

# Identity Politics on LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's Stage: The Monolith of Culture and the Trope of Blackness as Vectors of Racial Otherness

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**Abstract** Culture is central in LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's scheme of black identity construction. The concepts of culture and identity become substantial as Baraka's nationalism gains momentum. The playwright decisively engraves black identity in a larger cultural context and a broader racial history. This can be explained in terms of Baraka's espousal of an eclectic ideology that blends both culture and race. Culture and race transpire then to finally fuse. Consequently, Baraka moves in the direction of building identities that hinge on culture and declares blackness as intrinsic difference. The articulation of difference is comparable to the assertion of one's self as absolutely distinct. Such paradigmatic blackness comes to the fore as a result of white identitarian hegemony and racial supremacy. I shall take issue in this paper with black identity formation and its dependence on culture. The second part of this paper sheds light upon the trope of blackness as categorical difference closely related to the notion of race. This paper demonstrates the paramount significance of culture in the construction of black identity, and dispels the silence of the critical literature on matters relating to culture, difference, and identity in several plays written by Baraka during his various shifts of ideological position. It also argues for the importance of black culture and the positioning of blackness at the heart of identity politics.

**Key words** culture; identity; difference; sameness; blackness; race; membership

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### Introduction

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the black theatre stressed the importance of the stage as a platform of cultural enunciation and voicing of the existent dissimilarities between Western culture and black subculture. Olga Barrios, a notable theatre critic, points out that the black theatre of the 1960s “insisted on and praised the existence of another culture that had grown parallel to the Anglo-American: that of African Americans” (*Black Theater* 27). In a racially configured society where the culture of WASP-dom is predominant, black identity proclaims its differentness and distances itself from hegemonic framings. Victor Leo Walker II asserts that “Baraka attacks Euro-American cultural hegemony and advocates a separate African American social and cultural identity” (*Archetype* 239). Baraka’s belief in black culture as a unified category gains strength and intensifies. Baraka is ultimately conscious of the status of the black culture as an ‘other’ culture. The fact remains that he considers the culture of black people as, in Homi K. Bhabha’s phrase, “a body of difference” (*Location* 46).

Baraka’s conversion to nationalism makes him view black culture as a monolith. It is no mere coincidence, then, that the dramatist bases black identity chiefly on shared cultural components and objectives. Baraka’s version of cultural nationalism, it must be said, aims at constructing a distinct cultural identity. Here, it is worth noting that nationalism is tightly linked to identity. Defining the ties between the construct of nationalism, culture, and identity, Anthony D. Smith, a pioneer ethnographer, contends that nationalism is primarily concerned with issues of cultural identity (*Nationalism* 77). It remains equally true that race is also central to black nationalism. As Hazel Arnett Ervin puts it with regard to black nationalism and the construction of identity, “It [black nationalism] is also the

belief that black-identified people should collectively define themselves on the basis of race and adopt a politics that emphasizes pan-racial rather than global goals” (*Literary Criticism* 36). In Baraka's theatre, it transpires that culture is central in the construction of identity.

As Baraka's commitment to the nationalist cause grows stronger, he seems increasingly inclined to perceive black culture as tightly linked to black people. In *Blues People*, a book in which the dramatist theoretically muses on the construct of culture, Baraka writes: “The African cultures, the retention of some parts of these cultures in America, and the weight of the step culture produced the American Negro” (7). Besides, in “The Legacy of Malcolm X,” a very informative essay where Baraka exposes his visions on various topics, he declares: “Black People are a race, a culture, a Nation” (Baraka, *Reader* 161-7). Noticeably, culture is frequently interpellated and constantly associated with the nation and nationhood. Baraka increasingly asserts that Blacks constitute a ‘nation’—a nation with its proper culture. This nation-centred perspective makes culture become the principal provider of identity. Baraka's view of black culture corresponds with Edward Said's when the latter declares that “Culture is a source of identity” (XIII). This correspondence rests upon Said's and Baraka's views regarding historically subjugated people.

The dramatist primarily embeds black identity in shared cultural characteristics. In this context, a nationalist black culture is erected to ward off historic amnesia and deculturation in an effort to construct what Bhabha terms “liberatory, non-repressed identity” (62). Therefore, the assertion of black cultural distinctiveness becomes a necessity dictated by an emergent cultural identity. The cultural turns out to be a designator of the newly born black entity. Accordingly, it becomes legitimate for Blacks to lay the first bricks of a black entity with its idiosyncratic culture and identity. Culture, as Baraka regards it, is the epicenter of black being and the prime source of persistence. Thus, black culture becomes the bedrock upon which black religion, politics, art, folklore, and rituals are implanted. On another plane, when blackness (Baraka's consideration of African Americans as quintessentially black) is foregrounded it becomes eventually a catalyst for difference.

I shall take issue in this paper with identity formation and its reliance on culture. The latter, as I shall show, is pivotal in Baraka's project of identity construction. The category of culture, as I will explain, evolves as Baraka's nationalism grows firmer. The second part of this paper copes with the trope of blackness as difference. Identity, as I shall spell out, is synonymous with specificity, and blackness becomes the site of the articulation of black differentness. Will Kymlicka's and Charles Taylor's thoughts in the field of sociology and political

science will inform the discussion on issues of cultural membership and dominant social formations. The postcolonial perspective to which Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon adhere proves illuminating with regard to the question of difference and otherness and its connection to sameness. This paper posits the centrality of culture in the construction of black identity, and dispels the silence of criticism and paucity of critical attention to matters of culture, difference, and identity in the theatrical works of Amiri Baraka. Due to the disinterest of the critical literature as regards the problematization of identity and culture in the playwright's early to middle to late plays, this paper argues for the vitality of black culture and the placement of blackness in the heart of identity politics.

### **The Involvement of Culture in the Genesis of Black Identity: Implications and Manifestations**

Generally speaking, the characters that people plays such as *Madheart* (1971), *A Black Mass* (1971), and, to a certain extent, *Experimental Death Unit # 1* (1971), endeavor to cultivate a sense of cultural cohesion and compatibility based on sameness and predicated on identicalness. Culture is then steered toward the territory of identity formation in an effort to deal with age-long cultural prejudice. Culture, in Baraka's playtexts, is coterminous with the development and construction of black identity. Noticeably, it is interpellated to chronicle and harbor that popular patrimony of black people. Obviously, culture plays a leading role of a defence mechanism against public attempts of suppression of the legacy of cultural prejudice. Culture definitely provides the source and mainstay necessary to perpetuate and undergird all the forms vital for survival. As a result, cultural identity becomes the ineluctable destiny of the black man.

The play *The Slave*<sup>1</sup> (1964) exposes the processual espousal of a cultural identity in the person of Walker Vessels. Described as militant drama, *The Slave* focuses on the black man (Walker) as a potential revolutionist. The aesthetics of the revolutionary act, the reality of racial splintering, and the construction

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1 *The Slave* (1964) focuses on the black man (Walker) as a potential revolutionist. The aesthetics of the revolutionary act, the reality of racial splintering, and the construction of a novel identity form the major foci of the play. The setting of the play is a battleground of race war, and the play's action foregrounds Walker's encounter with his former white wife, Grace, and her husband, Easley, one of Walker's former liberal professors. The encounter takes place at the culmination of the fighting, when Walker returns to the Easleys' home to settle old scores. The encounter is replete with racial tensions and confrontations.

of a novel identity form the major foci of the play. The setting of the play is a battleground of race war, and the play's action foregrounds Walker's encounter with his former white wife, Grace, and her husband, Easley, one of Walker's former liberal professors. Apparently, there is no cultural grounds for the staged racial confrontation. Still, there is an intellectual basis as Walker is characterized as educated and lettered. The play displays Walker's interest in poetry and writing. The latter appears to be a cultural organizer and a political activist on the way to maturation. He represents that enthusiastic response to white dogmatism.

In certain identitarian respects, when Walker feels that he is bound to his people, he spontaneously closes ranks with Blacks to "change the complexion of tyranny"<sup>1</sup> What draws Walker to the black cause is the cruelty of oppression. That is why he blows up universities, bombards cities, and participates in general strikes. Walker, later on, corroborates to Easley that Blacks have historically been compromised. "The country twisted 'em'. The country had twisted them for so long,"<sup>2</sup> Walker answers Easley in a lengthy conversation. Increasingly, Walker identifies his fellow Blacks as a particular referential group oriented toward liberation. In *Black and White Racial Identity*, Janet E. Helms notes:

Reference-group orientation refers to the extent to which one uses particular groups; for example, Blacks or Whites in this country, to guide one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. One's reference-group orientation is reflected in such things as value systems, organizational memberships, ideologies, and so on. (5)

This backs up Walker's new allegiances and increasing identification with other Blacks. In the play *A Black Mass*<sup>3</sup>, the black characters voice their creed regarding knowledge, creation, and inventiveness. Through the dramatization of the myth of Jacob, Baraka assigns the lion's share to 'black' science and culture for the cultural revolution to flourish and take roots within the black community. The play's major characters are Nasafi, Tanzil, and Jacob. The setting is a testing ground where Nasafi and Tanzil are working on a new invention. Jacob finally creates a monster-like

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1 Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman and the Slave* (New York: Morrow, 1964) 66.

2 Baraka, *The Slave*, 77.

3 The play *A Black Mass* (1971) is a dramatization of the myth of Jacob, and its central characters are Nasafi, Tanzil, and Jacob. The setting is a chemical laboratory where Nasafi and Tanzil are concocting an elixir to combat oppressive time and where Jacob is trying to create a living organism. Jacob finally creates a white monster. The three scientists discuss the futility of aimless knowledge and inhumane science.

creature. The three black inventors debate the sterility of absurd knowledge and the irrationality of preposterous science of the white culture. In Barakian terms, ‘black’ knowledge is the alternative and could constitute what Bhabha calls in *The Location of Culture* “the knowledge of cultural difference” (45).

The play’s stage directions indicate that the black scientists are deliberating within a laboratory replete with book rarities, codices, and machines. This mirrors what Baraka calls the learnedness reflective of the black national culture. The scientists are identified as black, rejoicing over their inventiveness and exploratory talent. Nasafi refers to Jacob as black and full of human care.<sup>1</sup> This is an indication of the values of humanity and dignity embedded in black culture. Tanzil assumes that the black scientists are representative of humankind. Arguing with Jacob about rationality and humanist thought, Tanzil highlights that effete rationality produces “anti-humanity,” “abstractions,” and “opposites.”<sup>2</sup> Tanzil’s caveats to Jacob shows his profound concern about the conservation of black science and the perpetuation of the culture of pacifism. The rejection of whiteness (here it is perceived as otherness) is itself an incentive to safeguard one’s cultural identity, draw demarcating boundaries, and secure one’s territories.

Beneath the racial message of the play, there is certainly a cultural one that sustains a novel conception of cultural identity. At the outset of the play, Nasafi praises the strengths of black people. ‘Black’ science involves observation, experimentation, and speculation, which merits celebration. In this respect, black knowledge is the upholder of black cultural forms and symbols. Black science is one feature of the cultural identity—an identity that is culture-based, relying on the endowments of black people. Worthy of applause and pride are black artistic forms the way Nasafi puts it in the beginning of the play. Black intellectual production and technology are one of the cornerstones of black culture; they are highly effective tools in the cultural struggle to withstand cultural backwardness. Because it is the time of “nation time,” the scientists are concerned with temporal lengthiness and linear procession in an effort to usher in what Bhabha labels “cultural temporalities” (3). What is sought is a temporal rupture to enhance cultural enunciation and signification, for the perceived current temporality seems laden with injustice and cultural harm. That is why the black scientists are preparing a beverage to vanquish time, and invert the old equation of cultural bias.

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1 Baraka, *A Black Mass* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971) 26.

2 Baraka, *Black Mass*, 26.

The play *Madheart*<sup>1</sup> can be defined in terms of Black Nationalism accompanied by the articulation of blackness and its emphasis on liberated awareness and cultural affirmation. The play revolves around the themes of cultural revival, racial uplift, and the redirection of the identitarian conductor. Its central characters are Black Man and Black Woman, and Sister and Mother. Devil Lady, Black Man's nemesis, stands for white cultural prejudice, racial bigotry, and Americentric values and norms. As staunch advocates of the black national cause, Black Man and Black Woman are the enforcers of imperial blackness, ethnic elevation, and the burgeoning cultural renewal. In trying to defy the white 'thing', the play's protagonists vociferously articulate their refusal of imposed acculturation and forced homogenization emanating from the white culture of WASP' dom.

The exorcistic acts of Black Man's and Black Woman's counterdiscursive practice emphasize the obligation to mount a cultural platform to curb the cultural shock and the encroachment of prevailing white values. That the two protagonists join forces in that direction is undeniable, especially when Black Woman becomes the ally of Black Man. More specifically, this gesture signals that unity induces membership and connectivity. In this context, Kymlicka argues that "cultural membership is important in pursuing our essentialist interest in leading a good life, and so consideration of that membership is an important part of having equal consideration for the interests of each member of the community" (Kymlicka, *Liberalism* 165). Therefore, allegiance and loyalty to the group is of paramount urgency because it simply means consideration, respect, and pursuit of one's own interests.

Mother and Sister seem to lose that compass necessary for the re-entry into the cultural group. For, as Kymlicka puts it in his seminal article "Individual and Community Rights," the loss of cultural membership "is a profound harm that reduces one's very ability to make meaningful choices" (25). Cultural identity indicates those noble ends, choices, and interests to construct the creed, rules, and regulations of the group. From a cultural point of view, Devil Lady represents cultural aggression because she inculcates an image of baseness in Sister's image of herself. In this direction, Charles Taylor argues that "dominant groups tend to

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1 The play *Madheart* (1971) revolves around the themes of the sexual allegiance and racial integrity of every black woman and man. Its central characters are Black Man and Black Woman, Sister and Mother, and Devil Lady. The latter is a symbol of whiteness and sexual dominance and lure. As black nationalists, Black Man and Black Woman engage in a fight to vanquish the myth of blond beauty, moral superiority, and cultural prestige. It is worth noting that the play lacks plot, like most of Baraka's agit-prop or nationalist plays.

entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated” (66). Functioning both as ‘cultural insiders’, Black Man and Black Woman fight Devil Lady on cultural grounds as well as to supplant those images with positive appreciation of oneself.

Devil Lady stands for the oppressor/aggressor culture with its technology and empire of media and means of communications. Sister admits that she is victim of popular culture vehicled through newspapers, television, and billboards. American mass media are believed to inculcate hatred of the self and glorification of its ideals. “The aesthetics and popular culture of racist societies constantly reinforce the image of the Anglo-Saxon ideal in the minds of Blacks,” Manning Marable argues, “creating the tragic and destructive phenomenon of self-hatred and cultural genocide” (9). Needless to say, this culture and these communication means disseminate a nightmarish model of white supremacy and idealism.

Black Woman self-consciously identifies both print and visual culture as barriers to the achievement of a true cultural identity conducive to an elevation above willed cultural expropriation. That is why she refers to the white culture as “White Magic” and she attributes the women’s blindness to “The white fumes [that] strangle their senses” (Baraka, *Madheart* 64-68). Sister is an instance of “cultural mummification” that results in mummified thought and paralogia. “The cultural mummification,” as Fanon argues, “leads to a mummification of individual thinking” (Fanon, *Racism* 44). Sister, in light of Fanon’s statement, stands for the deadness of culture and congealment of individual reasoning.

According to Baraka, the black man, as a self-righteous man, sees the question of identity from an institutional standpoint. The codification of culture and its systematization require certain conduits and channels to ensure its dispersion. That is why the institutional aspect is primordial in the cultural struggle. Black Man’s key institution is that of the “Black Arts,” or as Baraka calls it, “a functioning black arts institution.” (Baraka, *Reader* 375). It must be said that Black Man’s pronouncement of the popular motto “black arts” comes after fierce antagonism with Devil Lady. The latter must be fought on a cultural basis. Hence, it transpires that the cultural struggle is as important as the physical combat; it is not only one-dimensional but multilateral and polymorphous. This struggle entails the arts, cultural forms, spirituality, music, and aesthetics. In this sense, the institution of the black arts functions as a safety valve, correcting and straightening paralogical thought and delusional thinking. It becomes itself an empowerment; an invigoration much needed in the quest for cultural identities.

The play *Experimental Death Unit # 1*<sup>1</sup> revolves around cultural and racial activism to ward off stereotypes of black inferiority and venality. Culture is interpellated in the struggle for the promotion of black identity construction. The three major characters are Duff and Loco, two white men, and a black debauchee named Woman. The latter tenders them her sexual favors. Overtly excited and enticed, both men consort and hang around with her. Leader, the guru of the squad, orders his comrades-in-arms to shoot them all. Baraka is intent on showing the inconsequence of the white aggressor culture and its oppressive frames and standards.

By exposing a black profligate before two white artists, the playwright emphasizes the deadlock of racial relations and the dilemma of social interactions and socialization. The official culture is thought to be enmeshed in the disruption of black culture and ruination of common ethics. It is this power of contagion that the play displays. Respectability and self-worth demand confrontation and defiance for the cultural revival to fructify. Cultural revolution requires unity, fortitude, and discipline; only these compact qualities can enhance the cultural renaissance and foster positive self-appraisal.

Woman symbolizes the cultural vacuity of part of the black intelligentsia. She is an undesirable, iconic image on which the dramatist's didacticism hinges, and she becomes an object of focus throughout the play. The dramatist implies that renewal can only start via identifying the corrupt/polluted subjects who represent backward-looking cultures. Dealing with the oppressors is tantamount to cultural suicide and demise. In this context, Owen Brady contends that Woman "negates a self-identity and cannot recognize the Leader [the black commander of the squad of executioners] as a force for change, a Black vector moving away from white Western culture" (Brady 59). When Leader asks Woman who she is, she naively responds, "Nobody, baby...nobody at all...Who are you?"<sup>2</sup> Woman's apparent negation of herself and her subsequent forfeiture of identity steadily guide her to the gallows.

Being an image through which Baraka transmits his cultural message, the

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1 The play *Experimental Death Unit # 1* (1971) is also racially militant in tone and content. Its unique scene depicts a broad avenue during a very probable black rebellion. The three central characters are Duff and Loco, two drug-addicted white men, and a black prostitute named Woman. While debating life, taste, and beauty, Woman offers them her services. Both men seem tantalized, and they engage with her. The action is stopped by the entry of a black squad. Leader, the head of the group, orders his soldiers to shoot them all.

2 Baraka, *Death Unit* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971) 18.

playwright addresses all black women, telling them that interaction and intercourse with non-blacks equal assimilation and result in decapitation. Here, dealing in carnal pleasures can stand for cultural deficiency and the consequent collapse which results in “merely whitening to fit the white soul’s image. It is also for the black man, a weakening, through contact with a beatified decadence” (Baraka, *Home* 226). As shown above, it unquestionably appears that cultural elements and building blocks promote the creation of a distinct cultural identity. The latter is immensely embedded in distinctiveness. The notion of blackness thus enters center stage, and turns out to be an adjuvant of difference and an overt articulation of disparity.

### **The Trope of Blackness: The Pursuance of Difference as Absolute Otherness**

The trope of blackness has been approached by various black critics, authors, and theatre practitioners. Henry Louis Gates has contended that Baraka, like many black playwrights and critics, has employed “blackness-as-theme to forward one argument or another for the amelioration of the Afro-American’s social dilemma” (Gates 31). Kept under historical erasure and institutional discipline, blackness is brought to the fore to defy historical invisibility and willed silencing, and to convey its differentness. At the outset, it is of certain practicality to approach the question of blackness from a Fanonian injunction about the relationality existent between blacks and whites. In this direction, Frantz Fanon asserts in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely” (Fanon 161). What can be inferred from Fanon’s statement is that the relationship between the black man and the white one is ever dialectical. Simply put, this kind of connectedness becomes itself the site of the articulation of blackness as difference.

In a similar vein, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their examination of historical becoming, emphasize the centrality of difference. Both authors argue in favor of voicing one’s particularity to preserve one’s cultural characteristics and one’s value system and become what one wants to become (Deleuze and Guattari 357). Similarly, Albert Memmi, commenting upon colonial people’s claim of difference, asserts that the expression of one’s difference is tantamount to an affirmation of oneself (Memmi 64-5). Likewise, Min-ha Trinh, writing about ontology and difference, contends that “[O]ur struggles over meanings are also our struggles over different modes of being: different identities” (Trinh 142).

The dramatist’s advocacy of separatism paves the way for an embracement of an ideology based on the concept of blackness as essentiality. From 1965 up to 1974, the playwright has reclaimed his blackness, has retrieved his black identity,

and has consolidated his belief in their inherent qualities. It is interesting to highlight that Baraka in 1967 changed his name from LeRoi Jones to the Bantuized Muslim appellation Imamu (spiritual leader, later dropped) Ameer (afterwards Amiri, 'prince') Baraka (blessed), as a confirmation of his re-entry into blackness. This change of patronyms signals Baraka's (and, by extension, his characters') search for what Bhabha calls "an originary identity" (Bhabha 3). Again, this shift of appellations emanates from a deep-seated bitterness and recurrent disappointment vis-à-vis the state's renegations, laxness, and failures in handling the question of identities.

Baraka's adoption of what appears as a hard line marks a watershed in his career as a playwright committed to diagnose the current plight of persecutory practices and cultural nonrecognition. It is remarkable that the color code is almost always a vehicle of the Barakian thought. For the black man, as Baraka puts it, to grow up in America is "a maze of light and darkness" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 42). The color code, Baraka declares, "taught me early what America was" (Baraka 315). Commenting upon his name change, Baraka says that "the name change seemed fitting to me and not just the meaning of the name Blessed Prince, but the idea that I was now literally being changed into a blacker being. I was discarding my 'slave name' and embracing blackness" (Baraka 266-7). Further, Baraka outspokenly announces: "We had a blackness to us, to be sure. It was always in us, we had but to claim it. And it claimed us" (Baraka 319). The playwright's view of the world and his cultural stance lead him to cultivate a sense of the particularity of blackness. This seeming exception and singularity encompass the belief in, and the promotion of, differences that underlie the encounter between Blacks and Anglo-Saxon whites. In other words, the playwright's reclamation of blackness marks what Etienne Balibar terms the "right to difference" (Balibar 56).

The dramatist's conception of blackness as a core or kernel is blunt, and tends to be strategic in the long run in order to corroborate that sense of black difference. Once again, Baraka's seminal essay "The Legacy of Malcolm X" is illuminating for our discussion. Stressing black difference, Baraka proclaims: "We are different species. A species that is evolving to world power and philosophical domination of the world. The world will move the way Black People move!" (Baraka, *Reader* 166). Obviously, Baraka draws the ultimate line that separates Blacks and whites. Interestingly enough, it is once again race that motivates the drawing of boundaries. Worthy of note here, when discussing the existing differences between races of the globe, is Charles Darwin's remark as regards the outer color. As he puts it, "[O]f all the differences between the races of man, the colour of the skin is the most

conspicuous and one of the best marked” (Darwin 200). Ostensibly, Baraka’s brand of difference pursues a definite color code.

The dramatist’s plays serve as a mirror to his ideological shifts and intellectual apostasy. This current move means the reappropriation and elevation of the powers and resources of black people. In theatre, this means enactment of plays for Blacks and about Blacks. In *The Autobiography*, Baraka admits that BART/S’s (Baraka’s repertory theatre and school’s) performances involve an “artification of certain aspects of history to make a recipe for ‘blackness’” (253). Therefore, blackness is brought to the fore, or, better still, becomes stage-centred. It is cardinal to point out that blackness has been constructed through a long historical contact with whiteness (a Fanonian idea at basis). More importantly, the Barakian stage transmutes into an arena in which to perform the new politics of difference.

Identity, in this context, becomes synonymous with specificity. The feminist philosopher Judith Butler argues that, “what we expect from the term identity will be cultural specificity, and that on occasion we even expect identity and specificity to work interchangeably” (qtd. in Gilroy 98-9). Harold Cruse, the leading black cultural critic of the 1960s, points out that blacks constitute an entirely distinct separate bloc of the population. In *An Afro-American’s Cultural View*, Cruse notes that “the American Negro cannot be understood culturally unless [s/]—he is seen as a member of a detached ethnic bloc of people of African descent reared for three hundred years in the unmotherly bosom of Western civilization” (49). Cruse determinedly confirms the specificity, ethnic and cultural, of black people.

As far as Baraka’s plays are concerned, the urgency of the reclamation of one’s blackness as different can be traced back to *The Slave*. This play is an outcry in the cultural and political wasteland of imposed homogenization and enforced assimilationism. Walker’s withdrawal from the world of whites can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, he finally comes to the truth of difference, and, on the other, he realizes the American political platitude. Here, Walker understands identity both as sameness and difference; sameness that relates to shared properties (his daughters and soldiers), and difference with the Easleys as they are of different color and complexion. As Amy Gutmann puts it in “What’s Morally Relevant about Racial Identity,” “The color of Americans significantly affects their life chances and experiences, not for any essentialist reasons but for no less significant historical and social reasons, which no single individual is sufficiently powerful to change” (Gutmann 170). Blackness, this historical construction, requires collective individuals rather than lone ones to drastically alter its associated historical negative meanings.

Liberalism's obsessive denial of difference and its advocacy of universalist values compel Walker to reclaim what Katherine Fierlbeck terms "specific characteristics" (Fierlbeck 16). As an assimilationist ideology, liberalism is thought to negate difference and dismiss groups' or nationalities' particularities. The Easleys' disparagement of Walker's cause of liberation, their denigration of his black officers, their description of black militancy and mobilization as pure "insanity" and sheer bloodletting—all these indicate to what extent they despise the rights of others to withstand oppression. Easley and Grace believe that Walker and his people do not belong to the American polity, since they do not measure up to certain societal and civic norms. The result for Blacks, as Iris Marion Young puts it, is that "their difference is constructed as deviance and inferiority" (Young 116). Walker's reaction is to agitate for the assertion of his values and the reclamation of freedom and specificity. Discussing the dialectical relation between difference and sameness with relevance to political action, Lucius Outlaw contends that

'difference,' rather than similarity, has a significant basis of political mobilization. We are once again in an era in which 'difference' has been made a virtue and has become the basis of organized political struggle in sometimes stringent competition with an ideal of equality that presumes essential sameness. (Outlaw 140)

It is actually Walker's perception of political disadvantage, which motivates his bloody action for a reclamation of an identity that is lodged and moulded in difference.

In the play *A Black Mass*, the interplay between sameness and difference is foregrounded. Indeed, the black scientists cling to their similitude in opposition to the difference that Jacob intends to create. The relationship between sameness and difference is dialectical in nature. Jacob opposes the self to the other. He believes in a selfhood that is contingent upon alterity. He tells Nasafi that he will create a "man like ourselves, though different because it will be beyond the human imagination."<sup>1</sup> His obsession with difference may explain his hatred; hatred of the self, at least in Jacob's thinking, may bring about a radical alteration of one's sense of the self. Jacob, later on, confesses to Tanzil that he will create a "man like ourselves, yet separate from us. A neutral being."<sup>2</sup> In fact, what Jacob creates is sheer abomination perceived as difference.

1 Baraka, *A Black Mass* (London: Calder and Boyars LTD, 1971) 27.

2 Baraka, 27.

Unlike Jacob, the scientists comprehend sameness as difference: that is their common sameness before the detestable difference of the white Beast. The visible shared qualities of blackness are the converse of an appalling difference represented by the genocidal Beast. According to Tanzil and Nasafi, it is a killing callous difference. The scientists' attachment to their unadulterated sense of black selfhood prevents them from appreciating a crude version of difference—a difference lodged in perversion and distortion. As Paul Gilroy puts it in his book *Against Race*, “the signs of sameness have degenerated readily into emblems of supposedly essential or immutable difference” (Gilroy 101). Accordingly, the black scientists seem to perceive their difference as immutable and stable.

Therefore, the scientists may be seen as championing their blackness against the hideousness of the Beast. In pressing for a front among black scientists/artists, the dramatist underscores that the only real difference is black culture with its infinite sources and resources. Whatever the ambit of the contagion, vestiges of the black original culture still remain, defying intrusion and forced erasure. Tiila, in this instance, is a living example in this order of things. When Tiila was hurt, the stage directions indicate that she “laughs and weeps in deadly cross between white and black” (Baraka, *Black Mass* 32). Even though Tiila is seriously hurt, she holds on to her blackness, resisting obliteration. Blackness, as such, becomes a site of real voiced and articulated difference.

In the plays *Experimental Death Unit # 1* and *Madheart*, difference is located in the caution and reservation against mixing with whites. The refusal to mingle with non-blacks accounts for the conservation of a distinct and immaculate blackness. The black revolutionary youths of *Death Unit* intervene to bar a black prostitute from dealing with decadent men. In like manner, Black Man and Black Woman strive hard to turn Mother and Sister away from alien lure. In this sense, conservation of one's properties and values can be interpreted as an affirmation of one's particularity. While Mother and Sister opt for consorting with whites, Black Man and Black Woman choose to cut their bonds with the totalitarians of whiteness such as Devil Lady. We are actually in front of a case of endogamy. This is going to be confirmed later in the play when Black Man and Black Woman reunite. It is clear that both protagonists draw boundaries and distance themselves from the rest of the characters. In cultural terms, adherence to one's blackness is the guarantor of one's difference. Blackness turns out to be, in James Clifford's terms, a “boundary to be maintained” (Clifford 344).

Likewise, the black invigorators appear to demarcate the boundaries of the cultural and sexual territory. Blackness, essentially perceived as a category of

difference, necessitates this demarcation of frontiers for the sake of affirming the specificity of one's values. Endogamy remains a manifestation of this refusal to mix with the other. Hence, it becomes a strategic weapon in the conservation of one's difference. In this context, the black youths act upon an adverse situation which implicates the black body. As moral enforcers, they start from an assumption that the black seed is forbidden to outsiders. That is why sexual intercourse should remain exclusively among members of the same group to safeguard Blacks from dilution or worsening. This explains the pursuit of a different black identity that is basically untarnished and unsullied. The black squad draws a sketch of rising awareness directed toward the articulation of cultural maturation and growth.

From the aforementioned, culture targets the expression of one's conspicuous difference denied by what Baraka calls "the culture of inequity" (Baraka, "Multinational" 393). In this sense, "Cultural distinctiveness," Tejumola Olaniyan contends, "becomes fully fixed, complete, and unnegotiable" (Olaniyan 5). This is, indeed, the consequence of clinging to one's blackness as a catalyst of difference. The quest for one's blackness opens the gateway for an expansive articulation of authenticity and proclamation of one's Africanness. Blackness becomes expressive of originality, and Africa is revealed as an exotic continent that stimulates imagination and yields certain Afrocentric ideas.

## **Conclusion**

In the last analysis, it is clear that the playwright predicates black identity on a shared culture and a common racial history. The substantiation of black cultural and racial difference becomes a must dictated by a firm belief in a completely disparate black identity. Culture becomes the orbit around which black people conjointly rotate, and the sphere toward which they gravitate. This move toward the espousal of a black identity predicated on blackness as difference rests upon the plight of age-long racial prejudice and long-standing cultural bias.

Baraka's racial vision of the world leads the latter to cultivate a sense of black particularity. This vision of black singularity encompasses a belief in, and promotion of, certain politico-cultural priorities and differences and multiple racioethnic distinctions. Baraka's understanding of blackness as an essence is categorical in an effort to affirm and consolidate that sense of black idiosyncrasy. By and large, Baraka's brand of difference increasingly pursues pure cultural lines to break free of the fetters imposed by the monoculture, and steadily goes along straight racial pathways.

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