

# LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: A Philosophical Journey of a Black Author

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## ABSTRACT

*This text examines three early writings by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, a radical Black intellectual whose stance toward the role of African Americans within American society underwent a significant change in the early 1960s. He belongs to a generation of Black authors who began to publicly advocate the use of violence in the struggle for an overall improvement of the socioeconomic status of African Americans. Heavily influenced early on by the Beat Generation and liberalism of Greenwich Village, Baraka emerged in the sixties as perhaps the most powerful literary voice of Black intellectual circles in the United States. In particular three of his early texts – Blues People: Negro Music in White America, Dutchman and The System of Dante's Hell – reflect his views of the African American situation in the context of the 1960s and are analyzed in this paper in terms of the intellectual transformation of Baraka from a mere advocate of Black culture to a militant Black Nationalist advocating a revolution against white supremacy.*

## KEYWORDS

Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, Black Arts Movement, 1960s, Black Nationalism, racial segregation, African American culture

## Birth of a Black Intellectual

The origins of the man who became Amiri Baraka can be found in the in the sociocultural environment surrounding him during his early years. Born, raised and educated as a member of the black community in the America before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1950s was something more than just being different. Being black was comparable to being cursed, as skin color was often seen as the determining factor of human personality, although there were considerable differences in the attitude towards the African American community between basically liberal Northerners and conservative Southerners. During the 1930s and 1940s two nation-wide crises emerged in the United States that made social conditions across the country even worse: the Great Depression brought on a high rate of unemployment and rapidly increased poverty levels, and World War II took away many blacks along with the many other young Americans sent to fight against the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific. Both of these events meant that the racial problem troubling the USA throughout its history was once again overshadowed. At this point the possibility of change for blacks in American society seemed more utopian than feasible.

Amiri Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones (originally LeRoy)<sup>1</sup>, was born into what could be described as “a stable lower-middle-class, upper-working-class black family”<sup>2</sup> on October 7, 1934 in Newark, New Jersey’s largest city. Despite being born in the “liberal” North, Jones experienced all sorts of racial prejudice during his youth. This abuse,

1 Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: University Press, 2001), 21.

2 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 21.

however, was usually not physical as was the case with Southern blacks, who were persecuted by various racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Although most of what young Jones encountered was verbal insults and taunting by his white schoolmates, Jerry Marks describes how this left a mark on the future Baraka.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most powerful early influences on the writer's philosophy was religion, particularly the Baptist church he was forced to attend by his family and which organized services conforming to white liturgical traditions and not to the more community-oriented Congregationalism. For young Jones, this was one of the most evident proofs of white supremacy and at the same time a sign that black self-confidence had significantly faded over the decades, as the blacks preferred to imitate the prevailing tradition, from its very core unnatural to the black community, than to promote original black cultural forms. Although the movement later called the Harlem Renaissance was flourishing just around the corner in New York City at the time of Jones' birth, the lives and social position of ordinary African Americans in suburban and rural areas of the country did not seem to have improved. Moreover, the idea that the black cultural tradition promoted by the artists of Harlem would become a basis for maintaining the newly gained self-esteem of the African American community ended up in disillusion for the new generation of black intellectuals, including young Jones. He perceived the Harlem Renaissance as no longer a cultural movement possessing political and social power but only as a literary movement which, under the influence of contemporary social, economic and cultural trends, was unable to promote blackness by all means necessary.<sup>4</sup> In general, it was particularly his disgust with such "a temporary alienation from traditional black values"<sup>5</sup> that is most evidently reflected in his early literary work.

In addition to his forced church attendance, Jones' education and subsequent army service formed his young adult personality and his future way of writing. During his years as a student he often encountered white dominance within the educational process. After a brief stay at Rutgers University in 1951 he moved to Howard University, which as Watts indicates was considered "a capstone of Negro education"<sup>6</sup> to study philosophy and religion in a black intellectual environment. However, soon after he entered Howard he found out that many of his black colleagues were studying merely to blend economically into the mainstream society and not, for example, to become educated for the sake of promoting black culture. This was seen by young Jones as something unforgivable, or more precisely as a "sickness" of a black community that was being taught "to pretend to be white."<sup>7</sup> Jones saw this as a humiliation to black people, whose culture and intellectual achievements were clearly not seen as equal to that of whites. Moreover, this represented an imminent threat for any future development of black cultural traditions: "Because the dean wanted black students to convey to whites an image of themselves that was deserving of white acceptance, black students were not taught to innately value themselves. Instead, the properly socialized bourgeois Howard student should internalize this 'white gaze' in his or her psyche."<sup>8</sup>

3 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 22.

4 Robert E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Nationalist Black Revolt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

5 John Wakefield, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *The Alternative* (1965)," *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Bruck (Grüner Publishing, 1977), 188.

6 Amiri Baraka, *The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 352.

7 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 22.

8 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 23.

It is not surprising that Jones soon started to despise such an environment and was eventually expelled from Howard for protest activities. Jones started to search for better conditions for the intellectual side of his personality to develop. Nevertheless the experience Jones gained during his stay at Howard was crucial in the development of Amiri Baraka. What also affected him during this phase of his early life was the fact that Jones, with shades of W.E.B DuBois' double consciousness, was constantly oscillating between two "moral ambiguities of growing up in a divided culture: at home and at school, he met the values of middle-class black culture, while on the streets of Newark he encountered the values of jazz musicians, junkies and whores."<sup>9</sup>

Both confused and disgusted by the existing situation, Jones began looking for something completely opposite to his previous life experience. What he wanted to find was order, the prospects for which he saw in the U.S. military. Jones enlisted in the U. S. Air Force in order to enter what in his *naïveté* he saw as an egalitarian institution with a clear set of rules which would supersede the racial and social differences among its members. What Jones encountered, however, was another more disillusionment. Although he did escape the "sick" bourgeois morality of the middle-class society, he realized that any institution originating from such a community must be logically deformed in the same way as its originator. The one advantage Jones took during his years in the army was that he became acquainted with Marxist philosophy, for which he was subsequently dishonorably discharged from the Air Force. Nonetheless, Jones had found that life as an activist represented the very basis of his ideas of social improvement.<sup>10</sup>

What, on the other hand, played a considerable role in his becoming an outspoken black artist was the influence of the contemporary countercultural Mecca of Greenwich Village, where Jones lived for several years in the late 1950s and early 1960s and during which time he grew into a well-known writer promoting black culture. The bohemian lifestyle of the district gave Baraka as much artistic freedom as he wanted. Jones encountered modern jazz improvisation, a form he began to see as a distinctively black means of expression. Together with his first wife, Hettie Cohen, he experienced the daily exotic creative environment in which eventually he to start writing his first literary pieces.

The rebellious nature of Greenwich Village avant-garde artistic circles like the Beats also contributed to the emergence of Amiri Baraka the social and political activist, even though the political orientation of the countercultural artists within the Village has been widely seen as obscure.<sup>11</sup> Although it may seem highly improbable that Baraka's shift to black nationalism was influenced by the liberal artistic environment of the neighborhood, sociologists studying nationalism (notably Anthony D. Smith) have argued that the fundamental precondition of becoming a nationalist is a renunciation of bureaucratic values and middle-class morality, which is exactly what the Beatniks around Baraka were doing in their philosophy, poetry, and fiction.<sup>12</sup>

In the years following his 1960s transformation from Beat poet to radical activist, Baraka continued to focus on taboo topics of the time, which eventually made him *persona non grata* within Western cultural circles. Most critics considered him an ultimately misogynist author in whose works women are often subordinated to the will of men. Moreover, in his writings and public speeches traces of homophobia and anti-Semitism

9 Wakefield, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *The Alternative* (1965), 187.

10 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 25-27.

11 Komozi Woodward, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), xii.

12 John Hutchinson and Anthony David Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford: University Press, 1994).

can be found. The former was a widespread stance among the member of the Black Arts movement and Baraka himself used the epithet “faggot” to label anyone who did not conform to his view of the world. Leaders of the Civil Rights movement in particular were often addressed as “faggots” in works such as “Civil Rights Poem” and “Hegel.” Ron Simmons argues that Baraka’s homophobia stemmed from his doubts about his own sexuality in his early years as a student and Greenwich Village bohemian and from the attitudes he witnessed in his youth.<sup>13</sup> In another poem called “The Black Man is Making New Gods” Baraka’s views of homosexuals blended with the anti-Semitism that has recurred in his writing since the 1960s as he describes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as “The Fag’s Death they gave us on a cross.”<sup>14</sup> Werner Sollors “attributes Jones’s anti-Semitism to various influences, including the right-wing chauvinism that often inhabits modernism and bohemianism.”<sup>15</sup> Since then, Baraka’s anti-Semitism has reappeared in many ways and forms. The 2002 poem “Somebody Blew Up America” provoked the public as it was presented as “hate speech” regarding the Jewish (Israeli) conspiracy that led directly to the events surrounding the September 11 WTC attacks. In the text he criticizes American/Israeli imperialism and presents to his audience a vision of an eternal global conspiracy of the privileged against the unprivileged. In response to this piece in particular, the designation Poet Laureate of New Jersey that Baraka held was abolished, as there was no lawful way to remove him from the post. Amiri Baraka remained a figure full of contradictions and controversy until his death on January 9, 2014. He had been a leading voice of African American cultural, social and political militancy for more than fifty years.

### A Personal Voyage to the Heart of African American Culture

One of Baraka’s first literary efforts is the widely anthologized poem “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note.” Originally published in an eponymous collection in 1961, the work could be considered perhaps the most intimate piece within Baraka’s entire oeuvre. The poem represents the author’s early years as an artist and beatnik in style and philosophy. What is hidden within the free verse poetry of Baraka are intimate and contemplative themes which mostly refer to the relationship with his wife and children.

However, soon after his attempts at poetry Baraka turns toward the role of jazz and blues music, which for quite a long time had been considered the most evident representatives of the black artistic expression. Baraka attempted to show the enormous cultural value contained within many widely acclaimed jazz compositions and improvisations. It was once again the environment of Greenwich Village that provided Baraka with many encounters with renowned black musicians as well as music critics. Baraka commented on how “the Village has had a legacy of black music, both the show biz and gambling club variety, as well as the more blues-oriented music that was created when the great waves of black immigrants came north after the Civil War in the latter part of the nineteenth century.”<sup>16</sup> This musical legacy of jazz and blues provided Baraka with inspiration in creating his first great work – *Blues People: Negro Music in White*

13 Ron Simmons, “Baraka’s Dilemma: To Be or Not to Be?” in *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Devon W. Carbado (New York: University Press, 1999).

14 Maurice A. Lee, *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet* (Valencia: University Press, 2004), 85.

15 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 149.

16 Imamu Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1987), 183.

*America* – which he published in 1963 and became an instant classic of African American cultural studies.<sup>17</sup>

By the time the book was published, Baraka had already written several other critical essays on contemporary black music which gave him the experience and perspective in writing *Blues People*, which Lee B. Brown calls Baraka's "major statement about race and music."<sup>18</sup> To Baraka himself the book's examination of black culture was a means of exploring the nature of the race and to what extent it had been culturally and historically integrated into the American society of early 1960s:

I am saying that if the music [blues and jazz] of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, i.e., society as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the text a social and cultural history of African Americans is explored through analyses of traditional black folk music, within which is hidden many allusions to the history of the ordinary life and culture of the black Americans. The work's trajectory stretches from the very beginnings of the primitive black music in Africa through the colonial period, the Civil War, ending with present-day America. What Baraka captures is the evolution of rhythm and verse throughout history and relation thereof to the current social and economic conditions as well as interconnectedness of these forms with religion. The study is therefore not entirely focused on music but aims to depict the phenomenon of African American culture in its wholeness. Moreover, it "charts the historical development of black music and then uses that historical development as a metaphor for exploring the Americanization of the Negro."<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important themes that recurs in Baraka's book is the omnipresence of the white element which constantly, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, affects the development of black music. The outcome of such a process seems to be that white culture involuntarily and unknowingly adopts and subsequently modifies the elements of "negro music." With this premise Baraka is able to counter those who propagate the inferiority of black race and culture. Watts describes Baraka's aim to "undermine the credibility of those scholars and general populace who participated in the negative stigmatization of black people. By focusing on the creative products of these devalued peoples, Baraka questions the criteria used to determine just who in America is and isn't 'cultured.'"<sup>21</sup>

The result of his examination is clear – "Negro music" continues to play an undeniable role within the American culture, in fact has always been its main component. Moreover, the ongoing transformations of jazz and blues are reflected in mainstream cultural forms. The genres of blues and jazz emerge as something that is by all means a representative of "Americanness" with its original values of blending of nations and races. America itself is by Baraka seen as "an idea/experiment"<sup>22</sup> which made the development of the traditional black genres of music possible and thus its stance cannot

17 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 117.

18 Lee B. Brown, "Marsalis and Baraka: an essay in comparative cultural discourse," *Popular Music* 23 (2007): 242.

19 LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963), ix-x.

20 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 117.

21 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 119.

22 Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003), 76.

logically be negative toward the black presence within its culture. This also serves as a foundation of the idea that American blacks must be considered racially, culturally and socially equal since they have always been an integral part of the society and their traditions have modified and become specifically tied to the American culture.

Although the abovementioned efforts of Baraka may seem radical in the context of the times, in comparison with his later literary texts *Blues People* can still be regarded as rather a defensive style of writing. By advocating the historical value of the traditional black culture he aims to introduce at least some of the racial pride he gained during his study of blues and jazz music among his fellow black intellectuals as well as among ordinary blacks. At this point, although he will not formally take the name until 1967, LeRoi Jones, artist and member of the Greenwich Village intelligentsia, transforms into Amiri Baraka, representative of the radical Black Arts movement and author of a much more radical text – the 1964 play *Dutchman*.

### Amiri Baraka as a Black Radical Dramatist

During the months following the publication of *Blues People* Baraka's worldview underwent a fundamental change. What used to be merely a promotion of racial equality, sober expressions of racial pride and admirations of black traditions now took the form of a direct attack against the strongholds of white prejudice. Baraka hoped he would immediately capture the attention of both the blacks whose pride he aimed to raise and the whites who had for so long oppressed the blacks. The time also seemed right to Baraka, as the Civil Rights Movement had gained importance over the years and its main goals were now soon to be addressed by the Lyndon Johnson administration. To Baraka, however, Martin Luther King's ideas bore a strange resemblance to what he had experienced during his university years – that American blacks are searching for mere acceptance or recognition within the society and that they would sacrifice anything to achieve this minimal goal.<sup>23</sup> Baraka wanted to publicly oppose such an endeavor, which he perceived as too deferential. What he and some of his fellow black contemporaries adhered to more was closer to the philosophy of Malcolm X, whose radical stance towards the problem seemed more inspiring for young radicals: "Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery!"<sup>24</sup>

As Baraka wanted to address his potential audience as fast as possible, his intellectual assault was initiated on theatre stages. In 1964 *Dutchman* came into being as one of the earliest literary pieces employing the principles of what became known as modern black nationalism. The author's shift toward confrontational social and political activism is clearly reflected in the play, which provokes its audience into examining many contemporary issues and controversies.<sup>25</sup> Thus ever since its publication the play has met with contradictory reactions by both audiences and critics, who almost immediately characterized the work as highly controversial.

23 LeRoi Jones, *HOME: Social Essays* (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), 17.

24 Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 12.

25 Eric Bergesen and William W. Demastes, "The Limits of African-American Political Realism: Baraka's *Dutchman* and Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*," *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William W. Demastes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 219.

The play's events consist of what could seem at first as an ordinary encounter of two people in a subway car. Clay is a black man and Lula is a white woman, however, thus in 1960s America each may be expected to behave in terms of certain social expectations based on race and gender. The "macabre setting of a haunted subway car"<sup>26</sup> is an expedient environment for the author since it represents the society from which an individual cannot escape. The play is full of Baraka's anger and outrage that relate to the current social situation among African Americans.

The play begins with Clay sitting alone in a subway car when a "tall, slender, beautiful" white woman named Lula appears and sits next to him although there are other empty seats in the car. It is not an accident that Lula chooses this seat – since she represents the omnipresent oppressive power of the whites she wants to transform such an enormous power into reality and thus intends to employ the presumed racial superiority in practice. From this very moment, the audience follows Lula's endeavor to stir Clay into both verbal and physical communication with one evident intention – to humiliate him in the same way the dominant white society does. As a way of achieving this, her attitude constantly changes from frivolous to deadly serious, a stance which attracts and at the same time disgusts Clay. Also, it is her incessant use of sexual innuendos and racial stereotypes that frustrates Clay, whose attempts to defend himself are always deftly countered by the haughty Lula.

What we are witnessing on the stage at this point is a perfect example of the so-called master-slave relationship, with the white Lula trying to control the black Clay. Here, however, unlike in many other cases of white dominance, Clay eventually finds the inner strength to defend himself and even to express a certain pride in his own race. At the beginning Clay is portrayed as a humble and submissive man whose reserved attitude represents the overly mild effort of his race to be accepted within the American society. As the relationship progresses, however, he evolves into a much more active and self-confident man who allows his long-suppressed anger toward the whites out. This "changed" Clay can be in a way seen as Baraka's alter-ego, since *Dutchman* clearly follows the ideological and intellectual transformation of LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka from passive to active and even radical in his endeavor to emancipate his people. In general, both the play and the main male character demonstrate "the revolutionary fervor of an African American who possessed the growing racial self-esteem that would be a touchstone of the 1960s."<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the feelings of anxiousness and inescapability from the subway car pervading the whole play point toward a fatal climax. Lula, who assumes a privileged position within America by the mere fact that she is white, seems to be led by the power of the whole white society, which is desperately trying to preserve its control over any minority by using any means possible. Clay, on the other hand, is doomed to fail in his attempts to feel equal to Lula, since every time he attempts to do so he is immediately reminded of his racial inferiority and of his inevitable subordination to the ruling mainstream.

For Clay, his accidental encounter with Lula therefore does not mean merely facing down her taunts but being confronted with the prejudiced society as a whole. He is pushed by the constant insults "to the edge of violence, he unleashes his rage in a mythical linguistic tantrum that rips away his white assimilation, exposes white racial

26 George Piggford, "Looking into Black Skulls: American Gothic, the Revolutionary Theatre, and Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*," in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, eds. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 143.

27 Bergesen and Demastes, "The Limits," 218.

myths, and embraces his racial heritage."<sup>28</sup> Under such hard conditions, similar to psychological torture, his anger toward the many injustices is inevitably released and he tries to resist by leaving the train and thus the oppression. However, this cannot be achieved in the current state of affairs as no black man is able to flee from the real world. For Clay to leave the train would mean that he is a free man able to successfully resist the oppression. Lula eventually stabs Clay to death, thus confirming and completing her dominance over the black body. Soon after the act she chooses another black man to be put through exactly the same fate. For Karen C. Blansfield, this is "a clear implication that the cycle of racial killing-emblematic of American society's attitudes towards African Americans-will continue."<sup>29</sup>

*Dutchman* is an extremely powerful play full of the political and cultural ideas of the Black Arts Movement. It represents Baraka's concept of how black theatre can work within mainstream drama and to what extent could it be used to foment the forthcoming revolution. For the author, the themes performed within the black theatre should be highly topical, if not controversial, and aimed directly at the black spectator, who would then undergo a transformation into a more active, efficient, and self-confident member of the African American community.<sup>30</sup> For Baraka himself, the play had one immediate outcome – almost instantly he became a leading figure in the American black artistic circles, thus through this position of relative power was able in his texts to both confront whites with their responsibility for the current condition of the society and at the same time put forth specific claims of the black community.

Holding ethics and aesthetics to be one, Baraka describes mainstream theater as reflecting the "unholy" values of White society. Against this, he presents the aims of the new Black theater. Firstly, it should deconstruct the fiction of Blackness and Whiteness propounded within dominant White ideology and, by looking "into black skulls," help root out internalized racism. Secondly, it should provoke the Black spectator into action outside the theater.<sup>31</sup>

A fundamental influence on Baraka and his theatre were the pioneering plays of Bertolt Brecht, who in his theatrical as well as essayistic work promoted the idea of theatre as a means of fighting against oppressors – in this case the Nazis.<sup>32</sup> Baraka's attitude as presented in *Dutchman* indicates that for him the theatre should play a completely new provocative role in the black community.

### Baraka the Experimenter in *The System of Dante's Hell*

After the success of *Dutchman* and under the influence of his newly gained reputation as a powerful author, the Harlem artistic world witnessed what could be called a completion of Baraka's transformation as an intellectual and activist. He fully freed himself from the bohemian environment of the Greenwich Village which, on the one hand, provided him with a freeing approach to creative activity, but on the other was almost inaccessible

28 Karen C. Blansfield, "Dutchman," *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature: A-C*, ed. Emmanuel Sampath Nelson (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2005), 634.

29 Blansfield, "Dutchman," 634.

30 Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 89.

31 Mary F. Brewer, *Staging Whiteness* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 95.

32 Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).



for African American artists.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it was his disgust with the Civil Rights Movement, which he continued to view as being servile, that led him to devote himself fully to the issues of race and revolutionary thought which from this time represent the very basis of his literary work. One of the first and most distinguished texts to fully reflect the new personality of Amiri Baraka was the 1965 experimental novel *The System of Dante's Hell*.

Although from the very beginning of his artistic career Baraka had been doubtful about the possibilities offered by the genre of the novel,<sup>34</sup> this text in particular "helped nurture his emergence as a significant and distinct voice in American letters."<sup>35</sup> The genre also helped him to break away entirely from the tradition of white writing, as it was particularly the Beat Generation authors that influenced him in his quest to become a man of letters and to develop his own highly individualistic style.<sup>36</sup> In general, what affected him the most in his endeavor to become a novelist was the fact that the genre conventions represented a widely esteemed standard of writing which Baraka wished to confront. He intended to destroy the deep-rooted perception of the novel as an interaction of characters producing a script. On the contrary, heavily influenced by some of the ideas of the Black Power movement inspired by Malcolm X, Baraka promoted the idea that no piece of art can be justified if it ignores the African American situation. Moreover, such an artistic piece should deliberately acknowledge the immense intrinsic value of black art. *The System of Dante's Hell* should therefore be regarded as one of the most elaborate works of art which can be considered "black" from its very core since it does not conform to Anglo-American literary tradition and "draws upon aspects of black expressive culture in the creation of a world order privileging the black experience."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Baraka's experimental novel owes much to modernist conventions and especially to the writings of James Joyce. The author seems to identify particularly with the Irish struggle for national and cultural emancipation embodied in some of Joyce's writings as well as other early 20<sup>th</sup>-century of Irish literature, for example John Millington Synge's drama *The Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>38</sup>

As the title indicates, the novel takes as an inspiration a fabled text of Western literature – Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, in particular the first part of the poem *Inferno*. It seems contradictory that Baraka, a black radical, chooses a literary work that is widely considered a part of the literary canon of the Western culture, the very same culture that adheres to portrayals of the white experience. Despite this, the book serves to Baraka as a means of his breakaway from the traditional American literature and particularly the Anglo-American "white" style of writing which he sees as closely associated with "bourgeois white racial ideology."<sup>39</sup> Baraka's literary experiment depicts and analyses the main character's "spiritual journey ... toward the development of a black consciousness"<sup>40</sup> and by using some of the best known modernist techniques (e.g. stream of consciousness

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33 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 86.

34 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 87.

35 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 87.

36 Charlie Reilly, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 100.

37 Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1996), 64.

38 Kathy Lou Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

39 Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 38.

40 Montgomery, *The Apocalypse*, 65.

in the first half of the novel) aims to give the reader a vivid feeling of the inner suffering of a black individual in what he perceives as a white-dominated world.

In the novel, which is sometimes regarded as the author's personal "exploration of a particularly middle-class black nightmare,"<sup>41</sup> Baraka certainly does not attempt to imitate Dante's masterpiece in examining life after death. He seems rather inspired by medieval morality as it is portrayed in Dante and tries to compare and apply the principles of an earlier age to the individual and social norms of the contemporary America. "Jones's [Baraka's] concern is with the myriad ways in which the American system, with its tendency toward categorization based on race, class, and gender, fosters among African Americans a psychological turmoil that is just as debilitating as an otherworldly hell."<sup>42</sup> Also, the novel can be seen as an autobiographical piece of writing for the mere fact that the main character is called Roi whose life story reminds us of the author's own. The book, however, is not a chronicle depicting a chain of events in the life of the protagonist as a physical being. *The System of Dante's Hell* concerns itself with Roi as a spiritual entity, and examines the formation of his mind and philosophy. This inner development of the main character is shown in the context of time and setting – some of the crucial events in the life of the character/author are mentioned (childhood and education in Newark, years in Greenwich Village, etc.) in order to show that they have contributed considerably to the shaping of his personality. In general, *The System* can be seen as a kind of subjective testimony of the situation of the black community within the dominating white society.

Although the book is not overtly political, it does contain certain statements which are in complete accordance with Baraka's own evolving philosophy. Above all, what is clearly present is his contempt for the types of African Americans who settle for mere promises and are content with the meagre steps being taken by white authorities toward change. Here, we must return to the idea of hell which, for Baraka, is greatly different from the original Christian concept. Watts describes Baraka's hell as rather "as the state of mind in which a black person endures a fractured and unresolved racial identity."<sup>43</sup> Hell becomes an earthly phenomenon, a form of imprisonment that does not necessarily limit a human being materially but is omnipresent without being noticed. Baraka argues that merely living in the unbearable conditions of the contemporary America represent an inferno for members of the black community. Thus an individual ghetto is formed in which a black individual is intentionally repressed by the outer world and is therefore hopeless to affect his present or future.<sup>44</sup>

The text as a whole is self-absorbed in the author's effort to depict the sum total of his life. All the events and experiences that accompany the main protagonist throughout the novel are related to the entire black race and are examined from a subjective point of view in terms of either beneficial or destructive power for a black individual. Once again, although the novel focuses on the black community, the power of the white society that penetrates the mentality of African Americans as well as of Roi himself seems to pervade the whole narrative. Roi is well aware of the fact that he has been intellectually shaped by texts written by distinguished white authors such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. He is not willing, however, to value the white influence on his intellectual personality,

41 Piggford, "Looking into Black Skulls," 155.

42 Montgomery, *The Apocalypse*, 65.

43 Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 89.

44 Montgomery, *The Apocalypse*, 66.

which eventually leads to self-loathing.<sup>45</sup> As Montgomery explains, the ultimate outcome of this situation in which blacks are unable to resist white power is a rather apocalyptic vision – “all people of color are united through their victimization by white racism and the only viable solution to the race war is a violent overthrow of the social order.”<sup>46</sup> Within the character of Roi, Baraka emerges as a black radical calling for violent means of change, a revolution which would bring the whites to justice and finally establish a world in which black culture would possess a far more prominent role than in the United States of then.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Following the era of the Harlem Renaissance, which for the first time introduced the black culture to the American public as worthy of serious examination, the work of Amiri Baraka fits into the pantheon of black writing following, for example, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Despite Baraka’s place in this evolution, he must not be perceived as merely a successor of the African American cultural tradition; his writing in many ways tries to free itself from convention in order to promote more radical views and prospects of a much different future.

Baraka took the issue of black identity and employed it in his texts in an unprecedented way. As can be seen in the three texts examined here, in the course of just a few years in the first half of the 1960s, Amiri Baraka transformed from rather an ordinary hip artist of the Greenwich Village to a self-assured individual, a proud black man promoting the cultural and historical value of black culture in mainstream American society.

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<sup>45</sup> Montgomery, *The Apocalypse*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Montgomery, *The Apocalypse*, 69.

<sup>47</sup> Harry Justin Elam, *Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 53.

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