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SONGS IN BLUE

FOR THE DAMNED OF THE EARTH

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in English

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This thesis aims to situate four of Amiri Baraka’s poetry collections—*Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note, The Dead Lecturer, Black Magic,* and *Hard Facts*—alongside Frantz Fanon’s model of development of the colonised intellectual. This development study of Baraka’s life and work adopts a broader geographical and political framework than much of the previous commentaries to see what insights Baraka’s poetry may offer to other communities forced to deal with racist and other forms of oppression.

This thesis will argue Fanon’s paradigm offers a useful means to understand Baraka as outsider, who in times of social upheaval struggles to ‘decolonise’ himself, then return to, and decolonise, his people. This can be seen as a type of quest for personal, cultural and national identity.

The concept of identity formed around W. E. B. Dubois’s ‘veil’ of split consciousness will be central to the work, as it provides a dynamic for understanding the poet’s continuous battles to find a meaningful place for himself and his people—alogous issues for all colonised peoples.

Assuming Fanon’s polemical and dialectical stance, the thesis proposes to chart Baraka’s career as a poet as it moves through assimilation, transition, nationalism, and Marxism, in relation to the ‘mother culture’ in which he develops as a person and a poet. Larger political conflicts form a counterpoint to the development of what Fanon calls ‘the native intellectual’, who is inspired by, and inspires in return, his people.
For Amiri Baraka, Amilcar Cabral, and Frantz Fanon, and others, either buried on battlefields, or still fighting on them. In deepest affection and admiration.
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For a fine supervisor and generous and warm-hearted dude—Roger Horrocks.
For a good friend Michael, who typed out my hand-written thesis—this work would not have been done but for your support—I thank you.
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I owe a debt I cannot repay to the Wellesley Course and its fine tutors and students, a programme which helps those of us with poor academic backgrounds, and in many cases those of us who have not had either the opportunity, or will, to find a way amongst the world to a university custom built for the white middle class.
Even as the politics of this thesis will go against the grain of my four 1992 tutors Reina, Moira, Lyndsay, and Tanya, I wish to recognise them, and the fine course they run.
For Ropati-manuia.
Finally, I wish to state my criticisms of this university, but—in the spirit of the generosity of the people I mention above—I refrain from making these at this time.
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INTRODUCTION

The African-American Amiri Baraka has lived an extraordinary life as a writer, political worker and social activist. As a writer his work has been directly linked with many social, cultural and political changes during a turbulent period of history. His metamorphoses as literary figure from 'Beat' (involved also with other American and European avant-garde literary techniques) to 'Black Nationalist', and then 'third world Marxist', are documented across a range of genres (poetry, drama, fiction, essays, music criticism and cultural criticism).

In this thesis I will concentrate on the poetry because there is such a large body of work in itself, but also because it provides such a full and sensitive account of these changes. I will, of course, allude to other genres. Each phase of his poetic development involves an intense negotiation not only with literary values but also with the values and ideologies that are implicit in the materiality out of which the writing develops. This makes examination of his biography from the black middle class streets of Newark, to Howard University, to the airforce, to Greenwich Village and beyond, to Harlem and Newark, equally as fascinating a study.

While remaining focussed on Baraka's writing, this thesis will not impose any tidy separation of the life from the work because it is the very attempt to bring these into a meaningful relationship that energises his literary development.

Baraka's life and work have been discussed in at least five book length critical studies, not to mention innumerable lesser studies across a field of journals, articles and reviews. I will outline the significance of each book length study chronologically, in order to attempt to illustrate, in brief synopsis, what each critic has added to the scholarship around Baraka, what contexts these critics have viewed him within, and what similarities or concerns overlap. From these brief sketches I will attempt to illustrate what work on Baraka still needs to be done, and how my own study is situated within this scholarship.

Theodore Hudson's From Leroi Jones to Amiri Baraka (1973) is a useful biographical text written by a young, black critic, influenced by the black nationalism of that period of Baraka's development. By situating the artist's work against stylistic idiosyncracy and biography Hudson offers up an important first critical survey.
Academically significant, the work is also politically important. That is, the critic offers access to Baraka’s work, up to and including his militant nationalist art and politics, to a general public kept away by the author’s avowed hatred of white people, and his suspicion of white publishing houses. Hudson’s survey offers a way to understand Baraka’s work, even if the critic’s obvious analytical skills are limited by the more pressing need to survey rather than analyse in greater depth, Baraka’s works. The literature is analysed along a line favourable to Baraka’s shift from Leroi Jones to a rebirth as a black nationalist, as Imamu Amiri Baraka.

Kimberly Benston’s 1976 The Renegade and the Mask contextualises the African-American culture, music and nationalist (black) aesthetic. One is able then to situate the works in their cultural contexts. Primarily an examination of Baraka’s drama (although one chapter is devoted to the poetry), the book offers many insights into the relationship of that drama to African-American politics, art and music. Underpinning the text in philosophical terms is the notion of Existentialist man lost in the centre of the universe, together with and a Hegelian desire to find meaning through dialectical synthesis, which might allow for some fusion of being in the world as an alternative to alienation and divided self-identity.

Werner Sollors’s 1978 Amiri Baraka / Leroi Jones: The Quest for a Populist Modernism also works, like Benston’s book, as a search to synthesise two conflicting energies. One source of conflict is the need to forge “a romantic unity of life and art”\textsuperscript{1} within the tensions of being both “a practical man and . . . a visionary . . . an Afro-American and . . . a Western Modernist”.\textsuperscript{2} Sollors’s work outdistances Benston and Hudson’s works in the scope of its examinations of these tensions. His book covers all genres of Baraka’s work, tracking Baraka’s career through four aesthetic phases with their corresponding political commitments. This implies that the art of each phase is an ‘outgrowth’ of the political affiliation which is the materiality from which the art springs. Sollor’s concern to develop his idea of populist modernism becomes an overarching principle in the work. He comments: “the phases are . . . linked by Baraka’s persistent demand for a populist modernism, a unity of life and art, literature and society, through all his periods and changes.”\textsuperscript{3} Conflict as a basic structural

\textsuperscript{1} Sollors, p.2.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p.8.
principle underlies this study, as it does Benston’s work—indicating the critics’ concern both to situate him within western literature and at the same time to respect his ‘otherness’ and originality as an African-American artist.

Lloyd Brown’s 1980 *Amiri Baraka* attempts a ‘generic’ study of the different genres of Baraka’s art in the belief that formal changes “reflect certain aspects of his development as politically committed writer, and it simultaneously helps to define the very nature of the experience which it contains.” In this fascinating approach, Brown reads the texts closely, assuming that an analysis of the different nuances of expression, and the different modes of presentation provide unique insights into Baraka’s political evolution, and that there is a dialectical means of understanding artistic practice and political thinking together. A teleology of development is obvious here, differing from Sollors in its desire to place the literature within the political evolution of the man himself. Brown is, however, also concerned to understand this process of refraction in its complexity, so that he explores artistic as well as political influences, noting the Symbolist strains at work in Baraka’s poetry.

Henry Lacey’s *To Raise Destroy and Create: The Poetry, Drama and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka* is an important addition to the scholarship. What other critics such as Sollors and Benston have noted in passing is now seen by Lacey as a central means of understanding Baraka’s work. He writes: “the psychic turmoil of this particular artist reflects strongly the recent emotional history of collective black America”.

Benston’s text argues this point in Existential terms, Sollors discusses it briefly in his four phased model. Other critics illustrate the tensions and difficulties between the writer and his life, or between the drama and its cultural context, but Lacey’s work provides a more direct assertion of the need to relate the artist’s work to the African American community’s, search for identity (bolder communal and personal). He states “In his development Baraka presents a striking example of this painful longing for a positive sense of self.” Lacey’s work deepens the scholarship by adding a richness to the African-American aspects, by showing that any life emerging out of that materiality is bound to be fraught with questions of identity, place, and psychic wholeness, within the disorienting situation of a racist, white society.

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4 Brown, preface, unpaginated.
5 Lacey, ix.
6 *ibid.*
William Harris's *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: the Jazz Aesthetic* is perhaps the finest of the major studies. He situates Baraka's inversion, improvisation, upheavals and rewriting of the poetics of his literary fathers in relation to jazz music principles, which reflect distinctive African-American sensibilities. Harris argues that Baraka's use of jazz techniques works on multiple levels, as a means of both continuing and disrupting avant-garde poetics. It is also a means of resisting and satirising the dominant culture's art, its forms of thought and its sense of value, expressing the African-American experience in a mode crafted out of that experience. Such work 'reinvents' art through its experience and improvisations. This aesthetic process can be seen as analogous to Baraka's life-style of social and political activism for African-American People. Such art is resistance culture. Harris is careful and exhaustive in his concern to show how Baraka is influenced by, and then transforms the Modernist techniques of Dada, Surrealism and Symbolism, via his improvisations. He is also concerned to acknowledge the American tradition of writers such as Pound, Williams, Olson, Kerouac and Ginsberg, not to mention O'Hara and others, as influences that Baraka must contends with and improvise with in new social and political contexts, like a jazz musician (who to borrow a Modernist phrase) 'make it new'.

Each critic in this study (except Sollors) places Baraka and his works in an explicitly American context, while Sollors places Baraka in a broader line of modernist writers. Among these critics I sensed common themes: literary crisis, resistance in the face of political and social terrorism both life and art; the desire (shared by each critic) to both show sameness and difference, in relation to America's poetry, and to its culture (being both an outsider and an insider).

The developmental models offered by Sollors, Brown, Lacey and Harris suggested a different framework to me—Frantz Fanon's model of colonialism and his paradigm of the native intellectual, as illustrated in his discussions in 'National Culture' in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harris himself suggests this framework (in a footnote), but then dismisses it:

See Frantz Fanon's three stages of the native writer for interesting parallels with Baraka's development. Even though in his first stage Fanon is too categorical about assimilation, lumping all foreign influences together, the second stage, where the alienated native wants to return to his culture, is very similar to Baraka's cultural nationalist period, and the third stage, where the native wants to awaken the people, is analogous to both Baraka's
nationalist and Marxist periods. Yet one serious shortcoming of the paradigm is that it does not take into consideration the absorption of rebellious element from the dominant culture by certain native artists.  

In response to his scepticism I would argue that the way to apply the colonial paradigm to the African-American context would be to see 'rebellious elements'—for example, the Beat and Projectivist influences—as a part of the dominant culture that makes it possible to accommodate and assimilate the 'native intellectual.' American history began with a rebellion, and there have always been outlets for rebellion in American art and popular culture—but they do not necessarily bring personal and political realisation. The system has great powers of absorption. Interestingly, Harris does hint at a form of colonisation in avant-garde poetry and therefore in the values of the community it came from. He says:

In essence ethnicity was excluded from the post-World War II poem: the language of the majority culture dominated the avant-garde poem of the 1960s. From a minority perspective, it was written in the language of another tribe and, furthermore, was larded with that tribe's values and assumptions about reality.  

One might suggest that for a black writer, starting to question his poetic and social allegiances to that community (in light of the civil rights movements and international decolonisation in Africa), such rebellious art is a powerless weapon against a racist system that continues to colonise Africa-Americans. Avant-garde art offers the dream of 'integration' in Greenwich Village and other bohemian enclaves, but such a dream can never cancel out the nightmare of police brutality, poverty, illness and discrimination that surrounds, underlies and penetrates any such refuge. I will argue later that the evidence of a split consciousness in Baraka's first three phases of development illustrate the struggle of the colonised African-American intellectual against the effects of being 'civilised' or 'cultured', yet alienated from black identity, leading to a self hatred he must overcome by a search to find his self in his people.

I am drawn to Fanon's framework because I believe it can help us to understand Baraka's development in a broader, international perspective (drawing upon the experience of many historical instances of racism). Baraka himself moved towards such a global perspective. I am also drawn to it personally as a Pacific Islander living in New Zealand who finds great relevance in both Baraka's and Fanon's work for coming to

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7 Harris, p. 30.  
8 Ibid., p. 86.
terms with my own colonial experience and that of the people with whom I have
grown up. I will return to these issues later. But first, I must allow Fanon to introduce
his perspective: in more detail:

If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases
which characterize this evolution we would find spread out before us a
panorama on three levels. In the first phase, the native intellectual gives
proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His
writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in
the mother country. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up
these works with different trends in the literature of the mother country.
This is the period of unqualified assimilation. We find in this literature
coming from the colonies the Parnassians, the Symbolists and the
Surrealists . . .

In the second phase we find that the native is disturbed, he decides to
remember who he is. This period of creative work approximately
corresponds to that immersion which we have just described. But since the
native is not part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his
people, he is content to recall their life only. Past happenings of the bygone
days of his childhood will brought up out of the depths of his memory; old
legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and
of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.

Sometimes this literature of just before the battle is dominated by
humour and allegory; but often it is symptomatic of a period of distress and
difficulty, where death is experienced, and disgust too . . .

Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native,
after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on
the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people’s lethargy an
honoured place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the
people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a
national literature.9

Fanon’s model allows a reader to understand the invidious hegemony of power that
colonialism is able to bring to bear upon a colonised writer whose very efforts to fit in
leaves himself or herself alienated on psychological, existential, linguistic,
imaginative and cultural levels—not only from other members of his/her community,
but from his or her own deepest self. This approach allows a reader to put the insights
of literary critics’ into wider political, geographical and social contexts, as well as
gaining a more profound sense of the conflicts and complexities that a black
intellectual must live with.

A theory formulated on Africa’s shores, in the Algerian conflict, is useful to a
reading of Baraka for it links common struggles, both political and psychological.
Fanon’s model does not ‘fit’ Baraka, exactly, but it provides suggestive comparisons
in which one may discern many similarities. Comparing Africa to the United States
helps one to see the American situation from an external vantage point outside

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America, and thus in a sense it allows us to see the culture African-Americans are
trapped inside.

This model as used here situates Baraka’s work and themes within the collective
history of struggles to resist colonialism or neo-colonialism. It is natural for any
member of a colonised people—and I would describe myself in these terms—to want
to see solidarity between different colonised peoples—and to want to learn from other
and our own struggles for identity and wholeness against self-hatred. It is central to
this thesis to discuss individual and cultural identity in the context(s) of colonialism.
One might see the act of renaming ‘Negro’ as ‘black’, ‘Afro-American’, ‘African-
American’, etc., as a response to this crisis of identity. And each new term moves one
back to a recognition of the broader history of Africa and other colonised peoples as
part of one’s heritage that has been ‘silenced’ by white racism.

The model itself has been created by a native intellectual, an outsider to the
affairs of Algeria, and so is an useful paradigm within which to look at others on the
edges of society. Fanon gives us powerful insights into the ‘blues’ many native
intellectuals must wrestle with. Self division, an ambivalence towards one’s own
colonised education, places the intellectual in an anomalous position in the colonial
world, neither fish nor fowl, but uniquely equipped to articulate and interpret the
people’s struggle—for example, through his/her training in certain forms of the art. In
a fashion, Fanon tells a story of the biblical prodigal son in a colonial context. One
might see Baraka’s search for personal and communal black redemption as similarly
emblematic of the experience of any colonised artist.

Related to this sense of alienation is the issue of class difference that Fanon’s
model implies—the intellectual who even as he goes back to the people ‘behaves like
a foreigner’. It is a dynamic, with an attendant sense of guilt, that—according to
Fanon—motivates an intellectual eventually to return to the people. Baraka will say in
his autobiography on his journey to Harlem from Greenwich Village:

The middle-class native intellectual, having outintegrated the most
integrated, now plunges headlong back into what he perceives as blackest,
native-est.10

The native intellectual suffers from the split between his assimilated self and what he
desires to become. Granted, Fanon’s theory is itself framed within a European

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discourse. Its conflicts of oppositions is Hegelian in spirit, mediated through Sartre's Existential world of interpersonal conflict, where individuals in an alienating world objectify one another, because the presence of others in the world is threatening to the self. Fanon takes these, and the psychoanalytic influences of Freud and Lacan and transforms them into a theory of the colonial world, of coloniser and colonised as antagonists.

The concern with 'the self' is at least as old as Rousseau in continental thought. In the existential and phenomenological intellectual climate of France occupied—and then liberated—one sees a concern among many different theorists for this self sundered from it-self—Lacan, Camus, Sartre, and Fanon to name only four. In Fanon's colonial situation he will try to resolve the oppositions through struggle, in the hope that a higher synthesis may create a higher humanism:

The end of race prejudice begins with a sudden incomprehension. The occupants’ spasmed and rigid culture, now liberated, opens at last to the culture of people who have really become brothers. The two cultures can confront each other, enrich each other. In conclusion, universality resides in this decision to recognize and accept the reciprocal relativism of different cultures, once the colonial status is irreversibly excluded. In this way he turns philosophy into praxis. One might see Baraka’s poetics of his Beat and nationalist phases also as attempts to re-construct the self. Like Fanon, Baraka must develop the theory and finally see the field of forces from a broader, colonial perspective.

One should recognize important differences between Fanon’s background and Baraka’s here—two different intellectual traditions, men trained in different fields, one (Fanon) never losing a belief in a higher, more collective, humanism which the other (Baraka) only arrives at in his Marxist phase. It is Fanon who will say in Black Skin, White Masks:

We shall have no mercy for the former governors, the former missionaries. To us, the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him.

Even in the fervour of the later Wretched of the Earth (written out of a context of revolution, as Black Skin, White Masks is not) he sees an emotional catharsis as the deeper reason for acts that by themselves are ugly and nihilistic:

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11 Sartre’s classic Being and Nothingness—for example 'The Body for-Others' pp. 339-351, and 'My Fellowman' pp. 509-531.
12 Fanon, Toward the African, p. 44.
13 Black Skin, p. 8.
At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.\textsuperscript{14}

Also, Fanon is far more willing to challenge the status of women as inferior\textsuperscript{15} than Baraka is until his late Marxist phase.\textsuperscript{16}

During his beat phase, Baraka’s existential despair and black humour—his hip irony—cause him to question any notions of human progress, even though his use of Surrealism and Projectivism are associated with some sense of personal authenticity. Only in the ‘violent and sunbaked’ poetry of \textit{The Dead Lecturer}, which builds into black nationalism, does Baraka engage clearly with humanism, and even here the sense of irony is still strong.

One might see Fanon and Baraka as two brilliant individuals of the black diaspora who, because of the need, become ‘renaissance men’: theorists, political organisers, editors, and fearless ‘public intellectuals’ (or what Gramsci would call ‘organic intellectuals’), willing to get their hands dirty in the collective struggle.

In a colonial context one might better understand Baraka’s often quoted Manicheanism as it emerges from his poetry. One can empathise with his desire to attempt to grow into a fullness of self outside the white symbolic realm, and find an African-American subjectivity for himself. This idea can be related back to Baraka’s early experimental poetry and to the ongoing strain of Surrealism in his work. Fanon would see this ‘harsh’ style as an attempt to liberate the black unconscious, to find a Lacanian ‘mirror image’ of the self that could escape the snare of the double-consciousness. It is Hayes who links Fanon’s words to the great African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote in \textit{Souls of Black Folk} (1903):

\begin{quote}

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Wretched}, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{15} He is open to the idea of women becoming far more than ‘women’ in a male chauvinistic society, Algeria. One might question how independent, how free women are to construct themselves even in a more liberated, revolutionary society. But there is faith and trust, a belief in women as revolutionaries, leaders and fighters that is far ahead of its time on issues of women’s ‘rightful place’. Even within the notion of heterosexual family constraints, as basis for the nation as family units, he offers up a relatively progressive examination of women’s potential in struggle, which breaks her free of many restrictions in the society. See Fanon, \textit{A Dying}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{16} Baraka, \textit{Autobiography}, pp. 424-5. Although written retrospectively this section offers clear evidence of the poet’s sense of guilt at his previous male chauvinism, through an analysis that is gender and class sympathetic, within a Marxist economic understanding.
feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.'

I would argue that this existential condition is central to Baraka’s poetry. Hayes also links this situation to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*:

> For the black no longer has to be black, but must be it in front of the white. 
> . . . The black has no ontological resistance to the eyes of the white. Overnight the Negroes have had two systems of reference with regard to which they felt the need to situate themselves. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously, their customs and the earnestness with which they are discharged, were abolished because they found themselves in contradiction with a civilization of which they were ignorant and which imposed itself on them.18

What is useful here is a common psychology of oppression is identified by two critics who did not know each other.19 While Gaines illustrates other black Americans who have never felt this split,20 the literature of ‘black America’ illustrates how pervasive this sense of bifurcation is. Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, or Baldwin’s *Another Country*, not to mention Wright’s *Native Son* all raise similar questions of identity. What is curious in Baraka’s case (as we shall later explore) is the way that his Surrealism links him with a black literary tradition that even up until 1963, he had little use for.21

Baraka’s poetry illustrates the painful rite of passage that Malcolm X describes in his schoolyard talk with a white teacher. As an aside this following quote might illustrate that the split consciousness was not simply a black middle class writer’s or intellectual’s bane alone. Responding to Malcolm’s desire to become a lawyer, his teacher says:

> Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be.22

Noting how this same teacher encouraged all the white students, most of whom were not as academically gifted, Malcolm felt that the ‘veil’ had been lowered; “It was then

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17 qtd. in Hayes, p. 19.
18 *ibid.*
19 Gaines, p. 33.
20 *ibid.*
21 Jones, ‘The Myth of a Negro Literature’, pp. 105-15. Jones’s reluctance to acknowledge a worthwhile black literature was, admittedly, tied to what he considered a ‘canon’ saturated in the culture and values of the black bourgeoisie. As a Black Nationalist he satirised such pretensions. As a Black Nationalist he condemned such ‘Uncle Tom’ behaviour until the need to overcome sectarian differences in the Black Nation was made manifest in the lat Nationalist work, *Spirit Reach* and *In Our Terribleness*.
22 Little, p. 111.
that I began to change—inside.”23 One finds in Baraka’s poetry the pain and anguish of learning to live in this hostile white world. One can see in the poems a man’s search for a coherent location in language, in culture, in the body.

In the 1960s African-American militants began to speak of the colonialism experienced by black people throughout the world, and to invoke Fanon and the ‘third world’ struggles. Lawrence P Neale commented on the relevance of the colonial paradigm to the United States:

[It] breaks down the ideological walls which have contained the struggle thus far. It supplies the black theorist and activist with a new set of political alternatives.24

The colonial model was seriously considered by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their Black Power (1966), indicating that Fanon was becoming a popular theorist for the militant voices of black nationalism as these voices emerged out of the urban ghettos, as a northern response to the Christian civil rights movement’s desire for integration in the south. They wrote:

But Black power means that black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the “Third World”; that we see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles around the world. We must hook up with these strategies.25

One needs to understand the main features of ‘classic’ colonialism’s to see why this link seemed so important. Robert Blauner provides a useful outline:

Colonialism traditionally refers to the establishment of domination over a geographically external political unit, most often inhabited by people of a different race and culture, where this domination is political and economic, and the colony exists subordinated to and dependent upon the mother country. Typically the colonizers exploit the land, the raw materials, the labor, and other resources of the colonized nation; in addition a formal recognition is given to the difference in power, autonomy, and political status, and various agencies are set up to maintain this subordination. . . . Classic colonialism involved the control and exploitation of the majority of a nation by a minority of outsiders.26

The impact on the colonised was an upheaval of all indigenous institutions, metaphysics, systems of authority, relationships to the land. At the most basic level, the colonised were taught that all such beliefs and practices were ‘evil’. Fanon says:

23 Ibid.
24 qtd. in Allen, p. 51.
25 Carmichael & Hamilton, xiii.
26 Blauner, p. 191. Seeing the differences between this form of colonialism and the African-American, Blauner goes on to say, “Seemingly the analogy must be stretched beyond usefulness if the American version is to be forced into this model.” Bearing this in mind we should apply Fanon’s model to the American context with the same caution when discussing Baraka’s work.
The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values.  

One only needs to look at the history of Aotearoa, or Australia. On top of this political and military colonialism, Carmichael and Hamilton see the development of a more psychological yet equally powerful form of domination:

Institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group position prevails: whites are "better" than blacks; therefore blacks should be subordinated to whites. This is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly.

Race prejudice is an internalised form of what began with the gun: "This institutional racism has another name: colonialism." Carmichael & Hamilton will note that African-Americans can no longer be seen as geographically separated from a mother country, yet notes that under apartheid, black South Africans live like black Americans. They suggest that the economic exporting of raw materials under classic colonialism is paralleled by the situation of the poorly waged black underclass exploited in the U.S. today, struggling to buy back the finished goods that they helped produce. No black politician elected from a white political party can accomplish anything useful for the community. Carmichael & Hamilton note the violence of a racist police force in the ghetto like that which maintains oppression in the black colony. They also emphasise the notion of colonial dependency, where merchants and money lenders collude to exploit the black community, keeping it economically dependent while reinvesting nothing back in return.

The problems with their analysis lie in the general assumptions that what motivates the whole system is racism. This is an under-reading of colonialism which does not clearly see racism as the ideology of an exploitative system which exploits other groups also, such as Native American Indians, Latinos, and poor whites. This is not to suggest that Carmichael & Hamilton’s arguments are not useful and provocative. They reflect the anger and tangible despair of a people who see who oppresses them, and how, yet no one is doing anything to change these conditions.

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27 Fanon,
28 Carmichael & Hamilton, p. 5.
29 Ibid.
They understand the need to go outside the American context to find a vantage point unclouded by its lying ideals.

Blauner is perhaps more to the point when he says, “A final fundament of colonisation is racism.” He offers the concept of what he called, in 1969, internal colonialism:

It is my basic thesis that the most important expressions of protest in the black community during the recent years reflect the colonized status of Afro-America. Riots, programs of separation, politics of community control, the Black revolutionary movements, and cultural nationalism each represent a different strategy of attack on domestic colonialism in America.

One might see in these arguments theory sympathetic to a nationalist tradition seeking to separate itself from more integrationist traditions. International precedents such as the decolonising of Africa could be seen as the possible ‘spark’ for African-Americans. Southern Christian black civil rights had achieved much through its appeal to ‘decent’ Americans; its boycotts and sit-ins, culminating in the civil rights bill of 1964, and the voting rights bill of 1965, not to forget the march on Washington in 1963 where Dr. King delivered his famed “I have a dream” speech. But the gains associated with these activities brought nothing to the unemployed ghetto dwellers of the north, and so more militant movements developed around such figures as Malcolm X and Elijah Mohammed (leader of the Nation of Islam). These movements received less media coverage (although Malcolm X was somewhat of a ‘celebrity’) until the ghetto rebellions of the mid 60s meant that militant voices could no longer be ignored.

This ‘split-consciousness’ of integration and separatism as conflicting responses to oppression had a long history in African-American social history. Martin R Delaney and Marcus Garvey were two of the many earlier leaders (Delaney in the 19th Century and Garvey in the early 20th) who had sought working class support for their brands of Black Nationalism, whether seeking to go ‘back to Africa’ or to establish a separate state in the United States. Malcolm X, Carmichael and Baraka come from this side of the argument.

Mean while the integrationist impulse had passed through Frederick Douglas and to Booker T. Washington on to Dr. King. This movement tended to appeal to

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30 Blauner, p. 193.
31 Blauner, p. 194.
Southern rather than Northern blacks and to the middle class rather than to the poor. Separatism and integration never entirely went away for each implied the other. When one occupied public attention, the other would surge back like Freud’s ‘return of the repressed’. In the mid 60s it was separatism that made a violent—but arguably a necessary—return. What I am suggesting in rather drawn out fashion is that one needs to understand African-American cultural theory of the 1960s as one means, through separation and violence if necessary, to becoming as a people whole in the widest senses of that word. The separatism growing out of black nationalism emphasised self-determination, turning inwards to one’s own people and culture, and talk of colonialism was a way to articulate this. It was not necessarily Fanon’s conception of colonialism, but it raised relevant issues (such as the reconstruction of black history and identity).

Colonialism then, if one considers Blauner and Carmichael’s arguments, takes different forms in the American context. What emerges is a theory to appeal to the masses. Implicit is the notion of a nation—built out of oppression, sharing a common history, struggling today for freedom against colonialism. ‘Nation’ could be seen as an imagined community taking its shape in the struggle. Fanon, in the Algerian context, held to a similar ideal, of an unstable, yet ultimately coherent nation defining itself through the people’s liberation struggle in the Manichean colonial world. One could argue that Fanon reifies colonialism in accepting political and national boundaries established by the coloniser, but in the heat of battle the dream of freedom transcended such ‘minor’ concerns.

Similarly one might see the idea of nation, in the African-American context of the 1950s and 1960s, not as a utopian fantasy but as something to be constructed. In that sense both Fanon, and the African-American nationalists had a realistic concern with praxis—theory codetermined with practice—which was the everyday political activity of resistance. Yet some may see such talk of nationalism and political activism today as historically dated and thematically naïve. I would concede that this kind of discussion can easily slip into armchair philosophising. Some would go further and object that black nationalism is caught up in binary oppositions (such as a free nation born out of a colonial and oppressive one). One could also argue that I am

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32 This is, of course, a raw and simplified analysis.
playing rhetorical games by my talk of colonialism and my use of Fanon’s model. Why does this student persevere with a theory nearly forty years old?

Contemporary French theory may see my assumptions as problematic. I retain a Marxist respect for dialectic, and am not horrified by the fact that Fanon’s model implies a linear and humanist conception history in its movements to higher human development. Foucault’s conceptions of psychology and social control may seem more complex than Fanon’s, trapped as they are in Hegelian and Existentialist notions of the self. A critic might also argue that the idea of a native intellectual ‘deciding to remember who he is’ is far too essentialist, as is Fanon’s idea of ‘the people’. Fanon’s grand narrative, in a post-modern use of that phrase, might be seen as an uncritical extension of Enlightenment epistemes. A deconstructionist could use this ‘contradiction’ to show that the whole of Fanon’s project was problematic.

Contemporary theorists might challenge this argument on every single point. I can think of two fine ones, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, who do, in some of their works, challenge all of these ideals. Bhabha’s reading of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* in his ‘Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition’, is a post-Structuralist, psycho-analytical influenced work that might be seen to challenge many of this student’s assumptions. Bhabha presents a complex picture of the colonial self and other relation—always-already inessential and never unified. This critic works in a field of ‘fantasy and desire’, pushing Fanon’s own words into the psycho-analytical economy that he feels Fanon’s work implies, but at times seeks to avoid in the pursuit of a Hegelian resolution of an essential self and colonial other which might blend into a synthesis.

Bhabha presents a world where image, identity, and self-hood are constantly projected, only to be split up and fragmented. Situated within a violent and distorted colonial world, all such projections within this economy are distorted. This incessant projection and consequent deferral of meaning again splits any possibility of a unified self, or other, as Fanon presupposes. For Bhabha this creates a zone of in-between-ness, and not the antagonistic and deadly oppositional colonial relation that a traditional reading of Fanon seems to imply. In this psychological space Bhabha conceives of a zone within which anti-colonial and psychological resistance might be sourced through mimicry and concealment, as the coloniser’s projections are returned with the colonised’s difference—not in direct oppositions but instead in a skewed
fashion, where boundaries are less distinct. Bhabha presents a colonial world of rapidly shifting layers of image, identity, and self-hood moving through the economy of fantasy and desire, deconstructing Fanon’s dialectic and essentialism. These are brilliant and complex arguments. My work, in contrast, may be seen as presenting too simplistic a conception of the self—totalising and repressive. I am critical of Bhabha’s theory because it assumes that the colonial subject must evade the colonial gaze to hide behind masks rather than work towards destroying the system of colonial ‘fantasy and desire’. As Benita Parry notes, the oppositional and antagonistic struggle that continues in modern colonial or neo-colonial societies, that Fanon charts, is gone in Bhabha’s account.  

Spivak presumes, in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, that her colonised figure, the Indian subaltern woman, is silenced by the Imperial discourse that followed on the heels of military conquest. Combined with this Imperialist episteme of violence (through the control of knowledge) is a Hindu patriarchy which silences the subaltern. Spivak’s aim is to ask how a native intellectual might retrieve this silenced female subject without tainting her speech in the discourses of the native intellectual historian—whose own consciousness has been shaped within this doubly oppressive episteme and who, therefore, in attempting to find the subaltern’s voice silences her anew, constructing her ‘subjectivity’ within the framework of these discourses of violence. While her essay covers much more ground than I can discuss here, these ideas are central to her project. Again this critic might question my whole enterprise in relation to the native intellectual subjectivity, and the ability to meaningfully construct an identity through struggle.

The difficulty I have with Spivak’s work is its conception that only through obscure and difficult pathways can the subaltern voice be heard without being caught up in the coloniser’s discourse. She implies that all signs and symbols are tainted, any subjectivities constructed out from this system are suspect, and cannot escape the dominance, the panoptic vision, of Imperialism and Hindu patriarchy. She assumes a near absolute sundering between the native intellectual and the subaltern.

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33 Parry, p. 42. While this refers to Bhabha’s ‘Signs Taken For Wonders’ rather than ‘Remembering Fanon’, the same principle applies.
To argue fully with such complex themes would require a thesis in itself. I respect the fact that both critics are attempting in different ways to fight colonialism and neocolonialism. But their particular mode of struggle seems to value complexity as an end in itself. In attaching an extreme (and perhaps disproportionate) importance to discourse in the construction of political reality, contemporary theory risks painting itself into an academic corner, and illustrates how deeply implicated these theorists are in the discourse of the West. Such theorists' arguments are directed to an intelligentsia without facilitating a dialogue of theory with practice, with the everyday lived experience and collective political instincts of the community (Fanon's and Baraka's 'people'). It is not necessarily to vulgarise theory—arguably, it can improve theory—if it emerges from the academy (or the avant-garde coterie) to spend time on the streets. I have learned this in my struggles with student politics, in my loose association with members of the Socialist Workers' Party of New Zealand, and in my everyday experiences as a Pacific Islander from a colonised people.

There are several issues here—the first is the 'use value' of theories in terms of political application. The second is the danger of theory that focuses on discourse to such an extent that its own discourse loses touch with other areas of experience and therefore the very people that it was meant to assist. Even if we admit that Fanon's discourse is also caught up in colonising intellectual tradition, he never loses sight of the fact that all people can remake themselves, and oppose what oppresses them through a dialectic between action and theory. This is the idealism which fuels this student, which I see in Fanon, and which I feel emerges clearly in Baraka's poetry.

To say that 'the people' is trapped Marxist discourse, loaded with ideologically fixed and inflexible presuppositions is a fair criticism. But this need not be applied naively; consider Cabral's comment:

Unity is a means toward struggle, and as with all means a little goes a long way. It is not necessary to unite all the population to struggle in a country. Are we sure all the population are united? No, a certain degree of unity is enough. Once we have reached it, then we can struggle.35

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34 Parry asserts: "Fanon's theory projects a development inseparable from a community's engagement in combative social action, during which a native contest initially enunciated in the invaders' language, culminates in a rejection of Imperialism's signifying system. This is a move which colonial discourse theory has not taken aboard." ('Problems in Current Theories', p. 45).

35 Cabral, p.31.
Even in neo-colonial technological society, and not a colonial liberation struggle
(from which Fanon’s and Cabral’s work emerges), such theory might be attuned to the
new historical period in which we live.

I state my case as a space-clearing gesture so that I might proceed to speak of
Baraka in relation to cultural identity, as it relates to Fanon’s paradigm, and as it rests
upon the above understanding of people.

In the best spirit of Fanon, Stuart Hall notes that:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as
of ‘being’. . . . It is not something which already exists, transcending place,
time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have
histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant
transformation.\textsuperscript{56}

We might still accept that the ‘self’ is a complex of practices and
transformations even as we could admit that this is situated in a materiality, a history,
a culture, and a struggle. Baraka, as colonised intellectual, will attempt to dig up an
essential personal and cultural identity out of the past in his nationalist phase in order
to construct, in the agon between past and present, a meaningful identity in the
American colonial world.

This thesis will contain four chapters built around four texts: Preface To A
Twenty Volume Suicide Note, The Dead Lecturer, Black Magic and Hard Facts. This
enables one to see continuities and contradictions arising within each text, and allows
a reader to see how the poet’s concerns develop and interconnect. This thesis will look
most closely at the transitional phase into cultural nationalism, and the black cultural
nationalist phase, as these both intersect, as illustrated in Black Magic. This is because
of my own personal interest, but also because these poems represent the most
substantial and controversial body of work that Baraka produced. Always I will
attempt to place texts and literary concerns in social contexts, as coming out of a time,
a place, a perceived need for new poetry and theory. The transition between cultural
nationalism and Marxism will be covered by my discussions around Black Magic.
Since only one poem exists in this transition phase I will attempt to discuss both
phases through Black Magic’s final poems. Through the poems of Hard Facts’ I will
explore the new contradictions that arise need resolution, that lead to Baraka
taking the role as shaker of ‘the people’ after having tried to immerse himself in the

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}
people. I will speak of the poet as Leroi Jones up to that point where he changes his name. Thus, even though *Black Magic* is written between 1961-5 it is published in 1969, a year after Leroi Jones has become Imamu Amiri Baraka. This also serves to remind us of the war within the self, as it emerges in both *The Dead Lecturer* and *Black Magic*.

By the end of the work I hope to have shown Amiri Baraka in a new light, and to have given all those whose lives are touched by the same issues—including those in New Zealand—food for thought. Does our theory of writing come back to the people? Baraka’s does. Are we accountable to our people, or above and beyond them? As native intellectuals we are always separate from our peoples. But Fanon, Cabral, Baraka and Mondlane provide useful examples of how to move with and learn from our less fortunate people. As Haki Madhubuti once said, “Wake Up, Niggers.”
CHAPTER ONE: PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE
(1961)

In order to situate Jones’s Preface to A Twenty Volume Suicide Note within a colonial context one needs to better understand the socio-political milieu out of which it is framed. This milieu is New York bohemian, avant-garde culture, and for Jones its geographical focus is Greenwich Village—one site upon which a ‘Beat’ culture, society and literature had emerged. I will argue that it is this version of American culture that acts as a colonising force on Jones in a variety of ways.

In a 1952 article John Clelon Holmes, a Beat novelist, traced the origins of the word ‘Beat’ in its American post-World War II situation. He said of the origin and meaning of the word:

The origins of the word “beat” are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and ultimately, of soul; a sort of feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; the young generation has done that continually from early youth. 37

A sense of being weary in the world is accompanied by a fierce individualism emphasising the need to live in ‘authenticity’, in the existential sense of that word. As Holmes discusses Jean-Paul Sartre it might be useful to understand this philosopher’s notion of existential responsibility and freedom. Sartre notes, on freedom:

Indeed by the sole fact that I am conscious of the causes which inspire my action, these causes are already transcendent objects for my consciousness; they are outside. In vain shall I seek to catch hold of them; I escape them by my very existence. I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free. 38

Along with such an existential understanding of individual freedom comes responsibility. Sartre states:

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word “responsibility” in its ordinary sense as “consciousness [of] being the incontestable author of an event or object.” 39

37 qtd. in Charters (2: 629).
38 Sartre, p. 439.
39 Ibid., p. 553.
Sartre is careful to say of this harsh and absolute picture of humanity in the world:

This absolute responsibility is not resignation; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom. What happens to me happens through me, and I can neither affect myself with it nor revolt against it nor resign myself to it. Moreover, everything which happens to me is mine.\textsuperscript{40}

The result is that Sartre places humanity in the precarious position of accepting responsibility for a freedom which is painful to confront because it demands a balancing of one’s facticity (the sum total of the facts about one’s life in materiality—a changing sum since one might be a student, then a lawyer) with one’s desire for transcendence (the ‘ideal’ self that one may project outwards above the situation that one is in). When these are in conflict the result can be bad faith—like a liar who projects a self-image of complete honesty. A self founded in this shifting matrix can not be essential, it is always-already becoming.

But with this self, one cannot escape responsibility for one’s freedom, one must face the fact that human individual reality is founded in a split between what we are and what we desire to be—thus we are forever incomplete, potentially unhappy. That is, even as we have the potential to change our facticity, we can never attain our desired transcendence. Out of this split emerges negation, anger, resentment; but also a stoicism and spirit of heroic resistance. The importance of Sartre’s work (and of Camus’s \textit{Myth of Sisyphus}) is its expression of humanity attempting to find new meaning, a new authenticity and new value in an age where the great universal values, in the shadow of the second world war, had come to be seriously challenged. Holmes says:

\begin{quote}
[The Beats'] members have an instinctive individuality, needing no bohemianism or imposed eccentricity to express it. Brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war, they distrust collectivity... Their own lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hacksterism and Jean-Paul Sartre. The beatness set in later.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Beat cultures flourished in San Francisco in the middle 1950s and in the Village in the middle and later 1950s (where bohemians had flourished since the early years of the century). It is out of a search for an authenticity in American life that a counter-cultural zone of resistance to mainstream America emerged, populated generally by a disaffected, white middle class who turned to jazz, Zen Buddhism and mind altering drugs in order to ‘tune out’ of America. This culture celebrated free sex, valorised the ‘outsiders’ of American society—Blacks, homosexuals, drunks, drug

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 554.
\textsuperscript{41} qtd. in Charters, (2: 629).
addicts, the insane, and the poor—in an inversion of the values of the dominant
culture. Black male-white female relations were evidence of the ‘assimilated’ and
‘free’ spirit of the society in relation to the racism of the wider society. It was a place
that allowed for the transgression of taboos, that celebrated lifestyles at odds with
mainstream society. From this scene emerged Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Burroughs’s *Naked
Lunch*, and many other landmarks in Beat literature.

One might see here the development of certain aspects of Sartre’s
philosophy—the search for authenticity, the need to shoulder responsibility in sorting
out one’s own values and lifestyle—while one notes equally a rejection the political
implications of Sartre’s thinking—such as the idea that we are responsible
individually for the world and for each other in a moral sense. This extension of
Sartre’s profound political sense of responsibility led him from the French Resistance
to his subsequent activism on the extreme left of French politics (which destroyed his
friendship with Albert Camus, and brought him into a solidarity with Fanon and the
Algerian struggle for freedom against French colonialism in North Africa).

These comparisons allow one to see Norman Mailer’s influential comments on
the ‘hipster’ in a different light, as a celebration of some aspects of Sartre and a
rejection of others. More importantly here one might see links with the idea of black
identity emerging in Mailer’s notion of the hipster figure.

It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American
existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective
condition is to live with instant death by atomic war . . . or with a slow
death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled . . .
then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with
death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist
without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious
imperatives of the self.42

The white counter-cultural rebel seeks an “otherness” in which to define him/her self:
In such places as Greenwich Village, a *ménage-à-trois* was completed—
the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the
Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life . . . in this marriage of
the white and black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.43

Critically Mailer comes up with the idea of a black existential condition which whites
will try and emulate:

Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and
no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a
street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk.44

In a curious mix of biological stereotypes, and modernist primitivism, Mailer says:
The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility
or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to

42 qtd. in Kearns, p. 302.
43 Ibid., p.304.
44 Ibid.
survival as blood, the Negro has stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present... in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm...

Such an understanding of Beat culture illustrates how black existence, culture and life could be appropriated by a Jewish critic and a white beat culture, and essentialised in terms no less racist and presumptuous than redneck American views of blacks as children, or animals, or non-humans, etc. Black suffering is aesthetised as a stance anyone might take up, denying the reasons why this oppression exists, or that black people might be three-dimensional, people in their own right and not one-dimensional existential hipsters, the ‘original’ kind. In the Village context one can might see how these inverted values might appear to welcome and celebrate the black intellectual, even as they silence him/her by ‘fixing him in an essence’, as Fanon would say, in essence that is precisely on the other side of the American coin.

This essentialism—this colonialism—is analogous to Fanon’s imagined discussion with whites drawn to the Negritude movement, but who had no true understanding or empathy with the need to develop a unique black subjectivity. He describes their attitude: “I will be told now and then when we are worn out by our lives in big buildings, we will turn to you as to the childhood of the world. You are so real in your life—so funny that is.”

One must be alert for these underlying primitivist stereotypes as one watches many of the white authors—such as Ginsberg, O’Hara and others—drawn to Bebop, Charlie Parker and Dizzie Gillespie, and the Black jazz scene’s non-conformity, dress sense and general ‘cool’ aloof stance to the world.

If the Beboppers were rebelling against a racist culture in their music, the literary avant-gardists were rebelling against the literary formalism of the academy (such as Eliot and the New Critics). Out of the values and feelings of this community came theories of poetics that sought a more direct and honest relationship of poetry to life, with forms free enough to capture life’s vicissitudes and the rhythms of the body not poetry as a ‘higher realm’ of wit, form and spirituality divorced from the body.

Jack Kerouac’s ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’ is indicative, I feel, as much

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45 Ibid.
46 Fanon, Black Skins, p.132. See also Berghahn in Images of Africa, pp. 118-51, for a discussion of the Harlem renaissance, and the prevailing racial stereotypes that will go on to be influential on the Negritude movement that Fanon describes above. One might see in Maller’s white Negro hipster a continuation of racist stereotypes now valorised as heroic Existential ‘archetypes’.
of the white hipster concern with the immediate and the existential, as an attempt to appropriate, or merge with, black culture’s (jazz) ‘primitivism’, its celebration of the ‘now’, of the body. This is achieved through the principles of the act of writing. He states: “SET-UP: The object is set before the mind either in reality as in sketching ... or is set in the memory.” He emphasises freedom and improvisation, like jazz in his

“PROCEDURE ... sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image ... [and] SCOPIING, Not ‘selectivity of expression’ but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thoughts.”

The interest in the subconscious is tied to the jazz improvisatory: “if possible write ‘without consciousness’ in semi trance”. This allows for the poet to experiment, to transgress the linear logic and tired world of white middle-class American values and move into modes of poetry that can draw upon European influences “For the Surrealists the voice of the unconscious was above all prophetic, pointing not to some psychic dislocation but rather to a promise of the self’s eventual unity.” This however is still to be shaped in American contexts.

I would argue that Baraka’s own exploration of the Surreal owes much to Kerouac, and his ‘musical modes’ of composition. Kerouac’s work operated as a space-clearing gesture to many Beats including LeRoi Jones, to become comfortable using their own ‘natural’ jazz instincts. Another poetic of resistance useful to a young Leroi Jones was that formulated by Ginsberg: “The secrets of individual imagination—which are transconceptual & non-verbal—I mean unconditioned Spirit—are not for sale to this consciousness”. Here was an idea of what a poet’s responsibility might be, and what poetry might become: “a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin’s walk.” One might see in both Kerouac and Ginsberg a concern with the self, the body, there is a concern with the heroic, romantic, and spiritually transcendent poetic tradition of Shelley and the Romantics, and a celebration of the manic and unstable nature of writing and being in post-War America. Introspection becomes a site for the exploration of modes of

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48 qtd. In Jones, p. 343.
50 qtd. In Nicholls, p.281.
51 It should be remembered that for all Kerouac’s emphasis on spontaneity and freedom he held strangely conservative political views, and believed in a peculiar form of American nationalism that was not unsympathetic to the very virtues that America postulated but did not practice. Yet this did not lead him, as it did Baraka, to an openly activist art and lifestyle.
52 See Harris, *The Jazz*, p.112.
53 qtd. In Hoover, p.637.
poetry that attempt to transcend linear logic as an aesthetic protest against the status quo. This poetics, explicitly suspicious of too much engagement with material reality, will act as a colonising influence on Jones.

Another important influence was the loosely named 'New York School' of poetry, particularly Frank O'Hara. This was poetry "characterised by wit, charm, and everydayness," which, "extended William Carlos Williams' emphasis on the American vernacular into urban popular culture of the 1950's and 1960's."\(^{55}\)

As Hoover notes, there is the surreal influence in an urban context in O'Hara's poems.\(^{56}\) O'Hara's poetry was unorthodox in 1950s' terms, but deeply soaked in the details of American culture (as Pop Art was, a decade later). In that respect, one recalls Fanon's words about how the adoption of any model (in this case, a literary model) is never politically neutral:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.\(^{57}\)

These avant-garde poetries were radical in that they moved the boundaries of what was fit material for poetry, and they exploded the separation between the personal and the public. Poetry became a revelatory act of confession and exploration of the deepest parts of experience, real life popularised in a spirit of warm egalitarianism. Conversely, these poetries refused to commit themselves to political and social issues except via aestheticised gestures of protest (Ginsberg was admittedly a partial exception). This is even as one acknowledges the strong protest elements in much Beat writing.

Perhaps the most influential poetics of the time within Baraka's milieu, was that of Charles Olson's 'projective verse'. In a trajectory less introspective than the Beats, Olson developed poetic 'space' as a means to explore a new field of composition, beyond inherited forms and measures. He endorsed a close relation between breath and syllable as the poem was projected literally out of the body, through the breath line. He urged the poet not to misuse his/her energy in gestures toward metaphysical transcendence or to fall back on old habits of metaphor and simile. Likewise, what was to be avoided was the merely descriptive.

What Olson emphasised was the figure of a poet in the world in an egalitarian relation to those objects within his/her field of vision—creating in the flux of writing a new relation to this world, and thereby a new sense of self. This was to conceive of

\(^{55}\) qtd. in Hoover, p.121.
\(^{56}\) *Ibid.*
the writer in almost Existentialist terms, without the sense of alienated consciousness whose language was set against, and not in empathy with, reality. It was one thought following another as the field of composition opened out in the poet’s breath line, which disciplined the act of writing and kept keeps linear logic or sequential time from imposing its usual template. In this rough summary of Olson’s ideas one sees another poetic response to post-war blues, and to the conformity of the academy. Here was an urge to explore, to reveal and uncover, within a discipline based on the poet’s own mind and body, that presumed a far more optimistic vision than the Beats or O’Hara’s work suggests (although most of O’Hara’s work had its own cheerfulness, and sense of play). Olson’s field of awareness and demand for open form would become highly influential upon the young LeRoi Jones, as is apparent in Jones’s ‘How You Sound’ (1960):

MY POETRY is whatever I think I am. . . . I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I fell is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives. I must be completely free to do just what I want in the poem. . . . “Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it’s that.” Says Charles Olson. . . . & I follow closely with that. 38

A final contemporary influence was Robert Duncan, another poet associated for a time with Olson’s Black Mountain College. Duncan married a lyrical richness to a historical/cultural impulse, always uniquely linked to contemporary American culture and life. Emphasising Olson’s Heraclitean flux, but denying that poet’s demand for open form, Duncan proposed a verse of gentility, a Beat elegance, with a transcendent impulse (quieter than Ginsberg’s or Kerouac’s flights of fervour), concerned with being in flux with the world. Collectively these poets offered LeRoi Jones the opportunity of finding, creating, and establishing a new self through the poetic act that might resist America’s post-war banality; they offered a form of freedom, as many critics observe.

And yet—freedom and openness are complex concepts, never beyond question. That which does not help a black voice to speak freely and fully colonises just as effectively as the cultural values of a racist, mainstream America. In terms of split consciousness, the poetics articulated in this early book, Preface to A Twenty Volume Suicide Note, serve to divide the ‘colonial subject’, as the poet assimilates these influences in his eagerness to find a space for resistance. As Fanon says:

In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. 39

38 qtd. in Hoover, p. 645.
39 Fanon, Wretched, pp.178-9.
Here the mother country is (in literary terms) ‘American Literature’ or (in specific geographical terms) Greenwich Village which is situated above Wall Street and below the affluent Upper East (and West) Side, (Harlem is further north, out of sight). Assimilation still assumes difference, a space between being and becoming. The first poem named after the title Preface to A Twenty Volume Suicide Note opens:

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
The ground opens up and envelopes me
Each time I go out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus . . .

Existential alienation is presented in an exploratory, breath sensitive poetic that explores the everyday in a mood as full of black humour as it is redolent with a deep despair. The mix of polysyllabic and monosyllabic lines helps to keep us off balance the solemn and the everyday.

A reader might discern two impulses here, not yet in conflict. On the one hand the poet is structuring his experience, announcing his concerns, in a poetics which presupposes an attempt to chart his language and his experience through what we might call the ‘mother culture’. Each word is a revelation of personal experience in poetic process. On the other hand the black humour implies an ambivalence in the poet’s mind, not only concerning his relationship to the world he inhabits, but also with the fearful notion that language itself, is losing its meaning, its ability to define and communicate. This is a form of colonisation at a deep level of assimilation. The way to resolve this anxiety or split is to deepen his relationship with the discourse he is given, the Beat and Projectivist modes. The poem speaks of attempts to build his faith back into the language, (using this term in its broadest sense, so as to include anything from words to numbers):

And now, each night I count the stars
And each night I get the same number.
And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave. (7-10)

The lines are both comic and deeply despairing, leading back to the self and introspection. Disorder, powerlessness, and despair are familiar themes for an African-American poet. But here the context remains individualised, looking inwards rather than outwards. The speaker is left powerless:

Nobody sings anymore (11)

The poem ends with a promise of the gaze of the child might make him whole:

And then last night, I tiptoed up
To my daughter’s room and heard her
Talking to someone, and when I opened
The door, there was no one there . . .
Only she on her knees, peering into
Her own clasped hands (12-17)

This projection leads back in a circular fashion to deepen the poet's sense of despair; his own odd experiences and his own language are as meaningless as the child's prayer. The ending is both comic and claustrophobic. The child's gesture reminds us that the poet has renounced the conventional religious aspect of the African-American (or of American) culture in moving to the agnostic independence (and potential isolation) of the Village.

One notes a poet locked into a poetry of the self where each projected act of movement into the world is met by a corresponding recognition that the success of such a venture is dubious. Olson's projective act is short-circuited. If one used Sartre here, one might see a tension between the poet's attempts at negotiating his facticity with his desire for transcendence. One might say that such a model works better for the Beat community, who are mostly white 'outsiders' to society, than for the black outsider, whose facticity is built upon less secure (more colonised) foundations.

The poet plays with cultural identity in 'Hymn to Lanie Poo'; experimenting with language, satirising pretension, and exploring his field of vision in exciting rhythmical jazz-like phrases. In the colonial context of my argument, he 'performs' identities even as he questions them. One might note that he comes to his 'conclusion' through a mode of composition that is itself playful, self-reflexive, and exploratory. The poem begins:

O
these wild trees
will make charming wicker baskets
the young woman
the young black woman
the young black beautiful woman
said

This American 'Rimbaud'\(^{60}\) expresses an impish style in the act of questioning, line by line, his sister's middle-class black pretensions.\(^{51}\) The elegant sound of 'charming wicker baskets' infuses the act of 'civilising' the wild trees with a pretentious class consciousness. The act of writing both constructs and deconstructs as the 'young woman' illustrates her 'refinement' and 'decorum', aspiring to become both black and bourgeois. What lies hidden, the 'jungle' consciousness, always comes back to haunt her—the profanity, the wild rhythm of jazz and its screams of the body:

The wild-assed trees
will make charming
wicker baskets.

(8-10)

Her brother as ghost-writer admits, humourously
(now I'm putting words in her mouth... tch)

(11)

---

\(^{60}\) See Nicholls, p. 27, for a very brief outline of Rimbaud's lifestyle as writer.

Rimbaud was an original European bohemian who spent time in colonial Africa, Jones is satirising, even as he 'celebrates' himself as black Rimbaud.

\(^{51}\) See Lacey, p. 20; this was his sister's name.
The stereotyped construction of blackness as wild and carnal is satirised with equal humour as is the notion of middle class pretension. The everyday act of watching the cityscape becomes laden with sexual, tension:

All afternoon
we watched the cranes
humping each other

The staccato rhythms accentuate the sub-conscious, yet strangely self-conscious, desire to hide all traces of blackness, expressing the desire to escape blackness:

dropped
our shadows
onto the beach
and covered them over with sand

In this curious world the poet gleefully reminds the black middle class that his sister represents of the world's 'dangers' to a black person constructing themselves through white eyes:

beware the evil sun . . .
turn you black
turn your hair
crawl your eyeballs
rot your teeth.

One notes a black hipster anarchist at work, undermining both black and white notions of black cultural identity from a suave, hip perspective which gets its juice (or energy) off playing with all these identities in the act of writing. This, of course, is to illustrate how society's values push him into the role of being a performer (like a kind of sinistre minstrel show comedian, Sambo the cannibal). He does the unexpected drop down the scale of his jazz solo in

All afternoon
we sit around
near the edge of the city
hacking open
crocodile skulls
sharpening our teeth

He plays with surrealism to evoke a wild jungle consciousness, mixing reality with dream:

makes faces in the moon
makes me a greenpurple &
maroon winding sheet
I wobble out to
the edge of the water
give my horny yell
& 24 elephants
stomp out of the subway
with consecrated hardons.
Here the poet scour his own subconscious, moving from one side of the American
coin to the other. Both the ‘civilising’ of blackness, and the jungle myth (which still
lurks behind Beat fantasies as more ‘natural’ and ‘rhythmic’) are treated satirically—
with implied quote marks—yet the poet seems unable to break out from this paradigm
of stereotypes.

She had her coming out party
with 3000 guests
from all parts of the country.

(48-50)

In the sister’s guest list, the stereotypes of Africa and America are conjoined:

Queens. Richmond, Togoland, the Cameroons;
A white hunter, very unkempt.
with long hair
whizzed in on the end of a vine
(he spoke perfect English too)

(51-55)

Stanza four is important, for it seems to evoke a quiet yearning, alive—if
briefly—in the poet, for a black self to take its place in the world beyond the artificial
role of the performer (or trickster):

Each morning
I go down
to Gansfont St.
and stand on the docks.
I stare out
at the horizon
until it gets up
and comes to embrace
me. I
make believe
it is my father.
This is known
as genealogy.

(111-23)

The imaginative search for a wholeness, expressed in the metaphor of the
horizon as father suggests that in some recess of the mind, the poet is still
searching. The lines are (once again) both comic and sad—a more thoughtful and
somber moment, even as the rest of the poem swings and wails in its longer breath
lines and its cheeky humour. In relation to the colonial argument I am developing, the
stanza is Olsonesque in its out-going investigation, expressing a desire to reach
something solid through the imagination. But such a solution can be conceived only
in aesthetic, imaginative terms.

It is as if the strengths of projective verse (i.e., its exploratory, open
investigation, improvisation of language and sensibility in the creative flux) do not
entirely mesh with the generally apolitical Beat consciousness. That is, what frees him

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See Harris, p.68 for a useful and brief opinion on the imagination as Baraka expressed this in Beat
frameworks.
to investigate some issues discourages him from exploring the political or social reasons why he feels alienated. One might, in Beat terms, confess all, but where does one go next? If one remembers the violence of the Eisenhower/McCarthy period, one can see why personal and symbolic forms of protest seemed the only possibility. But as such an approach is assimilated by the poet certain doors are closed at the same time others are opened. By stanza five the poet has moved out of his depression into new ironic and humorous performances of the black hipster:

We came into the
silly little church
shaking our wet raincoats
on the floor . . .
The preacher's
cunning eyes
fix'd when he saw
the way I walked to-
towards him; . . .

(124-135)

*He's wet with the blood of the lamb!!*

(139)

The church, as site of middle-class respectability and moral virtue in the black (as in white) community, is desecrated by the poet and his sexuality. Black cultural identity of an acceptable kind is again sent up when the people 'move in the spirit,' gospel euphoria being equated with sex, drugs, and 'rock'n'roll'.

And everybody
got real happy.

(140-141)

One can find echoes of poetic styles in the poem—Beat euphoria, O'Hara
everyday charm, Olson exploration, French Surrealism, etc. Stanza 6 has an O'Hara influenced technique that looks back to Guillaume Apollinaire. Random cafe conversations are combined by the poet to illustrate salient points about his own community. One notes in this collage a Southern influence:

It's not that I got anything

against cotton, nosiree, by God

(145-6)

and the desire for white women in sexist tones:

Man lookatthatblonde

whewee!

(148-9)

One also notes the shallow discussions about politics:

I think they are not treating us like

Mr. Lincoln said they should

or the Mr Gandhi

For that matter.

(150-3)

---

63 See Hoover, p.121, for remarks on O'Hara, and an influence upon his work by a black French writer. This introduces another satirical layering on Jones's above poem.
Here is small talk by people with trendy interests in religion and only the most superficial understanding of Charlie "bird" Parker's alto saxophone genius:

ZEN

is a bitch! like "bird" was  

(154-5)

And these are people, himself included, who are nearly white, nearly 'ofay':

Cafe olay

for me, Miss.  

(156-7)

What is fascinating here is that the poet is assimilating new techniques through a self-oriented poetic that allows him to explore and discover things about himself. He is anarchistic in the sense that he cuts a swathe through all pretensions—but this anarchy ultimately seems to lead to a kind of hip detachment. He asks the reader to 'dig', smiling sardonically at all the pretensions he unmasks. Do these techniques really challenge the values of society when the payoff is to become cool, a neutral disaffected observer? And if the poet uses many techniques to play around his subject, he is still moving around within the boundaries of the 'mother country'. Each investigation opens out new possibilities, but within the same hipster-existentialist set of idioms and attitudes.

The poet himself seems to recognise this, and in stanza four questions in his parody of trendy café conversations.

About my sister

(O, generation revered
above all others.
O, generation of fictitious
Ofays
I revere you...
you are all so beautiful).  (168-74)

To be ofay here is to be white in an Anglo-Saxon middle-class sense, which certainly does not represent Kerouac, Ginsberg and others. Like them, Jones is a 'rebel' against the destruction, the atomic 'white-out' of post-war blandness his sister is lost in:

Smiling & glad / in
the hugo & loveless
white-anglo sun / of
benevolent step
mother America.  

(189-93)

The colonial framework adds interesting questions to the discussion of poems such as 'In Memory Of Radio'. The popular radio figure of the poet's childhood is resurrected up by the adult Jones:

who has ever stopped to think of Lamont Cranston?
(only Jack Kerouac, that I know of, & me.  

(1-2)
There was a strong and curious American nationalism in Kerouac and his attachment to certain heroes of sport and popular culture. Here, a cartoon-like radio figure has become god-like to the adult Jones in this reminiscence of childhood innocence. This is in conflict with the predicament that the poet finds himself in as an adult. In language influenced by Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti, he states:

What can I say?
Is it better to have loved and lost
Than to put linoleum in your living rooms? (5-7)

Which leads him back to doubting his own self, also seen as a cartoon figure:

Am I a sage or something?
Mandrak's hypnotic gesture of the week? (8-9)

In a longer breath line, he plays with the desire of an adult to retrieve the wholeness apparent in the childlike. If one talks of colonial issues here, one could question why an African-American poet is so concerned with white popular culture. One answer would be the fact that such images were universal for all Americans, especially in childhood. The O'Hara-esque enjoyment of popular culture struck a note of freshness at the time this poem was written, culturally a way of thumbing one's nose at High Culture, and artistically as the beginnings of a Pop Art sensibility. This is a game that Jones can play well, but it relies upon a suspension of any serious political analysis of what these popular images imply. Fanon says in the context of the Antilles:

The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about "our ancestors," the Gauls, identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to the savages—an all-white truth. There is identification—that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude. He invests the hero, who is white, with all his own aggression.64

One might see in Jones a dialogue with himself on the worth of these images, but not in a specifically African-American context. That is, he appears to question the 'truth' of popular culture, but not consistently as an African-American. In a playful, subversive stanza he himself adopts the role of a cartoon figure, one who plays with universal values spoken into language:

& Love is an evil word
Turn it backwards / see what I mean?
An evil word, & besides
who understands it? (14-7)

If one asks where the images of popular culture come from, and how they effect people, Fanon quotes G. Legman in Black Skin, White Masks:

With very rare exceptions, every American child who was six years old in 1938 has therefore assimilated at the very least 18,000 scenes of ferocious tortures and bloody violence.65

Talking in the American context of 'cowboys and Indians' comics, his discussion is

64 Fanon, Black Skins, p. 147.
65 G. Legman quoted in Fanon, Black Skins, p.147.
useful for it raises the wider issue:

There is still no answer to the question whether this maniacal fixation on violence and death is the substitute for a forbidden sexuality or whether it does not rather serve the purpose of channeling, along a line left open by sexual censorship, both the child's and the adult's desire for aggression against the economic and social structures which, though with their entire consent, perverts them.66

One might see such comments as polemically psychoanalytic and invested in Marxist ideology, and far more than earnest then Jones's playful poem—but the fact remains that the 'cowboy and Indian' mythology has turned up more than once in American political life—from Eisenhower to Vietnam to Reagan. That is, there can be a disturbing continuity between popular mythology and real world politics. In the 1950s white power structures controlled radio, television and the press and all the Beats could do was develop playful, irresponsible ways to read such media. From a colonial perspective, such a response was apolitical and risky (in its immersion in racist forms of popular culture).

Such heroes as The Shadow represent the figure of the loner, individualist, explorer that a writer like Kerouac still saw as representing real American values as alternative to middle-class conservatism. But Jones is not unaware of the ironies. Even as he clothes himself in the disguise of the black cloaked hipster, 'The Shadow,' he is raising questions about this figure that go beyond mere ambivalence. He goes for subtle ironies rather than takes a direct adversarial position against hegemony. But even as one must acknowledge Jones's consciously ambivalent position in the Beat world he is still working in that frame of reference. His response is one of cartoon-like play and subversion, not open resistance to a whole economy of values. One notes here a split in consciousness between the white Beat symbolic and the poet's complex ironies. But this might be seen to represent the 'lack of fit' experienced by one who tries to build into the coloniser's world, but is always in a sense an outsider (whether that world be mainstream popular culture, or its opposite, Beat culture).

Yet does not the poet fuse influences from Beat and European sources with black American music, which is a hallmark of Baraka's poetry throughout his career? Again one might say that these cultural influences work within a set of values that do not adequately recognise black subjectivity. Romanticising bebop and making heroes of jazz musicians did not prove that the Beats had a deep insight into black culture. One poem which utilizes the blues feeling inside this poetic economy is 'Look For You Yesterday, Here You Come Today.' The poem opens:

Part of my charm:

envious blues feeling
separation of church & state
grim calls from drunk debutantes

(1-4)

66 Ibid.
In black humorous introspection, the poet improvises a language out of his field of awareness infused with the sensation of living a life of the blues. It has been noted by other critics that Jones does not use the blues form when he examines the blues sensibility. Free form illustrates a desire to frame his 'song' outside traditional parameters. His blues are situated in language of playful self-examination:

Morning never aids me in my quest
I have to trim my beard in solitude.
I try to hum lines from "The Poet In New York" (5-7)

These lines could have been written by O'Hara. An everyday casual mood of claustrophobia evoked in:

People saw metal all around the house on Saturdays. The phone rings. (8-9)

The poet's life as publisher evokes a world-weariness:

terrible poems come in the mail. Descriptions of celibate parties
torn trousers: Great poets dying
with these strophes on. & me
incapable of a simple straightforward anger (10-14)

In these fast moving, expressionistic phrases the poet confesses the despair that enervates him, even as this occurs in a flux of energetic creation. The tone is explicitly complex (never 'simple straightforward').

In positive terms, one may see in these lines a poet performing his everyday routine in a conversational voice laden with an urbanity characteristic of Frank O'Hara. The difficulty is that the stance is reactive in that the worldview demands of the poet an apathy towards any action that might overcome his blues. Instead he says:

It's so diffuse
being alive. Suddenly one is aware
that nobody really gives a damn. (15-7)

In a light jovial projection into a new perspective he considers 'artistic' alternatives to escape his malaise:

I would take up painting
if cd Think of a way to do it
better than Leonardo. Than Buach
Than Hogarth. Than Kline. (25-8)

Always the self is in motion, moving between the public and the private, between self-hatred and urbane humour, in the rhythm of breath lines—a performance of self (consciousness), that is always in 'medias res'.

What emerges are the concerns of 'Die Schwartz Bohemian' painting over the surfaces of his being, in a manner similar to "Hymn For Lanie Poo" in stanza six (the cafe scenario). That is, what is being expressed is the thought of a poet leaping everywhere in almost manic fashion over nothing particularly tangible:

I am a mean hungry sorehead
Do I have the capacity for grace? (31-2)

67 See Harris, p.61 for a discussion of how Jones uses aspects of the blues in this poem, but not the blues form.
There is an elegance and humour as the poet develops his own blues framed inside the idiom of the New York school. The poet's natural irony and introspective moodiness are expressed in lines that suggest the gaiety and spontaneity of living in New York, with surreal hints of menace:

I stood upon a mailbox
waving my yellow tee-shirt
watching the grey tanks
stream up Central Ave

(43-6)

This picture of an (imagined) childhood experience is followed by a mantra against evil memories:

All these shots
are Flowers of Evil
cold & lifeless
as subway rails.

(47-50)

In these lines, Charles Baudelaire meets Frank O'Hara, though it is unclear whether we should laugh or cry over these self-cancelling. As a whole, this poem seems to illustrate Jones's current interests, from Frank Sinatra to Franz Kline. It dances onwards through personal reminiscences, blues, and personal history in a fast moving montage of feeling and thought. For all its vigour, this stance reminds one of the stereotyped mainstream conception of the artist.

The 'rebel' artist or poet is expected to lead his or her life in defiance of to live his/her responsibility, hard work and thrift and instead to live in a whirl of motion where everything is a discovery.

The bohemian is meant to dance through life without too many cares. Compare the humour and sense of child-like hurt in:

All the lovely things I've known have disappeared
I have all my pubic hair & am lonely.
There is probably no such place as Battle Creek, Michigan!

(58-60)

In such lines (reminiscent of O'Hara, Ginsberg, and other friends), Jones seems to be parodying the blues:

What is one to do in an alien planet
where the people breathe New Ports?

(64-5)

Is this a reference to cigarettes or to the upper middle class community where jazz festivals take place against a backdrop of yachting, and expensive houses? The poet laments:

THERE MUST BE A LONE RANGER!

(72)

All of these colourful images and thoughts flicker across the page as energy impulses that, once expressed, fall into a void. Their value resides in the intimacy with which they reflect the poet's mind, his being-in the world. While serving as the record of a cultural moment, they could less gerously be seen as stereotyped bohemian play by a petit-bourgeois practitioner of art for art's sake, or in this case for the artist's sake.

He may flirt with the culture, but he seems removed from any real sense of community—a Lone Ranger indeed. This is best expressed by the poetic death he
humorously conceives for himself:

My silver bullets all gone
My black mask trampled in the dust

& Tonto way off in the hills
moaning like Bessie Smith.

These last two lines could have been given a sharp racial twist if Tonto (the Native American) had conspired against the Lone Ranger (as white champion or as 'Uncle Tom'); but instead Tonto seems to grieve for his dead boss.

What is celebrated here is a bourgeois form of anarchy, an apolitical 'politics' of subversion, and a self-absorbed exploration of the poet's feeling as the limit of this avant-garde poetry. To move beyond the self for these poets is fraught with dangers, after the loss of faith in Communism on the one hand, or in the possibility of effective political action within the U.S. on the other hand.

While I have emphasised negatives, I should also note that this training is invaluable to the later work of Leroi Jones (as Amiri Baraka). The discipline of the breath line helps Jones in later works to construct potent, concentrated verse. The emphasis on the total commitment of the artist to the act of writing infuses his later work with an intensity and physical presence that is very relevant to the building of a revolution. His ability to play with assimilated influences will help him to explore new ideologies; and his spirit of risk-taking will eventually energise his struggle to decolone himself, his language and his relationship with society. The fact that he has been 'outside' the black masses enables him to have a unique standpoint from which to conceive of the black nation when that time comes. Fanon's native intellectual is placed in an ambivalent position between coloniser and colonised, and that is an opportunity as well as a problem.

In this phase, although Jones still identifies himself with the AVANT-GARDE community, in 'OSTRICHES & GRANDMOTHERS' he says:

All meet here with us, finally: the
uptown, way-west den of inconstant
moralties.

In surreal tinged lines he situates himself in this community, black and white (and any combination thereof):

Faces up: all
my faces turned up
to the sun.

A mood is elaborated using stream of consciousness techniques:

Summer's mist nods against the trees
til distance grows in my head
like an antique armada
dangling motionless from the horizon

Sound and image are imbued with the gossamer thread of the surreal, in this context used to express mood in reverie, a sensual exploration of language itself. The poet
explores this mood in an astonishingly rich language describing a social content that is
delicate but also uneasily fragile:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Intimacy takes on human form} \\
& \text{& sheds it like a hide.} \\
\text{Lips, eyes} \\
\text{tiny lace coughs} \\
\text{reflected on nights stealth} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(16-20)

In these night thoughts the poet returns, as always, to a sense of isolation, to an
image of communication that is actually quite sinister:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tonight one star} \\
\text{eye of the dragon.} \\
\text{The void} \\
\text{signalling} \\
\text{Reminding someone} \\
\text{its still there.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(21-26)

The following lines extend this mood of ambivalence where ‘utterance’ suggests
fulness but its content is emptiness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It's these empty seconds} \\
\text{I fill with myself. Each} \\
\text{a recognition. A complete} \\
\text{utterance.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(27-30)

Does he fill empty seconds with himself, or himself with empty seconds? The
poem could go either way. One feels lost in the space and time as if caught in a slow
motion gaze upon the universe. Tour relief, the gaze finds ‘beauty’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Here it is color; motion;} \\
\text{The feeling of dazzling beauty} \\
\text{flight.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(31-33)

But while the poet's reverie is exhilarating, it leaves us with nothing more substantial
than a flicker of ‘motion’ and ‘flight’ (like a meteor). Is this the strangeness of living
‘uptown’ (presumably not in Harlem but in some bohemian enclave on the West
side?), where life and relationships seem oddly insubstantial under the ‘void’ of the
night sky (not many stars are ever visible in New York).

In his darker moods the poet seems to contemplate suicide. The death instinct
is a recurring theme in his poetry, still in line with stereotypes of the artist. 'WAY
OUT WEST' begins:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{As simple an act} \\
\text{as opening the eyes. Merely} \\
\text{coming into things by degrees.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(1-3)

The seemingly benign import of this act of recognition is juxtaposed with images of
the surreal, disturbing as well as colourful:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Morning: Some tear is broken} \\
\text{on the wooden stairs} \\
\text{of my lady's eyes. Profusions} \\
\text{of green. The leaves.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(4-7)

In a poetic technique associated with T.S. Eliot\(^{68}\) (among others), an inner dereclication
of soul is reflected in the outer urban decay:

\(^{68}\) Brown, p.108. Brown notes the Eliotic influence upon Jones's work in this collection.
Like old
junkie on Sheridan square, eyes
cold and round . . .

This city
& the intricate disorder
of the seasons

One senses a depression that the poet is trying to resist, a mood of dark self-
absorption:

Even so,

shadows will creep over your flesh
& hide your disorder, your lies

One might see in this poetry a voice that is starting to question the boundaries
imposed upon it. Irony reappears, but only as a quiet flicker.

I am distressed. Thinking
of the seasons, how they pass
how I pass, my very youth the
ripeness of my life drained off . . .

The poet imagines himself as a fantastical, mad King Lear figure disappearing into the
waves:

Walking into the sea, shells
caught in the hair. Coarse waves
tearing the tongue.

This is obviously a poetic death, but one can not help thinking of the black
artists who have committed suicide even in so 'integrated' a place as the Village. One
may recall James Baldwin's character Rufus, the jazz drummer in Another Country
who leaps to his death:

He felt himself going over, head down, the wind, the stars, the lights, the
water, all rolled together all right. He felt a shoe fly off behind him, there
was nothing around him, only the wind, all right, you motherfucking
Goddamn bastard, I'm coming to you.  

The morbid fascination with suicide and death that emerges throughout this collection
was a concern shared by many others in the Beat community because of a need to
explore the outer edges of possible experience aesthetically, as a form of 'moral'
protest to a constricting social and political environment, and in response to personal
crises. Jones's own dalliance with themes of suicide and death has a cultural
specificity that adds an ethnic dimension to wider Beat concerns.

Jones's life in the Village make him in some respects a ghost. The poem 'THE
BRIDGE' (which I will deal with only briefly) shaped through jazz analogy 70 (a jazz
soloist who has lost the bridge of the composition that leads him/her to the head of the
tune), is not entirely successful as a protest against the deaths of black artists at an
early age, as this concern is mixed with more personal concerns with mortality. Rather
it seems the poetic expression of a troubled poet seeking to express his feelings in a

69 Baldwin, p. 91.
70 For a good introduction to a jazz reading of this poem, see Lacey, p. 8.
fashion that his particular constituency of readers will understand.

The changes are difficult, when you hear them, & know they are all in you, the chords of your disorder meddle with your would be disguises. (17-19)

In this middle section of the poem, Jones appears to be searching for the 'chord changes' that will allow a new consciousness to emerge.

A poem such as 'The Clearing' may be seen as an attempt to express dissatisfaction with the known world by escaping into the imagination. The poem begins:

Trees and brown squares of shadow. The green washed out and drained into clumps of mist that cloak more trees. And trees, outside the window; or spreading heavy fronds stepping away from the light. We come to a forest, or we see it from the window. (1-8)

One could say of such symbolist poetry in its French context that the style demanded that "all the rules of normal communication must now be broken if the relationship between art and society was to be significantly transformed." 71 An American equivalent was the poetry of Robert Duncan (e.g. 'Sometimes I am permitted to return to a meadow'). One can see, in the colonial context, how such an art technique might represent embodied for Jones a means by which he could transcend in a world where was still ill at ease. The problem lies in the fact that Symbolism is still an aesthetic (or symbolic) mode of resistance.

We step into it spreading the heavy leaves or drop the blind & let it clutter in the damp breeze from the yard. (8-10)

Both quotes evoke the solitude, mystery and magnificence of a dense forest, which offers the prospect of rejuvenation. In Duncan-esque style, the poet goes on to create a private mythic world through the flux of the writing process:

Where are the beasts? In a forest, there are always wild beasts. And the sun, a woman, goes there to sleep (11-13)

One notes a poet searching inside his consciousness for archetypal images that will, when projected onto the page in language, both reveal personal truth and open up a new reality.

The poet spins out impressions of the mind laden with sensual feeling, as if asking the reader to feel the poem through all five senses. These impressions are woven together in a vibrant, rhythmic spell.

Brown trunks their shadows against the white wall, rain spreading against the glass. Blue rain outside, and shadows against the wall. A wet wind

71 Nicholls, p. 25.
moves them. The smells
come in.

A primordial consciousness walks in this 'dawn of the earth':
I am
an animal watching
his forest. Listening
for your breathing, your merest
move in the dark. You wear
a gown of it. The dark
ness

The poet becomes an Adam to his imaginatively constructed Eve, created as
counterpoint to his reverie, as though to make himself whole. The poet and his 'Eve'
glide through the imaginary as natural phenomena, at one with both their world and
themselves:

And
we can move naked
through it, through
the forest
if it does not disappear. Who
will remember
the way back.

One sees this desire for unity, this search in the subconscious as an attempt at
awaken something deeper within himself, as if the act of writing will open a doorway.

This is a faith he may have seen in Duncan.
The eye is useless. Sound, Sound
& what you smell
or feel. I am someone else
who smells you.

Here is a desire to live through the body to return to a more primordial consciousness
governed by other senses besides sight. The city is left far behind.

There is an undercurrent of tension and uncertainty as the poet investigates the
possibilities of this forest:
what bird
makes that noise? (If this
were a western place, a temperate hand
could shape it. A western mouth
could make it on this mist

Each impression seems laden with the knowledge that it is a created, imagined space
inside which the poet can never fully find rest. The beauty of these images may be that
of a mirage:

(if this
were a western place, a bank
of the Marne, Cézanne's greens
& yellows floating unreal
under bridge. A blue bridge
for a temperate eye.

The forest is now a work of art, a Cézanne painting—still beautiful but distanced. The
inner world's reverie is disturbed. A bird singing in the forest becomes a voice singing
in the claustrophobic space of the poet's consciousness, back to his usual living
quarters:

Your voice down the hall. Are
you singing? A shadow song
we lock our movement
in. Were you singing?
down the hall. (62-66)

This location becomes claustrophobic, leaving the poet chafing at the barriers of reality, uncertain (like Keats in his famous Ode) of what he had actually heard and experienced.

White plaster
on the walls, our fingers
leave their marks, on
the dust, or tearing
the wall away. Were you
singing? What song
was that? (66-72)

Does ‘we’ and ‘our’ refer to human beings generally, or to him and his female muse (both now returned to prosaic human form)?

Out of this arid zone the poet hurtles headlong into a new projection that is laden with an incredible need to find find fulfillment—as though restoring a prosaic relationship to its dream potential.

I love you (& you be
quiet & feel my wet mouth
on your fingers, I
love you
& bring you fish
and oranges. (73-78)

Yet there are still tensions—‘& you be quiet.’ This is a poem of love and sensuality, pursued as a relief from the isolation of self, but always with an under-current of anxiety.

The surreal and the symbolist show a young poet experimenting with a variety of techniques, feeling his way to creating a new voice (even a new reality) for himself. The belief in the surreal will continue to be important to him in later political verse, for it will help to express his deepest feelings, ambivalences, and tensions.

This poem goes on to negotiate the relationship further, in terms that are now metaphorical rather than fully Symbolist.

(Before the light fails
we should move to a dryer place,
but not too far from water) (78-80)

And:

The forest is huge
around us. The night
clings to our cries (I hear
your voice
down the hall, through the window, above all those trees, a light
it seems
& you are singing. What song
is that. The words
are beautiful. (88-97)
The 'real' relationship has now fused with the vision and the forest seems to have become one with the urban jungle. In the poem as a whole one senses a spirit moving in the poet, attempting to overcome layers of dead skin. The search into French Symbolism—via Duncan—seems an attempt to find a new 'song'.

A more clear-cut questioning of Beat culture emerges in 'Betancourt', a poem written after Jones's journey to Cuba in 1960. It speaks of a Mexican Marxist poet he met there. He described the meeting in *Home*: as he travelled on a train out of Havana with a train full of revolutionaries,

[Senora Betancourt] jumped on me with both feet as did a group of Mexican poets later in Habana[sic]. She called me a 'cowardly bourgeois individualist.' The poets, or at least one young wild-eyed Mexican poet, Jaime Shelley, almost left me in tears, stomping his foot on the floor, screaming 'You want to cultivate your soul? In that ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, we've got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of.'

From the experience in Cuba, celebrating its freedom from Batista and his capitalist corruption, the poet begins to question his life, and his values:

The idea of "a revolution" had been foreign to me. It was one of those inconceivably"romantic" and/or hopeless ideas that we norteamericanos have been taught since public school to hold up to the cold light of "reason".... The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grew beards and will not participate in politics. Drugs, juvenile delinquency, isolation from the rapid mores of the country, a few current ways out. But name an alternative here. Something not inextricably bound up in a lie. Something not part of liberal stupidity or the actual filth of vested interest.

He has started to see himself and his community in a new light, through this encounter with people who have moved to change the world by acting upon it. He is left with an understanding of how deeply implicated his values are in American politics and imperialism.

The poet has assumed 'rebellious' values, written 'rebellious' poetry. He had, in Fanon's terms, assumed a culture, built a place for himself, in a society that sought to silence any real liberation struggle, such as that of the Cubans.

If one looks at this development in colonial terms one might suggest that in regards to values and culture, the African-American poet is now self-conscious of the need to find a new way, a new language. Fanon's native intellectual is disturbed, beginning to question who he is, starting to tear himself away from the mother culture:

the huge & loveless
white-anglo sun/ of
benevolent step
mother America.

'Betancourt' again signals the theme of change, returning to the relationship context of 'The Clearing'. But now the muse/lover is the woman he met in Cuba.

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72 *Jones, Home*, pp. 42-3.
73 *ibid.*, 61.
What are influences?
A green truck
wet and glowing, seance
of ourselves, elegy for the sea
at night, my flesh
a woman’s; at the fingertips
soft white increased coolness
from the dark
sea. \[(1-9)\]

In a mode expressionistic, fast moving and conveying a mood of sensuality, the poet examines who he has become. Through a surreal examination of his past, the poet begins an inner investigation of poetry, value and life.

We sat
with our backs
to the sea. Not

in the gardens
of Spain, but some
new greeness \[(10-15)\]

Betancourt’s impact on the poet is articulated in sensual, lover’s words.\(^{24}\) The intensity is striking, though one may feel a little uneasy at this translation of new political feelings into the familiarity of love talk.

Walking all night
entwined inside, I mean
I tasted you, your real and fleshy
voice
inside my head. \[(24-28)\]

Her words penetrate his ‘head’ so deeply that sexual analogies seem justified. The emphasis on flesh articulates a poet’s awakening sense of his body as a force in contact again with life, feeling and action. His spirit too, is refreshed by the religious zeal of Betancourt’s life-force

as if some primitive
corruption re-sat
itself in full view
of a puritan flame \[(30-33)\]

there is an odd contrast between the ‘puritan flame’ of Betancourt’s pure politics and Jones’s sexual imagery. Still, he may be imagining—in Sartre’s terms—how each lover attempts to win the other’s ‘freedom’. Here, the poet imagines a union, as if when she stripped his soul bare he did the same for her:

And last night, talking to ourselves, except
when some wildness
cuts us, ripped impossibly
deep beneath black
flesh
to black bone. Then
we loved each other. Understood
the miles of dead air

\(^{24}\) Sollors, p. 68.
between our
softer parts. (75-84)

A new social consciousness seems to infuse the breath line with a new
dynamic, a new range of mood, rhythm, and image. The inevitable question arises:
Did Jones literally become sexually involved with the Cuban woman? Or is he still
using a Beat mode of address in personalising the poem in those terms?

Jones speaks of ‘some old man’s poems’—a traditional poet, or could this be a
caricature of himself?

I was reading
some old man’s poems
this morning. A lover
hid himself under
the stink of low trailing
sea birds, heavy sun, pure
distance. He had to go away,
I mean, from all of us, even
you, marvelous person
at the sea’s edge. (96-105)

Implicitly, the poem questions the role of the self-absorbed artist he has become. The
new ‘relationship’ that has developed with Betancourt is obviously symbolic
(whatever literal form it may have taken), but Jones explores this new imaginative
projection in a style that looks backwards. The political is still addressed in oblique
and difficult language, though at times the statement becomes more distinct:

That

there are fools
who hang close
to their original
thought. Elementals
of motion (not again,
that garden) but some
slightness
of feeling
they think is sweet
and long to die
inside. (115-26)

The earlier poem is now bracketed, and its mode of ‘feeling’ is presumably also
questioned. Ironically these lines are still written in a familiar Duncan-esque style,
even though their opint is to criticise that tradition. Similarly there are lines of poetry
criticising poetry as a cop-out:

I know now
what a poem
is) A
turning away . . .
from what
it was
had moved
us . . .
A
madness. (131-40)

In ‘The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu’ the poet illustrates a desire to write out these
tensions from within in order to find a new place to stand. The title is significant in this context, for the image of a Chinese villain possessing an ‘ancient Oriental wisdom and fiendish cruelty’, is a useful metaphor for the poet’s own sense of inner conflict and enemy status in the community. He states:

If I think myself
strong, then I am
not true to the misery
in my life. (1-4)

The pronoun use suggests at least two selves through which the poet sees himself; two selves at war with one another, leaving the poet in a paradoxical position over what he is and what he wishes to become.

The uncertainty
(of what I am saying, who
I have chose to become) (4-6)

He is in a place in-between. He begins to question his relation to his body and to his partner (and apparently imagined other woman):

the
very air pressing my skin
held gently away, this woman
and the one I taste continually (6-9)

The sense of being disjointed, alienated, leads him into surreal reverie that expands the sense of alienation to vast size:

in my nebular pallet tongue face
mouth feet, standing in piles
of numbers, hills, lovers. (10-12)

It is only through an ‘asiatic cruelty’ a stark self-appraisal of himself that the poet can come to terms with the ugliness that he sees in himself and his life. But there is still an ironic wobble to these lines:

If
I think myself ugly
& go to the mirror, smiling,
at the inaccuracy, or now
the rain pounds dead grass
in the stone yard, I think
how very wise I am. How very very wise. (13-20)

The sense of being disconnected in one’s own body is a frightening aspect of what Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man says:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.75

The solutions to this split between being present and being invisible, will be different for Ellison and Jones. Ellison will stay with the detached sense of irony and

75 Ellison Invisible Man, p. 3.
‘absurdity’, Jones’s will head for a full involvement in black nationalism. Both were positions open to writers of this generation—one remaining a modernist, the other moving away from those ironic, stylist aspects of Modernism towards a passionate, aesthetic (which did, however, continue to draw on some of the wilder aspects of Modernism). Politically speaking, these avenues will represent two distinct means of coming to terms with Du Bois’s veil.

It is moving to read the poet’s ‘Notes For A Speech’, his first real attempt at bridging the gap between himself and the peoples of Africa. There is a blues tone which illustrates the poet’s sense of impotence at being outside the culture. The poem begins:

Africa blues
does not know me. Their steps, in sands
of their own
land.  

There is no dialectic between the poet and the people, just a sense of being sundered, irrevocably distanced. Africa is, to the poet, a television or newspaper image, removed from real life, in surreal blues flavoured images:

A country
in black & white, newspapers
blown down pavements
of the world.

Africa, is divorced from this poet who is torn between two selves:

Does
not feel
what I am

The desire for a true understanding, as the poet explores his new field of awareness, leads to disjointed guilt and hate infused images:

Strength
in the dream, an oblique
suckling of nerve, the wind
throws up sand, eyes
are something locked in
hate, of hate, of hate, to
walk abroad,

In this world of miscommunication each side of the African-American relationship is locked into a mutual mistrust and hatred.

They conduct
their deaths apart
from my own. Those
heads I call
my “people”.

A mode of poetry which put the self at the centre is no longer a good place from

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76 One might examine Ellison’s response to being taught that he was an unwanted black outsider in his wonderful reminiscences of childhood in ‘On Being the Target of Discrimination’. His response here is to rise above such racism, which is, I think, to desire to become ‘American’ beyond black and white—in other words to integrate in its non-pejorative sexualised senses. Granted, he has no illusions about the difficulties. See Ellison, The Collected Essays, pp. 819-28.
which to operate. If the poet still holds the hope that such inner investigation will
bridge distances, the poem disillusion him:

    Black
    words throw up sand
    to eyes, fingers of
    their private dead. Whose
    soul, eyes, in sand

(31-35)

There is tremendous loss, almost a breakdown of the image, as the poet finds all exits
'closed' in his field of vision. He becomes terribly self-conscious of his 'whiteness'—
his social and cultural white identity constructed through language:

    Lighter, white man
    talk. They shy away. My own
    dead souls, my, so called
    people

(36-9)

He is forced to confess, in a quiet sad voice:

    Africa
    is a foreign place. You are
    as any other sad man here
    American.

(39-42)

The recognition of his Americanness brings no sense of relief. The native intellectual
has passed from one (American) culture into an in-between space a no-man's land.
The sense of self-hatred and awareness of being colonised will deepen in the next
poetic collection, *The Dead Lecturer*. 
CHAPTER TWO: THE DEAD LECTURER
(1964)

I have attempted in chapter one to illustrate a number of things. For instance, the idea that the ambivalence that comes out of some of the Preface poems indicates a poet who is always in some senses outside Beat beliefs and assumptions, even as he immerses himself in Beat life and culture.77

I have implied that this doubt is a tension that all assimilated artists experience in a colonial context—even as they build into a frame of reference they are always simultaneously outside it, because at some level there is culturally a ‘lack of fit’. In psychological terms, one might see the poet in his many experiments with avant-garde techniques more or less consciously searching in language for that which might complete him in relation to identity issues. To the extent that these techniques are laden with the values and beliefs of American artistic bohemia—in relation to art, politics, the self, personal morality and the role of the artist in society—one sees a poet assuming a culture.

The later poems of Preface begin a serious questioning of this cultural package. In The Dead Lecturer continues these personal and cultural struggles for identity, place and politics. One sees many signs of a psychological, spiritual and existential struggle in these poems as the poet begins to try to reshape (decolonise) his being, his language, his thinking process, to take on a more ‘definitive shape’, to give himself greater substance as actor in and upon the world. This poetry reaches for a new social context even as the poet himself still lives in, and writes for, a downtown New York audience and for white publishers. That is, even as he is still resident in white bohemia he is looking outside of its boundaries in geographical, cultural, and socio-political terms.

77 See Sollors, p.261: “By continually forcing himself to abandon roles in which he had become accepted by smaller or larger audiences, Baraka fought the reification process that would make him the ‘Beat poet’ ‘the angry young man’, or ‘the black nationalist.’” This is a useful analysis but it seems to aestheticise the artist’s life and work. If one accepts my colonial model, one might say that it is the native intellectual’s bane to always be on the outside. He/she never fully returns to the people, never fully escapes from the colonising power’s education and training. Thus he or she is always doomed to being ‘outside.’
His political activities (so ‘party political’ as to represent a ‘sin’ in Beat terms) carry him around New York protesting Lumumba’s death, calling for ‘Fair Play for Cuba’, organising a black literary organisation, and fighting for the rights of Robert Williams (a socialist black militant forced into exile). Malcolm X was then starting to touch the nerves of many young black people fed up with the ‘turn-the-other-cheek’ philosophy of Dr. King, king, for all his virtues, did not recognise the harshness of life in the urban northern ghettos which was breeding anger and would lead to rebellions later in the 1960s. Leroi Jones is aware of Malcolm X; the poet was starting to see himself in more political, more international contexts. If, as in Olson’s terms, poetry emerges from the body then Jones begins to search for a new poetry that reflects his new ‘ politicised’ relation to the body and its African genetic (and cultural) heritage.

Internationally, 1960 alone sees thirty-three African nations become ‘independent’ (before neo-colonialism moves in). The world witnesses the tragedy born of an independent Congo. Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected ‘native’ prime minister of the Congo is betrayed by the United Nations peace-keeping force (which he asked to protect democracy in the wake of Tshombe’s neo-colonialist movements in Katanga province, with the aid of Belgian soldiers). Lumumba is then killed by Tshombe, who is soon displaced by another neo-colonialist, Mobutu Sese Seko.

Algeria, in its colonial war with France, penetrates the consciousness of politically aware people around the world. The hegemony of the conservative 1950s starts to fray. There is talk of revolution in the United States, requiring action and not just talk. Malcolm X stands as the national symbol of liberation, with struggles in Africa seeming to usher in a new era of revolution in international contexts.

One sees Jones’s predicament. The self shaped in Beat values, where politics is defined mainly in terms of political liberation, comes into open conflict with the desire for a more community-based politics, based in solidarity with the black colonised—to be revolutionary not only in terms of writing or sexual morality, to become one with African-American people as they develop more openly militant stances towards their oppressors.

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In this context one might see similarities between Jones and Fanon’s native intellectual who is labouring to wrench free from both a poetry and a world view, a site that has previously informed and shaped his identity. This entails struggling to wrench oneself away from a thought process, a set of values—the very fibre of what one is. Fanon is aware of the depth of this struggle as he describes the style of writing that emerges.

This is sufficient explanation of the style of those native intellectuals who decide to give expression to this phase of consciousness which is in the process of being liberated. It is a harsh style, full of images. It is a vigorous style, alive with rhythms, struck through and through with bursting life; it is full of color, too bronzed, sun-baked and violent. This style, which in its time astonishes the people of the West, has nothing racial about it ... it expresses above all a hand to hand struggle and it reveals the need that man has to liberate himself from a part of his being which already contained the seeds of decay. Whether this fight is painful, quick or inevitable, muscular action must substitute itself for concepts. 79

Stuart Hall’s explanation of Jacques Lacan’s notion of identity helps to contextualise Fanon’s remarks in relation to Jones as ‘native intellectual’ in a colonial context:

Thus, identity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at birth. There is always something ‘imaginary’ or fantasized about its unity. It always remains incomplete, is always ‘in process,’ always ‘being formed’ ... Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness which is ‘filled’ from outside us, by the way we imagine ourselves to be seen by others. Psychoanalytically the reason why we continually search for ‘identity’, constructing biographies which knit together the different parts of our divided selves into a unity, is to recapture this fantasized pleasure of fullness (plenitude). 80

Fanon’s brilliance lies in transposing what might be called a Eurocentric, universalist theory of identity (in that it assumes an ‘ideal’ family structure, ‘normal’ social and cultural conditions upon which the subject is founded) into a colonial context, as Parry notes:

In Fanon’s writings the colonized as constructed by colonialist ideology is the very figure of the divided subject posited by psychoanalytic theory to refute humanism’s myth of a unified self. Denied the right to subjectivity, internalizing and refracting the colonizer’s address to its other as darkness and negation, alienated from a ravaged natural culture, the colonized is condemned to exist in an inauthentic condition. 81

79 Fanon, *Wretched*, p. 177.
Whilst one might suggest American colonialism differs from the conditions in the Parry quote above (in the sense that one might suggest that black culture in America has a certain richness) the other denials and divisions are there. What is particularly galling to Jones in this phase is his understanding that in the very act of situating himself in a ‘rebel’ culture he has simultaneously fenced himself off from a relationship, kinship, and cultural identification with the black masses who are at this historical moment starting to awaken, both inside and outside America.

If one accepts New York bohemia as a site of reversed and distorted values (the ‘benign’ side of the American coin) one can also conceive of any relationship with American culture as colonial and divisive. The poet hints at this when he says in The System of Dante’s Hell:

The flame of social dichotomy. Split open down the center, which is the early legacy of the blackman unfocused on blackness. The dichotomy of what is seen and taught and desired opposed to what is felt. 82

Although the words above are written in 1964, and not the years of The Dead Lecturer (1961-3), the poet will build his way into this self-understanding, constructing himself anew by recognising that ‘two warring souls’ jostle within himself.

In the second poem of this second poetic collection, ‘Balboa The Entertainer’, the poet speaks of making as a struggle:

It cannot come
except you make it
from materials
it is not
caught from

What emerges out of the poet’s short breath lines is instructional and space-clearing in its political dimensions: making must come from action upon the world—not romantically ‘caught’ out of thin air.

This is while he still recognises himself as one who is not yet ready to act, even if he needs to protest his community’s idleness:

(The philosophers
of need of which
I am lately
one
will tell you. “The people”
(and not think themselves
liable

to the same
trembling flesh) (5-13)

The lines' shape indicates a poet feeling his way through.

Fanon's native intellectual might be seen in The Wretched of the Earth to be motivated by a sense of guilt. In the American context here, the poet confesses his own lack of social consciousness:

I say now "The People,"
as some lesson repeated now (13-14)

In this sense the poet admits the price he must pay for tearing free of the old way is a type of disintegration of being, caught betwixt being and becoming, like an entertainer on stage who loses his way—as the title 'Balboa the Entertainer' seems to suggest is the poet's difficulty, a concern continued from the Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note but now expressed more seriously.

You will go
blank at the middle. A dead man. (22-24)

This view requires that one look into the void, being caught between cultures and risking annihilation. The speaker of the poem accepts these terms as a necessary rite of passage. One senses in these lines the poet speaking to himself, willing a potential crisis to come onward:

But
die soon, Love. If
what you have for
yourself, does not
stretch to your body's end. (25-30)

There is a violence implied ('die') behind the lyricism:

(Where, without
preface
music trails, or your fingers
slip
from my arm. (31-35)

It is as if all his projections are prodding him, demanding of him that he come to some life-and-death decision.

One notes a more up-front approach in 'A Contract (for the destruction and rebuilding of Paterson)'.

Flesh, and cars, tar, dug holes beneath stone
a rude hierarchy of money, band saws cross out
music, feeling. Even speech, corrodes (1-3)
It has been noted by critics that this poem follows in the footsteps of William Carlos Williams's famed social protest poem, *Paterson*.\(^{83}\) One notes in the lines above a poet wrestling with the cityscape that he is portraying; spitting out his disgust, fury and energy in long breath lines alive with the sound cacophony of the city. One notes the same emotional intensity is present in this public consciousness as in the earlier works, but emotion is now framed within the nexus of the social.

With a sense of urgency the poet seems to be attempting to tear himself free of apathy, apolitical miasma, and the language (quieter and shorter lines) that he has become mired in.

In a more personal vein he adds:

\[
\text{I came here} \\
\text{from where I sat boiling in my veins, cold fear} \\
\text{at the death of men, the death of learning, in} \\
\text{cold fear of my own. (4-7)}
\]

These chilling phrases have a positive aspect, for from this existential terror and anger he has moved into a more combative social awareness. Paterson is an ugly industrial city further from the artistic centre of things, but closer to the social and political heart of the U.S.—here is American capitalism without disguise. It is stated by critics that the long breath line is evidence of a more expansive and aware consciousness of the world.\(^{84}\) This is not to suggest that Jones stops using shorter lines, but generally it feels as though the craftsmanship of the small, tight poem has become too small a universe for expanding thoughts.

If one is attempting to 'vomit up' a whole world, one needs longer lines. Césaire's *Notebook of A Return to the Native Land* also attempts to swallow and spit out the various aspects of the world he knows (colonised Martinique). It uses physical imagery with a fierce intensity:

\[
\text{At the end of the wee hours, this most essential land restored to my gourmandise, not in diffuse} \\
\text{tenderness, but the tormented sensual concentration of the fat tits of the mornes with an} \\
\text{occasional} \\
\text{palm tree as their hardened sprout, the jerky orgasm of torrents and from Trinité to Grand-} \\
\text{Rivière,}
\]

---

\(^{83}\) See Lacey, p.62; Sellors, pp.87-8. Both critics ground 'A Contract' in Baraka's attempts to utilise Williams's influence to help him develop a unique, personal American urban voice.

\(^{84}\) Sellors, p. 90, talks of Jones utilising the 'black scream', a Coltrane technique, in the context of his discussion on the poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus'. Harris talks of Jones's breath line in relation to the use of the black form "slyke and chant" as it helps him to develop a more militant voice, and assume a black cultural identity, pp. 72-3.
Jones’s lines about Italians carry within them an almost hysterical tone of voice:

Loud spics kill each other, and will not

make the simple trip to Tiffany’s. Will not smash their stainless heads, against the simpler effrontery of so callous a code as gain (11-13)

One senses a poet blazing language out of a highly charged state of mind, hoping that the poetic act of summoning up a language physical enough, violent enough, explosive enough, will transform his colonised spirit. Such lines obviously risk being seen as racist and offensive, as Césaire’s sometimes were. It is in this context that one might understand his savage polemic against the black middle class:

You are no brothers, dirty woogies, dying under dried rinds, in massa’s droopy tuxedos. (14-16)

For a man who in many ways belonged to the black bourgeoisie, even as he satirised them in his Beat phase, his lines (changing length in staccato rhythm) become doubly merciless, for his fury masks his guilt:

Killed in white fedora hats, they stand so mute

at what

whiter slaves did to my fathers. (23-25)

The poet’s sense of identity is shaped around an identification with what Malcolm X called the ‘field nigger’. The slaves who suffered doubly at the hands of the ‘massa’ and his hand-picked, relatively privileged, ‘house niggers’.87

The difficulty is that this sensibility is itself expressed in a ‘bourgeois’ language of lyrical abstraction:

They pray

at the

steps of abstract prisons, to be kings, when all is silence, when all is stone (25-28)

85 qtd in Césaire, p.39.
86 See Harris, p.87. In many ways Harris’s argument can be carried into a wider colonial context. I am therefore indebted to his original insights.
87 See Malcolm X in ‘Definitions of A Revolution’ in Clarke, Malcolm X: The Man and His Times, p.277. One might understand Malcolm X’s Manicheanism as a strategy with which to get all black people mobilised. In the short term, such measures might seem divisive, turning black against black along a rough class analysis, and digging into a painful historical fact of slave plantation life. In the long term, Malcolm’s ‘house nigger’ analysis might be seen as a means of forcing the people to take a good hard look at themselves and to think of ways that they might better serve Malcolm’s idea of a separate black nation within America.
These echoes of traditional poetry signal the distance that the poet must go in order to decolonise his verse. How to criticise the black bourgeois escapists from social reality—in lyrical, metaphorical verse, or in black vernacular (‘no brother, dirty woogies’)?

The issue of identity is painfully present in the poem ‘This is the clearing I once spoke of.’ One might see this poem as an ideological and poetic expansion of themes introduced in the poem ‘The Clearing’ from Preface to A Twenty Volume Suicide Note. In that earlier poem the search in the unconscious was a fantastical journey whose moments of existential terror gave way to a joyful self-discovery that provided an imaginative, if not fully satisfactory, remedy against personal isolation. In the newer poem, ‘This is the clearing I once spoke of,’ this space has become a site of deeper identity contestation. That imaginary has become a dying geography. The poet, in rapidly shifting pronoun usage—I, me, you, my)—suggests a new complexity of self or selves that cannot be contained within the old imagination. The poem begins

The talk scared him. Left alone, with me
at some water. (Suddeness of your mind,
because you will be saved. Stand there
counting deaths. My own is what I wanted
you to say, Roi, you will die soon)

In these shifting selves and fast moving projections the poet again wrestles with the notions of fear, terror and hope associated with the death of an old self (or selves). His inner being is fragmented here as if many contradictory voices are screaming out from within, attacking and preying upon each other in his mind. The outer world impinges on the inner, in a surreal fashion:

And
it went well, till evening, and the birds
fled. Their trees hanging empty at the
river. All of it a creation

The poet takes his own advice, offered in ‘Balboa the Entertainer’—‘it is not caught from’—but the process of ‘creation’ seems to involve a terrifying act of will that has to take the poet through the inferno of conflict at the centre of his being. Reality keeps breaking into this inner world:

The simple elegant hand, a man
will extend. More than we can lose, and
still talk lovingly of “ourselves”

56
An act that signals the poet’s need for communication, a handshake of good faith that he needs to keep his hold on identity.

It is out of this surreal and fragmented writing that a new energy source for poetry is found:

We sat looking and the wind changes
our fire, it was blue, and sang slowly

The poet imagines a new unity and the jettisoning of old selves:

I love you, I say that now
evenly, without emotion. Having
lost you.

He is watching the ‘Aurora Borealis’ inside, not terrified of its visual ‘premonitions’ of the rupture of identity:

Or sitting, at the ruptured
threads of light, Wind and birds, spun
out over the water, silent or dead

In this poem, Baraka projects himself imaginatively into a place of chaos, an unnatural calm in the eye of a storm that might allow him to emerge into a new ‘becoming’, out of the death of the old self (or selves).

Whereas the above poem evokes a complexity of selves, the poem “An Agony As Now” seems to portray a deadly contest between two discrete selves. It illustrates the torment in more racial or cultural terms:

I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes.

This is not merely a poem that makes a reader aware of the racism of white America. It is a graphic illustration of a black man who has come to see his own body as a claustrophobic prison, a self-hatred that is the bane of many colonised peoples. The poet utilises great dramatic skill in these first two lines, jolting a reader’s mind, as the reader realises that the poet is speaking to him/her at third remove. In the next lines he says:

Smell
what fouled tunes come in
to his breath. Love his
wretched women.

It is through this astonishing mode of address that one is given insight into the poet’s absolute alienation with what has previously seemed to him to a ‘liberated’ life. The hatred at large in the world can not be ignored. The poem ‘scans’ its field of vision in
short, concentrated gasps of expression. The speaker’s ‘true’ self is hidden under a mask, he is both a soldier going to war in a battle he does not believe in, and by this thought already a prisoner of war. The hatred of the outside world disturbs the very boundaries of his self and undermines his body.

Slits in the metal, for sun. Where
my eyes sit turning, at the cool air
the glance of light, or hard flesh
rubbed against me, a woman, a man
without shadow, or voice, or meaning. (7-11)

In a curious sense one almost feels as if the poet is turning life-time of anxieties about his dealings with white people (including his own readers) in upon himself, adding these to his already deep sense of self-hatred. That is, since he cannot yet openly attack others he attacks himself. One might imagine the hells that all colonised people might go through in this world that silences indigenous subjectivities.

One might contrast the sense of imprisonment that the poet expresses in the face with the freer, though still highly energetic voice emerging in the early poems of Black Magic written during the same period (1961-3), but held back from his usual publishers (which text I will investigate in chapter three). Both collections of poetry express a poet in transition.

One critic has noted the similarity in themes between this poem and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s ‘We Wear The Mask’.⁸⁸ Whilst the older poem suggests a historical legacy of identity problems inherited by each descendent of slavery, Jones’s sense of the problem is more complex. Dunbar’s poem evinces a concern with being recognised as human in an era where even ‘token’ integration was not possible for black people in wider society. Jones, on the other hand, had ‘integrated’ into a

⁸⁸ Lacey, p.64. The first stanza of that poem reads
We wear the mask that grins and lies,
Hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties. (1-5)

And the last verse says:
We smile, but, O great Christ our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise
We sing but oh the clay is wild
Beneath our feet, and long the mile
But let the dream otherwise,
We wear the mask (10-15)

Quoted in Adoff, p. 8.
bohemian lifestyle that seemingly welcomed the black ‘outsider’, while subtly
discouraging a specific black subjectivity from raising its voice. He is Fanon’s native
intellectual. The poem raises the question that many of these poems ask: does a true a
true self exist, beyond the masks of a constructed self, education, marriage, and
literary career? The poet is perplexed, looking to strip off these layers, to touch the
ture self, when boundaries are still complex and confusing.

\[
\text{Touch. (not mine}
\]
\[
\text{Or yours if you are the soul I had}
\]
\[
\text{abandoned when I was blind and had}
\]
\[
\text{my enemies every me as a dead man}
\]

There is a splitting of the self here, as if the very difficulty of claiming
ownership of sensation is indicative of a poet searching to escape Fanon’s ‘seeds of
decay’. Touch should be both an affirmation of the presence of flesh and the
confirmation of being fully in the world.

The poet seems to ponder: does any experience belong to his new emerging
self, or still to his old ‘metal’ constructed self? The poet is engaged in complex
questioning, in highly dramatic fashion, of his own sense of personal disorientation.

Where does (self) hatred end?

\[
\text{It can be pain (As now all his}
\]
\[
\text{flesh hurts me) It can be that,...}
\]
\[
\text{Or pain, the mind}
\]
\[
\text{silver spiraled whirlled against the}
\]
\[
\text{sun higher than even old men thought}
\]
\[
\text{God would be. Or pain. And the other.}
\]

A dazed, fragmentated mind screams through these images, a desire for a physical and
spiritual freedom.

The very discourse appears to indicate a schizoid consciousness of many
conflicting voices, as if the field of composition and the poet’s relationship to
language has become more troubled and strained. One way to interpret this is to
suggest that at the deepest levels he is attempting to decolonise himself. Fanon speaks
in Black Skin, White Masks of the sensation of being split asunder under the gaze of a
white child on a train:

\[
\text{In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the}
\]
\[
\text{third person but in triple person. In the train I was given not one but two,}
\]

\cite{footnote:128} Jones himself will say in Knight’s The Beat Vision of schizophrenia at this juncture of his career,
\textit{The Dead Lecturer} is much more coming to grips with my own concerns, the key one of which was the
question of estrangement, of being, say, a schizophrenic, being concerned internally with one group of
ideas but at the same time seeing other people’s concerns were different." p.137.
three places. . . . On that day completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object.  

The speaker of Fanon’s passage and Jones’s poem is a man who has internalised the coloniser’s values and culture into himself so that the hatred that accompanies that culture can attack his very subjectivity from the inside. What is the remedy? He must refract these values through the scrutiny of a new self in order not to punish himself, but in a perverse sense, to free himself. One notes here an inversion of the process that Fanon describes for a colonised intellectual.

This offers one a way to understand his criticism of his own previous writings:

(Inside his books, his fingers. They
are withered yellow flowers and were never
beautiful.)  

(27-29)

Laden with dying culture, at a remove from his own life, in the very act of writing:

You will, lost soul, say
‘beauty’. Beauty, practiced, as the tree. The
slow river. A white sun in its wet sentences.  

(29-31)

The poet finds himself returned to his initial conundrum:

Cold air blown through narrow blind eyes. Flesh,
white hot metal. Glows as the day with its sun.  

(37-38)

The poet reaches for a kinder condition, a state of acceptance:

It is a human love, I live inside. A bony skeleton
you recognize as words or simple feeling.  

(39-40)

But the barriers remain:

But it has no feeling. As the metal is hot, it is not
given to love  

(41-42)

The horror intensifies, hinting not only at the violent nature of black self-hatred and its effects, but also to the burning of black men and women by sadistic white lynch mobs. The poet’s agonies, even if self inflicted in some ways, are in other ways indicative of the racist situation that creates such tensions within black people:

It burns the thing
inside it. And that thing

---

99 Fanon, Black Skins, p. 112. The poignancy of Fanon’s words hit home in other colonial contexts. One feels that this white ‘knows’ everything about you in one glance. In fact they have taken a ‘room out’ inside you even as they ‘look’ at you. Transposed into public policy against indigenous peoples, such a look loses its harmless character for it is this look turned into action which makes aboriginal Australians the damned of their own earth, and which denies Maori people equal partnership under the Treaty of Waitangi, and tells Polynesian people to forget themselves, their history, their culture, their traditional ontologies. Such glances in colonial lands are never inconsequential.
This poem may be criticised as histrionic, but it remains an extraordinary record of the troubled self in a world of hatred (by implication, racial hatred). It represents, in a complex and obscure fashion, an attempt to verbalise the experience of claustrophobia and the desire for change.

The poet’s interest in images of blackness constructed by colonial power is widening. It is important to note Malcolm X’s words from 1964:

We are living in a time when image-making has become a science. Someone can create a certain image and then use that image to twist your mind and lead you right up a blind path.  

Although written after ‘A Poem For Willie Best’ Malcolm X’s words appear to verbalise what Jones was attempting to do in that poem. By deconstructing and then reconstructing black images, the poet re-shapes his own psyche, his own image of himself caught in the coloniser’s gaze and is able to link his inner conflicts with black America’s historical conflicts, concerning identity. Benston gives a fine close reading of this poem. But I will try and add to that by attempting to show colonial issues as they arise in the poem. As the text notes: Willie Best was a Negro character actor whose Hollywood name was ‘Sleep’n’eat’. It is notable that the best Jones/Baraka poems refer to music, indicating the new role that music offers to somebody attempting to resist the coloniser’s eye. The poem begins:

The face sings, alone
at the top
of the body

This presentation reads as a visual television approach, the camera technique (with each line representing a ‘shot’) constructs a new way in which to conceive of the split between the black smiling entertainer and the black man simultaneously compromised as a human being. The poet says:

All
flesh, all song, aligned. For hell
is silent, at those cracked lips
flakes of skin and mind
twist and whistle softly
as they fall.

---

91 qtd. in Clark, pp.307-8.
92 Benston, pp.110-3. So also, in a more ‘split-consciousness’ perspective does Lacey, pp.64-8. I am indebted to their insights, upon which mine emerge.
93 Jones, Dead Lecturer, p.18.
One witnesses the disintegration of not only flesh but spirit, the 'mind' that exists beyond the image, the black colonised self tormented in both mind and body. Jones functions as an unseen narrator, as if he had frozen the life of Best's essence on celluloid and is projecting this life back to him via film:

It was your own death
you saw. Your own face, stiff
and raw. This
without sound or
movement

(9-13)

The face is frozen in close up, the film proceeds in eerie silence. The 'readers' are led to experience for themselves what it would be like to experience a distortion of their being for the sake of 'entertainment.' Crucially here, it is a white audience that is evoked, told how it objectifies Best, and by implication how Jones feels he has been objectified by a white audience. The struggle to identify and root out colonialism of the mind is being waged here at the deepest level. It is Fanon who says:

Can the white man behave healthily toward the black man and can the black man behave healthily toward the white man? A pseudo-question some will say. But when we assert that European culture has an image of the Negro which is responsible for all the conflicts that may arise, we do not go beyond reality. 94

Illustrating this in an American context, Jones shows the talented black man caught in these currents:

His blood, for a time
alive, and huddled in a door
way, struggling to sing. Rain
washes it into the cracks. Pits
whose bottoms are famous. Whose sides
are innocent broadcasts
of another life.  

(15-21)

The poet introduces a different way of looking at Best:

At this point, neither
front nor back. A point, the
dimensionless line. The top
of a head, seen from Christ's
heaven, stripped of history
or desire

(22-27)

Best becomes a mere point as though in an animation sequence, a starting point of sorts, but at worst the ultimate reduction of his humanity. The poem creates a picture of a man removed from all that might give him self-awareness and dignity. There is a merciless and angry sensibility that implicates the reader's consciousness in
the act of objectifying a black man’s humanity in the very process of being an audience. In a perverse fashion the poet attempts to force his white audience to in turn objectify themselves, behind the ‘veil’ that Best as a representative of black people is fragmented.

Born into death
held fast to it, where
the lover spreads his arms, the line
he makes to threaten Gods with history. (30-33)

The imagery is savage in its development to:

The point, becomes a line, a cross or
the man, and his material, driven in
the ground (41-43)

The world (including the reader) has proceeded to crucify Best, and then left him to his agony:

No one
will turn to that station again. (47-48)

The cross is deftly developed into the image of a crossroads, a site of perplexity in stanza 3. Despite its depressing catalogue, the poem evokes a spirit of black resistance. Its gaze sweeps across the ‘gifts’ of slavery, the plantations (fields), the military training gained through the second world war and Best’s own symbols of his ‘blackness’ for a white audience, the black Christ’s cheap meat and sour wine. One senses a native intellectual imaginatively walking in his people’s history, searching amongst the legacy of materials through which a true black subjectivity might be clothed, for ‘symbols’ of black identity that will help to articulate his people’s ravaged spirituality. Still, the poet has no sympathy for Best himself at this point:

Where
ever,
he has gone. Who ever
mourns
or sits silent
to remember

There is nothing of pity
here. Nothing
of sympathy. (82-90)

It is only when Jones imaginatively constructs Best’s performances as symbolic of black people’s living history that sympathy returns:

94 Fanon, Black Skins, p. 169.
This is the dance of the raised leg. Of the hand on the knee quickly.
As a dance it punishes speech. 'The house burned. The old man killed.' as a dance it is obscure

Ku Klux Klan violence, a people's history, is inscribed in each reflexive act of the body giving the performer a presence that transcends triviality, for he carries his people's historical 'cross', and is 'redeemed' in the poet's eyes.

The poet 'sings' the song of black male psychological and physical castration, the 'feminisation of black manhood':

This is the song
of the highest C.

The falsetto. An elegance
that punishes silence.

Even as the poet still seems to acknowledge the 'deformity' there is a sense of anger resistance in this song.

One begins to note how the concentration of image, the short breath lines, and the elliptical suggestive language lead to a rich, evocative poetry of black social and political themes. The developments of line and thought from old Beat concerns leads to a projection outwards of a poet attempting to renegotiate a new relationship with black history and culture. One might see this as a gradual decolonisation at the level of poetic form, shaping a newly developing consciousness.

Stanza seven is critical in the drama for it is here that the poet clearly ties himself with Best:

This is the lady
I saw you with
This is your mother
This is the lady I wanted somehow to sleep with

As a dance or
our elegant song. Sun red and grown
from trees, fences, mud roads in dried out
river beds

In this cryptic passage the poet appears to call to the muse of black music as both Best's mother and Jones's would-be lover. She is somehow the ancestral link through whom the 'music' of southern black history emerges in both black artists ('entertainers'). Jones calls out his gratitude to Best, although he is met by deafening silence:
Can you hear? Here
I am again. Your boy, dynamite. Can
you hear? My soul is moved. The soul
you gave me. (129-32)

Best becomes a resister to the white gaze that attempts to ‘essentialise’ him, as though
fighting a boxing match:

The balance
He was tired of losing. (And
his walking buddies tired
of walking;
Bent slightly
at the waist. Left hand low, to flick
quick showy jabs a la Sugar. The right
cocked, to complete,
any combination. (141-149)

One is given an almost slow motion picture sequence of an ageing Jack Johnson
losing tragically to white fighter Jess Willard for the heavy-weight championship of
the world. Hinting at the two ways traditionally to escape the ghetto (sport and
entertainment), these images have a poignancy of tone as the poet tries to create a
‘mirror image’ of muscular resistance that might complete the damaged relationship
between self and other. Consider Fanon’s remark:

At the foundation of Hegelian dialectic there is an absolute reciprocity
which must be emphasized. It is the degree to which I go beyond my own
immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and
more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the
accomplishment of movement in two directions I keep the other within
himself. Ultimately I deprive him even of his being for itself.95

Strangely, Jones’s

... renegade
behind the mask. And even
the mask a renegade
disguise

(158-61)

lacks credibility, for the poet (even as he attempts to improvise and challenge the
white colonial gaze) is creating a fantasy of disguise—that of Ellison’s ‘invisible man’
or Bhabha’s ‘mimicry. But Fanon reminds us that disguise is not an answer to the
fundamental problem:

Ontology—once it is fully admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—
does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only
must the black man be black he must be black in relation to the white man.

95 Ibid., p. 217. For a useful discussion of some of the ways in which Fanon uses the Hegelian dialectic,
refer to Lou Turner, “On the Difference Between the Hegelian and Fanonian Dialectic of Lordship and
Bondage” pp. 134-51 in Fanon: A Critical Reader. To someone unfamiliar with Hegel this article
might present difficulties.
... The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.  
I would argue that this colonial relation obtains until the poet, like Fanon’s native intellectual, tears away from the whole frame of reference and creates a new one in the context of the black community. Jones and others will attempt to frame a new identity through struggle to ‘excavate’ and ‘rediscover’ an African spiritual ontology out of which a new black American identity fused to living existence might provide ontological resistance to this ‘look’ of the coloniser.

Here in this poem Jones is not quite at this level. Imagining himself at a crossroads he says:

And he sits  

wet at the crossroads, remembering distinctly  
each weightless face that eases by. (Sun at  
the back door, and that hideous mindless grin.  
(Hear? (192-6)

The poet is not yet an actor upon the world whose writing is an apt extension of his revolutionary activities. Despite his progress, he must still face the ghastly memories of Best as ‘smiling nigger’ under the white colonial gaze as talisman of each black person’s cross—‘entertainers’ for white people.

The move to decolonise implies a severance with the old community. But in some poems, such as ‘Joseph To His Brothers’, he lacks a will to wrench free, even as he announces his irrevocable alienation. He is still part of the Beat ‘family of Jacob’. It is as if his own participation in what he has come to despise mutes his criticism somewhat. He says:

They characterize  
their lives, and I  
fill up  
with mine  

(1-4)

One notes the contradictory impulses alive in a native intellectual in an American context. The need to linger, in a ‘long kiss goodbye’ to his old ways and old friends coexists with the impulse to spit up any lingering taste of the past.

It is as if the act of decolonising awakens two urges within the poet—one to wage war, the other to gently set the record straight. These two conflicts are not resolved even as he satirises his community in gentle verse:

\[96 \text{Ibid., p. 110.}\]
These philosophers
rein up
their boats. Bring
their gifts, weapons
to my door. As if
that, in itself,
was courage, or counting
science

(10-17)

In this sense it is hard to situate Jones comfortably in Fanon’s model unless one
suggests that the phases overlap and are less rigidly defined than Fanon appears to
suggest. A ‘violent and sun-baked’ poetry appears incumbent to his more quiet and
gentle verse. The poet, in the above lines, is not remonstrating with his ‘people’, the
tone is quiet, the voice seems tired, and disillusioned:

The story is a long one. Why
I am here like this. Why you
should listen, now, so late, and
weary at the night

(18-21)

Whilst he manifests a disturbing sense of identity crisis in brilliant, cryptic
verse, he seems apparently ‘sane’ and ‘together’. He bails out of resolving this tension
in:

So little
of this we remember. So few portions
of our lives, go on

(29-31)

But his voice is slightly more militant in ‘Short Speech to My Friends’. He
openly questions a Village taboo,

Is power, the enemy?

(21)

Beat poets would beat a hasty retreat from ‘power’. Jones creates an expressionistic,
fast moving collage of images:

(Destroyer
of dawns, cool flesh of valentines, among
the radios, pauses, drunks
of the 19th century. I see it,
as any man’s single history.

(21-25)

He writes satirically of those who specialise in escape:

All the possible heroes
dead from heat exhaustion
at the beach
or hiding for years from cameras

(25-28)

His satirical attitude to Beat consciousness allows him a certain political
strength and identity that are soon shaken when he must examine how far short he is
of becoming a black revolutionary figure. He seems caught between artistic and political revolution:

A compromise
would be silence. To shut up, even such risk
as the proper placement
of verbs and nouns. To freeze the spit
in mid-air, as it aims itself
at some valiant intellectual's face

(38-47)

Any act may be cheered in ‘artistic rebellious’ terms, as an act of Dada violence:

There would be someone
who would understand, for whatever
fancy reason

(44-46)

But what is the point of such avant-garde rebellion in a larger perspective, in relation to the lives of one’s own children?

Dead, lying, Roì, as your children
came up, would also rise.

(46-47)

He recognises his own foolhardiness, and the need for a new look at history:

As George Armstrong Custer

These 100 years, has never made
a mistake.

(47-49)

A poet seeking to tear free from his colonisation will turn to experiment with jazz techniques in his poetry as one means of filling himself with a ‘pure’, ‘black’ consciousness. The jazz impulse is always apparent, even in Jones’s earlier works. But in this phase of his development jazz becomes a means to realising a new distinctly African-American being-in-the world. There is music that screams out in that way.

In his influential jazz study *Blues People*, he will make the point:

And it seems to me that if the Negro represents or is symbolic of something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music. In other words, I am saying that if the music 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.97

Given his polemic stance in this work (with its concept of pure black music, diluted by impure white influences) one might suggest that music, in its ability to carry culture, would represent the best means by which Jones could come into black consciousness, a type of spiritual redemption. Through jazz, he might become black,

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as through avant-garde poetry he became Beat. It is one of my disappointments that I cannot give more space to the centrality of this tradition to Jones's development. But I will provide a brief sketch of the musical scene, circa 1961-5.

A new music was emerging out of Bebop; faster, more insistent, more chaotic in musical terms. Ornette Coleman's improvisatory album *Free Jazz* lit the way for many different experimental jazz musicians. John Coltrane's moves on *My Favourite Things*, Eric Dolphy's *Out To Lunch*, and the later development of young horn players Albert Ayler, Pharaoh Sanders and Don Cherry would cut a path that older jazz musicians such as Max Roach, Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk would explore as they moved to new phases of their careers. Although each musician listed here (and there are many more) brought outstanding contributions to the body of jazz, it was John Coltrane's 'gifts' that would leave the longest-lasting impressions upon Jones and many other black artists. In terms of influence upon Baraka, Coltrane was as big an influence as Malcolm X, which is unexpected in the sense that Coltrane was an extremely gentle, non-violent individual whose music was an extension of his deeply felt philosophical and religious beliefs.

As an alto saxophone learner player for a time I have a rudimentary understanding of Coltrane's skills and some understanding of basic music theory. Coltrane was famed for the ease with which he could compose and play music that emphasised difficult high-speed and chordal progressions. A penchant for playing each note of an octave at high speed, rather than simply the ones most closely related to the chordal structures of his pianist, led to a 'harmonic residual effect' that one critic coined 'sheets of sound' to describe.

Coltrane was famed for his experimentation with Eastern modal structures in his later work, moving outside the normal Western conception of music and progressions of the chords. He utilised the high register scream on both soprano and tenor saxophones in a music that, in its deep and chaotic sense of search, broke all the rules of musical decorum, as Charlie Parker had a generation before. Yet his music also reflected—even in its turbulence—a tone, a 'voice' always in control, an

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98 At least among other black artists of the 1960s. See Lacey's 'Baraka's "Am/TRAK" EVERYBODY'S COLTRANE POEM' for evidence of the many Coltrane poems that emerged to celebrate this extraordinary man and musician. Adoff's *The Poetry of Black America* alone has many Coltrane poems.

99 Ira Gitler, a noted jazz critic.
impossibly calm tone that always framed his more extravagant and tempestuous roars and screams. Coltrane was supreme improviser and mercurial performer.

Always in Coltrane’s music emerges a voice searching for beauty and truth that might overcome the evil of the times. Coltrane himself said:

You know, I want to be a force for real good. In other words, I know that there are bad forces; forces put here that bring suffering to others and misery to the world, but I want to be the force which is truly for good.\(^{100}\)

One ‘hears’ this in *A Love Supreme* or *Stellar Regions* for example.

Other critics have suggested why Jones was drawn to Coltrane in particular.\(^{101}\) For the purposes of this thesis one might see the appropriation of this great artist’s techniques as a means for the poet to extend his improvisations with language and thought into a place where he could ‘write’ himself into a collective black consciousness out of a white one.\(^{102}\) It is as if Jones assumed he could take his ‘horn’ and learn to play more complex and black ‘music’—a projectivist’s idealism working in a new idiom. Granted a political critic might see this as a petit-bourgeois belief that the artistic act could adequately prefigure the social act, moving one into a black revolutionary consciousness purely by aesthetic means.

The poet conceives of himself as a true super hero seeking to become fully black, no longer hiding behind a mask. In the poem ‘The Invention of Comics’ he states:

\[
I\text{ am a soul in the world} \tag{1}
\]

The line’s sound and imagery give voice to a new Jones struggling to be born. The sound and sense of the line roll the image up, in a wave of sound that blows itself out into existence, only to reconfigure and improvise over the old note in a self-reflexive blast that searches for a new sensibility.

\[
\text{in the world of my soul, the whirled light / from the day.} \tag{1-3}
\]

\(^{100}\) *qtd.* in Kofsky, p.241.

\(^{101}\) Harris, p.72. In a sense one might suggest that the militants, who appropriated Coltrane’s music as symbol of black art destroying white forms, refused to take on board Coltrane’s philosophy. This world view is shown out in the previous Coltrane quote, and in the whole of the Kofsky interview, pp. 221-43. This is a fascinating insight because this presumes some of the black writers of a black nationalist persuasion were taking Coltrane’s work to places that the musician himself may not have been comfortable with, even as Coltrane’s work is laden with an African-American pride and spirit deeply influenced by a need to ‘return to the source’, that is, a cosmic and African spirituality framed by an Eastern religious philosophy.

\(^{102}\) Harris, p.78 speaks of attempts by Baraka to commit poetic parricide, of his white literary fathers, whose poetries were no longer tenable.
Through inverting word orders and creating the new out of the ‘destruction’ of the old (as world becomes the active verb ‘whirled’), the poet taps new energies. This provides a jazz improvisational structure in which to pursue his attempt at decolonising himself, in a black world:

The sacked land
of my father. (4-5)

Jones’s ideas on jazz improvisation (and the idealistic belief that creating and moving towards new forms will create a new self) could be seen as an extension of Projectivism (Olson had little interest in jazz, but other poets influenced by projectivism such as Creeley and Ginsberg talked of it constantly). For Jones, the form allows him to disrupt and fight against Olson’s open form, to sing back his ‘notes’ to himself, to play his blues in reverse, a jazz inversion. Like Coltrane Jones sought to undo and remake himself in the ‘freestyle jazz act’:

In the world, the sad
nature of
myself. In myself
nature is sad (6-9)

This gave the poet a form in which he could ‘swing’ through his inner conflicts, accepting complexities but still and playing on, in a search for a higher place. A Coltranesque search for “A Love Supreme”. Jones’s investigations focus on the theme of energy (or the lack of it):

Small
prints of the day. Its
small dull fires (9-11)

One notes how the poet improvises off the word ‘small’, which leads him into unexpected images that express a held-back energy:

Its
sun, like a greyness
smeared on the dark (11-13)

and:

Seen
from the top of a hill. A
grey expanse; dull fires
throb on its seas. (16-19)

What is different about the poet’s inner investigations (and his use of the surreal) is that the poem’s tone is more vibrant; this feels like an autobiographical journey, a quest.
One also notes the jazz process of ‘repetition with difference’ building his improvisations in and around the theme of personal identity, creating something of the feeling of Coltrane’s ‘sheets of sound’. Layer upon layer of images are built up round the core idea. Improvisations around the core idea of identity take the self into new unexplored regions of being and becoming. These flights are necessary correlatives to the quieter and more sombre movements. There is a more ethnic, prideful articulation implied by the lines:

The man’s soul, the complexion
of his life. The menace
of its greyness. (20-22)

‘Greyness’ looks towards blackness. Even in his sombre musings the poet sometimes takes off on a lyrical flight:

And the moon, from the soul. Is
the world, of the man. The man
and his sea, and its moon, and
the soft fire throbbing. Kind
death. O,
my dark and sultry
love (28-34)

The poet appears to be willing himself a kind of black death that will reincarnate him, put him back in view of Isis, goddess of the Egyptian moon, a black soul at the dawn of creation. At least, one senses that behind the death urge there is lyrical energy. A violent rebirth is linked to death—a good example, particularly in the colonial context, is ‘Black Dada Nihilismus’. As one critic has noted, one sees a poet making a connection between Sartre and Fanon and the African-American struggle for freedom. He further invokes the most extreme of avant-garde movements, Dadaism (which emerged as a burst of anarchism in protest against the madness of the First World War).

Instead of doing a close reading of that poem, I will examine ‘Rhythm & Blues (for Robert Williams, in exile)’ as this poem is more relevant to our emphasis upon Jones’s personal development as a native intellectual. Robert Williams was a black member of both the National Rifle Association (N.R.A.) and the North Carolina

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103 Harris, p.81, recalls that Sartre wrote the preface to Wretched of the Earth. The lines in ‘Black Dada Nihilismus’ state:

From Sartre, a white man, it gave
the last breath. And we beg him die,
before he is killed (26-28)
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.). His advocacy of armed resistance against Ku Klux Klan (K.K.K.) violence in his hometown led to shoot-outs with the Klan and even a cessation of Klan meetings for a time in Monroe, North Carolina. Found guilty of ‘kidnapping’ two elderly white people in a so-called black riot (when he appears to have actually saved their lives), he fled first to Cuba, and then to China where he was fêted as a great revolutionary figure (in much the same way that Paul Robeson's espousal of communism won him similar international acclaim, even as he was vilified at home). Amiri Baraka (Jones) recalls meeting Robert Williams in his autobiography as both men waited at the airport in Miami to board a flight to Cuba in 1960:

He was wearing a big straw hat like a campesino (Cuban farmer) when I met him, with a wispy tip of beard. He was a big man, maybe six feet three inches and about 240 pounds, imposing, strong looking. One never doubted that, aroused, Rob could be a mean mf.104

The revolutionary figure of Williams will become an exemplar of black masculinity for Jones in this poem; as he seeks in his own way to become like Robert Williams as man and as poet. What is fascinating is the unusual way perhaps the social and lived relations of black life are presented as images of a people moving in a dark, surreal nightmare zone. For a poet seeking to articulate a new stance towards the U.S.A. he must evoke within himself the consciousness of a black revolutionary. He searches for this perspective as he regards America:

The symbols hang limply
in the street. A forest of motives.

A reader could infer in these lines the death of the traditional values that supposedly unite the 'land of the free and home of the brave'. There is a terror stalking this America, a terror that traps black people in a surreal materiality:

black steaming Christ
meat wood and ears
flesh light and stars
scream each new dawn for

The strength of using the surreal in this context is that it puts Jones inside his people's agony, a spiritual presence moving over, and within, this grotesque scene:

whatever leaves pushed from gentle lips
fire shouted from the loins of history

104 Baraka, Autobiography, p.244.
The poet fuses with his people's suffering, his lines a revelation of the emasculation of black history and culture, and an attempt to give voice to the existential lamentations of a people. There is a spirit awaiting with terrible patience in:

\[
\text{immense dream of each silence grown to punctuation against the gray flowers of the world} \quad (10-11)
\]

In this warped, land of greyness the poet states:

\[
\text{I live against them, and hear them, and move the way they move.} \quad (12-13)
\]

One senses a poet willing himself into a more militant position. He is announcing not only to himself, but also to old friends, his identification with an upsurge of militancy and anger emerging out of black society at this time. This might draw him into its centripetal force and give a new centre to his confused subjectivity.

\[
\text{For his heels dragged in the brush. For his lips dry as brown wood. As the simple motion of flesh whipping the air.} \quad (15-17)
\]

The poet evokes the scene of a black man dragged through a forest, whipped, murdered. He appears to be attempting to find a revolutionary consciousness forged in an immersion in historical race pain, and its psychically damaging effects. This will presumably bring about an upheaval of his being that will reshape his consciousness and unite him with a wider black family. In one sense, the poet still betrays his petit-bourgeois conditioning; he sources all possible action in an idealistic process of collective remembering that allows a blind anger to emerge and define him. He is, therefore, playing the petit-bourgeois anarchist in the cause of revolution, retreating into the self for energy as the source of action. Some revolutionaries would see a revolutionary consciousness best built in other ways—by social action and links with other social actors. On the positive side, however, one might see this idealism as necessary to his development; he is able to internalise, then project out new understandings of the world that will give him a space in which to develop a more coherent politics and poetics. He sees himself in the midst of 'madness.' He writes:

\[
\text{Controlled eyes seeing now all there is}
\text{Ears that have grown to hold their new maps} \quad (23-6)
\]

Emphasising the surreal, he illustrates the 'dead music' white society plays to glamorise itself, a music that is full of violent discords and 'minor' keys:

\[
\text{Empty white fingers}
\]
against the keys (a drunken foolish stupor
to kill these men
and scream “Economics,” my God “Economics”)

(29-32)

Business, culture, money are all conjoined in a foul symphony of colonial racism,
greed and perverted desire which the white elite has constructed for itself:

for all the screaming women drunker still, laid out to rest
under the tables of nightclubs
under the thin trees of expensive forests

(33-35)

One might see how useful the assimilated influences of the surreal, the vernacular, and
the expansive breath line could become in facilitating a new, more potent and socially
useful verse. These influences allow Jones to articulate, not only his highly charged
state of mind, but the destruction that he sees based in white America, attacking black
people with its greed and unreality, masked by ‘symbols’ of decency and love.

For a native intellectual seeking a ‘fusion’ with the black masses, such verse
can be a very suitable medium through which to shape and define his rising polemic,
for the surreal is unstable, the varied breath line can carry fire and fervour, and the
symbolic social details illustrate Jones’s amazement at the emptiness at the heart of
American life. This is even as one witnesses the poet wrestling with an aesthetic
sensibility shaped under what Fanon calls ‘other skies’:

informed of nothing save the stink of their failure
the peacock insolence of zombie regimes
the diaphanous silence of empty churches

(37-39)

He also practices something Ginsberg used in his poem ‘Howl’. Ginsberg
says:

I depended on the word “who” to keep the beat, a base to keep measure,
return to and take off from again and onto another streak of invention.

Jones uses certain words—‘the’, ‘for’—to propel his lines. The poet screams out a
jazz poem of life and disgust in these jagged, polysyllabic lines that sweep into new
places:

The people of my life
caressed with a silence that only they understand

(50-51)

The poet is like ‘Bird’ or ‘Trane’ seeking to plunge screaming into contemporary life:

Let their sons
make wild sounds of their mothers for your pleasure. Or
drive deep wedges in flesh/screaming birds of morning, at
their own

(51-54)

102 qtd. in Hoover, p. 635.
In attempting here to construct a new self for himself, he is giving proof to what Stuart Hall says, that people construct identities, yet feel that they are digging one up that has always been there, an ‘essential’ black identity found in race memory and race pain. It is indicative of colonised people (here, a poet) that they appear to seek continuity amongst personal, historical, and social discontinuities created by colonialism’s violence itself.

The urban realities of Belmont Street, Newark has become the home of a dynamic people:

Grand / dancers /
spray noise and disorder in those tombs (63–5)

And the urbane, childhood scene trembles with new meanings:

Liverwurst sandwiches dry
on brown fenced in lawns, unfinished
cathedrals tremble
with our screams (65–8)

The songs of the ghetto, the violence of the switch-blade, the ‘cloth’ of street people’s religiosity, and the sheen of their movements, spring out in the dynamic lines:

Of the dozens, the razor, the cloth, the sheen, all speed adventure
locked
in my eyes. (69–71)

The poet desires to redeem himself in the physical, the body of the people. He is aware of his own limitations:

I give you now, to love me, If I spare what flesh of yours
is left. (71–73)

He meditates on the black culture of northern cities.

I am not moved. I will not move to save them. There is no “melody.” Only the foot stomped, the roaring harmonies of need (96–97)

This is a people ‘cooking’ in their ‘music’. The musicians are collapsing in exhaustion after a leader’s wild solo

The face and the fingers sweating, “Let me alone is praise for these musicians” (101-103)

The poet is sanguine enough to admit that the whole poem is:

My own mode of conscience. And guilt, always the obvious connection (104-5)
He struggles against the literary and personal values of the mainstream:

I am deaf and blind and lost and will not sing your quiet verse

But the poet imagines he will become a minotaur:

except as it rises against the mountains
like sun but brighter, like flame but hotter. There will be
those who will tell you it will be beautiful.

In this major poem one can trace a native intellectual wrestling with the older world into which he had assimilated, and the newer world of black struggle he was attempting to find the courage to throw himself into. Robert Williams is evidently the kind of hero figure that Jones would like to become. This is a useful poem to contrast the angry militant voice with the quieter, more familiar verse that continues to run through the collection.

One senses two impulses in this work. The first emphasises personal and social resistance through violent struggle, it calls for an usurpation of forms, development of racial themes, and more conscious militancy. Here the poet attempts to find a black consciousness, establish a black subjectivity. The other impulse leads one to feel that the poet is still deeply enmeshed in his previous community, and in his old cultural interests. These poems read almost as melancholy addresses to a lover, saying the romance is over, yet still bearing a tenderness and sense of warmth for the disregarded partner. Out of this split in loyalties one may better understand the dilemma of Fanon’s native intellectual caught between sympathies and loyalties to two worlds.

The poem ‘Duncan Spoke of a Process’ is one of these quieter poems. The poet explains his tiredness, his desire to continue writing poetry like Robert Duncan’s which is elegant and infused with feeling. He states:

And what I have learned
of it, to repeat, repeated
as a day will repeat
its color, the tired sounds
run off its bones. In me, a balance

In a lyrical exploratory tone the poet develops his projection, uses images tied to a more traditional, poetry. He says of his journey:

Before that, what came easiest. From
wide poles, across the greenest earth
eyes locked on, where they could live, and
whatever came from there, where the hand

(115-116)

(125-127)

(1-5)
could be offered, like Gideon’s young troops
on their knees at the water

The lines begin with a quote from Olson. Then the young artists are evoked as ‘young
troops’, the chosen ones, using the biblical story of Gideon, in the book of Judges, as
metaphor.

He constructs his sense of being imprisoned in lines as complex as any of
Duncan’s:

I test myself,
with memory. A live bloody skeleton. Hung as softly
as summer. Sways like words’ melody, as ugly as any
lips, or fingers stroking lakes, or flesh like a
white frightened scream.

In these expressionistic (and cultured) phrases the poet illustrates his sense of identity
crisis:

Moving, these
is a wreck of spirit,
a heap of broken feeling.

There is a romantic sensibility evoked in the poet’s blues in

I see what I love most and will not
leave what futile lies
I have. I am where there
is nothing, save myself

Still echoing Olson, he knows he can never return to the hot-house milieu that Duncan
and San Francisco circle represent, with their passion for cultural history:

What some noncombatant Greek
or soft Italian prince
would sing, “Noble Friends”

In a spirit of irony Jones becomes something of a Shakespearean Hamlet:

Noble selves. And which one

is truly
to rule here? And
what country is this?

‘To be or not to be’ that is Jones’s question. He has moved out of the literary
promised land and can find no green pastures as he scrutinises the lay of the land. His
farewell to Duncan and the poetics he epitomises seems ironic yet carries a residue of
affection and respect.

In ‘If Into Love The Image Burdens’, a poem with a Duncan-esque title, has a
similar tone:

Each correct color

78
not in nature, makes
us weep. Each inexpressible
idea. The fog lifts. The for
lifts. Now falls. The fog falls

One senses that the poet is saying a long lyrical goodbye to many poetic influences, now disappearing in fog. Among them will be poets like Olson, a poet sure of himself in the world and confident that poetry can make American society more humane and progressive. It is an American confidence that descends from Walt Whitman:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.\(^{106}\)

This move from a confident poetic world into a highly uncertain political one is not resolved by the end of the collection, even if the poet is giving very clear indications that he is moving to a more ethnic, militant stance. In the last three lines of 'The Liar', the final poem of the collection, he writes:

When they say, "It is Roi
who is dead?" I wonder
who they will mean?

\(^{106}\) The opening lines of Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'.

79
CHAPTER THREE: BLACK MAGIC

(1968/9)

Baraka’s moves towards, and the moves inside, a cultural nationalist framework (which Black Magic illustrates), are complex, linking up with Fanon’s intellectual in more than one phase. The desire to lose oneself in the people, to find a lost identity, in Black Magic, is characteristic of both the transitional and nationalist phases. The need to connect with one’s people, by digging in the past for a history denied by the coloniser, is reminiscent the nationalist phase. Baraka’s development is not simply linear. Fanon describes the native intellectual as one who comes to realise that his plunge into cultural nationalism has blinded himself to certain realities, and he then becomes a ‘mover and shaker’ of the people. I will argue in chapter four that this bears is similar to Baraka moving into a Marxist phase. But the difficulty here is that Baraka as a cultural nationalist is already positioning himself as a ‘mover and shaker’ of the people. While we must acknowledge these complexities, we will still see Fanon’s model as useful.

If one understands that the intellectual is shaped in his development by the masses of the people in the colonised world, one can see reasons why Fanon’s model may develop differently in the U.S.A. In Fanon’s colonial world it is the people who move from agitation against the coloniser, to cultural nationalism, on to revolutionary armed struggle. The intellectual is but a reflection of the process, separated by his education from the people, but eventually being strategically useful. In the northern ghettos of the U.S.A. many black militants saw cultural nationalism as the critical phase out of which any revolution would come. Ron Karenga, founder of U.S. Brothers (a cultural nationalist group) and an associate of Baraka, said (in the context of the black aesthetic): “We have always said, and continue to say, that the battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of Black people, and that if we [nationalists] lose this battle, we cannot win the violent one.”

Hall defines cultural nationalism as that which “asserts that black people have distinctive culture, life-styles, values, philosophy, etc., which are essentially different

107 Karenga, p. 31.
from those of white people." Some black nationalists disagreed with this emphasis on ‘culture’ over revolutionary struggle, but one might say that this campaign to develop consciousness within cultural frameworks occupied many black potential revolutionaries. Arguably it diverted them from the forms of political and social struggle. But in this respect, one might argue that Baraka’s movement into nationalism and cultural consciousness fitted Fanon’s revolutionary phase of moving and shaking the people, because—from a nationalist point of view—this was the most important arena of political struggle. Nationalists tended to believe that once the mind was free revolution would follow naturally.

It is only later that Baraka will see his error. Another issue that adds complexity is a point that Harris raises about rebel literary influences from the majority culture being overlooked in Fanon’s consideration of the assimilated intellectual. One might argue that Baraka was in a far better position to challenge white society because his poetic influences already involved an element of rebellion. This is important to note, yet one also needs to acknowledge how furious

108 Hall, Raymond, p. 1.
109 It is important to note that many different nationalists proposed many different responses to the oppressions of black people. The Nation of Islam, after the death of Malcolm X, called for a continuation of a policy of non-engagement with political and social struggle, preferring a spiritual revolution, and a faith in which Allah would deliver the black faithful from the devilry of the white man. The Black Panthers, on the other hand, proposed a Black Marxist revolutionary nationalism. For good insights into the Black Panther Party, David Hilliard’s This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard is essential reading. For a more critical discussion of the faults of Party leaders such as Hilliard, but more specifically Huey Newton, one might read Hugh Pearson’s The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and The Price of Black Power in America. I personally have many reservations about Pearson’s work, and find Hilliard’s text more balanced, informed and aware of the historical faults and achievements of a Panther party and leadership, most of whom were under the age of 25 at the height of their sway in the middle to late 1960s.

Some of the most profound theory on revolutionary struggle was written in prisons by African-Americans. George Jackson’s Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson is useful for it provides a voice for a whole part of the black revolutionary fighters ‘silenced’ by imprisonment for their political beliefs. Angela Davis’s If They Come in The Morning is perhaps the most comprehensive study of prison writings. This is one part of the struggle I am disappointed that I could not develop further; those members of colonised Americans imprisoned in jails, a double imprisonment within America. Jackson’s work, and the Panthers ideologies on revolution and struggle, have strong Marxist affinities, whereas the Cultural Nationalists of Baraka’s and Karenga’s persuasion disregarded such theory as white, and emphasised cultural consciousness over political revolution. Tragically, such differences were exploited and fanned by the F.B.I. in counterintelligence moves that sought to undermine and infiltrate the more threatening brand of Marxist revolution that the Black Panther Party represented. This led to the murder of two Panthers on U.C.C.A. campus in 1972 by members of Karenga’s organisation. One might see how different groups had different agendas over what constituted a black revolution for the black nation.

110 Harris, p. 31.
111 What I am suggesting is that Fanon’s model appears to suggest that a native intellectual might absorb what were avant-garde, rebellious and political techniques of Dada, Surrealism and symbolism, without taking on board the political significance of these techniques, a type of mimicry without real
Baraka’s rejection of his earlier work was. The leap from Village to Harlem and beyond is not an easy continuation, it is a kind of colonial struggle, filled with violence and disgust as the poet attempts to purge the past from his life.

One final point is necessary here. I have argued that the Village represented the ‘aesthetic’ face of mainstream. (I am, admittedly, talking about the Village in a symbolic way, as a shorthand for a bohemian, avant-garde milieu.) I have spoken of ‘opposite sides of the coin’. Black nationalism for Baraka now became the true opposite—in the belief that Beat culture had provided an illusory opposition. In this respect Baraka’s attempts to tear free and becomes truly black were always doomed to failure. He was always doomed to be in transition between being and becoming in this phase, because in many ways black cultural and political creation was still defined in reaction to white culture, as a direct Manichean struggle of opposites. One must acknowledge the great idealism, vision and passion of artists such as Baraka in bringing a black nationalist culture into being even as one sees the critical flaws—notably the pressure on black people to negate those parts of themselves that were ‘American’ and not ‘African’.

Keeping these issues in mind, let us turn to ‘Three Modes of History and Culture’ (3-4), which begins:

Chalk mark sex of the nation, on walls we drummers
know
as cathedrals. Cathedra, in a churning meat milk
(1-3)

One notes the highly energetic, fast moving rhythms and images of a poet searching and scouring in his being for language which will be a truthful account of the complex and often grotesque American situation. The allusions to graffiti and drumming in a surreal idiom indicate a poet who is becoming aware, he is focussing on street and urban black realities, signs that others will not see.

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substance that still colonises. This differentiates Baraka from this traditional colonial intellectual who appears to attempt to use these European influences, particularly in his more militant verse, to expand their artistic and political rebellion from their original European contexts into black ethnic rebellion. See Sollors, p. 93, on Jones’s ‘Black Dada Nihilismus’. Of the American influences of his contemporaries one might also suggest that these give him a point with which he can voice protest which will later expand into ethnic protest. In this sense, Jones is far better off than Fanon’s intellectual under classic colonialism. But I suggest that this development is no easy transition from Beat to Nationalist protest; it is fraught with tensions, violence, and is not easily accomplished. This move feels like a Fanonian splitting up and vomiting out.
The Surreal juxtapositions add a wild unpredictability to the images as if the poet is expanding his field of vision with the new energy source of black history as his fuel.

From heavy beginnings, Plantations, learning
America, as speech and common emptiness.
(7-9)

What fascinates a reader is the way that Baraka positions the whole of his being inside the imaginative, so that in expressing a connection with a history of slavery, racism, and cultural and social annihilation Baraka seems to become his people’s joys, sorrows and heartbeats, an act of empathy not dissimilar from Gadamer’s conception of the fusion of horizons. He is, by moving to the edges of the white symbolic through the surreal, coming closer to his people. Again one might compare this act of fusion, or empathy, with his people to the ‘disturbed’ native intellectual’s attempts desire to come back to the people with an alien tongue:

Old legends will be re-interpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.  

The poet expresses a deep desire (in the act of writing) to bring to the surface a submerged history that has previously been neglected by him. Black music again will be the link, providing a rhythm section for surreal improvisations which travel far through history:

Trains leaning north catching hellfire in windows, passing through

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112 Gadamer speaking of the hermeneutics of attempting to transpose one’s self into the past, as a historian must, says these words, on his idea of a fusion of horizons, between the horizon of the historian, and the horizon of the past, “When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which one historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition.” Gadamer, p. 304.

Whether one accepts Gadamer’s German idealist notions of a fusion of horizons is a moot point. What is important to note is how Baraka, in his projectivist searches into a black history, performs a similar fusion of horizons within himself, with his black history and his present relationship to it. Like Gadamer, the end of fusion is for the historian to walk away transformed by the insights that history has ‘spoken’ to him in the fusion, a dialogue. For Baraka, as a Pan-African native intellectual, this process becomes one in which the poet might walk away transformed into a deeper awareness of his black self consciousness. In this one might see hermeneutical and phenomenological similarities between Gadamer and Charles Olson’s projective verse, which brings objects out into the world in poetic acts of self-revelation.

113 Fanon, Wretched, p.179.
the first ignoble cities of Missouri, to Illinois, and the panting
Chicago
(11-14)

The improvisations spill out of the poet, obviously deep his study of African-
American history and culture at this period. One senses that these poems act as a
personal therapy journal.

Breach, bridge and reach where all talk is energy. And there’s
enough, for anything singular.
(21-22)

These are a people at the edges of the dominant culture, tuning in to messages on the
edge of the dial:

Entire
we arrive and set up shacks, hole cards, Western hearts at the edge
of saying. Thriving to balance the meanness of particular skies
Race
of madmen and giants.
(23-27)

The poem appears first to chart the moves from southern slavery to the north,
and then the spirituality of the people as it is channelled within new urban confines.
Shorter, more condensed lines capture the ‘sons’ formed in these city enclosures:

Brick songs. Shoe songs. Chants of open weariness. (28)

A rich texture of life is expressed in the ‘song’ of brick and shoe. A history of hard
work, deprivation and racism sings from these lines, just as an exuberance explodes in
these evocative images:

Knife wiggle early evenings of the wet mouth. Tongue
dance midnight, any season shakes our house. Don’t
tear my clothes! To doubt the balance of misery
ripping meat hug shuffle fuck.
(29-32)

The poet expresses a life filled with a sensuality that James Baldwin describes
beautifully (and carefully) as an African-American existential virtue:

The word “sensual” is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky
maiden’s or prapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler
and much less fanciful. To be sensual, think, is to respect and rejoice in the
force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the
effort of loving to the breaking of bread.114

114 Baldwin, The Fire, p.53.
This sensuality is alive in the explosions of verbal violence, as the writer attempts to write out of himself his own demons, in a dying colonial structure:

Burning coffins voted
and staggered through cold white streets listening
to Wilkie or Wallace or Dewey through the dead face
of Lincoln.
(34-37)

The hope of all middle class blacks was the promise of integration proclaimed by Lincoln’s emancipation of slaves act of 1865, and the continued rhetoric through which the black vote might be courted for white political gain. The poet himself is tired of such useless gestures:

Come from there, and belched it out. (37)

Next mode is an expression of the emotional and intellectual crossroads that the poet finds himself at after having ‘relived’ his people’s history. He is the native intellectual with fire in his soul:

I think about a time when I will be relaxed.
When flames and non-specific passion wear themselves away.
(38-42)

He prays for a time when, in a gentle and less turbulent frame of mind:

And my eyes and hands and mind can turn
and soften, and songs will be softer
and lightly weight the air.
(40-42)

The poet here is confessing the fire that is burning within him. Here the poet is not moving against white people, but newly situating himself in relation to a wider context. Some of this anger is probably a deeply felt sense of being an outsider to the larger black nation, whether as a middle-class black or an anti-middle-class Bohemian. What underpins his drive is a desire to return to ‘the people’, the classic case of an alienated intellectual looking for a ‘home’.

One notes a curious bricolage of black street talk and surreal imagery as the poet attempts to express a more polemical and political voice that will ‘speak from the ghetto’ in ‘The People Burning’ (pp.10-11). The poem begins:

They now gonna make us shut up. Ease thru windows in eight dollar hats sharpening their pencils on match books. List our errors and lies, shambling over our souls in the dark for the sake of unnatural advantage
(1-5)
The jumpy, syncopated rhythms are indicative of a poet in an agitated frame of mind. The images are acerbic in tone, fragments of the known world jumbled up as a nightmare. There is a white media thought police at work against black aspirations in the world.

They now gonna line you up, ask you about God. Nail your answers on the wall, for the bowling alley owners to decide
(6-8)

The surreal terror awakened here (occasionally reminiscent of Bob Dylan’s later song lyrics) is, in the poet’s mind, more real than the ‘surface’ of realism associated with the everyday world. But for the black people the world is often nightmare. There is a savage humour at work in these visions of the thought police disguised as nature:

They now gonna pretend they flowers. Snake stalked large named vegetables, who have, if nothing else, the title: World’s Vilest Living Things
(8-10)

It is this sense of a poet in an ironic no-man’s land that fuels his cultural criticisms of the south in:

The Dusty Hearts of Texas, whose most honest world is the long look into darkness, sensing the glittering affront of reason or faith or learning.
(11-13)

At times the poem appears to be situated in an unstable way between the use of black language to express the polemic in colloquial terms, and other cultural rhetorics used ironically.

Preferring fake tiger smells rubbed on the balls, and clothes the peasants of no country on earth would ever be vulgar enough to wear
(13-16)

One senses a poet still removed from his people’s life, even as he tries to speak for them. What the poet cannot do is return to a type of Bohemian role-playing of identities:

Become an Italian or Jew. Forget the hatred of natural insolence. The teetering sense of right, as balance, each natural man must have.
(17-19)
The poet’s notions of ethnic identity here seem laden with Bohemian prejudices. In a sense he catches only the outer garments of the people he criticises, as he performs a shallow, intellectual protest:

Become a Jew, and join the union
forget about Russia or any radicalism past a hooked grin.
Become an Italian quietest in some thin veneer of reasonable
gain
(19-22)

In long breath lines he attempts to develop a picture of how each group fails to come to terms with America’s racism and white hegemonies of power. Whilst one might question these shallow stereotypes of race and performed identity, his cultural criticisms are sometimes shrew. He is contemptuous of the musician who works merely as paid entertainer, never as social critic or prophet:

Sing at Radio City, but never rage at the chosen
for they have given you the keys to their hearts. Made you
the Fridays and Saturdays of the regime, clothed you in promise
and utility
(25-28)

These poems have more political implications than the earlier Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note. The above quote makes one think of Willie Best, but more critically of Sammy Davis junior, who could perform in Las Vegas to the adulation of white audiences, but for years could not sleep at any of the hotels he played in, or of other Jewish singers afraid to offend the ultra-orthodox (‘the chosen’).

The poet knows America’s hypocrisy on racial issues:

For the Reconstruction, for the march into any anonymous America stretches beyond the hills of newsprint, and dishonorable intention.
(30-31)

Nor will he return to his old life, to the ‘generation’ he has left:

Lean on your silence, breathing
the dark. Forget your whole life, pop your fingers in a cloud room,
hopped-up with doctor for the cowards of a recent generation.
(44-46)

Even these observations are wrapped in a self-absorbed language, still exploring his own subjectivity even as tries to to write it out of himself. But now the truth lies beyond the self in action:

It is choice, now, and
the weight is specific and personal. It is not an emotional decision
(47-48)
The poet is seems to be speaking more directly here than he does elsewhere in the poem, or in *The Dead Lecturer*.

In ‘Sabotage’ the poet is freer to examine his relationship to the more controversial and topical issues. The poem ‘Letter To Elijah Muhammad’ (p. 12) begins:

> When your talking is murdered, and only very old women
> will think to give you flowers. When history is the homework
> that presses you, silently at your dying, in your blood
> some briefer hatred drags long shank claws, what will it be like
> to be more than that? What will it be to adore the nature
> of your killers affliction?
> (1-6)

The poet explores his ambivalence to the Nation of Islam’s leader, the prophet Elijah Muhammad. The hatred within the prophet’s ideology—later alleged to have been responsible for the murder of Malcolm X—is imagined here to be turned against him by the white ‘makers’ of history, a knife into the chest which Muhammad perversely loves, as a kind of confirmation. This is a fascinating poem in relation to the fact that later Baraka will himself become a black racist preaching of the devilry of the white man, in Islamic influenced racism. Here it is the idea summed up in Raymond Hall’s description of the Nation of Islam eschatology that Baraka appears to question:

> But they [white people] are also destined to lose their control because they cannot live peacefully—even among themselves. Their blue eyes and their “pale white skin” do not have the natural ingredients to foster love, friendship, and true harmony.\(^{115}\)

The poet goes on to say:

> In whatever epoch of new understanding
> New faiths new religious zeal. The lone sayer is knowing exactly
> how far to trust what is real.
> (7-9)

He feels little comfort in his search for some ‘black collective identity into which he might merge:

> I am tired already
> (9-10)

Baraka surprises the reader when he voices in a quiet, sad tone his reservations about the most openly militant groups of black nationalists. There is a sense of troubled passivity in these meditations, an outsider’s view. This is an important poem in the context of this argument because it shows that, for all his bravado and
revolutionary talk, there still exists a quiet, troubled voice that has not yet found a place in the world between the old values and the new militancy that he is coming into. Again, one can understand this as evidence of the struggle of any ‘colonised’ intellectual to come to some authentic position in their lives, amongst conflicting political loyalties. The speaker is lost in grey between the black and the white worlds.

One of the more brilliant and experimental ventures into the imaginary, which transcends the greyness, is ‘Kenyatta Listening To Mozart’ (p.14). The poem begins:

on the back trails, in sun glasses
and warm air blows cocaine from city
to river, and through the brains of
American poets in San Francisco. (1-4)

The humorous improvisation from the Western back trail to the drugged out visions of the West will lead us eventually to somewhere new. A third world cowboy strides into this world of the surreal:

Spats brush through
undergrowths of fiction.
(6-7)

Wonderful images fly by in rhythmic ‘wingbeats’:

Mathematics
bird, undressed and in sympathy with absolute
stillness, and the neutrality of water.
(7-9)

The poet seems to be describing Mozart’s music—supposedly Western vulture at its most ideal—from a new (outsider’s) perspective. The poet evokes a mythical African consciousness which works to a different dynamic in the ways that it sees and hears:

Light to light,
the weighted circumstance prowls like animals in the bush.
A zoo of consciousness,
cries and prowlings
anywhere. (10-15)

The focus seems to have shifted from Mozart to the masses. The poet enters the people’s consciousness as he moves around this world of

Stillness,
motion,
that swim
exchanging
in-
formation. (15-21)

\(^{115}\) Hall, Raymond, p. 100.
This is no drug vision. The movements of the masses are as shapely as the melodies of Mozart.

The poet is both prophet and versifier, his words fly like birds in formation, and the act of writing becomes an almost esoteric act of awakening the mind to the aesthetics of social change. (Kenyatta was to become the first black President of Kenya in 1964.)

Choice and style
and are beautiful categories
(22-26)

Jones’s own words from 1964 describe this developing aesthetic:

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." ¹¹⁶

The poet may be said to be attempting to decolonise his mind, to find that space within the imagination where a new black country can be forged—and so recreate himself as an ideal image of black manhood, a Kenya of the soul.

Still, he is wryly satirical of such pretensions:

if you go
for that
(27-28)

The poet is still hung up on identity conflicts, and a deep sense of guilt, even as he attempts to move beyond them. The poem ‘Hegel’ (pp. 23-4) is a good example of this continuous struggle between ‘opposites’:

Cut out
the insides
where eyes
bungle their silence and trains suffer
to be painted
by memory.
(1-6)

This poem resonates strongly with ‘Willie Best’ and ‘An Agony As Now’.

Nevertheless, we do not feel that the poet is operating under the gaze of a white audience. He is freer to explore his inner conflicts and there is less sense of claustrophobia. He seems here to be the Hegelian black ‘self’ attempting to tear out the white parts of his ‘otherness’ in order to come into a sense of wholeness:

¹¹⁶ Jones, Home, p. 213.
This is a turning. As a man
turns. Hardened or reconceived
sometimes the way we wish our lives
would be. “Let me do this
again,
another way.” (7-12)

The poet is also free to criticise the colonising force of a culture (including its poetry) which separates people from a true sense of community, from reality, and from one another:

Pushed to the wall
we fall away from each other
in this heresy. Dispute each other’s
lives as history (13-16)

There is an elegant simplicity of language in this verse, almost a subconscious reverie as the poet elaborates on the effects of such a culture:

Or the common speech
of disaster, lacking a face or name, we give it
ours. And are destroyed by the very virtues
of our ignorance (16-19)

There is a sudden terror in the lines:

I am trying to understand
the nightmare of economics. On the phone
through the mails I am afraid. I scream
for help. (26-29)

The poet seeks an Hegelian other, a way out of his completeness:

I scream
for help. And none comes, has ever
come. No single redeeming hand
has ever been offered, (29-32)

Normally for Jones, such lines would be distanced by an element of complex irony. But the confessionism seems this time to be more direct. One is reminded of Cornaell West’s remarks:

The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. . . . In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and it is neither oppression nor exploitation but the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning.\textsuperscript{117}

Here the poet wants to re-make his relation with a world where even language is imbued with an alien culture:

\textsuperscript{117} qtd. in Gaines, p. 32.
The poet seeks the biblical word made flesh that will act upon and transform the world. If Hegel’s dialectic is essentially a redemption of two warring opposites in a fusion of becoming, Baraka pleads for a way forwards:

Either I am wrong
or "he" is wrong. All right
I am wrong, but give me someone
to talk to

(40-43)

With occasional ironies (‘right/wrong’) but mostly an unprecedented directness, the poet begs for some voice to articulate a question, and to resist his sense of alienation and ‘otherness’.

What is striking is how moods of self doubt and inadequacy can accompany a deep sense of conviction and purpose when the poet attempts to ‘move and shake the people’. In poems such as ‘Leadbelly Gives An Autograph’ (pp. 25-6), he takes upon himself the role of historian, musician, or griot. He becomes Leadbelly, the great blues singer, singing the people’s blues in a changed and more militant age. The poem begins:

Pat your foot
and turn
the corner.

(1-3)

To ‘pat one’s foot’ is to pass a turn in the African-American verbal game of the streets, the dozens. Here we seem to be asked to ‘turn the corner’ into a new improvisation of the old, emphasising revolutionary action:

Nat Turner, dying wood
of the church.

(3-4)

Nat Turner is fuel for the black nation because he burned brightly, killing over fifty of his white slave owner oppressors in Tennessee.118 His example poet can re-ignite old embers of passion and fury.

It is from this perspective, of trying to awaken the people that the poet re-examines the black nation:

Our lot
is vacant. Bring the twisted myth
of speech. The boards brown and falling
away. The metal bannisters cheap
and rattly.

(4-8)

118 See inside Kearns, Francis E.; Nat Turner “The Confessions”, pp. 213-225. In the racist 1960s such ‘distinguished’ journalism would surely have won Gray a Pulitzer prize. One still senses Turner’s spirit moving in the article under the journalist Gray’s white power ideology.
One notes projectivist habits shaping each improvisation; one notes how deeply this poem works by suggestiveness and implication, marrying black oral and verbal techniques (the blues and the dozens) with an aesthetic shaped in other contexts. That is, the poet is experimenting with both black and white 'ways of saying' as he performs his blues.

The phrase the 'twisted myth of speech' is particularly suggestive. James Baldwin, as a young Harlem Christian minister, recalls in *The Fire Next Time*:

> I was even lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before. And the blood of the 'lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born. Therefore, when I faced a congregation, it began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse, not to tell them to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.\(^{119}\)

Black oratory has flourished in church settings. What had it done to change the nations condition? Certainly there were the gains won by Dr. King through peaceful sit-ins, boycotts and attempts at integration into American society. But the blues, the secular opposite of this religious oratory, spoke still of emptiness and decay. Whether right or wrong,\(^{120}\) Baraka’s scepticism of non-violence and integration through peaceful means seems echoed in poems such as ‘Rhythm & Blues’.

We thought

> it possible to enter
> the way of the strongest.

> But it is right that the world’s ills
> erupt as our own. Right that we take
> our own specific look into the shapely
> blood of the heart.\(^ {8-14}\)

Baraka probes his field of awareness to find an adequate language to articulate these social as well as personal concerns. One notes in these lines a poet internalising the 'world' into his own 'heart', linking the communal struggle with his own. Yet this is still a surreal fantastical journey into the subconscious:

Looking thru trees

> the wicker statues blowing softly against
> the dusk\(^{15-17}\)

\(^{119}\) Baldwin, *The Fire*, p. 49.

\(^{120}\) See Tom Skinner’s *Black and Free* for an alternative Christian view of black oppression, by a former Harlem gang leader, who saw 'revolutionary' Christianity as reality transforming. For emerging nationalists such as Baraka, Christianity did not offer a pragmatic solution to race problems that allowed black people a dignity, to stand. A dignity not just in the next world but in this one.
There is a sense of history here, of voodoo dolls, that hints at a magical spirituality. The poet improvises this scene into one suggesting a new earth under a new sky, a new blues of the soul.

Looking thru dusk
thru dark-
ness. A clearing of stars
and half-soft mud.

The possibilities of music. First
that it does exist. And that we do,
in that scripture of rhythms. (18-24)

Jazz as an alternative to the official 'scripture', as real as the landscape from which it came:

The earth,
I mean the soil as melody. The fit you need
the throes. (24-26)

In these 'chord changes' of social history and political struggle one needs

To pick it up and cut
away what does not singularly express. (26-27)

One feels, even in such extraordinarily evocative verse, a poet still writing 'white' in his need to analyse and feel each impression in the manner of (say) Duncan. The poetry moves in the surreal, the magical, attempting to wed together different traditions in a way that is unlikely yet to speak to a black audience in a discourse that they would call their own—certainly in the case of a 'street' audience.

But there is a new kind of self-honesty, free (for better or worse) of the complex ironies of the past. A new realisation of his place in the flow of African-American history allows him to sing his own family blues:

The possibilities of statement. I am saying, now,
what my father could not remember
to say. What my grandfather
was killed
for believing. (32-36)

In a more familiar mode of satire—'black humour'—he describes his oppressors as the 'savages' and dares them to line up their supposed ideals:

Pay me off savages
Build me an equitable human assertion. (37-38)

But white culture needs black people for its energies:
But I provide the shock, the beasts
and myths

The City’s rise! (40-42)

The poet imagines a new world rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of black American history:

(and what is history, then? An old deaf lady burned to death in South Carolina (43-45)

'Sabotage' (1961-65) raises many complexities around the issues concerning a native intellectual. The poet appears to be fighting on many fronts. But by the end of that collection the poet can say, as he does in 'The Bronze Buckaroo' (p. 44),

Half way up the hill the mutineers stand and seek their comrades out
I am half way up, and standing. (20-21)

'Target Study', written from 1963-5, is a collection indicative of a considerable development in the poet’s desire to come closer to 'original blackness', even if problems of identity remain. The poem ‘Numbers, Letters’ (p. 47) opens:

If you’re not home, where are you? Where’d you go? What were you doing when gone? When you come back, better make it good. (1-4)

The poet seems to question himself, as though expressing his own fault in not living amongst the people of Harlem. His lines fill with street slang as he defines himself anew:

what were you doing down there, freakin’ off with white women, hanging out with Queens, (5-7)

The breath line is attuning itself to the sounds and inflections, the rhythms and internal rhymes of the black vernacular as the poet attempts to write his way home.

There is a macho streak in his ridicule of those who are ‘less than men’ (queens) in a borough (Queens) filled with ‘Crow Janes’. White women practice bad medicine.121 The poet is attempting to build himself an idealised, chauvinistic black

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121 Many black critics saw one of the fundamental psychological colonial effects on black men as a colonised people as a continued, and in a nationalist context, perverse attraction to white women. This might be seen as another development of the wider issue of sexism as it developed under cultural nationalism. But in another way, it is righteous, because to love white women, to make them one’s partner, is in a way to hate yourself, and your own black women. Although it would be called chauvinistic and racist today, I see this as a continued problem in all colonial nations including
masculine identity. The virtues of toughness, commitment and street savvy are seen as essential to overcome the poet's own sense of inadequacy and timidity, and bring him to the people. To buy into a language is to buy into a culture, into its energies but also its sexism and homophobia. The poet attempts to find language to express this new 'uptown' sensibility:

say it straight to be understood straight, put it flat and real
in the street where the sun comes

(7-9)

It is language that lacks aesthetic artifice complexity and artifice for their own sake, but it is complex in other ways—alive to the rhythms and colours of a people in motion:

Say what you mean, dig
it out put it down, and be strong
about it.

(11-13)

But still this tough stance seems a mask for the alienated intellectual, whose split consciousness becomes painfully revealed in:

I can't say who I am
unless you agree I'm real

(14-15)

and:

I can't be anything I'm not
Except these words pretend
to life not yet explained

(16-18)

Here he admits his 'yellow imperfection', his lack of substance as a revolutionary black man. Where the split in The Dead Lecturer is explored in terms of a desire to become militant from a life of inaction, this split involves his belief that he still falls well short of being a revolutionary figure. Confession is another mode of apology so that he can grow and develop. He is still a poet beginning to revel in a deeper immersion in blackness, 'blackening out' the white parts of his spirit:

I'm Everett LeRoi Jones, 30yrs old.
A black nigger in the universe. A long breath singer
would be dancer, strong from years of fantasy
and study.

(29-32)

Aotearoa—white women are still the ideal/idyll/idol of colonised brothers' minds. For nationalist readings of this issue see Jones 'American Sexual Reference: Black Male' in Home, pp. 216-33, and Cleavers 'The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs' in Soul on Ice, pp. 155-75. This appears to follow Malcolm X's philosophies on racial inter-marriage which are sprinkled through his autobiography. Even with their sexist and homophobic biases, one still sees these critics wrestling with colonial problems—to be attracted to white women is to be colonised by an image forced upon you by the white symbolic that denies the beauty of the female Polynesian face. In spite of this idealists may say that love is colour blind.
Again one sees a combination of guilt and confidence. The longer lines are filled with a buoyant idealism that places the black poet at the centre of the ‘universe’. Fanon describes this in *Black Skins, White Masks*, the refuge that the Negritude movement provided for thirsty souls:

Eyah! The tom-tom chatters out the cosmic message. Only the Negro has the capacity to convey it, to decipher its meaning, its import. Astride the world, I stare into the shoulders of the world as the celebrant stares at the mid point between the eyes of the sacrificial victim.122

Baraka has the same hunger to dissolve inside the black community, and to become a spokesperson for them:

My heart is large as my mind
this is a messenger calling over here, open your eyes
and your ears and your souls;

(41-43)

There are still tensions which suggest that in ways his reapproachment with the people and their language of the streets is contrived. What is still a projectivist breath line shapes the black vernacular. But at other moments a more lyrical, almost cosmic sensibility emerges that is sourced in a belief in the essential spirituality of the black man in a racist society. The poet confesses, signifies, and then instructs the people, as though undergoing an American equivalent of Fanon’s journey into the Negritude movement.

Baraka appears to hold to the same principles of an essential reservoir of black American feeling in ‘Young Soul’ (p. 49):

First feel, then feel, then
read, or read, then feel;

(1-2)

The jazz rhythms push the reader on in short abrupt phrases whose emphasis on the ‘e’ sound begin to have an unconscious as well as a conscious effect.

The poet becomes an instructor (to himself as well as others). His next lines turn back to the pressures of the social context:

then
fall, or stand where you
already are.

(2-4)

The poet asks, in these short, punchy breath lines, to meditate on the divisions between all black people, and within each black person:

Think
of your self, and the other

---

Which is quickly improvised into concerns surrounding one's own family and the wider black family:

think
of your parents, your mothers
and sisters, your beatstick
father.

The poet calls for a new masculine, black responsibility to be shouldered, suggesting that black men should carry the weight of their people's sorrow, family blues and historical misery. Emotion drawn from this deep reservoir of feeling will provide the creative chaos from which an authentic, and black, conscious self might be constructed. One could ask whether this is Baraka's own personal identity crisis being writ large or is it the nation's identity crisis? I think it is a good mixture of both, again, a native intellectual's blues inside the wider struggle.

One notes the brilliant uses of rhythm and phrasing which slow down or speed up the reading of the lines, as if the poet's ability to condense his thought, and shape his rhythms, learnt from his Beat days is finding new outlet in his nationalist verse. It is through feeling that healing is to be achieved:

Make some muscle
in your head, but
use the muscle
in yr heart.

An old reader may find this poetry simplistic and didactic; but he should be aware of the intense pressure under which it is taking shape, and of its new rhythmic subtleties. The poet is himself still struggling to realise his own advice. He, like the nation, has yet to come fully into existence.

The process is an excavation of a deeper African self beyond the ugliness that the American self is enmeshed within. One can see how Malcolm X's alienated call to look at Africa as one's home might attract an intellectual like Baraka. But one may

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123 See Neal, 'Some Reflections', pp. 12-5. Art is critical in its nommo, its magical qualities to awaken and free an ancient African self. Put into a decolonising struggle, this theory takes on dynamic, activist strains.
also wonder if this is not a black bourgeois intellectualisation of an artist's attempts to find a new plenitude.

He says in 'Confirmation' (p. 50):

There is no struggle to speak if you want to.
There is no slowness or stupidity we must bear.
There is no protection! There is no grace! There are all those things they talked about... but different!
Jesus Christ, how different! How much bullshit did they put into our way, (6-11)

Like 'Young Soul' and 'Numbers, Letters' suggests that the poet has not yet really come to grips with the community's struggles, in his use of the words 'we' or 'our'. What he is doing is important in that he is attempting to find a place from which to establish a space for African-Americans beyond the white symbolic. But he is still focusing on the subjective and the imaginary. The type of freedom he speaks of in 'Confirmation' as something one discovers through thought contrasts with lives framed inside a harsh ghetto environment, indelibly ingrained with suffering. This freedom is a petit-bourgeois existential 'feeling' of being free that does not solve material problems of poverty or power. In this sense, even here, Baraka can be linked with the native intellectual who grabs only the 'outer garments' of the people. This is harsh criticism for his brave attempt to find and build a cultural identity inside a black nation, particularly as Baraka went to live amongst the people of Harlem in 1965. But it can be backed by Fanon's realisation that the cultural nationalist phase is only a transitional phase beyond which more revolutionary forms of struggle are possible. Baraka, inside the struggle, is not yet gifted with Fanon's foresight. Even so, one might recognise the enormous service that Baraka's poetry provided to a black population starved of positive images of themselves. This makes this poetry (even if one acknowledges its failures) ground breaking. Baraka's personal drive added much to the Black arts upsurge of the 1960s, and was a key influence on younger black militant writers such as Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, and many others.

A two way process is visible again of the poet in transition these lines:

Whatever you've given me, whiteface glass
to look through, to find another there, another
what motherfucker? (1-3)

124 Robert Solomon asks the provocative question in his Existentialism, 'How much does Camus's absurd hero and the existential attitude require the routine and leisure of the bourgeoisie?' pp. xiv. Baraka's poetry continues at this point to be infused with a type of bohemian individualism.
A true black voice has been suppressed by:

the law of some dingaling god, cold
as ice cucumbers, for the shouters and the wiggles

(4-5)

Christianity may be strong in the ghetto, but it remains a white deceit. The surreal images carry a sense of resentment at the feeling that he should owe the white community anything; and in a complex sense he has yet to work out his relationship with the black community.

I don’t love you. Who is to say what that will mean. (10)

Yet, whatever the complexities, a move uptown is seen as a move to a new spiritual freedom:

I don’t
love you, expressed the train, moves, and uptown days later
we look up and breathe much easier

(10-12)

Although his need to fire a parting shot betrays the fact that he is more fixed to the old world than he might consciously want to admit:

I don’t love you. (13)

One of the ways that the poet seeks to come into a black self is through race anger, as one takes responsibility for a history of anguish and horror. In the poem ‘Dada Zodji’ (p.61) the poet talks of the distortions of history that seek to negate the dead, tortured, raped millions lost in the middle passage from Africa to the new world:

“Millions killed themselves,”
in the dark. (13-14)

The absence after ‘themselves’, before the word ‘in’ is filled with the agonies of the silenced ancestors. The poet is trying to lift their scream and accusations out of the historical darkness. This attempt to create a lava flow of anger is an attempt to build a revolutionary consciousness, for one may see clearly that one has been dehumanised and animalised, in understanding the savage behaviour of one’s coloniser. Malcolm X recalls,

I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery’s total horror. It made such an impact upon me that it later became one of my favorite subjects when I became a minister of M. Muhammed’s. The world’s most monstrous crime, the sin and the blood on the white man’s hands, are almost impossible to believe.”25

Baraka appears similarly galvanised by such atrocities. A black self can be constructed out of that fragment of the middle passage that each Black American carries in their
split-consciousness. This theme is improvised into a surreal modern day context that illustrates the continuation of a cycle of desperation and despair in modern day America.

Jumping
off buildings and boats
complex geography of motives (14-16)

What is valuable here is that the native intellectual is at exactly the right distance from the black people and the 'mother country' to articulate these concerns, for he is alienated from both black people and white liberals. He is also educated and can use the white coloniser's tools of literacy. And he is driven by a disenchanted bourgeois idealistic dream to merge with the black masses—so that he will give birth to extraordinary exhortation poetry, colouring the nation's identity crisis with his own blues. It is little wonder that other theorists will be drawn to this artist if he/she is brilliant enough. Ron Karenga will later formulate a 'Theory of the Black Aesthetic' that comes from much of Baraka's poetry, among other influences. He will say:

Black art, irregardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics which make it revolutionary. In brief it must be functional, collective and committing. . .
So what then is the use of art, Black art? Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution. . .
The second characteristic of Black art is that it must be collective. In a word, it must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life. . .
The final thing that is characteristic of Black art is that it must be committing. It must commit us to revolution and change. It must commit us to a future that is ours. [Italics in the original]

A key phrase here is 'in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life.'

Karenga's theory, built out of his conception of cultural nationalism, rests as much on Baraka's literary brilliance as it does on Karenga's analytical skills. Another great black theorist, poet and activist, Larry Neal, will similarly draw out principles for a rough sketch of the Black Aesthetic. Along with Baraka's cultural nationalist

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125 Little, pp. 250-1.
126 See Neal, 'Some Reflections'. One might see Neal marrying black aesthetic concerns with the more black holistic concerns with race pain, black spirituality, and emerging nationhood. I have applied much of his analysis to Baraka's work, an obvious influence on Neal's own theory.
128 Karenga, pp. 32-36.
129 Much of this theory comes after the 'practice' of Baraka's poetry. But this should not denigrate these brilliant theorists' achievements. And Larry Neal was a fine activist, poet, and political thinker in his own right, as Karenga was a theorist and Maulana to a lesser degree. See Larry Neal's 'Some Reflections On The Black Aesthetic' (1970), pp.12-15, in The Black Aesthetic, Gayle (ed.), and in the same work Neal's 'The Black Arts Movement' (1968) pp. 257-74, an important theoretical treatise.
poetry, such writing is an attempt to tap into and release a wellspring of black anger. Out of this energy, the new revolutionary self can ‘will’ a new world into being by the force of its personality. In this transitional work, ‘Sabotage’, the development of a black aesthetic can be seen growing. This is another way in which the intellectual is fighting the colonial battle, by positing an alternative set of values, myths and images to the purely political and economic dimensions of the Black Power struggle.

A reader still senses a poet who is a kind of outside observer. In ‘Return of the Native’ (p. 108) he will say:

Harlem is vicious
modernism. Bang Clash.
Vicious the way its made

Sound and image work together to illustrate a poet in awe of his new surroundings, this site of ‘crazy’ juxtappositions of old and new buildings crowded together in a violent jumble. He is an outsider in this capital city of black America even as he attempts to become its voice.

Can you stand such beauty?
So violent and transforming.

As the poet absorbs the scene into his breath line the feeling that the poet is somehow irrevocably individuated by his education and poetic training from the masses of black people becomes clear.

The trees blink, naked, being
so few. The women stare
and are in love with them
selves.

The women are seen as narcissistic. There is no Hegelian other reflecting back a feeling of community, or even recognition of the poet.

Summer heat maddens the inhabitants of this concrete jungle, a factor in the riots of 1964 in Harlem and other cities:

The sky sits awake
over us. Screaming
at us. No rain
Sun, hot cleansing sun
drives us under it.

A reader might discern an attempted sublimation of anxieties that this scene arouses in the poet, when he says:

centrally addressed to the genre of drama in the Black Arts Movement, its goals, shining stars, and most importantly, its alignment to the wider Black Power struggle—the aesthetic part of that wider conflict.
The place, and place
mean of
black people, Their heavy Egypt.
(Weird world!) Their minds mine
the black hope mine. (14-18)

To return home, then, is more difficult and fraught with anxieties than the poet himself would like to admit. Which, of course, makes his conceptions of the nation somewhat tinged by a petit-bourgeois idealism, removed ever so much from the grim beauty of the people that the poet struggles to 'stand' and adjust to.

Even the poet's valorisation of black rioters in the final part of the poem 'Three Movements and a Coda', indicates the distance between the intellectual and the people:

Came running out of the drugstore window with
an electric alarm clock, and then dropped the motherfucker
and broke it. Go get something else. Take everything in there. (27-29)

The poet goes on to say:

These are the words of lovers of dancers, of dynamite singers
these are the songs if you have the music. (33-36)

Having participated in the Queen Street riots in Auckland a number of years ago (minor and infantile in comparison to the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s) I understand the poet’s adrenaline, the sense that one is free to do anything, say anything, and be anything one wishes to be, as shops get smashed, police squads charge and helicopters circle the madness. Surely, one does dance in the street at such times. But the problem is that unplanned spontaneous violence does not change the conditions of oppression; what such violence does is ruin one’s own cityscape, damage one’s own resources, and add further tension to one’s own living environment.²

It is significant that later Baraka would help prevent riots breaking out in Newark, 1968, after the assassination of Dr. King led to protest across many black sections of American cities. Baraka came to moderate his view that such 'acts' constitute manly behaviour, and that out of such manly acts a black revolutionary violence might be born. For an oppressed and caged people one can understand this logic, but one also sees here an intellectual failing to recognise that revolutions come

² Sollors, p. 202, makes this point.
about through work and conscious struggle, not through anarchist poetic grandstanding.

By 1965, the poet will have moved to Harlem on the news of the death of Malcolm X. He will heed the dictates of Malcolm’s Organisation of Afro-American Unity (O.A.A.U.):

Our cultural revolution must be the means of bringing us closer to our African brothers and sisters. It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. Afro-Americans will be free to create only when they depend on the Afro-American community. . . . We must work toward the establishment of a cultural center in Harlem. . . . This cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves. . . . Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past. 131

It is perhaps here that one can see Amiri Baraka connect more deeply with the people and take a more serious cultural nationalist position. Baraka’s theoretical understanding of black nationalism and culture is made clear in his ‘The Legacy of Malcolm X and the Coming of the Black Nation’:

But the whole importance of this insistence on land is just now beginning to be understood. Malcolm said many times that when you speak about revolution you’re talking about land—changing the ownership or userhip of some specific land which you think is yours. But any talk of Nationalism must also take this concept of land and its primary importance into consideration because, finally, any Nationalism which is not intent on restoring or securing autonomous space for a people, i.e., a nation, is at the very least shortsighted. 132

Following Malcolm’s O.A.A.U. objectives—to build political links through an African-American national consciousness—what Baraka asks African-Americans colonised inside America is to claim their territory:

It is not abstract. Look down! Pick up the earth, or jab your fingernails into the concrete. It is real and it is yours, if you want it. But to want it, as our own, is the present direction. To want what we are and where we are, but rearrange by our own consciousness. . . . So that now we must find the flesh of our spiritual creation. We must be conscious. And to be conscious is to be cultured, possessed in specific virtues and genius. 133

One might note how Malcolm X’s concept of revolutionary action differs from Baraka’s more cultural formulation. 134 Here, revolution comes through making

131 X, Malcolm, ‘Organization Of Afro-American Unity: A Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives’ in Clarke, John Henrik, p341. This is a complex document that illustrates Malcolm’s changing ideologies, and a new internationalist stance.
133 Ibid., p. 244.
134 To be fair to Baraka, it could be argued many nationalists took different aspects of Malcolm’s sometimes confusing ideologies as the most critical parts towards building a black nation. This is a means by which we might understand the sectarian struggles between different nationalist groups.
physical upon the earth black consciousness as it exists in the spirits and minds of the ‘cultured’. It is a form of idealism that suggests that all things are born of—and may be transformed by—ideas. It is essentialist in that it assumes that the nation exists, and needs to engage in cultural consciousness in order to be fully unified and conscious.

Rather than outline some criticisms of this form of nationalism, I will attempt to raise a few issues as they arise in the poems themselves. For a native intellectual looking to become one with his ‘blacker’ people, one might expect a poetry of fervour, emphasising physical exertion and labour in the liberation struggle to free black people’s minds. But here one notes the cultural worker attempting to find wholeness in a blackness not yet fully revealed, struggling to emerge from the split-consciousness.

The poem ‘Black Art’ (pp. 116-7), the second poem of Black Art (1965-6) begins:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. (1-3)

Harris has noted how the breath line is still Olsonian, striving to be not merely ‘objectivist’ (in Olson’s sense) but real equipment for living in a very literal sense. One witnesses a great vigour, a kind of macho-ness of image and effect:

Fuck poems
are they useful, wd they shoot
come at you, love what you are, (5-7)

The first line can be read as a rejection of non-revolutionary poems or as the idea that as potent as the sex drive. This is a poetry urgent with need.

We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire. (9-12)

Jagged rhythms, sounds and images pound the senses. Launched on this train of thought—poetry as weapon, the famous slogan on Woody Guthrie’s guitar, ‘This weapon kills fascists’—the poet becomes increasingly provocative:

Possibly the main bone of contention between the Panthers and Baraka and Karenga was what was to be emphasised more: culture to bring forth consciousness, or action of revolutionary nature that created a revolutionary consciousness through acts of self-definition. Cultural nationalists called the Panthers’ doctrine ‘white’ because of their use of Marx and Engels with Malcolm X’s viewpoints, whilst the Black Panthers called the cultural nationalists ‘Pork chop nationalists’ not living in reality, and not working to change material hardships.

Harris, p. 75.
or dagger poems in the sling bellies
of the owner-jews

(14-15)

or,

Black poems to
smear on girdlemanna mulatto bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck
between 'lizabethan taylors' shoes. Stinking
Whores!

(15-19)

The poet, as he hurls himself at black people and at Jewish landlords and shop-owners in Harlem, strikes out left and right, in a way that some readers would regard as reverse racism. The poet's defence would presumably be that obviously creating a cartoon reality. There are precedents such as the third section of Kenneth Koch's playful poem 'Fresh Air', where poetry goes out and 'strangles' various 'bad poets'.

One feels that Jones is in new territory, testing his new boundaries, being deliberately provocative and offensive. This poem raises the same sort of problems as 'gangsta rap' in our time (which is also based on the idiom of the streets).

wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.

(21-23)

The lines have a comic exaggeration but also remind us that Irish policemen have been brutal enforcers of the white power structure.

Another negro leader
on the steps of the whitehouse one
kneeling between the sheriff's thighs
negotiating coolly for his people.

(33-36)

Poems are needed to spray 'agent orange' on all imperialists, a particularly insightful given America's build-up in Vietnam during 1965:

Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets
Clean out the world for virtue and love.

(40-41)

The shift to black nationalist is accompanied in this poem by a vomiting up of the old world. In contrast, the people are endowed with 'magic':

Let black people understand
that they are the lovers and the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors are poems & poets &
all the loneliness here in the world

(45-49)

There is a John Coltrane influenced breath line here, cascading image and sound down and through the line in a relentless 'blowing' out of the consciousness of the people, moving them into higher realms of. This must be seen as a considerable rupture of the
breath line as it was controlled by the Olson aesthetic. Now the line is infused with a black ‘breathe’ of magic. The whole world becomes the arena of change:

Let the world be a Black Poem  
And let All Black People Speak This Poem  
Silently  
or LOUD (52-55)

If one looks for comparisons in Fanon, one might think of these lines from *Black Skins White Masks*:

So here we have the Negro rehabilitated, “standing before the bar,” ruling the world with his intuition, the Negro recognized, set on his feet again, sought after, taken up, and he is a Negro—no, he is not a Negro but the Negro, exciting the fecund antennae of the world, placed in the foreground of the world, raining his poetic power on the world, “open to all the breaths of the world.”

The colonial intellectual—confined and shaped within the confines of a colonising culture—demands, in a liberation struggle, absolute space. Where there is perhaps a contradiction is that in some regards the nation he conceives of still has narrow limits.

‘Poem for Halfwhite College Students’ (p. 120) begins:

> Who are you, listening to me, who are you  
> listening to yourself? Are you white or  
> black, or does that have anything to do  
> with it? (1-4)

In these fast moving, phrase weighted lines, the poet implies that black consciousness is found and practised by excluding the ‘white’ parts of oneself. The personal, abrupt mode of questioning his students’ consciousness illustrates how the black nation that seeks a whole universe to express itself is always dogged by the struggle to escape the pale shadow of a former whiteness. For a native intellectual, one might see why such standards of appropriate levels of black consciousness are so necessary, for they help the intellectual forget his own past. And they are seen as providing a way into the nation for black people, a ‘national rhythm’ being the toll:

> Can you pop your fingers to no  
> music except those wild monies go on  
> in your head, can you jerk, to no melody,  
> except finger popper get it together (4-7)

What is highly intelligent about such lines is the very swing of image, rhythm and sound, working to stir up the black rhythmic impulses silenced by racist white

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137 See Baraka, *Autobiography*, p. 305: ‘I was guilty for having lived downtown for so long with a white wife. . . . I was still insecure and tender-hearted about my recent life.’
America. White culture (particularly in its ‘college’ form) hints that certain impulses are evidence of a jungle savagery and need to be suppressed. Turning in once again is important to the revolution, for it frees people to become more comfortable with their minds and their bodies.

Whether one agrees with these essentialisms or not, the poet is attempting to decolonise his people in a variety of ways in this poem, not least the jerky rhythms and quick shifts of perspective, learnt from avant-garde poetics but reworked in a black (jazz) framework.

The poet nudges his black student audience like a voice of conscience, or, as some may see him, a voice of the Devil:

\[
\text{How do you sound, your words, are they yours? The ghost you see in the mirror, is it really you, can you swear you are not an imitation greyboy} \quad (9-11)
\]

As in the last poem, Elizabeth Taylor becomes a symbol of the white culture model imitated by black fans:

\[
\text{can you look right next to you in that chair, and swear, that the sister you have your hand on is not really so full of Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton is coming out of her ears} \quad (12-15)
\]

The poem is profoundly oral and combative. It suggests that the nation will come into being only through a process of psychological decolonisation. But this stance leaves many outside the nation as ‘Uncle Toms’, and requires that one flagellate oneself until one finds one’s own ebony self:

\[
\text{Check yourself, learn who it is speaking, when you make some ultrasophisticated point, check yourself,} \quad (19-20)
\]

The Manicheanism of the split between black and white in this poem may be necessary in order to raise important questions, but it also raises the problems that I discussed earlier. In poems such as ‘Biography’ (pp. 124-5) it is through an evocation of a black man’s lynching that the poet attempts to awaken the consciousness of the people:

- red
- bleeds
- drips
- ground
- sucks
- blood
- hangs
- life-welting
Each word conveys a black magic, a spell with which to uncover the deeply buried black collective trauma that is every black person’s ‘biography’ — a collective history of rape, torture and lynching. The poet is attempting to decolonise black inertia at the very deepest levels of the unconscious.

The poet uses a language pared down to the bone, each word building a universe of depravity, the white men even bringing their wives and children to witness their ‘holy’ work to keep America white:

laughs
bonnets
wolfmoon
crazy teeth.

The agonies of the people are carried in the black child’s cry:

grandaddy
grandaddy, they tore

his
neck

The poet here experiments with language in a different, pared-down way from the other *Black Art* poems.

There is a temptation to call poetry framed within an explicit political ideology ‘political’ and lacking in artistic merit. I believe that Baraka always remains an artist. But his most spectacular verse is written when he infuses his own personal quest for identity into a wider nationalist framework, creating himself as the universal black man, a ‘Silver Surfer’ of the infinite cosmos. The poet takes his people through a psychedelic trip into the black infinite within themselves (or himself). In ‘The Racist’ (pp. 126-7) he writes:

I lean away from here, from what you see
into, out
of a far churning, burning
of atoms, away, pure vector space without a move

From the rhythms of the black street vernacular a voice launches out on a metaphysical journey. Inside the swirl of motion and energy stands the elemental blackman, transcending time and space, unifying multiple planes of existence, walking through new zones of feeling, like Coltrane moves in ‘Ascension’:

complete and there, and here, and touch me

*000000000000*
In such spiritual journeys the poet has transcended his history, risen above the
colonisation which seeks to crush him underneath its racism and violence.

It is a short leap from this to a deeper connection with African mythology and
beliefs on the spiritual aspect of humanity. Geoffrey Perrinder says in his African
Mythology:

A human being is more than body, he has a spiritual element which is the
breath of God, called God in man. Body and soul are closely interwoven
and are often spoken of as if they were one, though it is known that at death
the spirit leaves the body. ¹³⁸

Baraka in this most spiritual of poetry is attempting to awaken the divine African God
of the self, existing beyond the ‘seen’. (He speaks of this explicitly in Part of the
Doctrine, which I will come to last). Here, he creates a strange flight of language:

the hand, through air, my fair
‘s a cloud, just moisture cools the passage
a line of dry spells from here to start again

The sign

(45-48)

And a mystical breathline laden with colour, he reaches out into the universe:

Leans
we are worlds of leaning, falling, reaching, with
reaching with, what we reach for already
in back, of us, reaching
for and through
the space
we take.

(49-55)

In this lyrical verse the poet shows the black people the beauty that exists within; the
richness, the blackness; they are avatars of an ancient, African, spirit-people.

It is later, in the collection In Our Terribleness, that the connection with
Yoruba, Swahili, Arabic and African-American culture and spirituality merge in a
master work that ties biblical, Koranic, and other traditions together. ¹³⁹

Parallel to this higher expression of black consciousness is a poetry that seeks
to dehumanise those who can not take side in a scientific language that dissects,
without emotion. In ‘Attention Attention’ (p. 135) the poet says:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Attention</th>
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¹³⁸ Perrinder, p. 15.
¹³⁹ See Baraka, In Our Terribleness, not just for the majestic verse, but also the richly evocative
photography. One finds both text and image reception heightened and enhanced by the reciprocal play
between them that ‘speaks’ into a reader and viewer’s consciousness.
All greys must be terminated immediately
Project cutoff date moved up Fifty Years. (9-12)

With one hand the poet opens up a world for the black colonised, but with the other he
closes off any meaningful dialogue with white people. These are distorting lines,
which seem indulgent.

In other poems one finds this American intellectual revelling in a new freedom
deep inside the nation. One such poem is ‘These Cats Killing on a Cardboard Box’ (p.
143). The poet conceives of himself at ‘home’ in a humorous, intimate black hustler
speech:

Where’s there the
missing
of it, the wheres
hold of rolling
the streets
hold of smell in the
hold of taste touch
in the beyond what they be this five sense
we has or
spose
i can’t say I’m alone (1-11)

This slick, urban rundown on the feeling of being alive and full of spirit in the
neighbourhood is filled with the sly, shifty sounds and rhythms of a poet having fun,
trying to express to a crowd in the know his sense of the people’s essential soul:

i can’t say i’m alone
with 4thousand
colored folks on this strett
alone
defying chafaggy’s sin-souls
and they’s
in the hold of
the taste and they fly guitar laughs (11-18)

One still notes projectivist influences but the line has been made ethnic, with a
vernacular jazz syncopation, and more sensually soulful, as if the writer were more
relaxed.

all
of us, loving each other we play
these sincerities, evening now, we show
off, cut
the fool (23-27)

Home has become something more profound for a native intellectual in his cultural
nationalist phase, filled with a joy and life that his poetry captures, but which still
indicates a distance from this community, as though he is performing, ‘showing off a
little. Even so, there is a ‘sweet soul music’ played as the poet drifts into a mellow, sensual scat-singing:

\[
\begin{align*}
can \text{ you understand} \\
these \\
dribble \\
dee \\
bibble \\
dees \\
\text{these warm street shoobies} \\
\text{my soul gets off on.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(33-40)

The concern with the people’s spiritual state is a recurrent concern throughout *Black Art*. Possibly the finest poem in regards to these issues is Baraka’s exceptional ‘Ka’ba’ (p. 146). One should remember the Ka’ba stone is a key site within Mecca, around which the Muslim pilgrim must circle seven times,\(^\text{140}\). The poem opens:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A closed window looks down} \\
\text{on a dirty courtyard, and black people} \\
\text{call across or scream across or walk across} \\
\text{defying physics in the stream of their will} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(1-4)

The dirty, material scene of ghetto life becomes a perverse hajj for a spiritual and dynamic people whose movement within this colonial space vibrant and confined. Inside this black world Barak, as seer and prophet, proclaims:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Our world is full of sound} \\
\text{Our world is more lovely than anyone’s} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(5-6)

The rolling vowel sounds evoke the grace of the people, even as they recognise the tragedy and violence of the ghetto:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tho we suffer, and kill each other} \\
\text{and sometimes fail to walk the air} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(7-8)

The poet addresses the nation’s soul which he, as seer, can recognise beyond the physical:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We are the beautiful people} \\
\text{with african imaginations} \\
\text{fall of masks and dances and swelling chants} \\
\text{with african eyes, and noses, and arms} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(9-12)

\(^{140}\text{See X, pp. 397-421, for the sights and sounds of a black American Moslems’ experience in Mecca, particularly as he circles the Ka’ba stone, in orthodox Moslem theology the house of God built by Abraham on the instruction of the angel Gabriel in thanksgiving for Allah, sparing Abraham from having to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The bible, of course, tells another story.}\)
He notes energy in the spirit of the people that could potentially find expression.

But present in life, yet partially hidden, that might later lead to revolution:

though we sprawl in grey chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun

We have been captured, brothers.

The poet expresses a journey into the Pan-African self, an inner hajj of the soul back through slavery to a once regal soul.

And we labor
to make our getaway, into
the ancient image, into a new
correspondence with ourselves
and our black family.

An archaeology of culture make complete the African-American. For example, an Alex Haley will find within himself his Kunta Kinte, beside the shores of the Kamby Bolongo,\(^{141}\) which will lay the basis for a Pan-Africanism that links all African people everywhere, that might realise Kwame Nkrumah’s dream. The poet calls for new esoteric means by which to revolutionise themselves as black people, and then revolutionise the world:

\[
\text{We need magic} \\
\text{now we need the spells, to raise up} \\
\text{return, destroy, and create. What will be} \\
\text{the sacred words?}
\]

The poem is a fascinating attempt to forge those very words of black magic. It is a deeply philosophical poem that on the surface appears quiet and sombre in tone, but which relays the undercurrents and tensions of a black man attempting to wrestle with himself so as to tear free of his entrapment.

The poem illustrates the journey the nation is making to find its Ka’ba stone, and thus resolve its divinity, which is its deep African self. The nation’s hope is the colonised intellectual’s hope, and the poet has taken on himself the role of seer, of mover and shaker of the people, as many critics have noted.

In other poems the poet creates a dramatic scene of everyday ghetto life. One such poem is ‘Bludoo Baby, Want Money, and Alligator Got It to Give Up’ (pp. 169-71). Critics have noted how the poems in this phase of his evolution draw on Dadaist

\(^{141}\) Haley, *Roots.*
fragmentation, indicating Baraka’s continued use of avant-gardist poetic techniques:¹⁴²

say day lay may fay come some bum’ll
take break jake make fake lay day some bum’ll

(1-2)

This is soon improvised into some coherence, which leads to a sad ghetto tale being spun:

lay day in my fay bed to make brad for jake
limpin in the hall with quiverin stick

(4-5)

A white coloniser moves (described using pejorative ‘grey’—meaning whites, from grey meat), in lust and hate, into this depressing scene, out of his neighbourhood looking for some sex:

he’s hiney raised in a car by the curb
licking his yellow lips.

(6-7)

Singing a song to a different rhythm than Baraka’s black female sad song:

says, “come down goily i give you a stick . . . da da da
come down goily i give you a pinch . . . da da da
come down goily i sit in my car . . . da da da
come down goily to where we grey guys are . . . da da da . . .
da da da . . .
da da da . . .
da da da . . .” (9-15)

The poet slips into the subconscious of his dazed, black female character in a surreal street slang that voices why she is on the game:

she’s not thinkin him, secin him, seen people like him
dazed out there, sucking heavy vapors, her bat throw off like stick-it-in nitetime, for the dough, for the money baby,

(16-19)

She is drawn into the perversion of the outsider’s vicious whispers:

past oh miss, oh miss, oh, oh, yellow, vapor butt got him

(33)

Her misery becomes the community’s as she pleads with all that she cannot say

Kin you give me
somethin
can you make me
beautiful
with your bullshit
can you
love me
nigger
she askin us, jake jar
sis betty, where we at, at the pin of the stare, curld flag of misery,

(39-48)

¹⁴² Sollors, pp.196-7, notes the use of Dada techniques in this part of Black Magic.
Hope, dreams and desire for dignity and beauty in one's life are all shattered in this colonial cityscape.

stumblin down the stairs
when she turns to go back
and stick her head in the car
the motors running, she's already knows the money's in her slide (60-64)

The black men's job is to defend her in an act of community action:

we throwin rocks and garbage cans
barrin draggin the mother fucker out

stomp
bompa de de and run your heaviest
game,
baby, baby, take
it take it

run on the way, (65-72)

And:

money on the ground
blood on the ground (76-77)

The message becomes clear:

we protects
provides

the example
plain

when the sun
come up

again. (79-85)

In many ways this poem, even if one admits its brilliance in evoking a ghetto scenario, is a prime example of the male chauvinism of black cultural nationalism. Woman as 'complement' to the man needs him to protect her and perhaps secretly complete his self-respect, in that during slavery black men could not protect their wives from white violence and rape. Cultural nationalism, in many of the poems I have spoken of, speaks to black men, espousing masculine violence as a solution to becoming men. Even Fanon espouses this as necessary and psychologically cleansing of one's self-respect. I can see that violence may be necessary in this violent world. But it must free people from all oppressions—sexual orientation, gender, mental illness and so on. It is
one of the great failures of Baraka’s poetry in this phase that it fails to recognise that until all are free, none are free. This chauvinism helps to colonise half of the black nation that his poetry was supposed to free. I am not the first critic to raise this issue, and Baraka himself became aware of it as he moved into his Marxist phase.

It is a significant issue which demands more attention than I can give here. It needs to be raised as an illustration of a colonised intellectual who does not fundamentally question his own sexism or homophobia. Again, one might see this as a consequence of seeking to plunge into the deepest form of black cultural nationalism and street culture.

Other criticisms of this phase of Baraka’s career will be raised in the context of the chapter on Baraka’s move into Marxism. I have tried to bring up only a few criticisms in this chapter, so that the full flavour of the poet’s poetic achievements, and his genuinely moving belief in black identity, culture and being would be acknowledged.

The last poem I wish to discuss in this nationalist section is ‘Part of the Doctrine’ (pp.200-4), because it anticipates the poet’s moves into the more ‘Afrikan’ consciousness, the metaphysical poetry of In Our Terribleness, which unfortunately must lie outside the scope of this thesis. The poem begins:

RAISE THE RACE RAISE THE RAYS THE RAZE RAISE IT RACE RAISE ITSELF RAISE THE RAYS OF THE SUNS RACE TO RAISE IN THE RAZE OF THIS TIME AND THIS RACE FOR THE NEXT
(1-3)

The poet becomes a prophet in this most ‘magical’ of spells, swiftly building up a jazz improvisation of furious energy. Words change meanings as the poet seeks to ‘raise the race’ in a furious, yet elegantly constructed poem. The poet is standing at the soul’s juncture screaming into existence the magical words that might help the people on their Ka’ba pilgrimage. Language itself is force and vector of the black spirit, the ‘nigger feeling’. The poet anticipates deeper moves inside the black spirit in his later nationalist verse, which is truly a spiritual verse which speaks to a spiritual

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143 See Cheryl Clarke, ‘The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community’ in Home Girls, pp. 197-208. She makes specific reference to Amiri Baraka in this article, none of it complimentary, and, to be fair, she is right.
144 See Baraka, ‘Autobiography’, pp. 424-5. As he moves left he begins to question his reactionary male chauvinism as, in reality, counter-revolutionary backwardness. It is one of the saddest side-effects of a residual indigenous male sexism, and a colonial male chauvinism that creates a double oppression on many indigenous women, even in freedom struggles in colonial lands. In this respect, I have much sympathy for Spivak’s subaltern woman.
people. Lacey states that works such as *In Our Terribleness* seek to minister to the wounded black self. Yet it is also a verse that presupposes that black people possess a divinity that will emerge out of a Heraclitean flux of motion and black energy:

OURSelves TO EMERGE BURNING ALL INERT Gases GASSED AT THE 
GOD OF GUARDING THE GUARDIANS OF GOD WHO WE ARE LIKE GOD IS 
(4-5)

One notes how each improvisation acts like a Coltrane scream, words bouncing off and energising other ‘notes’ into a play of sound and fury that hurls language into the universe, neutrons and protons of meaning zooming across time and space, a metaphysical spirit that keeps improvising and searching outwards in new explorations of feeling, like a sun shooting out flames of heat, energy and light.

As a black astral traveller, the seer views ‘the fallen’ of this earth, children with the mark of the beast written across their foreheads:

THose WHO ARE WITHOUT GOD 
WHO HAVE LOST THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPAL OF THEIR LIVES ARE 
NOT RAISED AND THEIR RACE IS TO THEIR NATURAL DEATHS NO 
MATTER 
HOW UN-NATURAL 
(7-10)

There is a beauty and power in the will that conjoins broken black history, spirit, and being in a spell that unifies all the discontinuities:

TO RAISE THE EYES TO RAISE THE RACE AND THE RAYS OF 
OUR HOT SAVAGE GODS WHO DISAPPEARED TO REAPPEAR IN THE 
BODY 
(12-13)

The poet becomes father of a nation, its dreamer and seer, its healer. Again, in his later works, within the Kawaiida doctrines of the Nguzo Saba (the seven principles), the poet will take the concerns of UMOJA (UNITY), KUJICHAGULIA (Self-Determination), UJIMA (COLLECTIVE Work and Responsibility), UJAMAA (Co-operative economics), NIA (Purpose), KUUMBA (creativity) and IMANI (Faith) to create an African spiritual poetry that is a rich tapestry of myths, symbols and re-created histories. This deeply vernacular, proud, rhythmic verse attempts to find what Coltrane identified as ‘A Love Supreme’.

145 Lacey, p. 126.
146 Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*. 
147 To scream is to try to become, to try and be born. Critics note the use of the scream in Black nationalist verse; see Harris, pp. 14-7, in regards to his jazz aesthetics; Benston for the musical cultural aspects of John Coltrane’s music on Baraka’s aesthetic, pp. 87-8; Sollors (briefly), p. 204; the scream is, then, an African-American tradition, used in nationalist poetry to give birth to the nation.
Out of this search within the soul will come the people’s redemption and entry into a newer, blacker ‘New Jerusalem’:

We are raised and the race is a sun sons suns burst out of heaven to be god in the race of our raise through perfection.

(24-25)

In the abyss of the black soul, the native intellectual seeks to create, or recreate, a black Adam in a new Eden before the Fall, before the split in the black consciousness. From a colonial perspective he seeks to praise, exhort and encourage. He becomes father, brother, and wise leader to a people waking up in the ghettos of the north to the fact of their captivity. One must admire Baraka’s efforts as native intellectual in the midst of a struggling people, for he was a beacon of hope, as were Malcolm X, John Coltrane, and (in his own way) Dr. Martin Luther King—exceptional people in an extraordinary age of conflict.
CHAPTER FOUR: **HARD FACTS**

(1975)

A brief synopsis of events is required if one is to fully understand the development of the poet’s perspective between the poetic works *Black Magic* (published 1969 but written between 1961-6) and *Hard Facts* (1975).

Important during the early part of this period was Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre which brought black art, music, drama, and poetry to the black masses of Harlem. Despite its collapse in 1966 (due to a drying up of funds by a federal agency that would not support a ‘racist’ cultural organisation), it was the model from which other black arts repertory theatres would grow in nearly every northern urban locale with a sizeable black population. In 1967 the poet travelled to San Francisco to help organise Black Arts there, and to have deeper discussions with Karenga and his Kawaida system of African values practised as community principles. In 1968 he set up his new cultural centre in Newark around the practices of Kawaida.

1967 was a momentous year for other reasons. Baraka was arrested, convicted and briefly imprisoned for his role in the Newark rebellions. Because of the nationwide coverage that he received, he began to be seen among blacks as a leader authenticated through his war with ‘the man’. In accordance with these developments he made a name change in 1967 to ‘Ameer Barakat’, or ‘Blessed Prince’ in Arabic. He briefly dallied with orthodox Sunni Islam. His name changed into a more African conscious form in the Swahili ‘Amiri Baraka’, to which the honorific Imamu, or spiritual leader, was added, so that his name would reflect a new kind of black being in the world.

The artist’s prolific output continued during the early 1970s as he produces the following: poetry—*Its Nation Time* (1970); a poetry/photography collaboration with Fundi (Bill Abernathy)—*In Our Terribleness* (1970); a collection of important essays—*Raise Race Rays Raise* (1971); and another poetic collection—*Spirit Reach* (1972).

Besides these artistic works, the poet became deeply involved in both local and national politics, to give political weight to his cultural nationalist ideologies. His tireless activism, along with his organisation, the Committee For a Unified Newark
(C.F.U.N.) helped the first black mayor of Newark, Kenneth Gibson, to win office in 1970, and to be re-elected in 1972. In a highly racist atmosphere, full of political and economic corruption, and police brutality against the black majority of the local population (60% of Newark City), his achievements were all very public and very impressive.

On the national front he became a key mover in establishing forums in which (it was ideistically hoped) a black consensus of political opinion might be forged, and from which a black national power bloc might win political victories that would benefit the whole of the black nation.

Baraka was critically central to the Pan-African Congress of African Peoples, the black power conferences of 1970 and 1972, and perhaps the most important of these events, the National Black Political Convention of 1972, bringing together black people from all parts of the political and ideological spectrum to discuss issues involving the black nation.

The continued struggles in colonial and neo-colonial Africa saw him taking a more politically active interest in that continent. One might see this as his aesthetic and spiritual desire for a connection with Africa being developed and conceptualised more fully, as *Black Magic* appears to anticipate. Revolutionary African leaders and liberation theorists began to influence him—Kwami Nkrumah, by the early 1970s the ousted leader of Ghana; Julius Nyerere, the leader of Tanzania and master architect of a new East African Freedom and Socialism/Uhuru na Ujamaa; and the revolutionary example Amilcar Cabral, perhaps the greatest anti-colonial figure of Africa in his generation, and the leader and father of the Cape Verde/Guinea Bissau anticolonialist war against the Portuguese. It is from these influences, and from certain contradictions that his political activity made painfully clear to him, that Baraka came to take another look at Marxism, which had proved so successful in both Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau.

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148 The title of Julius Nyerere’s book outlining his government’s search for the elusive ‘Uhuru na Ujamaa’.
149 A true Renaissance man trained as a soil scientist, his agronomist work is still considered to be the finest analysis of soil conditions in both Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Beyond this Cabral became a brilliant orator, fighting for his peoples’ liberation on the debating floor at the United Nations. He became a supreme diplomat, the outstanding political and military strategist in the field, against the Portuguese colonisers. The foreword of *Unity & Struggle* reads: ‘In Africa, . . . Three great figures stand out indisputably—Kwame Nkrumah, the visionary; Patrice Lumumba, the martyr; Amilcar Cabral, the unifier.’ p. xviii.
One might note that the material reality of 1975 as an era was considerably different from the black nationalist idealism of the middle 1960s. By 1975 most of the eminent black leaders had been killed (Fred Hampton, George Jackson), imprisoned (Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and briefly Angela Davis), or in exile (Robert Williams, Eldridge, and Kathleen Cleaver). The force of the black power conferences had reached their peak by 1970 and by 1975 was on the decline, many black leaders choosing (or resigning themselves) to work through the Democratic or Republican parties (Jesse Jackson and even, later on, Eldridge Cleaver). Economic hardship, due to the 1973 oil crisis, led to an economic recession, exacerbated in 1974 by political instability with Nixon’s disgraced exit from the office of President. For the black poor most affected by these developments, the times were much harder; the brotherhood and sisterhood of the 1960s was undermined by pressing need for survival. One can see that, collectively, the conditions of the black colony were very different by 1975; many black power initiatives had failed, or been co-opted by the white power structure; the general society was concerned with ‘law and order’ issues after the turmoil of inner city black rebellions; and some black leaders were using gains—such as black studies departments at universities; more black representatives in civic leadership, police departments, and in business—to buy into the system rather than to change it. One could say that the revolutionary edge of the people, honed in ‘the sixties’, had lost its sharpness by 1975.

Mao Tse Tung started to become an important thinker for Baraka. The poet’s journey to Dar-es-Salaam in 1973 further awakened him to certain realities about Africa,\textsuperscript{130} and dialectically about the wider struggle of all African peoples.

In 1975, then, Baraka wrote his poetry collection \textit{Hard Facts}. The first poem, ‘Pressure To Grow’, opens:

\begin{quote}
Even grey-headed, learning is critical
strength we need word silences, neither
are brute resistance elemental passion.
\end{quote}

(1-3)

A reader notes the carefully weighted rhythm and sound at work here, the poet attempting to move a black audience to reflection without the bravado of cultural nationalism. The poet appears to be seeking a new kind of objectivity, as he re-thinks his ‘black’ positions on grey-headed theorists such as Marx and Engels. Learning
must be dialectical and open to a wider range of influences. There is an implied criticism of the wild, abandoned flights of self absorption, the ‘elemental passion’ that characterised the search for black spirit in Black Magic. The poet reflects on truth and learning:

If we could tell the truth all the time
If we could be with (need to be) loved ones
and tell the truth
Learning not just from books
Learning from our blood line

(4-8)

It is here that Baraka most resembles Fanon’s intellectual in his/her cultural nationalist phase. Fanon says:

The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events. . . But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go on until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge.151

The poet has learned dialectically from the error of romanticising deifying the black collective soul. Now he uses the strong vernacular voice and chant of his Black Magic poetry to exhort the people to look at the stuff of their material reality in America—truth, bloodlines, books. The poet leads the people in a ‘people’s chant’ to awaken them to material realities:

Learning from justice
Learning from work
Learning from constancy
Learning from love

A reader senses the split consciousness still at work here; rather than searching for a completed self in unifying the unconscious and finding the black spirit of Africa within, the poet is projecting out principles of community activity that will, through struggle, eventually complete men and women as actors and movers in reality.

Amilcar Cabral, a significant influence for Baraka,152 writes,

151 Ibid., p. 181.
152 Cabral might be seen to be an exceptional later influence on Baraka because he proposed Marxist, third world struggle for both Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau to help them sin freedom from an external coloniser (and allow them to keep their nation intact, albeit with boundaries drawn up by the coloniser), but he also proposed his nations’ need to form solidarity with the third world against the neo-capitalists and imperialists of the West. Unfortunately Cabral did not live to see his nation become free, falling to
It is not what he has in his head that defines reality, but reality itself that defines man. Man is part of reality, man is within reality, and it is not what he has in his head that defines reality.\textsuperscript{153}

Baraka's cultural nationalist \textit{Black Magic} poetry has the major ideological weakness of not working in reality, but imagining ways to incarnate alternative black ideas into reality. Baraka's new verse is indicative of a shift from native intellectual idealism to a native intellectual realism, a poet moving away from romanticism that over-emphasises the self, towards material culture. In Cabral's words:

\begin{quote}
Culture enables us to know what dynamic syntheses have been formed and set by social awareness in order to resolve these conflicts at each stage of evolution of that society, in the search for survival and progress. . . .

History enables us to know the nature and extent of the influences and the conflicts that characterize the evolution of a society.\textsuperscript{154}
\end{quote}

In some respects this is a more radical notion of culture than Baraka's cultural nationalism because it places culture (in a more material form) at the heart of the liberation struggle. It is working with material contradictions that will lead to national revolution, not working with insurgencies of the spirit in the realm of imagination or metaphysics. This new material approach to culture emphasises its living or dynamic qualities, as Baraka himself wrote: "We thought of culture in too many ways as a static quality, not as something changing with reality."\textsuperscript{155} One notes here much of Cabral, but also of Fanon, as significant new influences to a more Marxist praxis.

The poet suggests:

\begin{quote}
If we cd tell the truth  
all the time  
a terrible pressure wd be on the world  
it'd have to change  
if we changed so  
A lightning insistence wd harass the world
\end{quote}

This is a poet who has begun to emerge out of the solipsism of the self that characterises all of his previous poetry—including his wonderful black magic work. There is a self here still split, still searching for completion, now trying to tear free of the limitations of the individual mind, to join the wider struggles of the third world. One senses the poet's deeply held Hegelian idealism that presumed it was through

\textsuperscript{153} Cabral, \textit{Unity}, pp. 44-5.

\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 142.
evolution into a higher black consciousness that the world would be made more
Godlike. Baraka has developed a new sense of material or objective reality and his
search for the black self now takes place in activist and political spheres. One can see
the shift in his more measured style of writing. Granted, his new thinking continues to
attach a high importance to individual truth-telling (also a new development of
consciousness), and this continues to give poetry an important role. Traces of *Black
Magic*’s ‘nommo’ (lightning resistance) remain as the poet again attempts to come
into a newer, wider understanding of himself as a ‘mover and shaker’ of the people.
But poetry is not telling (only) individual truths but rather truths about the world in
general.

His enemies are, newly, black and white, implying that oppression transcends
mere skin colour, and that the ‘essences’ upon which such racist polarities
(black/white) are founded are no longer an adequate basis for understanding the
people’s struggle. The two sides are part of a larger truth:

The truth wd be out here
conkin crackers
&
nailin niggers

This suggests that the native intellectual has surmounted his own feelings of
inadequacy at not being ‘black enough’ and has now the necessary objectivity to see
and understand the social terrain. A clue to this is his use of more ‘universal’
language. Ethnic colloquialisms are still important but no longer dominate. His new
revolutionary attitude implies a more Marxist conception of the role of the
intellectual. Marx says in relation to the class struggle,

... a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in
particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised
themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical
movement as a whole. 156

The poet, as intellectual native, is still on the outside of his people, but here he is
becoming the ideologist of a new scientific ‘faith’, turning the people’s eyes to their
colonist oppressors, the imperialist multinationals that keep much of the black and
white working class in America poor, while undermining and exploiting local
communities in colonial and neo-colonial states. (One only has to think of Krupp

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Steel’s extortions of money from Kwame Nkrumah’s Volta Dam project.) So, the poet turns the people’s gaze outwards:

The truth’d be replacing
It’d be stomping pirates
Esso Esso Esso Esso Esso
Gulf
Gulf
Ford Gulf!
Wham!!

The play of sound and explosion here is in the service still of awakening a black consciousness, but it is directed at waking up the people to the real forces that oppress them.

Again the intellectual asks, instructs, and implores the people in short punchy breath lines, a kind of language of the proletariat:

It’d be raisin
& getting down
It’d put a righteous pressure
on the world
if we’d only
tell the truth
all the
time
& Learn
from
its production

The force of such speech is to build solidarity and consciousness. He has taken his passion, drive, and belief in the black nation and transcribed these into a form of nationalist Marxist writing. One should note here that Fanon’s and Cabral’s notions of culture are at times different, and it is towards Cabral that Baraka leans.157 But is

156 Marx, The Communist Party Manifesto, p.91.
157 This is a thesis in itself. These differences might be seeing that best by understanding Fanon and Cabral’s geographies of colonial struggle were different; that culture as tribal and community based was strong and living in both Guinea-Bissan and Cape Verde. Fanon’s writing appears to suggest that Algeria’s culture had been largely wiped out by the French. The notion of culture is important for both Cabral and Fanon, a seedbed of revolution. What constitutes culture and how it might be applied in the colonial context differs for both Cabral and Fanon. Cabral saw the different tribal, country, and city structures of culture as providing the food of revolution if a confluence of the best aspects of each group could be synthesised to create a national, rather than a regional or tribal culture. For Fanon, such cultural richness did not exist in the Algerian conflict, but through revolution itself providing a
through the insights of Fanon’s model that we can most clearly understand Baraka’s development.

Cabral, as liberation theorist, freedom fighter and third world Marxist, gave Baraka a new set of tools with which to analyse the American black colonial context. Baraka came to see the black nation in America struggling in a colonial context against not only race oppression, but class oppressions. This called for war on two fronts—one against racism in America and the third world, and one against class oppression again both locally and internationally. One might say, of course, that there is a tension between a revolutionary Marxist nationalism and a commitment to third world socialist world revolution since the later may be seen to undermine national boundaries. But the idealism of Cabral, his hope for a new free nation born out of colonial struggle links the two.

I have made struggle with the self critically central to understanding the dialectical development of LeRoi Jones into Imamu Amiri Baraka, then Chairman Brake. In poems such as ‘Revolutionary Love’, one witnesses a poet attempting, as in his earlier work, to dig out parts of himself blighted by an inner decay.

In this poem the poet attempts to wrestle with his sexism, illustrated by earlier comments such as this:

For instance we do not believe in ‘equality of men and women.’ We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals... When we say complement, completes, we mean that we have certain functions which are more natural to us, and you have certain graces that are yours alone. We say that a black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation. 134

richness of culture in mediares. One could compare Cabral’s Unity & Struggle, pp. 28-44, 143-6, with Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth, particularly pp. 166-99. This brief and shallow synopsis does not do real justice to either writer, so I encourage a reader to engage with both Cabral’s Unity and Struggle, and Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth. What is important to note here is that both are relevant to Baraka’s attempt to both excavate a forgotten black self and culture, as well as to create one, forgetting (which Cabral did not) that a rich culture existed under Baraka’s very feet in America, a black working class culture.

Baraka’s class and ‘tribal’ analysis of black culture is absolutely rooted in Amilcar Cabral’s analysis of tribal and caiss culture in his colonised land, lending Cabral’s cultural analysis a greater richness and usefulness, in relation to revolutionary theory, than perhaps Fanon’s offers. Baraka says, “But from Cabral we also began to understand that even our concern for culture had to be re-examined, and that finally our culture here in North America, if it was going to be a national black culture, had to be the culture of the Black working-class, urban and country, as well as the progressive nationalist projections of the urban petit-bourgeoisie, which did include a determination to identify with Africa.” “Why I Changed”, p. 31.

The poem ‘Revolutionary Love’ opens:

Black Revolutionary Woman
In love w/ Revolution
Your man better be a revolution
for you to love him

One senses the poet wrestling with notions of women’s ‘complementary’ nature even as he seems to be searching for an idea of woman that transcends this limitation, as the true revolutionary woman who has created herself anew in struggle, equal with the men. The obvious references to his wife Amina give this sense of internal struggle a personal flavour:

Black Revolutionary woman
the care of the world
is yours, in your hands is
entrusted all the new beauty
created here on earth.

The poet searches for a new language of mutual respect and understanding. There is the sense in this poem that the words are pared down, stripped of useless artifice, in order to define an equality in marriage and to develop a mutual language of revolution. This new desire to find a freedom for women in the struggle is at odds with the chauvinistic attitudes of the black male leadership in the cultural nationalist ideology. Baraka writes:

were
you my comrade in struggle, I’d still
call you lady, great lady
Bibi, Black Revolutionary Woman

This most profound of loves is seen as a root from which all revolution might grow, making woman the heart of the revolution:

and even in the pit
of raging struggle, we need what we love,
we need what we desire to create, were you
my woman, I’d call you companion, comrade,
sister, black lady, Afrikan faith,

159 See Angela Davis, An Autobiography, p. 161., for a Marxist woman’s perspective on the male chauvinism of the Black Cultural nationalist male leadership.
One can still feel the sexist preconceptions as the poet wrestles to free his woman from his own masculine ideological biases (which he had never strongly challenged before, either in his bohemian or his Black Nationalist days).

I’d call you

house, Black Revolutionary woman

I’d call you wife.

This ‘revolutionary’ respect for women is in striking contrast to the poet’s earlier personal attack on Nikki Giovanni, in the poem ‘Niggy Tha Ho’.\(^{160}\) That poem opens:

Many years ago in ol time america
was a cherub culla girl name niggy
wanted to be a writer, sd she
cd dig in the fire on the time, why
niggers ran in the street

In lines that closely mimic Giovanni’s use of black street speech,\(^{161}\) the poet uses his dramatic skills to ‘write from within’ this sensibility to show how black talk does not necessarily imply a speaker’s ‘black spirit’. The poem serves to question an ‘essential’ blackness but also is a harsh attack on Giovanni. To Baraka, Giovanni had gone through a change as dubious as (say) Donna Awatere’s move from front line Maori activist struggle to right wing conservatism in her role as Act party M.P. (to note an equally controversial New Zealand equivalent).

Giovanni’s most famous poem was ‘The True Import of Present Dialogue Black vs Negro’, whose opening lines read:

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? Nigger you can
kill

Baraka will say in his poem:

She sd nigger can you kill which
remains a good question. can you indeed
once you dig what needs to be killed?

\(^{160}\) See Giovanni’s selection of poems in Adof’s The Poetry of Black America, pp. 450-8.

\(^{161}\) For good examples of this idiosyncratic use of street vernacular, see the above footnote.
The former militant’s own words condemn her in her new phase of liberalism. The poet uses sly street slang to point the finger at someone who had always been a poseur:

So she copped some heat from the rage of the age, used some fire from the ignited veins of the almighty spook. I mean she did it, used it, laid it somewhere and how, threw it down, some sd. But what was she sayin you know what, what she put on paper the limb of the body, a string on the motion. Like, you hadda have some notion of what was going down.

The poet depicts a Frankenstein’s monster being created:

They fits good, once they been honed. They create em sometimes from ol cornflakes meltin in the moonlight missionary belches, racial squeches, a little smoke, some blood,

In these surreal juxtapositions, the poet ‘constructs’ Giovanni as monster, as traitor to the black masses. The anger of the poem suggests a personal catharsis on Baraka’s part, a need to express his anger towards an erstwhile comrade. Giovanni remains something of an enigma, a mentor of the black oppressed who has come to see ‘progress’ as whatever releases a few crumbs from the over-loaded table.

and all the time merica wont let them have it and they knew it was hip. Let em have it let em have it let em have it

In many respects the rhythm, rhyme and sly street speech is characteristic of Baraka’s nationalist work, but here he is using nationalist speech patterns and rhythms in a context of irony. In savage satirical form, the poet says:

klans
and lynchers, let em have it, roosevelts kennedys
dug what they really sd, let em have it klans & lynchers let em have it, and so relented, yeh they really understood.

One senses that the poet has taken satire and street language here to use in a materialist morality play. Even as he drops into an arguably sexist and unfair personal attack, one can see his new politics at work. By directing the reader’s vision to acts, the poet can get to Fanon’s ‘occult zone’ of culture, that material place where people actually live. ‘By their deeds you shall know them’ the bible says:

CIA carry her little buttock cross
the see. Hi HO, she in Dar, told them niggers
she rather be nairobi, watchin kenyatta’s teeth
turn to mud.

The poet ridicules this ‘Snow White’ (‘Hi Ho’) who sells herself (Hi ho, sexist street
slang for a whore, or ‘ho’) and sells the third world out in her flighty, superficial
elitism at Dar-es Salaam. Her neo-colonial instinct makes her attracted to Kenyatta,
revolutionary turned reactionary, the neo-colonialist of Kenya who oppresses his
people in the name of ‘Pan-Afrikanism.’

Giovanni has become a kind of precursor to Oprah Winfrey:

Hi Ho, now she on the t.v.
wit you uncle bubba or your aunty jimmy

And she is busy hobnobbing among the political elite, the black middle class:

Hi Ho, now she wit
the caucus, and the other eminent exploiters
of the race.

The poet satirises the American realm of artistic ‘freedom’, avant-garde art:

Hi Ho, advance for the po, go
to yr local museum, give yo stomach growls a number
& try to em to the curator as conceptual art.

What appears to incense the poet about such cultural games is the way they become
‘evidence’ of the freedom and openness of the American way. The system can
continue to fool black people with the myth that any of them can become famous and
successful—as artists, say—without admitting that such success involves standing on
your own people’s heads. The nett result is again a black nation denied true
subjectivity, this time more obviously split along class lines.

In the last section of the poem, the poet degenerates into personal, vindictive
talk. In this sense he has illustrated how far he is from over-coming his sexism. He
also illustratees how far he still is from finding that elusive sense of wholeness that he
seeks in the social. He is now fighting new contradictions as well as old demons. In
this sense he is ‘always already’ the native intellectual outsider, even in his more
ideologically sound position (scientific socialism).

The poem ‘Gibson’ allows a reader to see other reasons why the poet is
shifting from a cultural nationalist to Marxist perspective. Richard Gibson was the
first black mayor of Newark, voted in largely due to Baraka’s own energetic support.
Baraka later described Gibson in his autobiography:
You got the feeling talking to him that you might not be making sense, that he might be misunderstanding. You could not feel much of that warmth that comes from his mutual appreciation of patriotism and struggle. He was bland and his ideas were deadly conventional. . . . I thought he had some loyalty and feeling for black people. He was so dull I could not see that beneath that bland exterior there was a truly dull mind, a mind so dull that it had not yet even aspired to embrace the collective energy of black struggle except in the most opportunistic and low level, careerist way.162

Baraka’s satirical portrait was indicative of the poet’s own realisation of how the political process failed black constituents. The poem begins:

old boy in 1492, sailing west toward sun dash, was hip
we cd say what we wanted,

The hip yet sluggish personality of Gibson illustrates how far he is from black reality. The poem romantically links his entrance into the ‘new world’ of politics with another ‘neo-colonial’ figure, Columbus. The irony lies in Baraka’s belief that this is what Gibson was to black people, a neo-coloniser. This makes his political speech ironically true:

you see, i never changed baby, never . . . .
i grew is what, i never never
changed

The character has a simplified, narrow and egotistical view of his own importance, and is unable to understand how many people sacrificed and worked to put him in power. He adopted the required persona:

that year, 69, we worked to build our image among the “militants”
sure enough, a little motion from the rear of the meeting and i was in,

One sees how the poet’s own sense of the political process had been irrevocably damaged by such men as Gibson who use the system and do not change it.163 So, a different concept of human nature is needed, a more scientific sense of man as worker split from self-realisation by a social structure that is split in material reality.

163 “. . . merely putting black faces in high places, without changing the fundamental nature of the system itself, simply served to make that system more flexible and more dangerous . . .” Baraka, ‘Why I Changed’, p. 32.
Here the poet appears to be vomiting out onto the page the public and political battles he has fought, under the mistaken belief that black faces in power will change the system and bring relief to the black nation. Now the poet aims to deconstruct and demystify for a black audience this corrupt, and corrupting, political environment.

The dull minded politician’s only ‘flair’ is his short-sighted political vision, accompanied by a romanticised self image which highlights his stupidity:

and the convention, i had bellbottoms
then, and 40 young sisters the gibson girls, swinging on
my charm.

This hatchet job by the poet is shaped in slow lines that exude the sound and feel of a sluggish and stupid mind at work. The mayor’s ineffectiveness is clearly a source of savage humour but also tragedy for a black constituency.

the business community
wasn’t sure, i had some funny
friends, but, dig, i never, never
changed.

The enemies of black self determination find a long lost brother of the soul who shares the same fundamental avarice, selfishness and lack of morality:

and them dudes in the tall buildings
looked out, called out, sd, hey, ken, (dig?)
drop on in, get some dust, like get down,
and it all sailed, it got up, then, and sailed away,

In these humorous street phrases the poet indicates the real tragedy of a ‘dream deferred’, a nation ‘sailed away’ flattery and gifts silence him as a potential voice of black popular leadership attuned to the people’s real needs.

He is as high as a kite in delusional flights of grandeur in:

I’m overhead, look up, a distant, blue bird, airplane, super-man!

The implied association is: ‘Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s Superman!’ As much as he might be secretly despised by white business leaders and politicians in private, he is even more adrift from the black people, for he does not understand truly them or their anger.

Till now, they march in front of my shop calling me names, them
same niggers I told how to make a mayor, them some crazy dudes
wit the afrikan names (they changed em? talking that Marx shit too . . . wow)
While he is out of touch with the people, Gibson is attuned to the political process. He is willing to sell his body, his 'piece', for a 'piece' of the action:

I made my piece with the democrats
and they promised i cd get the nod for 80 in the congress

His stereotyped pieties reflect the poet’s sense that this is the nature of all who play the American political game:

i made a terrible speech about
the power was in the hands of the economic boys and that yng kids shd
grow up to be the president of general motors
and not the mayor. Yeh.

The poet puts Cabral’s advice to work well here, describing the ‘culture’ of politics in order to show it up as a trap. One senses that the poet, in this most intelligent of apparently ‘stupid’ poems is politically educating the people to see how and why they are still denied any legitimate access to education, politics and the economy. Sadly, this situation has affinities (which the poet was well aware of)\(^\text{164}\) with the reality of neo-colonialist Africa, such as the disgraceful example of Idi Amin in Uganda, along with other black opportunists.

In the poem, Gibson says:

and the governor asks me, all kinds of things, calls me
daily, i go a lot of places with all the heavies, they need
my council

If his ‘counsel’ is needed, it is likely to be merely to legitimise anti-black legislation in the State government. Gibson understands nothing, yet he knows what he likes:

power is where its at, give me power any time,

It is as if political work around Newark has shattered Baraka’s black soul idealism; even his language in many places illustrates a new distrust towards anything impassioned, much like Fanon who says (in \textit{Black Skins, White Masks}) “Fervour is the weapon of choice of the impotent.”\(^\text{165}\) One senses the poet attempting to get down to the true material of black working class culture; not the impassioned, but petit-bourgeois screams of the spirit in \textit{Black Magic}.

In the poem the world is starting to collapse around Gibson’s ears:

\(^\text{165}\) Fanon, \textit{Black Skins}, p. 9.
look out the window, there, just left of where that puerto rican bastard
bust out my french glass, messed up my abstraction i got from
arte ruler

The 1974 Puerto Rican rebellion will begin in front of Gibson’s office at City Hall
where he will order Newark’s racist police to charge down the protestors, leading to
the deaths of two Puerto Ricans. The poet implies the need for solidarity between
blacks and Puerto Ricans.

The poem ‘When We’ll Worship Jesus’ raises other issues concerning the split
consciousness, a consciousness now fought out in the material realm of everyday life.

The poem opens:

We’ll worship Jesus
When jesus do
Somethin
Wha jesus blow up
the white house
or blast nixon down

By utilising a highly oral, black religious idiom Baraka becomes a ‘Minister of the
Faith’, preaching and moving the people to recognise the contradictions between their
metaphysical idealism and the conditions of their lives.

What is needed is a new religion, a new belief system that resolves the
contradictions of a faith that calls for forgiveness, humility, and endless patience. The
poet attempts to show the people how deeply implicated organised black Christianity
is in maintaining the socio-economic status-quo:

when jesus get out his yellow lincoln
w. the built in cross stain glass
window box w/black peoples
enemies

The puns on Lincoln (the promise of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipating Slave Act of
1865, not fulfilled by Lincoln Continentals) and the show of wealth are satirised in
these aggressive, punchy breath lines full of shrewd political and social allusions.

The black Christian minister Tom Skinner has noted this type of
unconscionable behaviour amongst so called ‘respectable’ black Christian leaders:

A pastor who is not prospering economically is not considered to be a
successful minister. After I preached in a particular church one Sunday
morning the pastor took me into his study and said “Well young man, that
was a fine message; but if you expect to get any place, I mean, if you really
expect to make it, then you can’t go on preaching like that.” ... he walked to the window and pulled said the drapes to point out his brand new Cadillac in the church parking lot, saying “The church buys me a new one every year.” He opened up a closet in his study and he showed me some fabulous looking clergy robes that the church bought for him, $500 a piece. He showed me leopard skin capes costing $300.\textsuperscript{166}

Such a situation has counterparts in New Zealand, particularly in relation to the Pacific Island churches. Again one can see the relevance of Cabral’s notion of culture here. Christianity has become infected with the same greed as the wider society, its supposed spiritual healing a front for the extortion of poor black congregations who pay their dues every Sunday. In return, parishioners are given a message: ‘Don’t struggle, prophecy will be fulfilled, your patient long-suffering will be rewarded in paradise.’ The nett result is that any revolutionary notion of Christian practice, such as Tom Skinner and Dr. King attempted to live, is undermined.

The poet is here moving and shaking the people, speaking to them in an idiom they can understand. The poet is trying to decolonise a psychology of dependence that is in the black Christian’s mind to open the way for creative new forms of action. But so far, religion has no positive effects:

\begin{verbatim}
-- cops not afraid
of jesus
pushers not afraid
of jesus
not afraid
of jesus, capitalists racists
imperialists not afraid
of jesus shit they makin money
off jesus
\end{verbatim}

Colonised people have similarly been pacified with doses of Christianity so that the economic extortion might commence—the bible and the sword have often gone hand in hand in colonial lands. One thinks, for example, of the Belgian Catholic missions in the Congo.

The poet leads the people’s cry, following the Socialist examples of SekonToure in Guinea, and Mao Tse Tung in China, and Nkrumah in Ghana:

\begin{verbatim}
we’ll worship jesus when mao
do, when toure does
\end{verbatim}

do, when toure does
when the cross replaces Nkrumah’s
star

Black street slang makes these ‘communists’ less alien to a black working class audience.

The supposedly ‘militant’ and ‘responsible’ black religion of Islam is now linked with Christianity:

jesus aint did nothin for us
but kept us turned toward the
sky (him and his boy allah
too, need to be checked
out)

The poet appears to suggest religion is an ‘opium of the people’, and, in the colonial context, a means through which material conditions are disguised, and a deep and abiding black self-hatred is perpetuated in a spiritual journey to find wholeness outside one’s black body.

We can struggle against the forces of backwardness, we can change the world,
we can struggle against our selves, our slowness, our connection with the oppressor, the very cultural aggression which binds us to our enemies as their slaves

These are powerful ideas, though they will strike some educated readers as prosaic, as propagandist.

we worship our selves
we worship the light in us
we worship the warmth in us
we worship the world
we worship the love in us

The poet as native intellectual is tearing himself away from the old values of cultural nationalism and its metaphysics of blackness. In these apparently dogmatic, repetitive, ideologically loaded phrases, the poet seems to be trying to create an alternative form of prayer.

A new kind of self is being constructed in these plain, unadorned phrases, building blocks of a revolution, not merely in poetry, but in the world. This is the frame for a new reality filled with the rhythms and sounds of work, the repetition of
‘hammer beats’.

Build the new world out of reality, and new vision
we come to find out what there is of the world
to understand what there is here in the world!
to visualize change, and force it
we worship revolution

In the poem ‘TODAY’ the bitterness of recent feuds (with both liberal and nationalist black organisations) is apparent as he castigates and ‘spits out’ various types of black people. He is obviously wrestling to become a true third world Marxist. The poem begins:

Reactionary and middle class idealists
Forward wing of backwardness
Upside down intellectuals, with no base except the barest form of groveling

The language is that of the Marxist polemic, but jazz rhythms still swing through these lines. The lines are syncopated, appropriately, since these political figures do not swing together in unison. The poet expresses a high contempt for them in short abrupt breath lines:

niggers removed
from struggle
little
dabblers
Fellow travelers of
neo, semi &
full up
colonialism

One still sees evidence of an improvisatory, culturally nuanced vernacular poetry playing itself out through the lines, but the improvisation is now more controlled, with a Marxist care for political categorisation at work. The soloist has a better idea of where he will end up, a control that may see either strengthening improvisation or undercutting its energy. Improvisation has become less of a ‘scream filled’ flight into the subjective realm of absolute romantic poetic ‘feeling’, and (to some extent) more structured. Trendy white fellow travellers are still satirised in free-wheeling phrases:

Frustrated white boys
screaming black to masquerade
the fact you once used too much Nadinola
before the Alabama Panther and Detroit
Red made Black Beautiful + potentially powerful

These superficial radicals only follow the lead after the black power examples of the original Panthers, the Lowndes County Black Panther Party from Alabama (whose name Huey Newton and Bobby Seale appropriated for their Black Panther Political Party) and Detroit Red (Malcolm X’s Harlem street name). Whilst the poet satirises the popular whipping boys of all nationalists, the black bourgeois, he is also full of vitriol for his former friends and allies in the Cultural Nationalist movement:

- organic food eating niggers
- polygamous niggers
- niggers w/ feudalistic fantasies
- cosmic niggers, niggers who think they militant
- cause they don’t eat spare ribs

In these restless, fast moving images and sounds the poet improvises over this community’s lack of political action, which makes them the other face of the same capitalist coin. One sees the same principle at play in this as in Baraka’s earlier work—a need to vomit out a world, a world of inadequate approximations of true being. This is a strain in Baraka’s writing that goes all the way back to his old Existentialism (with its scorn for ‘bad faith’ and ‘inauthentic’ forms of existence).

Baraka still acknowledges there are contradictions to be resolved in black American working class culture as the basis of a revolutionary culture:

- meanwhile regular
  - Black folks eat watermelons, okra, fried chicken, turnips, all from Afrika

These lines seem as ironically toned as his fast-moving attack on:

- Abstract metaphysical shit talking bores
- counter revolutionary, selfish unserious pseudo imitators, red baiters, poets forever in residence
- Black studies pimps in interesting tweed jackets

Here the black revolutionary consciousness of Malcolm X has been co-opted into useless theorising (such as Robert McCoy’s Nigger Bible), sectarianism (such as that which led to shoot outs between Los Angeles Black Panthers and U.S. Brothers) and contradictory behaviour (such as Haki Madhubati, so called hard line revolutionary, who wrote Black Pride on a fellowship at Princeton University). Baraka’s scorn now spills out into third world contexts, tying this opportunism with third world neo-
colonialism:

Frauds in leopard skin, turbaned hustlers w/skin
type rackets, colored capitalists, negro
exploiter, Afro-American Embassy gamers

Fanon said:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it
can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of
gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to
the ever present reality of the people.\textsuperscript{167}

The poet maps this territory once again, seeing fragments of dead custom walking and
breathing as living culture.

If Fanon's statement above is indicative of a native intellectual's dilemma, the
way that Baraka intends to resolve this issue is through a Marxist framework:

Where is the revolution brothers and sisters?
Where is the mobilization of the masses led
by the advanced section of the working class?
Where is the unity criticism unity. The self criticism
& criticism?

One could counter Baraka's lines with the proposition that this also is laden with
bourgeois elitest terminology, that rhetoric is also alien to the urban black working
class of America and more at home in bourgeois intellectual contexts. Baraka's
application of revolutionary colonial Marxism has missed what is most fundamental
about Cabral, who says:

It is impossible to wage a struggle under our conditions, it is impossible to
struggle effectively for the independence of a people, it is impossible to
establish effective armed struggle such as we have to establish in our land,
unless we really know our reality and unless we really start out from that
reality to wage the struggle.\textsuperscript{168}

Whilst we must be generous to Baraka, whose use of language here is clearly an
attempt to create a new space for himself (the sense of of international class struggle),
it is obvious that this new ideology is not yet adequately adjusted and attuned to the
local terrain of working class African-America.

In his later work, \textit{Poetry For The Advanced} and \textit{Reggae or Not}, his Marxist
ideology will become more closely linked to specific African-American traditions of

\textsuperscript{167} Fanon, \textit{Wretched}, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{168} Cabral, p. 44.
jazz, blues, and cultural history generally. And so a higher synthesis is developed, closer to the heart of the people.

Relevant to this is the fact that he is now highly critical of so called ‘African’ traditional practices such as those implicated in male chauvinism:

“Mama Malkia”
who want the 50 sisters for each brother
ancient hustler, yo loins long gone don’t
have to serve, abstract atavistic theories to burden
our women w/ idle nonsense.

The breath lines’ high skip over the object of ire, with subtle double meanings and barbs, work to educate more ‘backward’ brothers and sisters. Such a critique is true to the principles of Cabral’s colourful liberation based Marxist dialectic which stresses Unity through struggle. The poet puts a stop to all this nonsense demanding

Revolutionary theory
Revolutionary Development
Revolutionary party
to build a new world, in working build a
new person
new mind.

In such seemingly simple lines one suspects that an older, respected writer and activist for the people has less personal demons to wrestle with, and less to prove. In significant ways, his cultural nationalist writing did lay a necessary base from which a Black American Third World Marxist writing could emerge. Some nationalist black vernacular is newly put to work in a new political framework. A new, larger enemy stands between the black nation and full selfhood—imperialism or neo-colonialism (as two guises of capitalism).

I will end with an analysis of ‘A New Reality Is Better Than A New Movie’ in order to illustrate the poet’s new perspective—the new version of the native intellectual’s fight for the soul of his people in the particular colonial context of the United States. The poem opens, as if out of a scene from a disaster movie of the middle 1970s, with a fast moving sequence of images:

How will it go, rumbling earthquake, towering inferno, juggernaut, volcano, smashup
in reality, other than the feverish nearreal fantasy of the capitalist flunky film hacks tho they sense its reality breathing a quake inferno sear on their throats even snorts of
100% pure cocaine can't cancel the cold cut of impending death to this society.

Filmic violence releases the tensions pent up among the black colonised, providing an emotional safety valve. American Capitalism exploits these tensions and profits from it, keeping the people ignorant of the real reasons they need such escapism. The films are the opium of the masses, while well-paid Hollywood hacks snort expensive 'pure cocaine'.

the joint blows up every hour and a half for two dollars and fifty cents.
They have taken the niggers out to lunch, for a minute, made us partners (nigger charlie) or surrogates (boss nigger) for the horror.

The poet interrogates those most affected by such capitalist 'false consciousness', in a string of questions reminiscent of his earlier 'Poem for Half-White College Students':

How will it go, does it reach you, getting up, sitting on the side of the bed, getting ready to go to work. Hypnotized by the machine, and the cement floor

Such long, show a poet attempting to create filmic sequences of the everyday material life of the black proletariat sufferer. Like Godard's films of the same period, this is a verbal counter-cinema to reflect real lived conditions, and to awaken a revolutionary consciousness of contradictions.

the jungle treachery of trying to survive with no money in a money world, of making the boss 100,000 for every 200 dollars you get, and then having his brother get you for the rent, and if you want to buy the car you helped build, your downpayment paid for it,

The poet seems to be holding a regular conversation with his black peers, not trying to impress or overwhelm them, but presenting in a simple form Marx's theory of surplus value and the exploitation of labour. He asks them provocatively:

If you don't like it, what you gonna do about it. That was the question we asked each other, & still right regularly need to ask. You don't like it? Whatcha gonna do about it??

One notes here how revolution is cultivated, moulded and disciplined in this part of the poem, as opposed to his earlier wild, joyous idealism that saw blackness exploding in the world to revolutionise it, a kind of spontaneous combustion of black spiritual good over white metaphysical evil. Now the process of decolonisation is more complex, but still possible:

They can't even show you thinking or demanding the new socialist reality, it's the ultimate tidal wave. When all over the planet, men and women, with heat in their hands, demand that society be planned to include the lives and self-determination of all the people ever to live.
This relatively straight-forward (but ideological) language is offered as a raw material that workers might pick up and—with quiet, collective strength—use to build a bridge to revolution. Of course one recognises a certain idealism in this view of the proletariat.

That is
the scalding scenario with a cast of just under two billion that they dare not even whisper.

It's called, "We Want It All... The Whole World!"

Here the poet becomes more impassioned (he cannot restrain himself any longer!) in this script for an alternative narrative that would truly represent a disaster for capitalism.

He reminds the people in fast repetitive lines that they have nothing to lose but their chains:

think somebody gonna hold you back
hold you down, downer than you been held
which aint even in it, is it. not downer than we been held cause
we been held down, like down, down and dirty we been held way down.

The poet changes tack in the next section of the work, illustrating how, in the material world, what Louis Althusser would call the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ shape our thinking. This is a lesson in media studies:

cause they put words in schools, radios, newspapers, televisions
words coming out of the heroic hero’s mouth heroically, the happy cop,
the strong sensitive cop, the tall cop, the cop whose father wanted him to be lawyer
and he’s gonna make it one day type.

Then the contradiction with the lived reality in black communities:
Are these the same gentle goodguy heroes who killed the little
14 year old in bed stay, the 12 year old in queens, the 18 year old in staten island,

The poet asks the people:
Yet when you hear the dictatorship of the proletariat. You don’t know. You aint sure
You heard about hitler, and franco. The daily star ledger news courier times bulletin tells you
die
dictatorship is bad. All but the dictatorship bein run now, the dictatorship of the minority

Baraka, as poet, is still an outsider to the people here. He acknowledges their fears of communism (again a product of the media), but one wonders if he is fully engaging here with the depth of the black working class alienation that leads to the apathy and despair he is trying to shake loose.

One might turn some of the poet’s questioning on himself. Does he recognise
that what is possible for himself, as a member of the intellectual class, is not so easily accomplished by the black proletariat? Contradictions that call for individual action from an intellectual disaffected with his own class do not necessarily create the immediate and collective response that the poet seeks from the black working class. And one feels that the language, in places, reverts to a romanticised, European Marxist terminology:

But listen, we are the producers of wealth, the factories land and money are created by the creators, the workers, the laborer in the mills, on the land it is the people who must own what shall be owned. What creates food and clothing and shelter for the Great Majority must be owned by that great majority. The workers must own what is necessary for the whole of society to live.

While the message and poetry here are stirring in their classic Marxist idealism—their long breath lines and ideologically confident, declamatory utterances—one suspects that one rhetoric has been replaced by another, equally remote from the lived realities of the people. The poet has yet to develop a strong black working class voice which will bring his Marxist views into the specific locale of what one might call the African-American colony in America. As Julius Nyerere said:

Socialism is international; its ideas and beliefs relate to man in society, not just to Tanzanian man in Tanzania, or African man in Africa. But just because it is an universal concept so it must also relate to Tanzanian man in Tanzania. And if it is to do this, it must be able to encompass us as we are—as our geography and our history have made us. 169

One does not hear a distinctly African-American Marxism in these lines, even if the familiar energy of “Power to the People!” chants can be heard buried under the ideological formulas:

the goal of our revolution is so the people can rule
the goal of our revolution is so the people can rule
the ultimate goal of socialist revolution is so the great majority of the people
the masses of people
can rule

But one can always have confidence that this brilliantly talented poet will continue to develop. Like Fanon’s intellectual in his revolutionary phase, the poet is forever in

169 Nyerere, p. 3.
transition, developing and growing into a politics and ideology with which to free the
black nation, and far less importantly at this stage, free himself:
the dictatorship of the proletariat
think about that
the dictatorship of the proletariat

At the fourth stage of Fanon’s teleology Baraka is ready to make enter a new stage of
beyond the Enlightenment self and its subjectivity, into a wider Marxist objectivity.
As always, there are strains still to resolve between the highly individualised creative
intellectual and the social collective, between sharply focused political aims and what
we might call the ‘linguistic collective’ (the broad potential of language that Baraka
explored in his earlier poetry—one spectrum of it in his avant-garde phase). This is not
merely a call for a return to more ‘aesthetic’ pleasures, but rather a question about
political poetry. The narrowing of language and form in some of the later poetry is a
perfectly appropriate discourse in relation to Baraka’s changed political aims; but if
we are to see political poetry in relation to its audience, then the discourse looks less
appropriate, less effective. The question is: Does Marxist poetry have to represent
another specialisation (or narrowing), or can it in some way represent a dialectical
synthesis that encompasses and incorporates the most important elements of earlier
stages? These are some of the issues that will confront Baraka as he moves from the
poem, ‘TODAY’.
Epilogue

I regret that this thesis could not cover the material I have developed more comprehensively. I read many Baraka works that I could not cover, and completely side-stepped his even more influential drama. There was simply no space within the confines of this project. I have tried to pick representative work which illustrates each of the main stages of this important writer’s development.

The over-all curve of this development is what is most important to me because it seems to have particular points of connection with New Zealand’s cultural situation. We in New Zealand are facing similar social, and political difficulties. The South Pacific Island people, my own tangata pasifika (many of us residents now in New Zealand), suffer in our new ‘home’ with the memories of colonial oppression received in the Islands, and which is our continued battle to find a unique Polynesian identity. But even more so in New Zealand, the Maori, Tungata whenua (the peoples of the land—the first peoples of New Zealand), are disregarded and suffer colonial damnation within Aotearoa (New Zealand). For both groups of related Polynesians the legacy of this South Pacific colonialism is ill-health, poor housing, academic under-achievement, substance abuse and dependency, violence, and other crime. But with this painful colonial inheritance comes a fierce spirit, a determination, and a character that belies our peoples’ material struggles. This reminds me of the richness of the African-American peoples’ spirit in the face of continued oppression in the United States.

By looking at the curve of Amiri Baraka’s career as a template for Frantz Fanon’s intellectual, I have seen many parallels, though there remain important differences between the types of oppression experienced by the African-American people and the people of the South Pacific. Although I do not feel a need to apologise for reading Baraka’s work in a political context, I have agonised over the attempt to balance penetrating literary analysis with considerations that appear to go well beyond purely ‘literary’ concerns. My primary concern was to balance Baraka’s wonderful poetry with an analysis that always took the poetry into the material problems the author was exploring. I do not feel that I have found answers through studying Baraka’s work, but feel I have clarified certain questions. The good thing is Amiri Baraka will continue to create new work that will shake up everything, including this thesis, that is said about his poetry to date.
This is one of the reasons this thesis will not end with a formal conclusion. Many questions are yet to be resolved. The living author’s work has not ended. Fanon’s native intellectual has evolved from the ‘suicide note’ (or at least a ‘preface’ to one) of a divided self, into a singer of blue songs for the damned of the earth—writing a new preface to a new world, building through Cabral’s unity and struggle, Marxist world revolution.
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Spirit Reach, Newark: Jihad Productions, 1972.
reggae or not!, New York: Contact II Publications, 1981.
Discography

(A brief sampling of musical recordings which I feel have informed my reading of Amiri Baraka’s poetry)

Albert Ayler. *Albert Ayler in Greenwich Village*, Impulse, 32XD-621 CD.
Ornette Coleman. *Free Jazz*, Atlantic, 781 347-2 13 64-2 CD.
John Coltrane. *A Love Supreme*, MCA, DMCL 1648 CD.
John Coltrane. *Interstellar Space*, Impulse, GRP 11102 CD.
Miles Davis. *Bitches Brew*, Columbia, G2K 40577 2CD.
Miles Davis. *Live Evil*, Columbia, COL 48525 2 2CD.
Eric Dolphy. *Out to Lunch*, Blue Note, CPD 0777 74624 21 CD.
Thelonious Monk. *Standards*, Columbia, CK 45148 CD.
Other Texts


Davis, Angela. If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance, Angela Y. Davis, Rachell Magee, the Soledad Brothers, and Other Political Prisoners, London: Orbach and Chambers, 1971.


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