

## **THE PERFORMANCE OF LANGUAGE HETERODOXY IN BLACK THEATER: PROFANITY AND INVERSION ON AMIRI BARAKA'S STAGE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's playtexts, the authority of the English language seems to become the object of linguistic mutilation and salient profanity. The employment of an obscene language and the disfigurement of language transpire to be acts of a deliberate withdrawal from linguistic norms. The dramatist along with the plays' characters seem to drop identification with domination from the agenda of cultural and political options, and gesture toward altering and inverting linguistic conventions and connotations. The playwright, consequently, appears to invert and subvert the English language, a language that is perceived as odd and dominative. Inversion is indexical of the linguistic proclivity to chase a language which levies its significations and meanings. The dramatist's transformations carved on the tissue of verbal and written forms signal an urgency to unchain the black vernacular and break off the shell of the English language. Baraka's style seems then to ground inversion with variation, revision, and repetition on the body of language itself. In this light, mutilation tends to assume a disruptive syntax, uncommon orthography, and disparate typography. Inversion implicates new terms and forms for the production of novel meanings. This is the new modality upon which the playwright's writing style is predicated. The goal of this article is to spell out Baraka's resort to profanity and mutilation along with outlining the reversal of signification and its attendant senses. The second objective of this article is to sketch and delineate the pattern of inversion marshaled by the dramatist. The first part sheds light on the playwright's recourse to profanity and obscenity of parlance. The second part traces the mutilation of language and takes stock of the inversive pattern.*

**KEYWORDS:** language, mutilation, profanity, inversion, signification, transformation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Several theater critics such as Errol Hill and Barbara Ann Teer have stressed that The Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s has invested in new forms and techniques. The objective is to introduce new patterns into the theatrical performance. Concurrently, Berthold Brecht and Antonin Artaud began to interrogate the foundation and authority of Western theatre and stressed the necessity to inject new elements into theatrical practice. Brecht and Artaud underlined the need to create a fresh theatrical language that appeals to the senses and mind alike, a language that engages the audience emotionally and intellectually. Black theatre in the 1960s and 1970s has also re-appropriated the African American tradition of song, music and dance and incorporated these elements as a tool to reassert that tradition. Theatre turns to be the most proper

medium for African American artists and practitioners to use their language as another alternate element that pertains to their tradition.

Language is important to a culture's expression. One of the objectives of the African American theatre practitioners of the 1960s is the erection of a novel language reflective of the black being and becoming. This minority language bears witness to the vitality of the Black English. The latter itself becomes the instrument with which to convey the varied features of the black lexis. When referring to Black English, June Jordan in her landmark book *On Call* highlights three qualities she finds in it: life, voice and clarity (129). Jordan emphasizes that Black English has been erected by a people who have constantly needed to stress that they are present and that they do exist against the odds. The operating system of meaning-making that circumscribes the Black ontology imposes a definite parlance and diction. When a language with its acceptations and significances mirror back the depravity of a people, the problem becomes one of challenging such a symbol of hegemony.

Black Americans are steeped in by what is thought of as a domineering English language, a language that is allegedly oppressive. As David L. Smith puts it with respect to the position of language and its manipulation by the dominant culture in Baraka's works, "Our culture provides us with an effective language of oppression but not with a comparable language of liberation" (Amiri Baraka 241). To evade the prevailing language, Baraka resorts to what Henry Louis Gates calls "signifyin(g)". The latter is "the trope of tropes" (48), Gates argues in *The Signifying Monkey*. Signifying is an outlet or a means, as Gates puts it, to avert oppression. The authority of the English language becomes the targeted object of linguistic mutilation and profane variety of language. The sustained use of an obscene language and the maiming of the official language become acts of a willful extrication from cumbersome linguistic standards. Though there is no elaborate and definitive definition of 'Signifyin(g),' Bernard Bell defines the latter as an "elaborate, indirect form of goading or insult generally making use of profanity" (*Afro-American Novel* 22). What interests us here is how profanity is significantly instrumentalized to convey corruption and venality and target submission to dominative paradigms.

If we borrow Michel Pecheux's tripartite diagrammatic chart of a subjugated subject's relationship to the dominant discourse/or language, we find (1) the "good subject" who yields to domination, (2) the wayward "bad subject" who "counteridentifies" with the discourse/language of domination, and (3) the subject who "disidentifies" with the prevailing structures of power and aims at their "transformation" or "overthrow-rearrangement" (*Language* 156-9). Apparently, Baraka and his characters belong to the third category, as they not only drop identification with domination from the spectrum of cultural and political options, but they also gesture towards transforming and even inverting linguistic conventions and connotations.

Baraka consequently sets out to invert and subvert the official language, a language that is perceived as foreign and dominative. This inversion is ensconced

in what William J. Harris terms the jazz aesthetic, an aesthetic that entails jazz variations, taking them as paradigms for the inversion of white imagery and iconology. Inversion is indicative of that linguistic necessity to exorcise a rigid language, which imposes its claims and meanings. The playwright's surgery effected on the body of verbal and written forms underscore this urgent need to unshackle the black ethnic vernacular and break off the shell of the English language. Baraka's style embeds inversion with variation, revision, and repetition on the fabric of language itself. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates argues that "[r]epetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms" (*Signifying Monkey* XXIV). Mutilation assumes a disruptive syntax, disparate orthography, and unusual typography. Inversion implies novel words and forms for the generation of brand-new significations. That is actually the new modality upon which rests the dramatist's writing style.

A central preoccupation of Baraka's drama has been the exploration of a uniquely Afro-American linguistic perspective from which to express one's views and expose one's positions. Baraka's theatrical works, then, explore the instrumentality of language to dramatize the social, political, mental, and cultural encounter between the people of the blues and white Americans. Baraka's interest in linguistic oral and written forms drive him toward more explicit dramatization during his quest for what he terms in "Work Notes—66" "the post white, or post American form" (*Raise* 15). In an attempt to sketch the graph of the American polity, Baraka puts language under constant strain and exhaustion.

This article studies Baraka's nationalist theater including plays such as *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (1964), *Experimental Death Unit # 1*, *Madheart* (1971), *A Black Mass* (1971), and *Slave Ship* (1978). The objective of this article is to outline Baraka's resort to profanity and mutilation along with demonstrating the reversal of signification and the meanings attendant to it. The second objective of this article is to spotlight the inversive pattern set by the dramatist. The first part sheds light on Baraka's recourse to profanity and obscenity of expression. The second part tackles the mutilation of language and spells out the pattern of inversion. The discussion will mainly be informed by Gates's insights. Pecheux's model, Cornel West's and Devon Boan's ideas are also illuminating for an informed understanding of Baraka's linguistic heterodoxy and inversion. Yet, it should be pointed out here that the intention is not to map out Boan's or Gates's insights on Baraka's works in a systematic way. Rather the objective is to show that Pecheux's model or Gates's thoughts are much informative in looking at Baraka's modality.

### **Language and Profanity**

Profanity is no strange idea in Western theater. Staging themes of transgression and catastrophe, Antonin Artaud's actors frequently release bursts of profanity in an atmosphere of groans and screams. Jean Genet replaces the language of acceptable speech by that of taboo. The obscene and the profane take place of the refined and the normative. In his play *The Balcony*, the Bishop's language is molded in profanity which indicates Genet's propensity toward linguistic profanity. Harold

Pinter frequently delineates vulgar and bullish masculine milieux, using four-letter words. In a play like *The Homecoming* Pinter creates a sense of mutual rancor through the odious vivacity of his language. Profanity, conceived as the antithesis of civil discourse, has also marked its presence on American stage. American playwriting in the 1960s and 1970s has witnessed a large recourse to profanity.

Playtexts of the period contained a great deal of profanity more than present-day plays do. Plays written by David Rabe, Edward Albee, or David Mamet shocked its audiences with profanity. Profanity is present in Baraka's plays written during his advocacy of black nationalism. Essentially, it signals the ugliness of the sorry state of policy and underscores the rottenness of the 1960s historical epoch reputed to be a phase of official repression and denial of civil rights and civic freedoms. Blatant as it is, profanity manifests itself in the lewd language and offending invectives exchanged between the central characters of *Dutchman*. In plays such as *The Slave* or *Madheart*, profanity verges on vulgarity and reaches impiety. The dramatist in the plays cited earlier puts language on the strain of profaneness, draining it of its communicative functionality and expressivity. The theatricality of rhetoric, especially in *The Slave* alludes to the desired detachment from the correct usage and use of written and spoken forms. Perceived as the very locus of repression and violence against Black people, the dramatist unchains his characters to assault the language that contains the representational economy of American culture.

The story of *Dutchman* is cruel and brutal. It attests to the tension of urban socialization and the inherent social psychology of human relationships. Its two scenes take place in a speeding subway car, "steaming hot, and summer on top, outside" (*Dutchman* 3). Scene I opens with a short-dumb show: a man (Clay) sitting in a subway seat exchanges looks with a woman and then smiles through the window at her (Lula), who stands outside and boards the subway. Lula enters the car and takes a seat beside Clay. She starts right away to utter crude statements that contain economic but ironical understatements characteristic of naturalist drama. From the start, both characters engage in a meager communication, exchanging insults conflated with certain sexual insinuations and hip idiomatic witticisms characteristic of inner urban enclaves.

Apparently, Lula uses a stereotypical language to scoff at Clay. She tells him, "I know you like the palm of my hand," the same hand "I unbutton my dress with, or let my skirt fall down. Same hand. Lover" (Baraka 17-18). She reminds him vehemently in a sarcastic tone that he is a black nigger and that his grandfather was a former slave. At this juncture and if we invoke Pecheux's tripartite model, Clay's acting as a "good subject" can be vindicated. Clay seems to grovel to his torturer, Lula. He also appears to capitulate to her exertion of domination. For a while, Clay manages to keep pace with Lula's unpolished words and vicious understatements. Clay, to a certain extent, demonstrates that he is able to keep this surface interplay. Increasingly, Lula grows animated and continues to sneer at him. She eventually bursts into an outrageous and offending tirade.

In what could be termed a reversal of the dramatic action, Clay slaps Lula and forces her to her seat. Clay's physical act is significantly dramatic; its juxtaposition to Clay's former inertia and Lula's mad physical gestures proves that Clay is ready to act upon his thespian situation. In this context, Clay appears to dominate the situation albeit partially. During this short reversal of the dramatic action, Clay's language regains strength and actual tone. At the outset, he is silenced and reduced to surface responsiveness. But when Lula's torture reaches its climax, his utterances become vicious. In a fiery emotion-releasing speech, his language turns out to be profane and obscene.

*Dutchman's* language, its content and implications, is designed to shock its audience. It is hence no wonder to see that the criticism which ensues the play's premiere focuses on Baraka's salient use of profanity. After the enactment of *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, some critics and political figures advised supporters to stop funding the Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART). The charge was that BART induces hatred. One of the program's funding figures, Sargeant Shriver, declared that "this theater [...] produced vile racist plays in language of the gutter unfit for the youngsters in the audience" (15). Despite Shriver's public indictment, Baraka announces in an interview "that profanity-I wasn't doing that just to cause a stir. I was doing that because that is what I felt [...]. And the profanity that I used twenty-five years ago [...] is now used everywhere [...]. What made it more interesting then is that it wasn't used" (308). At any rate, Baraka's profane language appears to be blatant and remains a salient feature that characterizes his writings. Clay's emotional vituperative outburst is generally conceived as an expression of the doctrine of the Black Arts movement.

More importantly, Clay's tirade conveys a highly cynical and lewd language that is articulated on a live stage. In this very climactic movement, language that denotes certain physiological activity and body organs dominates Clay's utterances: "You great liberated whore! You fuck some black man, and right away you're an expert on black people. What a lotta shit that is. The only thing you know is that you come if he bangs you hard enough. And that's all [...]. Shit, you don't even know how. You don't know how" (*Dutchman* 34). This shocking language is beyond undeniability. It borrows from the lexicon of human biological evacuations. Explicitly, it describes some processes that appertain to human biology. Clay, seemingly, is relocated in Walker's "shitty town" wherein forbidden words and tabooed language are permitted. Interestingly, Baraka parallels this enveloping ugliness with an expressive profane language. One can expect the audience to pant in shock and amazement.

There are certain parallels between the language of *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. When Grace evokes Walker's split self and Easley decries his "rebirth of idealism" and his "horseshit theories" (*The Slave* 62) of black liberation, Walker pours out a very lewd pronouncement (*The Slave* 62-63). It is apparent from these proclamations that language reaches blasphemy and obscenity. Such obscenity can also be grasped in the language of *Death Unit # 1*. In this play, Baraka dives into the underworld of prostitution. Woman, the only female character who

exhibits her physical charms and bargains with Duff and Loco, uses slang words consonant with her profession:

WOMAN. Oh...shit...one of them. Why you have to be walkin' around my turf?

LOCO. Aw, miss, I ain't no homosexual.

DUFF. I'm just eager.

WOMAN. For what? Your dick up my butt? (*Looks up, smiling*) Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, drizzle. Ah, drizzle. (*Death Unit 13*)

Ostensibly, all the ingredients of argot and obscene language are there to nest in Baraka's formal and verbal structure.

The fact remains that Baraka's language is crudely shocking. It must be remembered that when Baraka was arrested for firearms possession, the court referred to his language as "foul language" and denounced his use of obscenities. After this incident, an editorial referred to him in these terms: "What is a LeRoi Jones but an epitome of everything that is sick and perverted in the American society-of its violence, racism, cruelty, irrationality-a bundle of conditioned responses to a sick civilization!" (qtd. in Adams 117). Baraka, too shockingly, delineates what he perceives as the degeneracy and brutality of society. Brutality and profanity germinate, Baraka reflects, in any social order, "if it is not an order which can admit of any man's beauty" (qtd. in Costello 437). Obviously, Baraka and his characters are driven by the logic of slavery's heritage and its resultant trauma and its ugly order. Resentment and rage are primary motives. Not surprisingly, the dramatist's language remains lewd, harsh, and provocative.

The dramatist advocates a theater of assault and militancy, a theater that foregrounds violence and physical aggression as natural human acts. The onslaught is directed against certain absolutistic political orderings and socio-economic configurations, an absolutism that lacks social groundedness, overlooks certain racial realities, and condones socio-historical conditions. From now on, Baraka's stage will excommunicate and deride the "weak Hamlets" such as Clay, Mother, Sister, Woman, and the Uncle Toms of *The Lone Ranger*. The playwright therefore proceeds to effect the necessary epistemological break with everything that has a Western designation. Thus, Baraka physicalizes the stage in an effort to show that physical action stands for a total abandonment of Western decadent forms and modes.

The language of *The Slave* is similar to that of *Dutchman* in its intensity and profanity. But this time the rhetoric is that of the theater. Functioning as a character-specific speech mode, Walker's utterances belong to what Baraka calls in the prologue "a metalanguage" (*The Slave* 45). As the dialogue unfolds, language seems deficient, weak but violent, minimal but expressive. Baraka, very often than not, dramatizes language as a human means of communication. Commenting on the link between the dramatic action and language, Kimberly Benston observes that "the play's action is this drama of language" (*The Renegade* 184). Baraka intends for his language to be extreme and exhaustive. In debating with the

Easleys, Walker assumes different acting personalities and different languages. He once behaves as an Indian (56). On another occasion, he refers to Easley as Iago, the Machiavellian manipulator in Shakespeare's *Othello*. He further contrives an imprecise English accent (53). Furthermore, he becomes the yellow man who speaks in pidgin Japanese. It is obvious that Walker's rhetoric is theatric but highly symbolic. Speaking different accents, Walker detaches himself from the correct usage and proper use of spoken and written patterns. These models and patterns belong to the language of the master culture. It is then legitimate to alter and modify these available patterns and dispel their sacrosanct quality. This requires what trumpeter Clifford Thronton terms "a radical 'unlearning' of existent modes" (qtd. in Harris, *Poetry* 26).

Language as it is codified with its set of rules and conventions becomes powerless to convey Walker's sparking rebellious proclivity. It is exhausted and emptied of its energy and resourcefulness. As such, it forfeits its reliability to probe the black psyche and peer into the black sensibility. This is why Walker longs for a kind of a metalanguage to ascertain a full disassociation from mainstream modes. The language is not his and neither are his words. In this sense, communication is impossible between the Easleys and Walker. Each of them is incapable of forming constructive meaning; the one's meaning is the other's nonsense. Language finally breaks down. When language loses its communicative function, Anthony Giddens argues, it will lead to a "saturation of communicative action" (*Social Theory* 232). It can no longer function to translate the absurdity of the situation. It looks like it is drained of its communicative potentiality:

GRACE. You're out of your mind.

[*Slow, matter-of-fact*]

WALKER. Meaning?

GRACE. You're out of your mind.

WALKER. [*Wearily*] Turn to another station.

GRACE. You're out of your mind.

WALKER. I said, turn to another station [. . .] will you? Another station! Out of my mind is not the point. You ought to know that. (*Slave* 82)

Communication between Grace and Walker as well as Easley is beyond reach and comprehension. Walker, the black poet, recognizes the high tension between his love of language and his subsequent dependence on an alien lexicon (53). For Walker, metalanguage implies the deconstruction of Western forms and structures of repression. If we apply Pecheux's triadic scheme outlined above, we can classify Walker as the subject who slowly but decidedly disidentifies with reigning structures and resolutely targets not only their re-arrangement but also their radical transformation. This is a precondition for the inauguration of a new born revolutionary action. Analyzing Walker's recourse to the language of ideology and quest for a new linguistic mode of expression, Kimberly Benston writes :

Throughout the play Walker has used the language of revolutionary ideology. But the justification for this language cannot ultimately rest in terms constructed from its

own syntax, terms he had utilized in his debate with Grace and Easley; it must reside in some 'metalanguage,' some alternative form of expression. This second mode of meaning [...] is revolutionary action itself. (*Renegade* 188)

Walker's revolutionary project requires reworked syntax, revised grammar, and fresh vocabulary. The language of the oppressor is a major hurdle in the full realization and concretization of revolutionary thought. This new language is diametrically opposed to already existing notional and conventional rules. It is freed from rigid linguistic taboos and control of the official academy represented in the person of Bradford Easley and the like. Walker's way of speaking the English language with various accents and lewd undertones underscores his resolution in moving away from the center towards the margins. For the language he uses is not his; it is imposed on him. Walker's unrest and his refusal to bow before the language of high culture and scientific knowledge makes him all the more desirous to distance himself from what Jordon describes as "the language of the powerful that perpetuates power" (*On Call* 31). From profanity and obscenity, the dramatist's writing style becomes that of mutilation of language and inversion of the semantic system.

### **Language: Mutilation and the Inversive Pattern**

Characters of the various plays tend to invert and parody the language that they feel is not theirs. In postmodern parlance, parody implies challenging and subverting such language. This inversion and parody result from the imperious need to chase the ghost of a linguistic system considered by Blacks as inappropriate to map the contours of the black experience. Baraka's alteration of the verbal and written forms signal his craving to move away from the stranglehold of American frames and hold of the English language. In the United States, Jordon asserts that language has been "homogenized into an official 'English' language that can only express non-events including nobody responsible, or lies" (*On Call* 30). In trying to elude academicist influences and evade scholastic rules and regulations, Baraka strives to erect a voice expressive of oppositional linguistics directed against the lies and the denials. The writing formula becomes that of inversion and variation, which provides the basis for the dramatist's writing style and play with language.

In a conversation with Charlie Reilly that revolves around the attempt to turn away from Western influences, Baraka voices his desire to write in "a different writing style." In the same conversation, he notes:

What I was doing was trying to break away from European influences and the strong influences of many white poets who had affected my work. I did it consciously, but I didn't know that I was specifically breaking away from white forms at the time. I did know that the forms weren't mine. I was trying to find a voice, my own, and I needed to oppose myself to the European influence. (*Conversations* 100)

Baraka and his characters transgress the rules of formal language and violate pertinent import. He sometimes writes (and his characters talk) in a highly cryptic mode with eccentric typography and peculiarities. This tendency is most obvious



in the pre-nationalist and nationalist plays. When Baraka departs from the world of bohemia, he comes closer to the black vernacular. The latter becomes his preferred ethnic weapon in order to assault the reigning language. Expressions such as “gravy snot” and “red trains cough Jewish underwear” or “wildroot cream-oil” (31) in *Dutchman*; “a stumblebum in the Swedish baths of philosophy,” “the sawdust lips of science-fiction jigaboos,” and “the Woolworth heir’s cement condom” (59-62) in *Madheart*; “wop spick kike” and “babarebob” (12-15) in *Death Unit*; “izm-el-azam” (30) in *A Black Mass* all these sound strange and shrouded in enigmaticity. Variation of the meaning and the play on wording are recurrent. Apparently, Baraka targets his literary white forefathers whose specter still haunts him. The act of writing transpires to be an act of exorcism of past literary idols.

In the backdrop of this exorcism, some irregular linguistic elements and features seem to inflate the theatrical text with frequent suspensions, exclamative and interrogative phrases, and clippings of words and frequent droppings of letters. These characteristics of the text indicate Baraka’s unease and mutilation of language. The ethnic framework imposes this defacement of language through dangling constructions, elliptical sentences, clipping and excessive abbreviations, and derivation. Dealing with Baraka’s irregular employment of the English language and stressing the impact of ethnic frameworks, Theodore Hudson states:

The language that Jones employs to make his own laws, or definitions, comes by choice from his personal, sometimes private, and ethnic frames of reference. Shortly after his first published works, he consciously began to avoid ‘white’ language in favor of ‘black’ idioms, grammar, and syntax. (*From LeRoi Jones* 59)

Baraka’s intentional violation of correct usages evolves into a pattern built in the texture of his playtexts. The play *Madheart* follows this same pattern. Its language is vituperative and economic. It is replete with grammatical irregularities and fraught with colloquial and slang terms. Repetition is recurrent and sometimes looks trivial. When Mother and Sister surrender to the Caucasian model of good-looking, Black Woman offers Black Man her savoury charms. In retaliation, the two women vent slanderous remarks in a repetitive way (*Madheart* 62).

The repetition of highly obscene expressions is reminiscent of Gates’s consideration of the patterning of repetition as essential to ‘signifyin(g)’. One feels like attending a street toast where extremely unrefined language is used. With reference to the last quotation from *Madheart*, language descends to and emerges from the world of profligacy. It is, in fact, a language designed to convulse and propel the audience to certain realizations. “Baraka calculatingly uses words commonly excluded from polite discourse—“fuck,” “pissing,” “nigger,” “puke,” etc.,” David L. Smith asserts in his analysis of Baraka’s usage of unrefined language in his plays, “to maintain this linguistic assault on the reader’s sensibility. He also draws heavily upon images of physical violence to the same end” (*Amiri Baraka* 242). Arguably, when shock is created, a novel path of protest

or a new avenue for historical action is ushered. Simply put, this is Baraka making sense with words in his nationalist stage.

The style or, better still, the stylistic mould into which Baraka shapes his plays attests to the myriad grammatical irregularities, syntactic misshaping, and orthographic strangeness. The fact testifies to the playwright's desire to veer away from Western linguistics. The sustained deformation of the English language is a good testimony in this case. Forms like "I agrees," "as he do," in *Death Unit*; "you trying," "this ol'," and "in they eyes" in *Madheart*; and "I's so happy," "you'se han'some," and "We kneegrows," in *Slave Ship* all illustrate the irregularities regarding inflectional grammar, possessive marking, verbal agreement, and ways of pluralization.

The absence of an underlying third singular *-s* and the faulty conjugation of the auxiliary *be* are scattered and even become the rule rather than the exception. In addition, punning or wordplay such as "kneegrows" for negroes is so pervasive that it turns out to be a common feature in Baraka's theatrical pieces. Word pun, probably, indicates this striving to produce new terms and create new meanings out of debasing old ones. Like his protagonists Clay and Walker in *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, Baraka, as Richard Lederer states in his article "The Language of LeRoi Jones' *The Slave*," "must reduce to powder the grammatical and linguistic chains that have bound him to them" (*The Language* 15). It transpires that all the structural fetters must be broken in order to ensure a complete severance from 'white' rules.

In *The Slave*, Easley thinks that Walker's writing of poetry increasingly takes a political slant. In fact, during what is described as Baraka's aesthetic protest, political writing is seen to permeate the theatrical text. David L. Smith correctly notes in this regard that, "Baraka clearly associated political activism (and political writing) with ugliness and violence-with essentially anti-aesthetic impulses" (237). It seems that there is a remarkable Derridean intersection and interrelation between the political evil and the linguistic one in Baraka's plays (*Grammatologie* 242). The violation of the basic human rights of black people and the repression of the state constitute the political evil of the civil broil during the 1960s. This political evil results in linguistic viciousness that rests upon profane language written without observance of formal rules. Baraka consistently trivializes language and makes it appear deformed and ever-changing.

Inversion succeeds the mutilation of language with the sustained deformations and prevalent irregularities carved on the tissue of the English language. The pattern of inversion of meaning and the recourse to the connotative is a feature characteristic of Baraka's style and strategy. Baraka actually searches for a purely African American form amid the remains of Western configurations. This new non-Western form is supposed to set the pillars of new tenets and conceptions of the black experience and black reality. This is carried out through the production of different meanings while revising domineering significations. Reinterpretation of already existing import lies at the heart of Baraka's project of inverting the white system of signification. Gates refers to reinterpretation as the "deferral of

meaning” (*Signifying* 51). The meaning that is generated by the hegemon is deferred and inverted. To reinterpret implicates creation of a fresh meaning and turning the tables on the white control of the signifiatory system. In Gates’s scheme, the black man proceeds “to process a meaning from among the differences” (Gates 52). What the black man is in search of is new different meanings that contradict prevailing meanings and definitions.

Baraka’s authorial position as a dramatist can be ranked among what West labels as “Go It Alone” (*Keeping Faith* 27). This kind of authorship or this literary trend within the black academy favors autonomy, prioritizes the disparagement of mainstream forms, and excoriates Western generalizations and conceptions. It can be pointed out that this literary trend embodies the literature of inversion *par excellence*. It should be made clear that this trend in literature maintains a hypostatic (i.e. fundamental) relationship with the black audience and black spectatorship in general.

Within this framework, Baraka intends to amaze his white audience with respect to an evidence: language. In the context of inversive patterning and its impact on white and black readers/spectators, Boan, in affinity with West, conclusively writes: “One significant effect of the literature of Inversion (sic), then, is to make the white reader a stranger in his or her own house-the domicile of language, political power, social hegemony-while conveying to African American readers an exclusive solidarity of heritage, purpose, insight, and will” (40). While the white reader/spectator is made to look like a foreigner with his/her language, power and authority, the black reader/spectator experiences a flow of solidarity and strengthened volition.

The use of inversion is meant to enter old texts to destroy worn-out ways, undermine prevailing referentiality, and interrogate canonicity. If we refer to a play such as *The Slave*, the barren dialogue between the Easleys and Walker illustrates this point:

EASLEY. You’re still writing...now, are you? I should think the political....

GRACE. [*Looking toward Walker even while Easley extends the drink toward her*] Walker...you are still writing, aren’t you?

WALKER. Oh, God, yes. Want to hear the first lines of my newest work? [*Drinks, does a theatrical shiver*] Uh, how’s it go...? Oh, “Straddling each dolphin’s back/And steadied by a fin, /Those innocents relive their death, /Their wounds open again.”

GRACE. [*Staring at him closely*] It’s changed quite a bit.

WALKER. Yeah...it’s changed to Yeats. [*Laughs very loudly*] (*The Slave* 50)

Walker, the griot-leader, enters canonical poetic texts and alters them to fit his rhetorical strategy. He creates new meanings and images out of old literary and poetic materials to shed light on current critical situations. It must be noted that the 1960s are cruel times of social woe, cultural malaise, and political struggle. And language, as Devon Boan reflects in his comment upon the positioning of language in the Black writings of the 1960s, “is an arena of conflict and confrontation” (*Black I* 44). The

inversive model embedded in Baraka's playtexts proves that language is a site of contestation.

*The Slave*, as a fable, is structured by a continually interrupted dialogue. The essence of the play is a lecture modeled on the Platonic symposium in which past collective issues and future (allegorical or literal) action support and maintain this sterile dialogue of the deaf. The link between the play and Plato's symposium is one of inversion. Originally, the Platonic tutelage, as had been thought of and used, is an efficient means to a noble didactic end. Its tenet is instruction, education, and teaching. The very rationale of the symposium is to induce unity and inject cohesion in the body politic. But at the hands of Baraka (and his characters) the petty talk violently assaults the social body, inhibits agreement, and impedes fruitful debate.

The exchange that revolves around certain questions turns out to be a terrain of conflicting values and antagonistic views. Instead of mutual understanding and general accord, confrontation seems ineluctable and leads to bloody action. Again, Baraka seems to invert a deeply-rooted Greek tradition while immersing himself in the depth of history. This patterning of inversion means simply that Baraka and his characters are at war with the American establishment (Walker is the leader of a war that rages outside the stage).

On another plane, the connotative level is pivotal in the alteration of previously held beliefs. This alteration involves taking a stereotype and transforming it into its foil. This act of alteration is reminiscent of Baraka's espousal of what Harris calls the jazz aesthetic, an aesthetic predicated upon inversion and reversal. The latter involves the transformation and destruction of the meanings and symbols projected by the white man. The stage directions of *The Slave* suggest that Walker's soldiers are clad in revolutionary badges with minstrels on them. The minstrel and minstrelsy are widespread stereotypes that denote that Blacks are mere buffoons to entertain whites. Baraka inverts this stereotypical image into something that inspires fear and terror for whites. The minstrel, which previously connoted laxness and disempowerment, presently signifies courage and audacity. In an interview with Harris, Baraka provides clarifications:

I think one interesting thing in *The Slave* is that I had the army, Walker Vessels' army, wear revolutionary patches with minstrels on them. Grinning minstrels. What that meant to me was that would turn that very symbol which had been a degrading symbol for blacks into something of terror for whites. That grinning Uncle Sambo, with red lips and the white teeth would strike fear in their hearts. The terror groups, bearing these patches, would make revolution. (*The Poetry* 145)

Thus the grinning minstrel is inverted and transformed into a novel symbol of black militancy. In other words, the minstrel becomes the revolutionary. *The Lone Ranger* also conforms to this pattern of inversion. Time and again, Baraka inverts a popular figure to fit his own strategy. The American popular culture holds that the Lone Ranger is a symbol of temerity and moral fortitude. He is the cowboy who is a savior-type and is the embodiment of American idealism and heroism. In

this play, Baraka inverts this idyllic image, making him appear as the representative of exploitation. The Lone Ranger becomes the epitome of reactionary capitalists who present themselves as cultural heroes and state builders. In inverting the emblem of the Lone Ranger from an immaculate lawman to an outlaw, Baraka casts serious doubts on bourgeois individualism and idealism. Inversion becomes a stylistic/semantic necessity dictated by the rising tide of struggle and resistance in the political arena as well as the literary one. In his response to Benston's question about the predilection for an alternative form, Baraka notes: "I was consciously striving for a post-bourgeois/Western form, even before the cultural nationalist period" (*Imamu* 308).

Baraka's art and drama grow out of a manifest hostility to white Western forms and modes of thought. His characters display an aggressive stamina to topple the oppressive patterns contained in the fabric of the language itself. Clay's tirade and Walker's invective convey that Baraka is subjecting the body of language to a kind of linguistic autopsy to extricate hegemonic symbols and images. If we scrutinize Clay's procrastinated speech, we notice that his pronouncements incorporate certain manipulative linguistic devices. His succinct but definite phrases and his diction demonstrate his use of obscenity to indict the levelling whites exhibit regarding Afro-American art. Clay explains to Lula that 'belly rub' is not 'Queens'. He makes Lula learn the majesty of black dance. His mention attests to the attractiveness of black lore. Clay inverts white models in order to make and contrive genuine black images. Instead of the sexual connotation of 'belly rub,' Clay renders it a literal portrayal of an artistic and cultural black trope. In *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*, Harris elaborates on Baraka's frequent use of this rhetorical strategy:

Baraka's art, an art that constantly changes existent tropes, ideas, symbols, images and social forms from white to black. The formula can express itself in various forms of destruction from inversion to mutilation. In his constant desire to smash prevailing forms, a tendency that in large part grows out of his blackness, Baraka is one of contemporary America's most radical and innovative artists. (16)

Clay's assertion that Charlie Parker's music and Bessie Smith's song mean "kiss my ass" is an instance of his verbal outpouring to invert the ugly face of white clichés and misconceptions. But such verbal profanity can never be the equal of liberatory action. It is inscribed in stasis and ingrained in negation. Clay is the bohemian (pre-revolutionary) who is entrapped in the vicious circle of aesthetic protest and ethnic alienation.

Clay is the black Baudelaire embattled in his inept poetry and his middle-class compliance. When Lula kills him, the audience/reader senses his innocence. By eliminating Clay, Baraka inverts the held meanings of the categories of whiteness and blackness. The latter is significant of innocence and ingenuousness and the former of wantonness and immorality. Similarly, in *A Black Mass*, Baraka inverts the significations of the tropes of whiteness and blackness. Blackness, as seen when Tanzil tells Nasafi that blacks cannot kill, signifies innocence and abstention.

Conversely, whiteness is equated to chaos, bloodshed, and disingenuousness. This sense is insinuated when the white Beast sets out to attack Jacob, his associates, and the black women.

The recourse to and use of diatribes, invectives, and slang words are eventually legitimized when taken from the vantage point of the literature of inversion. By inverting old images and symbols and by distorting words, such work of inversion seems to expose what Michael Bakhtin describes as “a new sense of all old words, things and concepts [...] by freeing them temporarily of all semantic links, and freely recreating them” (463). In the process of inversion, Baraka dissects the language of the oppressor in order to deconstruct “the semantic rituals of power” (169), as he puts it in one of his essays in *Home*. The black experience, according to Baraka, must be written at last from a novel perspective that challenges the predominance of the master’s language. This new perspective translates the nonconformity of the black individual. Obviously, the playwright releases his characters to speak with the nonconformist and insurrectionary tone that he advocates. Semantic hurdles will consequently be broken down under the aggressive tone of the black vernacular. The latter proffers Baraka the tools with which to assert his new ethnic priorities in a definite nationalist emergency.

The major finding is that in Baraka’s plays the authority of the English language becomes an object of linguistic mutilation, purposeful profanity, and patterned inversion. While profanity takes the form of obscene parlance, mutilation is empowered through a heteroclit grammar, reworked and disruptive syntax, and odd orthography. Profanity and mutilation signal the cogency of ethnic frames. We have shown that there is a striking homology between Baraka’s mutilation and Gates’s theory of ‘signifyin(g)’. In mutilating the body of the English language, the playwright appears to implement revisions and dissections. Briefly said, Baraka engages in a processual construction of what Marcyliena Morgan calls “counter language” (Africanness 425).

## CONCLUSION

It can be said that Baraka and his characters belong to the third category of Pecheux’s tripartite model. The third category features the subject who ‘disidentifies’ with the prevailing structures of power. The identification with domination is categorically dropped from the cultural and political agenda of the characters that people the plays. Baraka, consequently, sets to react against the English language—a language that is the mainstay of the system of representation of American culture. We have also underlined that inversion translates a felt obligation to negate a language perceived as purist and bigot. Inversion works within the borders of the connotative system and interrogates already set meanings. We have highlighted that Baraka’s inversion correlates with Gates’s ‘Signifyin(g)’. Signifying is basically an attitudinal responsiveness to attempts at subjugation. We have demonstrated that the dramatist’s inversive patterning is not only a stand vis-à-vis attempts at subordination but also a willed effort to produce fresh meanings of black valor, innocence, and mobilization. Therefore, inversion subverts negative

import generated by the master culture and overturns the 'white' system of signification by creating new positive meanings of value and worth.

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