“What’s Love Got to Do With It? Everything! Teaching DUTCHMAN and ‘The Revolutionary Theatre.’”

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Approaches to Teaching
Baraka’s Dutchman

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Because the black power and black arts movements have been vilified as divisive, teaching Dutchman requires overcoming students’ assumptions that it is hateful. I therefore frame the play with Baraka’s theater theory. I emphasize that Baraka’s essay “The Revolutionary Theatre” (1965) is theory; it allows us to understand his vision of black theater’s possibilities. Though published shortly after Dutchman, the essay represents, to a great extent, the conception of theater that informed the play. In the classroom, considering that vision helps guard against privileging our own perspectives while reading Dutchman and studying the black radical movements for which it became a foundational text.

Engaging Baraka’s theory requires historical context, so before we read “The Revolutionary Theatre,” I cover the many ways that our nation’s policies have benefited white people, without regard to merit. I provide discussion-intensive minilectures based on George Lipsitz’s The Possessive Investment in Whiteness and Ira Katznelson’s When Affirmative Action Was White, and we explore the nation’s most effective affirmative action programs, the ones that have not borne that label. Through consideration of these policies, students notice how our society has positioned itself against African Americans by awarding benefits to whites and withholding them from black citizens. Concrete examples help students see why the nation’s most common practices depend on teaching everyone that African Americans do not deserve opportunities. The constant message that black people make poor decisions, are inferior, are lazy, and so on is crucial; it keeps citizens from questioning racial inequities. Once students consider the origin of inequities, they better understand the destruction Baraka seeks through revolutionary theater, the destruction of illusions that undergird the racist status quo—which oppresses black Americans financially, spiritually, and otherwise. Wanting to destroy illusions that perpetuate injustice is anything but hateful.

When assigning “The Revolutionary Theatre” (to be discussed for an entire class period before we engage Dutchman), I ask students to read with these questions in mind: 1. In which ways does Baraka’s logic depend on love for oppressed people? 2. In which ways does it depend on love for the American ideal of self-determination? 3. In which ways does it depend on love for that which is spiritual and human and cannot be labeled American?

Seeing love in this text is no easy task, so directing students to look for specific objects of love helps, and their search for these objects provides an invaluable framework for Dutchman. Together, we come to acknowledge the role of love in
Baraka's theory as well as the value his theory places on passion and the human spirit. Though these investments are woven throughout the piece, they are overshadowed by the essay's masculinist conception of power. "The Revolutionary Theatre" speaks aggressively, but the class's collective work reveals its preoccupation with love and spiritual affirmation. By analyzing Baraka's theater theory with an eye toward connections often obscured by the masculinist rhetoric of the black arts movement, we learn why black female energy manages to emerge briefly in Dutchman. Giving upper-level undergraduates this framework leads them to read more deeply.

An Antiblack Society?

United States citizens are educated to believe that racial inequality is an accident of history. Students typically assume, "Blacks may often end up on the bottom in terms of financial security and other measures of success, but not because opportunity is withheld." My boldest students will declare, "My grandparents didn't have much but they sacrificed and saved. Other people could've done the same thing." Because this is the belief with which most students enter my classroom, I present what Katzenelson calls "affirmative action" for whites. Without this context, the intensity of the black arts movement can be too easily dismissed as unjustified, inspired by nothing more than black people's lack of gratitude and patriotism.

Showing students that white people have always benefited from affirmative action exposes the lie this country most often tells, that race is a factor only when people of color are involved. Black arts and black power intellectuals understood that real affirmative action has always been for white people. In the colonial period, the rules governing who could own land deemed whites worthy and disqualified Native Americans who had lived here for generations. Later, "almost all of [the] land [granted under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862] was allocated to whites through restrictions expressly designed to deny access to blacks." Therefore, black people are scarcer among the more than forty-six million Americans who can trace the origins of their family wealth to that act of Congress. More recently, between 1932 and 1962, "98% of FHA loans ... went to whites via the openly racist categories utilized in the agency's official manuals for appraisers." Thus, when white parents have a home (or equity) to pass down to their children, it is often from an investment that they would have been prevented from making had they been black. The tax code multiplies the benefit of past discrimination because assets primarily available to white people, such as inheritance income and capital gains, are taxed less, while earnings are taxed more, thereby "lessening the value of income gained through work" (Lipsitz 107). Though students may be resistant, this historical background helps them begin to see that white people have done well in no small part because of government aid.

Consideration of the G.I. Bill makes the point more forcefully because students associate military service with "earning" rights and privileges. But as Katzenelson demonstrates, policies were implemented in ways that excluded people of color. Katzenelson explains, "With the help of the G.I. Bill, millions bought homes, attended college, started business ventures, and found jobs commensurate with their skills" (113). However, while "the G.I. Bill helped to unleash a prosperity never before known" and created "a more middle-class society," it did so "almost exclusively for whites" (114). Though the bill was the first color-blind social legislation (118), the government allowed states to control the administration of every benefit, including education. With local preferences determining the distribution of federal funding, "the veteran status that Black soldiers had earned was placed at the discretion of parochial intolerance" (128). Especially in the South, local agencies were resistant to the idea of black citizens benefiting from federal programs. Indeed, local authorities eagerly dashed African Americans' hopes that any status gained through military service and sacrifice would weaken segregation's hold (126). Students notice that the government's willingness to help whites and abandon nonwhites—as recently as their parents' generation—did much to determine the racial composition of the middle class.

Where Is the Love?

Having acknowledged affirmative action for whites, students begin to see that white people hold most of the country's wealth and power, but not necessarily because they are the nation's best and brightest. Suddenly, students can consider the possibility that, likewise, people of color did not earn their reputations as poor decision makers and lazy parasites. In the United States, astonishingly unfair practices determine access to education, wealth, and health care and whether one will live constantly exposed to toxins (Lipsitz 109).

If students can consider how little merit determines white people's economic, social, and political position, they will be more prepared to engage the opening lines of Baraka's theater theory: "The Revolutionary Theatre must say "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 210).² Given the country's insistence on affiriming whites at the expense of blacks, anything that does not automatically privilege whiteness would constitute change. If the default is to advantage white people and disadvantage others, then whiteness is an unspoken prerequisite for recognition as a United States citizen. Baraka is interested in what it would take to remove that prerequisite.

Love for the Oppressed

Love for oppressed people comes into view with Baraka's declaration that his ideal theater "must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims" (211). Such a theater demonstrates love by seeing the people about whom it claims to care. An important part of the nation's violence against those not privileged
with whiteness is that the country denies that they are victims at all. The United States limits the life chances of certain populations while declaring that they have equal opportunity. I remind students that, despite having been taught much American history, few (if any) of them had been exposed to readily available facts about the discriminatory distribution of FHA loans and C.I. Bill benefits.

Has not that omission aligned perfectly with our assumptions about who worked to build wealth and who did not? How many more examples of convenient amnesia might there be? Baraka wants to equip his audience to ask those questions. Schools discourage curiosity of this sort, so he wants theater to prompt it.

By recognizing that the United States has victimized and vilified African Americans, revolutionary theater advances ethics because it is ethical to acknowledge injustice. The only thing worse than wronging someone is to do so while denying that their circumstances result from your crimes against them. Yet this is exactly what American society does.

By acknowledging victimization and exploitation, Baraka's theater validates marginalized groups rather than denying their experience and labeling them "misguided" or "unpatriotic" for not accepting mainstream lies. By exposing that which the nation—especially its education system—insists on ignoring, this theater equips audiences to notice the unearned advantage of whiteness. Indeed, Baraka's theater constitutes an assertion of self-worth, a declaration that one deserves the rights that most white people take for granted.

Love for Self-Determination

Baraka's ideal theater moves beyond asserting the worth of those who are oppressed, however; his "theatre of Victims" is also a space for self-determination. Using self-worth as a foundation, Baraka hopes to empower his people to "change the drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted" ("Revolutionary Theatre" 212). Here, Baraka suggests the need to bring theatricality's transformative power to amateur and improvised performance spaces, not just professional venues. This is no surprise, given the premium the black arts movement placed on taking art to the streets. Baraka believed that, as with black arts work in other genres, the movement's theatrical efforts must affirm marginalized people outside venues validated by the arts establishment and controlled by mainstream market forces.

"Why destroy Washington, D.C., though?" my students usually ask. Since the capital has been a site for denying the nation's wrongs against certain people and denying their contributions, plotting its destruction demonstrates love for a very American project: self-determination. Rather than remain at the mercy of the powerful, who do not truly see you, you accept that you will have only the life that you are brave enough to create against the worst odds. Self-determination is considered an American principle, so if the United States simply used its own standards to judge black people who assert their worth and work to shape their own destiny, then it would admire them and not withhold opportunity. Instead, the nation chooses hyperalism by adding the prerequisite of whiteness when deciding whom to respect and recognize as citizens. In other words, the nation punishes black people for seeing themselves as fully American, fully entitled to the same self-determination that is honored in white people.

Love for the Spiritual and the Human

Baraka's theory also insists on the need to transcend any standard based on social categorization, including nationality. More than a love for American self-determination, then, his theory is based on a love for the spiritual. Baraka's ideal theater calls for the destruction of that which denies spiritual supremacy. He declares, "The Revolutionary Theatre must hate [white men] for loving. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit" (211).

With what technology is the spirit denied? My students can answer that question because they have learned about the nation's tendency to embrace affirmative action only when it benefits whites. Baraka seems to suggest that when the United States limits black Americans' life chances through social mechanisms it is denying "the supremacy of the Spirit." If African Americans are only what mainstream society says they are, then the nation can expect to treat them according to social hierarchy. However, if African Americans exist in a system of law that transcends social categories, then a justice much higher than that defined by the United States governs them. As Baraka's contemporary Audre Lorde reminds us, "powerlessness" is a "supplied state of being"—supplied by oppressors who want to see marginalized groups as "other," as fundamentally different from themselves ("Uses" 58). By declaring that "technology" is required "to deny the supremacy of the spirit," Baraka insists that differences among people are manufactured. Therefore, as Lorde would later assert, "every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change." ("Uses" 53).

Despite all that the country has taken from them, African Americans have spirit and imagination, and Baraka's theater will help them maximize these resources. Black Americans must understand themselves as spirits not limited by the nation's treatment of them, and they must prize imagination because it is "the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as 'things.'" Baraka's ideal theater performs such a projection by inspiring a visceral reaction. Baraka insists, "And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 213).

Because Baraka's revolutionary theater will put black people's spirits on display, he predicts, "Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will
be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real. American cops will try to close the theaters where such nakedness of the human spirit is paraded” (214). Those invested in the American status quo do not want African Americans to be empowered by “a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling” (212).

Insofar as Baraka's aesthetic privileges spirit and feeling, his ideas align with those later articulated by Audre Lorde, but Baraka's aggressive tone obscures the similarities. Baraka develops his theater theory by positioning himself against mainstream Americanism, what bell hooks calls white supremacist capitalist patriarchal. Nevertheless, because Baraka’s theory seeks to assert the kind of power that dominant American culture will recognize, it often replicates that culture’s masculinism. Baraka seems to sense the limitations of this strategy, but he cannot quite relinquish it. He admits, “The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world…” (212). Providing “daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind” requires that this theater be “a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on” (212).

In short, Baraka's theory highlights the contradiction of wanting African American humanity and citizenship to be recognized in a society shaped by white men. He speaks in masculinist language to assert an uncompromising manhood, one that must suppress any emotion other than anger. It is an understandable trap; he reads his surroundings accurately. Baraka understands what the cultural historian Marlon Ross would later articulate: “in modern Western culture, feelings are assumed to be the province of . . . individuals, not social groups—and more tellingly of vulnerable individuals who cannot protect themselves, like properly feminine women and improperly effeminate men” (293). Even understanding why Baraka takes a masculinist approach and even seeing that he senses the limitations, my students and I admit that his stance may obscure his investment in spirit and feeling. We therefore consider Audre Lorde's famous caveat: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used, examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable. . . For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (“Master's Tools” 110–11, 112).

**Spirit and Emotion in Dutchman**

The tension between Baraka's masculinist discourse and his recognition of the power of spirit and emotion becomes palpable in *Dutchman*, and when it does, black womanhood makes its only appearance—almost in spite of Baraka’s masculinist Afrocentrism. Lula describes Clay throughout the action, and when he does not accept her characterizations, she berates him. When Clay finally reaches his limit, he insists that murdering white people would be the truest sign of black sanity. During this tirade, he utters Bessie Smith's name, using her to understand his and his people's predicament.

Suddenly, Clay abandons all decorum and declares,

[White folks] say, “I love Bessie Smith.” And don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, “Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass.” Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she's saying, and very plainly, “Kiss my black ass.” And if you don’t know that, it’s you that's doing the kissing. . . And Bird [Charlie Parker] saying, “Up your ass, feeble-minded boy! Up your ass.” And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would’ve played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note! . . . If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. . . Just straight two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. (34–35)

With these assertions, the play corroborates Angela Davis's assessment of the significance of blues women, their transformation of individual tragedies into touchstones for cultural consciousness. Indeed, even those unfamiliar with the particular hardships that inspired black women's expression nevertheless claimed to identify with the music. Davis explains, “If not for the blues, many individual tragedies affecting black working-class communities might never have been recast as social, collective adversities” (111). The blues are much more than complaint, then; they "articulate a consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects" (119).

Baraka seems unaware of this music’s critique of male dominance, but he believes the art form crosses class lines; after all, the play underscores Clay’s middle-class status (and presumed distance from most black people), but when he decodes the blues, he claims connection to working-class African Americans. Most important, Clay confirms Davis’s observation that “the blues idiom requires absolute honesty” (107), and he insists that such honesty is unacceptable to those in power. Also, because Clay uses Bessie Smith’s seemingly straightforward, lyric-based music to contextualize Charlie Parker’s saxophone playing, Baraka echoes James Baldwin. In 1951, Baldwin argued, “It is only in music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the American Negro has been able to tell his story.” The story, Baldwin added, has been told “in sympos and signs, in hieroglyphics” (“Many” 19). In other words, the blues are popular with white audiences only because the music articulates black reality using
symbols and signs—"metaphors" and "grunts"—that white people do not actually comprehend.

When Clay analyzes his plight (and Charlie Parker's) through the lens of Bessie Smith, he claims a connection to working-class blacks, allows himself emotional affirmation, and decodes the blues. However, just as quickly, he retreats from the truth he speaks: [Suddenly weary] Ahhh. Shit. But who needs it? I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths" (35). By then, it is too late. Lula will soon murder him. Thus, black truth cannot be told plainly, lest those empowered to give or take life (and American opportunity) hear and understand. Clay is most in danger when he is most willing to translate the emotional truth that artists like Bessie Smith disguised with metaphors and grunts.

By reading "The Revolutionary Theatre" as a theory and by looking for the love that drives it, my students and I uncover what Baraka never seems to appreciate directly: black female energy. We admit the damage that his masculinist preoccupations do to black women, but we do not use it to overlook what he does not feel safe acknowledging outright. Wanting desperately to master, he uses the master's tools, but blues women's subversions nevertheless shine through, having worked on him too.

NOTES

1 Also see Coates.
2 Quotations from "Revolutionary Theatre" are taken from the Morrow edition of Baraka's Home.
3 To help students understand the power of theatricality outside traditional theater spaces, I emphasize the role of performance in everyday life. Performance is any embodied practice that creates and conveys meaning, and it almost inevitably affirms our identities. A person who cooks will find that the repetition reinforces their self-conception. Their ease with "props" like pots and pans can bolster this part of their identity. Similarly, when a schoolteacher's behavior suggests that they see you more as a disciplinary problem than as a learner, the performance has an effect on both the student's and the teacher's identities. To be even more concrete, I highlight for students how the "setting" of the university and the arrangement of the classroom lends to my performance as an educator; how my clothing choices ("costumes") affect my performance whether it should or not; how their behaviors can lend to a performance as a voracious learner or not.

4 Here, I urge students to think of the nation's capital as a setting for performances that create and convey meaning. They easily understand the procedures they see on C-SPAN as performances. And the resulting legislation underscores what the powerful deemed important to enact or not important enough to change. Students appreciate seeing the link between performance and material outcomes for people's lives, and they soon provide their own examples. For those who become more interested, I share ideas from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal urged collapsing the barrier between actor and audience, and his techniques allow people to rehearse resistance to oppressive situations so that, when they encounter them in real life, they will have already imagined empowered responses. Rather than the catharsis for audiences that Aristotle prized in tragedy, Boal valued creating circumstances in which "spect-actors" maximized "rehearsal." Boal's techniques help individuals see the world in ways that both expose oppressive forces and equip individuals to believe that they can alter their experiences of those forces—through their performances in daily life.

5 Also see my "Supreme Court Agrees with Michigan Voters: Affirmative Action Must Remain for Whites Only."

6 To underscore Baraka's investment in exposing the manufactured nature of social categories, I invoke Diana Taylor's theater theory, especially her concept of the "scenario." As Taylor explains, a scenario is a well-worn sketch or outline of action. Because it "resuscitates and reactivates old dramas," "the scenario makes visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes." Thus, a scenario "structures our understanding," and "because we've seen it all before," it can do so even if there are omissions (28). Because the United States has so relentlessly cast white people as contributors to society and everyone else as leeches, it does not take much to reinforce these ideas. I guide students in a conversation about how rarely negative stereotypes cling to white people. That's no accident, that too demonstrates the power of scenario.

7 This emphasis on visceral reaction puts Baraka's theater theory in conversation with James Baldwin's interest in what I term "flesh-centered imaginative work." However, because Baraka is confident that white people will respond only with anger, his theory diverges from Baldwin's. See my "James Baldwin, Performance Theorist. Sings the Blues for Mister Charlie."