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AMBIGUITIES IN AMIRI BARAKA'S BLACK NATIONALIST MESSAGE AND HIS EXPERIMENTS WITH FORM: *THE SLAVE* AND *GREAT GOODNESS OF LIFE*

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Abstract

In spite of the strong association of the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka with a compelling and unyielding Black nationalist message, it needs to be reiterated that there is a great deal of interest in experimentation with artistic and dramatic form as well as a tempering dose of ambiguity about the message in Baraka's plays. The assumption that Baraka crystallized his perceptions and then set out to illustrate them in his plays can blind us to innumerable complexities of his work, both in the message and in the dramatic form. The essay analyses The Slave to show that the protagonist Walker Vessels is not a confident advocate of a militant nationalism but a man who is caught in a series of contradictions that he attempts to destabilize. Great Goodness of Life is discussed as a play that subversively employs expressionistic dramatic methods to reveal their unsuitability for African Americans

In spite of the strong association of the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka with a compelling and unyielding Black nationalist agenda, it needs to be reiterated that there is a great deal of interest in experimentation with artistic and dramatic form as well as a tempering dose of ambiguity about the message in Baraka's plays. The assumption that Baraka crystallized his perceptions and then set out to illustrate them in his plays can blind us to innumerable complexities of his work, both in the message and in the dramatic form.

The Black Arts movement had provided a new perspective by insisting on a black view of the world. This new perspective demanded a debunking of the white American forms in search of what Baraka called the "post-American form," and that led him to try out various dramatic styles and explore the relationship between form and content (Baraka, *Raise* 34). By making their art the cultural corollary of the political and social struggles, the Black Arts theorists

challenged the stereotyped definitions of art and made the issue open to new formulations. Their insistence on a black perception of the world and of literary activities as the only valid perspective for the black artist had a liberating influence. The movement opened a large array of questions about the living connection of literature with life, and issues such as the functionality of art, the definition of racial identity, and the forms of art that not only recreate but also help construct viable African American subjectivities.

What follows in this essay is an attempt to illustrate the complexities in the message of black nationalism as well as the experimentation with form through discussions of two of his plays, *The Slave* (1964)and *Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show* (1966).*The Slave*, having been paired with *Dutchman* in the publication of *Dutchman and The Slave* in 1964, is often seen as the fulfilment of the prophecy of black enlightenment and militancy made by Clay, the protagonist of *Dutchman*, but this interpretation misses much of the struggle with the idea of black identity and black nationalism in the plays. *Great Goodness* is chosen here to exemplify Baraka's experimentation with form because this play, interestingly, uses expressionistic techniques to address the struggles with identity, rather than the more overtly "black" theatrical elements that he used in other plays such as *Slave Ship*.

Projecting and Subverting the Black/White Binary:*The Slave*

Walker Vessels, the protagonist of *The Slave*, is either seen as the natural extension or as the obverse of Clay in *Dutchman*. John Lindberg sees the two plays as stages in Baraka's vision of the race-war: in the earlier play the white wins and in the latter the black. He sees Vessels as the obverse as well as an advance over Clay. The insistence, however, on seeing the nationalistic message of these plays in a linear progression can blind us to the innumerable details of doubt, complexity, and ambiguity in the issues that emanate from militant nationalism. As in *Dutchman*, in *The Slave* too the nationalistic message is weighed down and framed by the need to explore the contradictions inherent within the black identity. In *The Slave* the declaration of race-war that forms the uncontested backdrop of the action that is irresistibly closing in upon Grace and Easley's life, is countered and undercut by Walker Vessel's grappling with his awareness of both the divisions and the intermeshing that underlie their lives. The unambiguous statement of rebellion and an all-out war made by the framing action of the playcontains within itself the bewilderment of the three characters whose past, present and future are tangled together and this is revealed in the on-stage action of the play. The play, in fact, is doubly framed in so far as the background action of the ongoing war is itself framed by the Prologue that attempts to put the play in a wider historical and ideological perspective.

In the Prologue to *The Slave*, Walker Vessels appears as an old field slavewith white hair who raises, in a rather cryptic manner, the issues that touch upon the interpretation of the

revolutionary action. The vantage-point at which this prologue sets itself is that of indeterminacy and skepticism. Even the slave's age is indeterminate as is his identity: "I am much older than I look . . .or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem"(Jones, *Dutchman*44). An unqualified "we" and "our" mark the statements of the slave and the generalizations have the tone of transcending time and race barriers. He is apparently talking for all humanity when he says, "We live where we are, and seek nothing but ourselves"(Jones, *Dutchman*43). This seeking, however, is not invested here with any glory. It is, on the contrary, the source of sin, for because of it, "We are liars, and we are murderers. We invent death for others"(Jones,*Dutchman*43). And this corruption of seeking ourselves and inventing death for others infests both the "core of our lives" and "the crust of our stance"(Jones, *Dutchman*43). At the core there is a "deadly filth" that lies under the facade of righteousness and deep emotion. This slave, who is highly articulate and reflective, thus begins the play with a baffling and unsubstantiated condemnation of an issue central to the play, the search for individual and collective identity. It is further seen as having no possible justification, as neither its beauty, brilliance nor its rightness justifies it: "the very rightness stinks a lotta times"(Jones, *Dutchman*44). Beauty, brilliance, dignity and rightness are all suspect as so many misguided ideas. This old man talks about perspectivism and also the difficulty of arriving at the truth. "Ideas," he says, "Where they form. Or whose they finally seem to be. Yours? The other's? Mine?" Ideas are not only perspectival, they also cannot be apprehended directly, "they need judging"(Jones, *Dutchman*44). What we need, he says, is a "meta-language" which is "something not included here"(Jones, *Dutchman*45). Does the 'here' refer to the play, or to the structure of our language, or to the human nature? The reference is left ambiguous, as are many other references in the Prologue. Finally, whatever the truth arrived at, is perhaps not worthy of being cherished: "Discovering racially the funds of the universe" has a ring of futility to it (Jones, *Dutchman*45). The last reference the slave makes is to the blues singers who are seen as "moaning in their sleep, singing, man, oh, nigger, you still here . . . and takin' no shit from anybody"(Jones, *Dutchman*45). As the Prologue ends, this philosophical slave becomes more "'field-hand' sounding" and then transforms into one of the three characters in the play, Walker Vessels. There is, thus, continuity as well as disjunction between the slave of the Prologue and Walker Vessels. This makes for a highly ambiguous interpretation of the play. One can neither assume nor dismiss the ideas advanced through Vessels as the message of the play.

The two acts of the play are set in the space and time borrowed from the invading violence of the war that is taking place outside. In these two acts, Walker Vessels is a tall, thin black man aged forty years, who was a poet but is now a leader of the nationalist black rebellion. His troops are about to overtake the city where Easleys live, and he has returned to the home of his ex-wife Grace and her husband, ostensibly to take his two daughters away. Both the acts of the play take place in the living room of Easleys', where Walker holds the couple under

threat while they debate various issues concerning Walker's life. In the second act, Easley attempts to attack Walker who kills him in self-defense. Soon after, Grace is killed in the explosions that rock their house and she dies asking about her daughters. Walker leaves, saying that the daughters are dead. As he leaves, he is again transformed into the old slave that he was at the beginning of the play and a child is heard crying and screaming, thus bringing the future again into the scene but leaving all questions about it suspended in the air. For most of the play, the action on-stage is primarily verbal, a debate which erupts towards the end into physical violence. The visit to the Easley home can be seen as Walker's desperate attempt to revisit those aspects of his life that were wrenched away from him by the heightened consciousness of the black-white divide, even as the present is inexorably catching up with them and making the chasm unbridgeable. What Walker Vessels and the play are grappling with is the consciousness that what divides him from Grace also mars his sense of selfhood, leaving him unable to feel whole. The problem for Walker is to translate and justify the neat, ideological rhetoric of the revolution in the more immediate and personal terms of his life. Easley castigates him and asks, "What do you hope to change? Do you think Negroes are better people than whites . . . that they can govern a society *better* than whites?"(Jones, *Dutchman*73). Walker answers him in very practiced terms. He offers a convincing rebuttal by arguing that the white man's talk of more love and beauty is a means of deflecting attention from the hard-core power game. Immediately following on that, however, he reveals his personal despair with socio-political causes, including his own cause. "The cruelty of it, don't you understand, now?" he says, "The complete ugly horseshit cruelty of it is that there doesn't have to be a change. It'll be up to individuals on that side, just as it was supposed to be up to individuals on this side"(Jones, *Dutchman*74). The contradiction between the individual and the collective causes is, in fact, one of the overriding conflicts that are thrown up in the play. In a situation unmistakably reflective of Baraka's personal life, his divorce from a white woman who bore him two daughters, Walker expresses the dilemma Baraka might have faced: the need to define identity in terms of the race and the community, and the sense of rupture in the individual self this identification would have brought. Talking about their estrangement, Walker blames Grace for betraying him by not understanding his revolt against the white man, "I knew you, if any white person in the world could, I knew you would understand. And then you didn't"(Jones, *Dutchman*71). Walker's sense of betrayal lies in Grace's inability to raise her individual self out of its racial context. Grace's easy identification of the individual with the racial self, "I was, am, white," further confounds Walker's ability to either identify or distinguish the individual from the collective. Justifying himself to Grace, he says, "I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression, not against individuals." In the same breath he admits: "It was individuals who were doing the oppressing. It was individuals who were being oppressed"(Jones, *Dutchman*72). In Walker there is a simultaneous commitment to and disillusionment with socio-political causes. He

senses the danger inherent in the privileging of either the individual or the collective over the other. Individualism corrupts the larger, collective goals, while the racial and community definitions violate the individual. Walker certainly does not speak the language of the leader of the revolt that he is supposed to be in the play when he points to individual responsibility: "It'll be up to individuals on that side, just as it was supposed to be up to individuals on this side"(Jones, *Dutchman*74). His need to revisit Grace and Easley, the visit that constitutes the physical length and space of the play, also negates at one level, although it culminates in, their murder. At the beginning of Act I, Walker meets Grace and Easley with a gun pointed at them. At the end of Act II, Walker has killed Easley, although in self-defense, and Grace has died in the explosion that rocks their house. In the intensity of their interaction, however, Grace and Easley are as alive for Walker as is his own cause. He is unable to formulate and effect a closure of his own truths without working it out with the "other half." Walker has the felt intensity of the personal and collective goals, but he also has an undercutting skepticism about the value of "[d]iscovering racially [and individually] the funds of the universe"(Jones, *Dutchman*45).

Another major polarity in the play is that of art and action, poetry and revolutionary activism. Walker is a poet turned revolutionary leader. It is interesting that Easley's denunciation of Walker takes the form of his denunciation of Walker's poetry. "Once a bad poet always a bad poet," he says, "even in the disguise of a racist murder"(Jones, *Dutchman*54). To Easley, a white professor, everything about Walker is suspect because of his indulgence in what Easley calls bad poetry and ritual drama. To Easley, Walker's poetry is filth because it is formless and because it is tied to ends other than literary. This bad poetry, in turn, becomes the cause of Easley's indictment of everything Walker does. "Can you understand," he says, "that anything and everything you do is stupid, filthy, or meaningless! Your inept formless poetry. Hah. Poetry? A flashy doggerel for inducing all those unfortunate troops of yours to spill blood in your behalf"(Jones, *Dutchman*54). His art and his politics are, thus, mutually condemned and condemning. Easley can neither separate the two in Walker, nor is their alignment justified. He is so convinced of the falseness of both Walker's life and art that even his own death becomes subsumed within what he calls Walker's "Ritual drama"(Jones, *Dutchman*81). He dies ridiculing Walker, failing even to perceive the reality of his own death. There is ambivalence in Walker's attitude to the relationship between his art and his act, but there is also the need to discover a living relationship between the two. The ambivalence is reflected in the irony Walker directs at himself as the man who prompted the bloody situation of the war between the blacks and whites, and says, "I have killed for all times any creative impulse I will ever have by the depravity of my murderous philosophies"(Jones, *Dutchman*66). The tone here is mixed, suggesting both a sense of truth and a parody of Grace's ironical depiction of him as the "sensitive Negro poet, savior of his people, deliverer of Western idealism"(Jones, *Dutchman*62). There is, however, a more

unambiguous rejection of the "liberal lip service," of the "high aesthetic disapproval of the political"(Jones, *Dutchman*74). Walker's attempt is not so much to defend his poetry from the charge of being doggerel, as to discover the place action has in the world. His feeling that none of the white liberal intellectuals like Easley would write poetry is because they, he feels, "had moved too far away from the actual meanings of life"(Jones, *Dutchman*55). Poetry born of action might be doggerel, but poetry deprived of its source in reality loses its life spring.
Walker Vessels is not a confident advocate of a militant nationalism, but a man who is caught in a series of contradictions. His attempts to destabilize the structure of oppositional categories which have governed his life such as the binary poles of aesthetic/politics, black/white, individual/community, mask/face are sometimes successful and sometimes not. What is revealed through the play is not the projection of an envisioned blackness but a sense of bewilderment at the contradictions in such a project.In *The Slave*, as in *Dutchman*, the need to create "poems that kill," the art that has the force of direct action is explored in all its complexity. In *Dutchman*, Clay holds forth a substitution of action for art, while the play works towards sharpening of art as a cutting weapon. Revealing a dialectical relationship between art and action, the play presents a nuanced reading in which artistic representation and "real" action are seen as competing strategies of power. *The Slave* revolves around the same issue and holds a debate about it at the level of structure and content. The play seeks to explode the notion of a pure, universal aesthetics by exposing the multiple connections between cultural and political structures of power.

Baraka's Search for a "post-American form": Using White Western Forms to Expose their Hegemony

The widely divergent views on the structural aspects of Baraka's plays illustrate the openness of the issue within black critical theory. Kimberly W. Benston and Werner Sollors, two early critics to study the Baraka canon, offered strikingly opposed readings of the structural aspects of his work. Benston, in his book *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*, privileges the formal evolution within his work, making it central to his interpretation of Baraka. He observes that Baraka's works are "formally inventive and offer a variety of theatrical experiences unmatched by any contemporary American dramatist . . .. As Baraka's vision of a liberated and separate black nation became more important in his world-view, his experimentation with dramatic form continued with increased vigor"(Benston209). Sollors in his book, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a Populist Modernism*, credits Baraka with bringing to an end the predominance of naturalism in black literature but finds his plays imitative of avant-garde European forms. "The new Black literature of the 1960s," according to him, "was often characterised by an overtly ethnocentric content expressed in dadaist, surrealist, expressionist, and Beat forms." He says it is "puzzling that many writers of the Black Arts

Movement were formally Western avant-gardists, although they expressed strong ethnic exhortation" (Sollors193, 194). However, in Baraka's case, he admitted that the plays revealed "a strategy of inversion . . . by rejecting the old literary prototypes, yet continuing to work within them"(Sollors206). Baraka does indeed use the European dramatic forms but, far from being imitative, he often uses these in a critical, indeed subversive, manner. As the following analysis of *Great Goodnessof Life: A Coon Show*demonstrates, he employs both realistic and expressionist techniques but problematizes the view of self and "reality" that these forms create. His play leads to an eventual realisation of the dangers inherent in these modes of perception to a viable construction of black selfhood.

Baraka's experiments with dramatic form are also expressive of his attempt to liberate the concept of subjectivity from the confines of individuality. As a Beat poet he had written poetry in which he explored the inner life and spiritual experience, poetry described by Werner Sollors as "spontaneous, individual, and purpose-free" (Sollors186). This imaginative level of experience was far removed from the existing social and material conditions, and the distance between the two, the imaginative and the material, was seen as a measure of the expressive success of the work of art. Baraka's growing concern with the racial and ethnic issues of the African Americans brought a radical change to his ideas of art and its relation to material environment. Mediating between the two was his transformed notion of African American subjectivity. In his essays written after 1965, when he moved to Harlem and committed himself to the Black Arts Repertory Theater, Baraka repeatedly elaborates the idea that the fulfilment of individual African American identity crucially depends on the attainment of cultural identity. Blacks striving for an individual fulfilment are severely indicted. Baraka proclaims that in the "racial struggle, the only 'individuals' would be people who did not have to worry about it [individuality]"(Jones, *Home* 119). The idea of a committed art brought with it an expansion of the concept of identity: "The purpose of our writing is to create the nation . . . . Create an individual ego, that is one measure . . . . Create the nation and the muscle of that work is, you see? a gigantic vision"(Baraka, *Raise* 121). African American realistic drama was proving incapable of going beyond the sordid material conditions to express the specificity of the lives of the black people both in individual and community terms. Early plays such as *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964) had already incorporated elements of symbolism in the dominant realistic mode. Baraka's concern with the expression and denial of black subjectivity continues in his revolutionary plays. There is also the expansion of the notion of subjectivity from the limiting frame of the individual to that of the community. The dramatic embodiment of black subjectivity, however, needed experimentation with forms.

Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show, written in 1966 and published as part of *Four BlackRevolutionary Plays* in 1969, is an indictment of the goals of black bourgeois individualism. By widening the vision to the surrounding malevolence and absurdity that can

explode in the black person's face at any time, the play reveals the black middle class dream of a colour-free individualism as tragi-comic and unsustainable. The interest of the play lies in the way it counterpoises a narrow "realistic" worldview with expressionistic techniques to expose the role of these modes in the formation of distorted and severely limiting construction of black identity.

In a Kafkaesque trial, Court Royal "a middle aged Negro man, gray haired," is summoned to face trial for a crime that he does not know he has committed. Accusing him of the crime is the disembodied "Voice of the Judge," which charges Court Royal with "harboring a murderer"(Jones, *Four Black* 43, 46). Court Royal responds by securely asserting his innocence, and as a proof talks about his social standing: "I work at the Post Office. I'm no criminal. I've worked at the Post Office for thirty-five years. I'm a supervisor"(Jones, *Four Black*47). Court's repeated protestations grow increasingly desperate as Voice insists that he plead guilty, and offers him the services of the court attorney, who is led in bound in chains and propelled by motors. To Court's horror, this robotic "house slave" turns out to be his friend and personal attorney, John Breck. Another voice, that of "Young Victim," begins to shout in the darkness accusing Court of betraying him. As Court begins to faintly recognize this voice, his confidence in his perception of reality begins to leave him and when he wants to know where he is, "Voice" replies: "HEAVEN (Pause) WELCOME"(Jones, *Four Black*53). Court's already rattled senses are next invaded by a sequence of three incidents, which confront him with aspects of reality that he is desperately trying to repress. In the first incident, two white hooded men push a "greasy-headed nigger lady," screaming and biting, across the stage. Court dissociates himself from her saying that she "drinks and stinks and brings our whole race down" and the Voice orders Hoods 1 and 2 to "grind her into poison jelly"(Jones, *Four Black* 56).In the second incident, a dead black man named Prince, perhaps a reference to Malcolm X, is brought in dead on a stretcher. Court again desperately tries to distance himself from the course of the militant nationalism by surrounding himself with images of the middle class life: "I have a car. A home . . . . A club . . . . I've done nothing wrong. I have a family. I work in the Post Office. I'm a supervisor"(Jones, *Four Black*56). In the climactic third incident, Court is faced with a surrealistic image with rapidly changing faces of Malcolm, Patrice Lumumba, King, Garvey, and "Dead nigger kids killed by police." All these faces are meant to be one face, that of blackness, which he is asked to recognize as the "face of the murderer you've sheltered all these years"(Jones, *Four Black*57). Court hysterically denies knowing that face till he breaks down and in a moment of agony cries out his connection with the images: "Oh, son . . . son . . . dear God, my flesh, forgive me . . . . My sons"(Jones, *Four Black*58). Court's nightmare, however, has only just begun. Voice first informs him that he will be sentenced, and then, in a sudden reversal, that he will be spared because he can see "the clearness of your fate, and the rightness of it"(Jones, *Four Black*61). For this he has to kill the "murderer," who, as Voice explains, is already dead. It is the "myth

of the murderer" that Court is being asked to kill. Court Royal's soul can absolve itself of guilt and become "white as snow" only after he performs the "cleansing rite." In an anti-climactic scene at the end of the play, Court Royal performs the rite by killing the young man who turns out to be his son, and then proceeds to reclaim his little world that came so close to being destroyed. The play closes with Court in a bright mood, with his soul "white as snow," setting out with his bowling bag to play in the alley. As he is "frozen" in this image, the lights dim to "BLACK"(Jones, *Four Black*63).

The play has an allegorical structure but the interpretation of the allegory is problematized. The idea that allegory produces a stable structure of meaning is undercut, and the play yields meanings that are diametrically opposed to each other. Crucial terms in the play, such as "guilty," "free," "heaven," "white as snow," are used in an ironical manner to invert their surface meanings. Court Royal is initially held "guilty" of harbouring the young man, but his real "guilt" lies in killing him. He proclaims himself "free" after his surrender to Voice, but this is really his most dehumanising entrapment. The play portrays Voice of the Judge, with its implications of impartiality and justice, as the malicious, manipulating and all-powerful god in an ironical "HEAVEN." At the other end of the allegorical structure are the images of black nationalists, of "Malcolm [X], Partrice [Lumumba], Rev. King, Garvey [and] Dead nigger kids killed by the police"(Jones, *Four Black*56). The spirit of black nationalism is more specifically embodied in Young Man who joins the stream of "murderers" Court Royal is accused of harbouring. It is this black spirit, in the shape of Young Man who is his own child, that Court Royal has to kill to purchase his freedom.

Court Royal, a "middle aged Negro man," is caught between these two worlds represented by Voice and Young Man. He is, however, pathetically unaware of this deep conflict underlying his apparently blameless life of eight hours of work, "then home, and television, dinner, then bowling"(Jones, *Four Black*56). Voice jolts his self-assurance at the beginning of the play by calling him "nigger" and "black lunatic." While Voice abuses him for being black, Young Man curses him as "half-white coward"(Jones, *Four Black*50). Court has a desperate need to identify with the white visions of happiness and innocence. In addition to this, he has pretensions of neutrality and distance from all that goes on around him: "I have nothing to do with any of this. I am a good man"(Jones, *Four Black*56). Voice's accusations compel him to acknowledge, for a brief moment, his essential involvement and complicity. Court eventually loses this insight, but not before the true nature of his crime, not of sheltering Young Man but of betraying and killing him, is made evident to the audience.

Is Court Royal guilty or is he being framed? If he is guilty, what is his crime? He searches in the material details of his life for a clue to his crime, and finding none, proclaims his innocence. When faced with the composite image of the black nationalist spirit, he momentarily glimpses his "crime" of betraying his own people: "Oh, son . . . dear God, my flesh, forgive me"(Jones, *Four Black*58). He is accused by Voice of harbouring a murderer,

and Young Man holds him guilty of letting "them take me"(Jones, *Four Black*50). Voice's inexorable assumption of Court's guilt ironically becomes the means of revealing the other perspective on his crime, that of refusing to acknowledge his connection with the black people. This further accentuates the ambiguity in the allegorical pattern in the play. The structure of guilt and expiation is used by Voice to subvert any possibility of true redemption for Court. He is promised the "cleansing of guilt, and the bestowal of freedom," along with the gun made of diamonds and gold in return for killing Young Man. Young Man symbolises the ideals of black nationalism that Court has betrayed. Court must, however, completely renounce any sympathy with the black cause and deal the last blow to it before he can be permitted to have a "soul as white as snow."

The knowledge and insights that Court fails to achieve are precisely those that the play has gained. His claims of independence, neutrality, and innocence come to naught when the omnipotent Voice implicates him in, and then compels him to commit, the murder. Voice needs Court to fire the last shot to kill the "myth of the murderer," "his last fleeting astral projection," because although the white oppressor can kill black bodies, blacks alone can kill their spirit" (Jones, *Four Black* 62).Court buys his constricted version of freedom at the cost of murdering his past and future, and severing all historical and familial links with his own people. The change anticipated in Court Royal's life is subverted by his myopic vision. Young Man tells him "You're here with me, with us, all of us, and you can't understand," but Court continues to yearn after the white visions of happiness, freedom and purity. At the end, his joy in his "freedom" is undercut: "white as snow" acquires a new meaning when the closing scene shows him "frozen" and the lights dim to "BLACK"(Jones, *Four Black* 62) .

The play employs expressionistic techniques in a double-edged manner. First, they are used to reveal the layers of reality hidden behind the "I work at the Post-Office" version of subjectivity that Court Royal cherishes, and then to expose these as subverting any possibility of a viable identity because they rob the world of materiality and morality. The scene in which Voice tries to prevail upon Court to kill the murderer is a brilliant example of how shuffling the levels of reality, along with linguistic tropes, can distort and erase perceptions and connections that Baraka envisions as crucial to African Americans. Court's confession of his "crime," of harbouring the "murderer," is the one moment when the play holds out the possibility that Court will transcend his limited, threatened individuality to unite with the larger collective identity. This moment, however, is lost when he is offered reprieve in exchange of giving "the final instruction"--Voice's euphemism for killing the "murderer." This, as Voice explains to Court, is merely a ritual, a ceremony because the "murderer" is already "dead": "The murderer is dead. This is his shadow." Voice further informs him that this "act was done by you a million years ago. This is only a memory of it." He thus commits history to a perpetual cycle of self-destruction for the blacks (Jones, *Four Black*61). Voice plays upon the notions of shadow and reality of the "murder" of the "murderer" and Court

Royal is lost in this world of mirrors. He fails to realize that his "guilt" of blackness cannot be expiated, that his soul can never be "white as snow," and that he is historically fated to be a victim. He is caught up in the chimerical notion of bourgeois individuality which will keep him tied to the cycle of being a victim and the murderer of his own children and of his future. Stylistically, the play exposes the distorting effect of both "realistic" and expressionistic modes of perception on Court Royal's construction of subjectivity. The narrow realistic perception keeps him trapped in the material details of his life, while the expressionistic means used by Voice make him lose sense of the materiality of his actions. In counterpointing Court Royal's severely limited and contemptible perception of bourgeois middle class "reality" with a ruthless and absurd dominant "reality" expressionistically conveyed through "Voice of the Judge," Baraka exposes both these modes of perception as positively destructive for the black perception of selfhood and the world. The meaning in the play emerges from the clash of, the disjunction between, the two modes that embody the two different constructions of "reality." Baraka deploys and then undercuts both the "realistic" and the expressionistic modes to reveal their unsuitability for African Americans, and thus points to the need to evolve new forms to construct a more positive and viable sense of black selfhood.

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