the lesbian relationship in the play gave the work a shock value that it most likely would not have today.”<sup>16</sup> The reveal of *Big Girl* and Clara’s relationship would not be shocking to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience as same-sex/gender relationships, families, and civil rights is now a “frequent topic of discussion” in the United States. With the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that it is unconstitutional to deny same-sex couples the right to marry, straight and queer members of Black communities are in dialogue (and often debate) around issues of sexuality. The outcome of the discourse will undoubtedly determine what Black community looks like in the future as more and more Black LGBTQ+ people claim their racial and sexual identities as equally significant in their life and art.

In many ways, Bullins’s *Big Girl* is already out; no one, not even the playwright, can drag her out of the closet; she is not in one. Her size and butchness take up space. She makes herself visible by using bawdy language, by openly abusing alcohol, by challenging men in her space, and by dominating the femmes in her home. *Big Girl* is a bully who does and says whatever she wants to. She teaches her developmentally delayed sister *Baby Girl* curse words and refers to her as a “little bitch” because she gets a kick out of it. She exists as a colonizer who maintains tight control over her subjects, using oppressive tactics to dominate and humiliate them. For example, when Clara brings Jack, a marine romantically interested in her, *Big Girl* tells him a story about how horribly Clara smelled when they first met because Clara, unknowingly, was carrying a dead baby inside of her. Here, Bullins positions *Big Girl* as repulsed by heterosexuality and motherhood, viewing reproduction (forced or consensual) as

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, 214.

always already a failure. Big Girl, and homosexuals like her, therefore, can be read as threats to the nuclear Black family.

Clara, on the other hand, is painted as the non-monogamous, manipulative, bisexual femme character—another stereotype of queer identity. As mentioned, she has invited Jack to her and Big Girl’s home under the auspice that her “ole man” would be at work. Unbeknownst to her, Big Girl has taken the day off. Although Clara’s intentions are unclear, Jack’s plan is to have sex with Clara. Without clarification, the audience, too, assumes that Clara desires to have sex with Jack. Later, she explains to Big Girl: “I only wanted to talk to somebody. I don’t have anybody to talk to.”<sup>17</sup> One would assume that Clara can talk to her companion, Big Girl, but Jack’s brand of communication (dialogue) is notably different from Big Girl’s dictatorial approach. Perhaps Clara wants to talk to someone who is not verbally abusive to her; perhaps she is interested in the learned manner in which Jack speaks; perhaps she does want to have sex with him. Regardless of her intent, there is room for nuance in her character development, although it is not present in the dialogue.

As anticipated, the play takes a violent turn when Big Girl discovers what Clara has done and, moreover, concluded what Jack’s intentions are. Big Girl, as is her nature, becomes furious telling Jack, “Clara’s ole man is home now.”<sup>18</sup> Bullins has Jack become so disgusted by the revelation that he exits offstage and vomits in the backyard.<sup>19</sup> His vomiting is symbolic of his distaste and discomfort with same-sex desire. This is a questionable response, in my opinion, but it is revelatory. If my theory that the playwright is always somewhere in the play is true, perhaps Bullins was documenting his own distaste for lesbian relationships at that time. (Notably, poet and activist Pat Parker, who was married to Bullins from 1962 to 1964, lived her life as an out lesbian in the late 1960s after a subsequent marriage ended.)

Nonetheless, Jack leaves the home and never re-enters. He is to be punished for his affront to the domineering Big Girl. Clara knows that Jack will be beaten by Big Girl’s henchmen, Bama and Hoss, for this and she pleads with Big Girl not to hurt him. The dialogue suggests that Clara has brought men home before and the result has been the same. The beating can be heard from offstage and Big Girl instructs Clara to get herself ready to go out to the movies. Clara says, “Please, B.G., please. Not that. It’s not his fault!” Quickly, Big Girl yells, “DO LIKE I SAY! DO LIKE I WANT YOU TO DO!”<sup>20</sup> Clara submits to Big Girl’s will and they exit. The play ends with Baby Girl screaming curse words, while the stage directions

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<sup>17</sup> Ed Bullins, “Clara’s Ole Man,” in *Five Plays by Ed Bullins*, ed. Ed Bullins (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), 280.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Miller rightly questions Bullins’s decision to portray Jack as oblivious to Clara and Big Girl’s intimate relationship, due to the many “cues” that Big Girl gives to that end, and because of his travel experience as a former United States Marine.

<sup>20</sup> Bullins, “Clara’s Ole Man,” 281.

indicate “*the sound of JACK’s beating*” is heard in the background. The overlap of screams, curses, punches, and kicks is effective in terrifying the audience. They are left wondering how Big Girl could be so callous? Bullins, ultimately, effectively depicts the negative impact of poverty and violence as a result of systemic racism on Black individuals and communities.

Despite the stereotypes of Black lesbian womanhood in this play, Bullins’s inclusion of lesbian characters supports Lisa M. Anderson’s argument that “there has always been a queer presence in Black communities.”<sup>21</sup> She further states that “[t]he efforts to retain and reveal that history, whether real or imagined, are vitally important to the efforts to create accurate representations of Black queer women throughout their history in the United States.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, playwrights, especially Black queer ones, have not always had the opportunity and space to accurately represent Black queer characters. When queer characters are depicted, they have long looked and acted like Big Girl and Clara. Yet, these representations are not representative of the diversity of Black lesbian life.

Kimberley Benston writes, “There is inherent in *Clara’s Ole Man* a quite traditional moral judgment recognizing that the clashes of its characters produce despotism and destructiveness even at the site of exuberant communitas [...], though no facile recipes for amelioration are offered.”<sup>23</sup> While Bullins’s larger intent in the play is clear, his limited understanding of Black lesbian personhood is also clear. He uses lesbianism for Artaudian ends—to shock an audience into awareness of an issue that they had not considered before. But at what cost? As written, the play presents as a cautionary tale for Black audiences, reminding them that queerness is dangerous, dysfunctional, violent; it is an assault on Black male masculinity and the viability of Black families. The anti-queer message is as loud as the anti-poverty message, which results in a cacophony of messaging that reads shrill from a Black queer feminist perspective.

### ***The Baptism***

Exemplifying the widely consumed stereotypical image of the flaming Black queer, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s *The Baptism* is an absurdist one-act play that depicts a character called Homosexual as an outsider within a religious context. He is named according to his sexual preference, queer behavior, and creative sense of “style” and “taste.” He is described as an “*elegant, 40-ish, priggish, soi-disant intellectual. Growing fat around the middle and extremely conscious of it. Very queenly.*”<sup>24</sup> To audiences, Homosexual is acceptable as the entertaining, funny, biting cruel, carefree gay stereotype in motion. Set in a Baptist church, the action takes place at an altar, rigged with film and radio equipment. Homosexual antagonizes the minister of

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Amiri Baraka, “The Baptism” in *The Baptism & The Toilet* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 9.



the church—a televangelist type (called Minister) with a chorus of saints and an amen corner who adore him. Drawn as a ballet dancing, confetti-tossing voice of reason, Homosexual resists the minister’s sermon on abstinence by preaching (and singing) the praises of the material, the physical, and the political. He sings:

The pride of life is life. And flesh must make its move. I am the sinister lover of love.  
The mysterious villain of thought. I love my mind, my asshole too. I love all things. As  
they are issued from you know who. God. God. God. God. Go-od. The great insouciant  
dilettante. My lovers, priests, immolated queers, how many other worlds are there, less  
happy, less sorrowful than ours.<sup>25</sup>

To Homosexual, God does not understand art and has created a loveless world. His solution to this problem is more “love,” sex, and material things that arouse ecstasy. The action in the play illustrates this perspective in an absurdist manner.

The central character is a boy (called Boy) who comes to the church to repent. Boy masturbates excessively and wants absolution for his sinful acts of self-pleasure. Jones/Baraka positions the young boy as a prime target for the homosexual’s desire. By associating homosexuality with deviance and pedophilia, Jones/Baraka reinforces a moral rift between heterosexual and homosexual desire. Noticeably, prior to Boy’s confession, he is regarded by the congregation as a holy figure, a savior. Homosexual, however, is anything but holy.

Having crowned Boy as the second coming of Jesus, the congregation discovers that he has been masturbating. According to the congregation, his sin makes him unworthy of the title of Jesus. They denounce Boy as the “Devil” and plan to sacrifice him. Homosexual tries to intervene but is beaten unconscious by the congregation for his effort. Thereafter, Boy responds with violence, “pull[ing] a long silver sword out of [his] bag” and killing each member of the church, including the minister.<sup>26</sup> A messenger enters on a motorcycle to take Boy to heaven. (God has made the decision, having watched the massacre, that the earth cannot be saved.) Boy refuses to go, so the messenger bludgeons him to death with a tire iron.

Interestingly, Homosexual is the only character remaining at play’s end. When he regains consciousness and finds Minister dead, he is relieved and apathetic. In *The Baptism*, Baraka’s primary focus of criticism is the exaltation of Christian religious figures purporting to be messengers of God. Having Homosexual be the last man standing might symbolize a homophobic depiction of what the end of the earth would look like—a world of sin and queer folks whose only mission in life is to “drift on up to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and cruise Bickford’s” for sexual

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<sup>25</sup> Baraka, *The Baptism*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

conquests.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Homosexual might be a heroic figure for black and queer folks alike. He is, surely, the mouthpiece for Baraka's view, according to Judith K. Taylor and others, that "there is an underlying philosophical corruption in European American culture...derived from Christianity's tendency to divorce flesh from spirit."<sup>28</sup> With this play, Baraka not only suggests that the separation of flesh and spirit is steeped in denial and hypocrisy, but he also insists that this separation leads to ritual drama—performances, such as religion, that are repeated until they become habitual. In *The Baptism*, Baraka rejects the politics of Black respectability (as he saw it) in the Black American church. He renders a gay heroic caricature whose eccentricities and hyperfemininity obscure his dramaturgical function as a vessel, however empty, for Baraka's critique of the Black church.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Baraka wrote in his Black Revolutionary Theatre manifesto, "The American [read white or Black male, middle class] Artist usually turns out to be just a super-Bourgeois, because, finally, all he has to show for his sojourn through the world is 'better taste' than the Bourgeois...many times not even that."<sup>30</sup> Baraka is talking about an artist like LeRoi Jones—the Greenwich Village-dwelling, middle-class, liberal writer he once was—and he is talking *to* himself, reminding Amiri Baraka of who he never wants to be again. Still, he cannot escape the bourgeoisie even as he writes to radically change the theatre for Black empowerment purposes.

Baraka and Bullins maintained a certain bourgeois politics of respectability even as they sought to distinguish themselves from the bourgeoisie. The respectability politics of the Black Revolutionary Theatre, and its Black Nationalist perspective, seems to represent queers and queerness in terms and images of excess and trauma. E. Patrick Johnson writes of Baraka's nationalism in his readings of the poems "Black Bourgeoisie" and "Poem for Some Half White College Students": "By founding Blackness on a socially constructed monolithic Black community, the rhetoric of Black authenticity discourse before and after the 1960s confounds ideological allegiance and skin color such that radical political coalitions are forestalled."<sup>31</sup> That is, the Black Revolutionary Theatre's rigid notions of Black identity marginalized those who did not live up to the expectations of the revolution.

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<sup>27</sup> 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in Times Square was once known as a hotspot for sexual escapades and drug abuse from the 1960s through the early 1990s before former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani "cleaned up" the area. See Ramón H. Rivera-Servera's discussion of the so-called reformation of Times Square in *Performing Queer Latinidad: dance, sexuality, politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Judith K. Taylor, et al. "Amiri Baraka" in *Critical Survey of Drama* (April 2003), 1.

<sup>29</sup> See José Esteban Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13:2-3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) for an in-depth discussion of the queerness of Baraka's life and art.

<sup>30</sup> Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre" in *Liberator* (July 1965), 1.

<sup>31</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 25.

Scholars have long argued that Black respectability will neither save Black lives nor sustain Black communities because its politics exclude valuable contributors to the culture. Of the politics of Black respectability, writer Roxane Gay insists, “Respectability politics are not the answer to ending racism. Racism doesn’t care about respectability, wealth, education, or status.”<sup>32</sup> The characters in Baraka’s and Bullins’s play interrogate Black respectability through character and place. The queer characters represent a countercultural existence that is both inherently Black and queer in a time when Black and queer characters often speak in spite of the silences and suppositions imposed on them. While the politics of respectability inherent to the Black Revolutionary Theatre denied Black queer people a space to represent their authentic truths, black queer identity, although skewed for questionable ends, did not go undocumented. This is evident in the dramatic literature of two of the most notable Black straight male playwrights of the movement.

The politics of Black respectability have long-denied women and LGBTQ+ persons a welcome seat at the table, with the exception being the Harlem Renaissance whose artists consisted of queer women and men like Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, Bessie Smith, and Countee Cullen. Still, they could only be but so comfortable embracing their queer identities and dared not make art that represented their blackness and queerness. Race took precedence because in Black communities, the one thing most of us can agree on is that race matters and racism is real per our lived experiences. Still, Black queer people experience racism and homophobia within and outside of our communities and that, too, is real. It is only now being addressed in diverse narratives of Black queer personhood. Playwrights creating Black queer-themed works have written in spite of the absence of stories that hold only part of their identities. We need only look for them in the archives or commission new works for production. In the face of fear, shame, and misunderstanding, contemporary Black queer playwrights are actively claiming space for Black queer bodies and stories on stage, and finding receptive audiences, as they insist that African American theatre is as queer as it is Black.

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<sup>32</sup> Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 260.

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