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## “How You Sound??”: Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz

*A true tradition is not the witnessing of a past closed and finished; it is a living force that animates and informs the present.*  
—Igor Stravinsky

*And Rhythm and Blues is “new” as well. It is contemporary and has changed, as jazz has remained the changing same.*  
—Amiri Baraka

**T**his essay is taken from a work in process on the contemporary black avant-garde writers Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed and their developing conceptions about race and ethnicity, racial politics, racial art, racial poetics and racial aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> This selection comes from a chapter on jazz, dealing with the highly individual ways in which these two authors utilize, emulate, and translate this African American expressive form into another: African American literature. They draw on the jazz tradition to expand, modernize, and vitalize the black literary tradition. I will restrict my discussion to Amiri Baraka’s relationship to free jazz, a 1960s experimental music. Although this dissonant and seemingly chaotic music is based on no “predetermined, underlying harmonic structure” (Carr 174)—that is, no traditional chord progressions—it is still rooted in the familiar sounds of black music, especially the earthy and funky sounds of blues and gospel. Some of the major musicians and/or composers of free jazz movement are John Coltrane, tenor sax; Albert Ayler, tenor sax; Cecil Taylor, piano; Archie Shepp, tenor sax; Ornette Coleman, alto sax; Sun Ra, keyboards; Henry Grimes, bass; and Sonny Murray, drums. Like white avant-garde contemporary music, free jazz self-consciously incorporates

noise; however, this noise originates in the black tradition. Unlike white avant-garde music, which is self-consciously arbitrary—free jazz is rooted in the African American audio past; that is, more specifically, it is rooted in the shouts of the black church and the hollers of the field, sounds saturated with the history of slavery. Furthermore, from its inception to the present, extramusical sounds, such as shouts, screams, and grunts, have been associated with the black musical tradition; in fact, they have been an integral part of that tradition, from the anonymous singers of the spirituals to James Brown to Albert Ayler to almost any contemporary black pop singer. In essence, the music is a contemporary way into African American history and tradition, into ethnic identity through sound and form, into what Baraka has called “the changing same,” that cultural continuity that persists in changing forms; what Eliot calls “the present moment of the past,” (*Selected Essays* 11).<sup>2</sup>

Although rich with the sounds of the African American past, free jazz provides the contemporary black voice that Baraka in the 1960s wanted to incorporate into his art. Baraka says of free jazz: “The new music reinforces the most valuable memories of a people but at the same time creates new forms, new modes of expression, to more precisely reflect contemporary experience!” (*Black Music* 267). Baraka believes that black music captures the ever changing voice of the black masses in its forms. It is there in the music that one finds the current vernacular of the African American people. In the 1960s Baraka’s project became the translation of the black free jazz voice into one for his poetry, a project similar to that of Langston Hughes. Throughout his career, Hughes kept changing verse styles—first blues, then bebop, and then free jazz—to catch the transmuting voice of the African American masses.

Moreover, this essay examines Baraka’s actual performances of his poems, his speaking and reading voice, his delivery style; in short, what Charles Bernstein calls the “audiotext . . . the poet’s acoustic performance” (13) instead of the imagined “sound” of the written page, the conventional subject of literary analysis. In other words, I analyze how Baraka literally sounds: his actual voice, his voicing of poems, his changing sound over the course of his career, and the reasons for these changes. Since, like jazz performances, no two readings are exactly alike, I am concentrating on specific performances of Baraka’s work. To demonstrate the radical shift in Baraka’s sound, let us compare the sound of the early “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” (1964) to the later “Dope” (1978). From these performances we can gauge the impact of jazz and the vernacular on Baraka’s art. The African American oral tradition offers a number of performance styles; styles that embody traditions and values, not because of an essential nature but because of associations over time.

The reading of “Black Dada Nihilismus,” published in *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), occurred at a writer’s conference at Asilomar in Monterey, California in August 1964, shortly after the publication of this new volume of poetry. Clapping politely after each poem, the audience for the reading was mostly white, including such luminaries as Kenneth Rexroth, Harvey Swados, Nat Hentoff and the then unknown young black poet and novelist Al Young. Even though the purpose of the

poem was to attack white Western institutions, it uses Eliotic language, rhythms, and imagery to accomplish this end. Elegiac lines like “in this place, a window on a dark / warehouse” and “Where the minds packed in / straw” (*Reader* 72) echo the Eliot of *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. In other words, it seems he is using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, using the King’s English to slay the king.

At this point there is the question of audience for the poem. Because it is a high modernist allusive poem, it is not likely that it would incite the masses into the street, since they would not know the allusions. It seems, instead of inciting the masses, at best, the poem identifies the enemy. Perhaps, since the poem is ambiguous (even though it identifies with the black masses, it does not want to kill the whites: “we beg him [John Paul Sartre] die, / before he is killed” [*Reader* 71]). It does not embrace the black vernacular; it moves toward the black chant and is more rhythmic than the other poems in *The Dead Lecturer* volume yet it is written in white standard English, the language of power and literature. The closest it comes to the vernacular is “got it, Baby!” (*Reader* 73). Even though, in the poem, he mentions, the “Black scream / and chant” (*Reader* 72), he does not employ these black forms in this poem. He has not found “the huge black voice,” the voice informed by the vernacular, the chant and scream. Moreover, perhaps, ironically, the performance style drew heavily on white middle-class literary and verbal conventions of the time. That is, Baraka’s reading is virtually indistinguishable from any other mainstream literary writer of the time—he manifests no black ethnic markers: in essence, he reads just like a white man, the literary model of the period.

Interestingly, even though he read “Black Dada” on November 26 that same year, with the New York Art Quartet, a free jazz group par excellence, brimming with the new sound, Baraka’s sound doesn’t change: there is no visible impact on the poetry by the music; the music has not penetrated the words. In fact, the reading is even more subdued and less rhythmic, less chantlike than the Asilomar reading. In short, it is not a call to action. I am not suggesting that black writers must employ an ethnic vernacular to be authentic but that Baraka mounts his attack without any ethnic markers, indicates an alienation from the very tradition, history, and ethnic community that he desires to a part of.<sup>3</sup> This poem shows the same formal contradictions one finds in Claude McKay’s poetry. In the 1920s in such poems as “If We Must Die” McKay attacks the white man in the white man’s form, the English sonnet and in conventional nineteenth-century diction. He asserts: “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (Randall 63). McKay has not made the sonnet his own, has not incorporated either his personal or cultural voice. In the 1960s Baraka attacks white institutions in white avant-garde forms, conventions, and diction. In part Baraka was drawn to the white avant-garde because of their rebellion against white middle-class society, but they were using white forms and ideology for their revolt. At this point Baraka has not found the right black form and ideology for his rebellion. In 1966, when Baraka is a cultural nationalist, he boldly observes, “Form and content are both mutually expressive of the whole. . . . We want different con-

tents and different forms because we have different feelings. We are different peoples" (*Black Music* 185).

Baraka's later poem, "Dope" (the version we are examining was recited in 1978 at Columbia University) is both written and delivered in a black style. In this poem Baraka renders his Marxist message in the sermonic style of the black Baptist preacher, drawing on a black performance style. Unlike the 1981 rendition of "Dope," with David Murray and Steve McCall, there is no musical accompaniment. Baraka says, "You can be the music yourself. You don't have to have a band" (Feinstein 77). Even though the David Murray version enhanced the poem with musical nuance, by underscoring musical themes, Baraka's reading without music embodied the black musical style; that is, at this point, he has internalized it. The key question here is why does he move from one performance style to another? And what is the significance of black music, especially, free jazz, in this transformation? Why did he move from "The Black Dada Nilhilismus" sound to the "Dope" sound? What does this change in sound mean?

In his major Beat poetic statement of 1959, "How You Sound," Baraka observes that "HOW YOU SOUND?? Is what we recent fellows are up to. How we sound" (*Reader* 16). Significantly, in 1959 all these recent fellows—the "we," Baraka speaks of—are Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, etc. (*Reader* 17). That is, all of these fellows are white avant-garde poets, unconsciously creating a white avant-garde sound, a sound that Baraka decides, over time, does not express his true self, that is, his black ethnic self; hence does not reflect his and his people's history. Elsewhere, I have discussed Baraka's need to cast off the white self, the white sound, the white voice, and achieve a black self and sound.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on his past, Baraka observes: "Having read all of whities's books, I wanted to be an authority on them. Having been taught that art was 'what white men did,' I almost became one, to have a go at it" (*Home* 10). In other words, studying white literature has turned him into a white man, somebody with white attitudes. Moreover, Baraka says more specifically about the Beat days: "Yeh, I was some colored bohemian liberal living on the Lower East side in heaven, yet I could not sound like that" (*Autobiography* 278). For Baraka "sound" is a sign of authenticity, of place: where you come from; he no longer wants to sound white, to come from that place. In the culture nationalist essay collection, *Raise Race Rays Raze* (1971), Baraka states, "American poetry reflects American lives. The various kinds, in America, from whatever voices. Each voice is a place, in America, in the totality of its image" (17). Furthermore, Baraka says of black music:

Only Negro music because, perhaps, it drew its strength and beauty out of the depths of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the 'lowest classes' of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class and the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society.

(*BLUES PEOPLE* 131)

Baraka was trying to shed his black middle-class self, which he felt did not include the voice of the people, the unassimilated voice of the black masses. For him this is not a battle that began with the white avant-garde; this is a battle that began back in his childhood. Commenting on his adolescence, Baraka observes, “Having been the only ‘middle-class’ chump running with the Hillside Place bads, I was ‘saved’ from them by my parents’ determination and the cool scholarship game which turns stone killers pure alabaster by graduation time” (*Home* 10). His parents, especially his mother, the traditional figure of indoctrination, and the academic system wanted to turn Baraka into a white man. This is not terribly different from the colonial system, through its schools, turning its subjects into little Englishmen or little Frenchmen. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) the third world theorist Frantz Fanon observes:

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 savages—an all-white truth. There is identification—that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude. . . . Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. (147, 148)

In “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Alternate Ending,” from the short story collection *Tales* (1967), Baraka explores the social and ethnic significance of middle-class pronunciation. Louise McGhee, the middle-class and college educated mother in this semi-autobiographical story, is on the one hand fighting racism, defending her son against racist teachers, but, on the other, enforcing the values of white-middle class society by insisting on white middle-class pronunciation and behavior. She asks her son,

“Is Miss Orbach the woman who told you to say sangwich instead of sammich,” Louise McGhee giggled.

“No, that was Miss Columbe.”

“Sangwich, my Christ. That’s worse than sammich. Though you better not let me hear you saying sammich either . . . like those Davises.”

“I don’t say sammich, mamma.”

“What’s the word then?”

“Sandwich” (39).

In this story the protagonist is carefully drilled by his mother to pronounce white and become white, take on white values. A language, dialect, embodies a way of life—what Baraka would call “an attitude” about the world. In another story, from *Tales*, “The Death of Horatio Alger,” Baraka discusses the consequences of another middle-class mother’s imposed education. The main character, Mickey, does not want to be the thing that his unnamed mother has made. Being middle class has deprived him of his manhood. In a schoolyard fight he does not fight back but simply curses, uses words, that is, is an artist. His father encourages him to fight back, be a man. His mother “stopped the fight finally, shuddering at the thing she’d made” (48), a white writer who can curse but not act. In the early years Baraka

could only envision the bourgeois artist as ineffectual. It is not until the Black Art and Marxist periods that he came to the idea of the artist as effectual, acting in the political world.

In the novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), in a black bar in the South, the autobiographical protagonist observes: "Of course the men didn't dig two imitation white boys come in on their leisure. And when I spoke someone wd turn and stare, or laugh, and point me out. The quick new jersey speech, full of italian idiom, and the invention of the jews. Quick to describe. Quicker to condemn" (128). In *Tales* Mickey declares, "I vaguely knew of a glamorous world and was mistaken into thinking it could be gotten from books. Negroes and Italians beat and shaped me, and my allegiance is there" (45). Of this time he has spoken of writing defensively to escape the influence of the white avant-garde, his ex-friends he ironically calls "his friends." Moreover, he also wanted to escape his whitened black middle-class heritage, to escape their content and form. He observes, "I literally decided to write just instinctively, without any thought to any form or to any kind of preunderstanding of what I was shaping" (Benston, "Amiri Baraka" 305). Baraka says of the writing of the time: "It wasn't the little, stylized, Creeley-esque stuff that I was doing at the time; it began to be my own kind of sound, my own voice" (ibid.). In short, he rejected the Robert Creeley sound because it did not reflect his voice and history. I argue that this intuitive, and not so intuitive, reshaping draws heavy on free jazz forms and traditions because they provide the avant-garde ethnic sound he desires, while leading him back to self, ethnic self, and ethnic history.

Free jazz not only provided a connection with Baraka's ethnic past but also provided an avant-garde form that was not beholden to the white world. It provided a sound that could connect him with his tradition, with the idealized black self, the self that is larger than the individual, the self that Hughes delineates in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," when he presents in the first person the continuity of the black soul across time: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (*Poems* 23). When James Baldwin says of himself, "I was the son of a slave" (*Nobody* 4), which is not literally true, he is partaking of a symbolic self, speaking from a self larger than the personal one. Before, Baraka had accepted the William Carlos Williams model to connect him with the local, with the speech of New Jersey. Allen Ginsberg argues, "Williams's practice. It brought Jones [Baraka] back to Newark, in a sense. If any literary influence had tended in that direction, Williams's influence tended to bring Jones back home to his own speech and to his own soul and to his own body and to his own color and his own town" (*Spontaneous Mind* 269). But real Newark speech was not pure enough, not black enough; it was not only the speech of blacks but also the speech of Italians and Jews, mixed speech.

To gain the idealized speech he must turn to free jazz. Since free jazz embodies both the present and the past of a people, its forms provide both real and idealized black identities. Free jazz allowed Baraka into the archetypal world of idealized blackness, a world stripped of whiteness, a world at once real and ideal. Here the black voice is purged of whiteness: actual but reified, no trace of the accents of Italians and Jews, only pure black sound. The purified black identity, where the black voice issues from, must be based on the real, on actual history and the local scene,

to connect Baraka to the African American tradition. The creation of black identity cannot be arbitrary: there must be something real behind the ideal, a cultural continuity. In other words, since Baraka is not Irish American, he could not connect to an idealized Irish history because he has no cultural connection to that tradition. The 1960s cultural nationalists, including Amiri Baraka, made a similar idealistic move when they found Mother Africa nestled on every street corner in the great American black cities. The idealized African Village could not be a total fiction; it had to be based on a real city, such as Newark, to provide connections with the African American psyche. Furthermore, some, let's say, Melville Herskovits, the anthropologist, Robert Farris Thompson, the art historian, and Randy Weston, the jazz pianist, would argue—an argument that I am ambivalent about—that Newark, no matter how tenuously and spiritually, had to have a trace of the real African Village, that there must be some retention of the Old World.<sup>5</sup>

Before we look at Baraka's utilization of black music, it would be helpful to look at his and two other distinguished black writers, James Baldwin's and August Wilson's employment of the great blues singer, Bessie Smith. All three address the meaning of black music to them in the person of Bessie Smith. In "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," from *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), in Switzerland, away from the black world, Baldwin discovers that "it was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt" (5). The blues singer helps Baldwin recapture the cadence of Negro speech and the lost world of his Negro youth and therefore recapture himself. In "Preface" to *Three Plays* (1991) Wilson says: "With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle" (*The Jazz Cadence* 564). Like Baldwin, the singer gave Wilson a rich image of himself that he hasn't found elsewhere. It is odd that a writer so conscious of both black music and language would discuss images of blacks instead of sounds. In "the myth of a 'negro literature,'" from *Home* (1966) Baraka declares: "It would be better if such a [n aspirant black] poet listened to Bessie Smith sing *Gimme A Pigfoot*, or listened to the tragic verse of a Billie Holiday, than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe" (113). These singers provide a more precise poetic model for a black writer than the European one because they not only share a common language but also a common experience. They provide a vernacular model, reflecting the African American experience in the New World.

Baraka notes: "The blues is so basic because it is black speech at its earliest complete articulation as a New World speech. The speech of black people native to the Western world! . . . The blues is the actual secular day-to-day language given the grace of poetry" (*The Music* 262). Thus all three writers see Smith and the blues as entrances into the black world. Since the blues speaks black vernacular English, it tells the stories of the tribe, revealing African American identity. Therefore to learn to write the blues is to write the actual speech of African Amer-



icans. All three feel that the blues artist has captured the actual speech of the people in a way that the literary artist haven't. In "Words" Baraka has said: "In the closed circle I have fashioned. In the alien language of another tribe. I make these documents for some heart who will recognize me truthfully" (*Tales* 90). He wants to speak and write in the language of his own tribe: he wants to be a blues artist; he wants to use that basic form, which is behind most post-spiritual black music in this country.

To achieve this black sound, to find a black language, Baraka turns to free jazz because it contains the sound of the blues, the black voice, the black memory, in its most contemporary form. Baraka argues in several places that blues contains the cultural memory of black people (*Black Music* 180 and 183, *The Music* 263). In fact, Baraka finds his black voice through black music and free jazz, in particular. Baraka says:

Blues and jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of "Negritude" in formal American culture simply because the bearers of its tradition maintained their essential identities as Negroes; in no other art (and I will persist in calling Negro music, Art) has this been possible. Phyllis Wheatley and her pleasant imitations of eighteenth-century English poetry are far and, finally, ludicrous departures from the huge black voices that splintered southern nights with their *hollers*, *chants*, *arwhoolies*, and *ballits*.

(HOME 106)

Baraka turned to free jazz musicians because they are the African American generational equivalent to white avant-garde artists, that is, they produce an art as sophisticated as the whites. Elsewhere I have concentrated on the power of the new music to destroy the old. Following Baraka's lead, I used the figure of John Coltrane for this task: he embodies the force, the energy, to destroy the old forms.<sup>6</sup> Here, however, I want to concentrate on the power of the new sound to enable Baraka to create both a new and an old sound, what he refers to as "the changing same," the revision and extension of the tradition. Free jazz allows him to find new forms that contain the old voice. In the end it is Albert Ayler, not Bessie Smith, who allows Baraka to find his voice, because Ayler embodies the contemporary black sound. Baraka insists it is the artist's mission to transmit the contemporary: "If it is honest it must say something new" (*The Music* 266).

It is not arbitrary that Baraka is drawn to the black avant-garde. What the black avant-garde has that the white one doesn't is the black oral tradition as well as an advanced style of expressing that tradition. The music critic Frank Kofsky says:

It has been written so often as to be a cliché that the avant-gardists are striving to simulate the sound of human speech in their playing. Even a casual audit of a few of their recordings will illustrate the validity of this dictum; but what has not been stated is the kind of discourse that is being reproduced. . . . What one will hear in the music of John Coltrane, Eric



Dolphy, Sam Rivers, John Tchicai, and especially Archie Shepp is not speech “in general,” but the voice of the urban Negro ghetto. . . . That Archie Shepp’s growling, raspy tenor saxophone locutions, for example, distill for your ears the quintessence of Negro vocal patterns as they can be heard on the streets of Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Harlem, or wherever you choose. Although the speech-like attributes are conceivably less palpable in their work, this is also the significance of Coltrane’s eerie shrieks and *basso profundo* explosions, the jagged clarinet squeals of Eric Dolphy, even the more stately and oblique lamentations of John Tchicai: all invoke, to one degree or another, those cadences and rhythms that are unique to the lives of black people in the city millieu.

(BLACK NATIONALISM 134-135)

Kofsky is right about the voice of the people in the free jazz, but he is only working in the present tense of this music: there is also the sound of the past time, which includes the field holler and the church shout as well as the voice of the urban proletariat. It is a black way to “make it new” and, at the same time, “make it old,” that is, to continue “the changing same.” The black musical tradition has always issued from the black voice, but free jazz expresses the contemporary as well as actively expressing the past; it is the history of the music as well as its present tense.

It is of the first order of importance that free jazz includes the traditional sounds of spirituals and the blues as well as the more radical and dissonant sounds of contemporary music. These forms allowed Baraka to connect with the African American expressive past, which is profound, and also with the most avant-garde sounds of the time. We get a sense of this when we hear Albert Ayler’s “Down by the Riverside,” from *Goin’ Home* (February 24, 1964). Baraka perceptively says of Ayler: “The music sounds like old timey religious tunes and some kind of spiritual march music. . . . Albert’s music, which he characterizes as ‘spiritual,’ has much in common with older Black-American religious forms. An openness that characterizes the ‘shout’ and ‘hollers’” (*Black Music* 193). The folk religious sound provides a profound underpinning and meaning to the music. Baraka using this technique in his art is not unlike Philip Roth using the Jewish joke, Yiddish, and Yiddish-inflected English to enrich his English prose. And it is not unlike John Zorn, in his Masada project, fusing Jewish folk music with Ornette Coleman-like free jazz. All three are connecting with tradition, something larger than the individual self, a cultural continuity and resonance. Moreover, as we have seen above, Baraka not only uses the blues sound of the new music but the church sound as well—to invoke Gwendolyn Brooks’s term, the preachment sound, “the sermonic mode” of the black oral tradition. In “Dope,” discussed above, Baraka adopts the preacher sound, the preacher performance style, to preach his sermon of communism.

Baraka was not only seeking an individual past but also a collective one, seeking the past of the tradition. Baraka states: “An expression of culture at its most un-self- (therefore showing the larger consciousness of a *one self*” (*Black Mu-*

sic180). Interestingly, this sounds like a classical vision of self; like T. S. Eliot's in "Tradition and Individual Talent" where he observes that the individual must "surrender . . . himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable [the tradition]," (*Selected Essays* 7). Elsewhere Baraka declares: "Find the self, then kill it" (*Black Music* 176). Kill the individual self to achieve the collective voice of the tradition; moreover, kill the individual black middle class voice to find the black mass one. Finally, distance yourself from the white individualistic "Cult of Themselves," (*Raise Race* 22) of white American civilization. For Baraka to "kill the self" means to kill the white Western self, the overly assimilated self, not the black individual self purged of whiteness.

Baraka's new sound came together with his major and controversial poem-manifesto, "Black Art." Significantly, it was first published in the *Liberator* in January 1966 but it was performed on Sonny Murray's *Sonny's Time Now* in November 1965, that is, the spoken word predates the written one. In addition to free jazz player Sonny Murray, Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, and Henry Grimes are on the record; liner notes are by Baraka himself. Baraka says that this album is new, free, spiritual and innovative—that is black avant-garde.

In this poem Baraka learned to speak in a distinctive African American voice, or at least one fully informed by the African American sound tradition. Baraka takes on the voices and sounds of the entire African American sound tradition. Baraka observes, "Poetry, first of all, was and still must be a musical form. It is speech musicked. . . . And the clearer I got on my own legitimate historical and cultural sources, the more obvious it became that not only was the poetry supposed to be as musical as it could be, but that reading with music would only enhance and extend its meanings and give new strength to its form" (*Black Music* 243, 244). Hence his voice is larger than a personal voice but embodies the voice of the tradition. This is different from the voice of "Black Dada," which embodied the voice of another tradition and therefore another history.

"Black Art," fuses the screams and cries of the music and poetry. Baraka says:

Black poetry, in its mainstream, is oracular, sermonic; it incorporates the screams and shouts and moans and wails of the people inside and outside of the churches; the whispers and thunder vibrato and staccato of the inside and the outside of the people themselves. (BLACK MUSIC 244)

Baraka's screams are wild and free—free jazz screams. Baraka asks, "Can Robert Lowell scat?!" (*Raise Race* 26). At this point, scatting is alien to the white mainstream poetic tradition. Here Baraka employs the scream, a jazz form. In this recording he imitates, even competes with the free jazz musicians' screams, linking him to the scream of the church and the tradition. This is an amazing performance where Baraka does not only imitate the players but the players imitate him: Baraka screams and they scream back. The sound is wonderful and chaotic, resembling sirens, machine guns, and horns: "rrrrrrrrrrrr / rrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh" (*Reader* 219). It sounds like a divine catfight where Baraka has

learned to speak the passionate language of the scream, connecting him with both the church, the Holy Roller, and popular entertainment, James Brown. He has learned to make divine noise, has found black energy, leaving the white vehicular language behind. Baraka has screamed and hollered himself into the tradition. As this aggressive music creates black consciousness, it wipes out the white world.

Baraka muses, “Players like Coleman, Coltrane, and Rollins literarily scream and rant in imitation of the human voice, sounding many times like the unfettered primitive shouters” (*Blues People* 227). Then Baraka says, “The hard, driving shouting of James Brown identifies a place and image in America. . . . James Brown’s screams, etc., are more ‘radical’ than most jazz musicians sound, etc. Certainly his sound is ‘further out’ than Ornette’s. And that sound has been a part of Black music, even out in them backwoods churches since the year one” (*Black Music* 185, 210).

The jazz singer Abby Lincoln’s scream in “Triptych,” on Max Roach’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960), seems controlled in contrast. The three sections of “Triptych” are “Prayer / Protest/ Peace.” It is in the middle section, “Protest,” that Lincoln screams, but it is not a free jazz scream; it is melodic, musical, and structured—in fact, pleasing; it is protest, not revolt. Perhaps this is the difference between the civil rights scream and the black power scream. The civil rights’ scream ends in peace and the free jazz one ends in rebellion. Baraka says, “Coltrane’s cries are not ‘musical,’ but they *are* music and quite moving music. Ornette Coleman’s screams and rants are only musical once one understands the music his emotional attitude seeks to create. This attitude is real, and perhaps the most singularly important aspect of his music” (*Black Music* 15). Therefore from the new music one is not only learning technique but also attitudes toward the world. Baraka sheds white attitudes for black ones.

Significantly, “Black Art” ends, after a great verbal explosion, poetic screams with these lines

We want a black poem. And a  
Black World.  
Let the world be a Black Poem  
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
Silently  
Or LOUD. (*Reader* 220)

The poem ends in the imperative mood, ends with speech, with sound. Bell hooks says, in the essay “Talking Back,” that “for us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced” (*Talking Back* 8).

In summary, free jazz enabled Baraka to develop a new-old African American

voice, the changing same, simultaneously his own personal and ethnic voice. Free jazz allowed Baraka access to both traditional African American expressive forms and new radical contemporary ones and allowed him to come into a fuller sense of self, allowed him to be “in the tradition”: [in the] Tradition / of Douglas / of David Walker / Garnett / Turner / Tubman / of ragers yeh / ragers / (of Kings, & Counts, Dukes / of Satchelmouths & SunRa’s” (*Reader* 303). It allowed him to be part of a persistent yet changing tradition; it allowed him both a musical and racial continuity in the discontinuity of the multiplicity of black sound.

#### NOTES

1. Here are a few words about racial identity. Before advancing to Baraka and Reed, it is perhaps helpful to know my position on this issue. I do not find either *social construction* (the belief that identity is a linguistic fiction) or *essentialism* (the belief that identity is static and transhistorical), including *strategic essentialism* (the belief that identity is a useful fiction), particularly useful terms. I want to say race is real not in terms of skin color but in terms of shared cultures, histories, traditions, ideologies, and experiences. Moreover, for me, racial identity, is fluid, always adjusting to the current moment but historically and culturally grounded, always responding to a residue of personal experiences and cultural memories; that is, racial identity is persistent; however, it is highly influenced by factors beyond itself. Looking at race in its historical and cultural context, my larger project will compare and contrast the changing definitions of race in the sixties, with the example of Baraka, and in the seventies, with the example of Reed. Wanting to escape the homogenization of white American culture, Baraka became a cultural nationalist, affirming black culture and rejecting white culture; and Reed, wanting to escape the homogenization of black culture by cultural nationalists, including Baraka, became a multiculturalist, affirming all minority cultures and rejecting black nationalism. There are a number of philosophers and theorists trying to move beyond the categories of social construction and essentialism. A book that tackles this theme is Moya and Hames-Garcia’s *Reclaiming Identity and the Predicament of Postmodernism*.
2. I want to thank my colleagues and friends Jeff Nealon and Paul Youngquist for reading this article with care and rigor. I feel very lucky to have belonged to the lively and productive intellectual community at Penn State.
3. For other discussions of Baraka’s performance of “BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS” with the New York Art Quartet, see Nielsen’s *Black Chant* (190–95) and Benston’s *Performing Blackness* (220). These interpretations very nicely fill out the description of the performance. Nielsen provides the fullest account, depicting its understatedness, and Benston finds the recording a breakthrough to a new ethnic sound.
4. The need to cast off white identity to achieve black identity is one of the main themes of my entire study, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*, but especially see chapter 3, “The Failure of the White Postmodernists” (67–90).
5. For their ideas about African retentions, see Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit* and Herskovits’s *The Myth of the Negro Past* and listen to any number of Randy Weston’s CDs, such as *Tanjah* and *African Cookbook*.
6. See chapter 1, “The Jazz Aesthetic,” of my *The Poetry of Amiri Baraka* for a full discussion of the transformative powers of the new music, especially 14–16.

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