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The Specter of Marxism: The Marxian Influence on Amiri Baraka's Black
Nationalist Poetry

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THE SPECTER OF MARXISM: THE MARXIAN INFLUENCE ON AMIRI
BARAKA'S BLACK NATIONALIST POETRY

by

Emahunn Raheem Ali Campbell

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Abstract

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Baraka's move from cultural nationalism to Marxism came through an understanding "that it was the [capitalism] that oppressed [Blacks] and that it could not only utilize whites, who seem to be in control of it, but that it could also utilize Blacks." His reasoning is not solely based on one's relation to the means of production; it is also based on what he was observing in his native city of Newark, New Jersey during the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly as it related to the political and social ascendancy of the Black petit bourgeoisie. It is my argument that these Marxian antecedents manifest themselves in his cultural nationalist poetry. Furthermore, these ideological influences and aesthetic manifestations, which have internal and external contradictions, function dialectically in a way that anticipates his shift from cultural nationalism to Marxism.

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Introduction

Within the early scholarship on Amiri Baraka, one oftentimes observes the neatly categorized nature of the literary periods in which scholars, such as William J. Harris, place Baraka's work. Moreover, the general composition of past scholarship not just on Baraka but the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as well as the Black Power Movement is usually taxonomized by way of nomenclatures such as "cultural nationalists" and "revolutionary nationalists." This taxonomy is based on what some scholars point to as the Communist Party USA's (CPUSA) departure from the "Negro question," in which the CPUSA in the early 1930s supported the idea of Blacks having their own separate nation in the southern portions of the United States. Recently, however, "revisionist" historians have called these categorizations into question, and they have done so under a larger rubric of Leftism (Mullen and Smethurst 3). The revisionist scholarship that has recently proliferated and gained attention has grouped political, cultural, and aesthetic movements predicated on race with similar movements that have been primarily based on class—thereby closing the seemingly permanent bifurcation between Black nationalist movements/organizations and white, Chicano, Asian, and Native American movements/organizations. As James Smethurst, William Sales, Jr., Cedric Robinson, Aldon Nielsen, and others have argued, the associations forged through political, intellectual, and aesthetic encounters between BAM and Black Power Movement activists and white, Chicano, Native American, and Asian American artists and activists from Leftists and, more specifically, Marxists circles, have profoundly influenced the ways in which much of the movement proceeded. With these considerations in mind, I raise the following

inquiry: How much influence did Marxism(s), the philosophy and theory, have on BAM and BPM artists/activists, specifically Amiri Baraka, during his Black Nationalist period?

Until recently, there was a conscious effort, particularly by artists and theorists in BAM, to separate what they were producing in terms of art from that of Black Harlem Renaissance artists. While there are salient and clear distinctions between the aesthetic and political projects of both camps, what is often ignored by BAM artists and activists, as well as the editors of anthologies of African-American literature, is the radical literature that Black artists such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright (among others) produced during the 1930s. The reticence to recognize and address the literature produced by Black artists during this decade may be an effort among artists and activists of BAM to, among other things, dissociate themselves from the palpable evocations and aesthetic incorporation of Marxism in order for the artists and activists of BAM to assert and emphasize their Blackness in the various political and cultural realms available to them at the time. This has serious implications, for it is to argue that there was 1) a (possible) conscious effort made by BAM artists and activists to divorce themselves from forms of seemingly white philosophical and aesthetic practices and beliefs, and 2) there are specters of Marxism that appear in the works of Harlem Renaissance artists, and, for the purposes of my argument, I will also show the influence of Malcolm X's philosophy, which was partially influenced by Marxism and socialism, on the aesthetic production of Baraka.

This project begins with research that I have conducted starting with Komozi Woodard's *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (1999), James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2006), and Jeffrey Ogbar's *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (2004). These three texts, as well as the pertinent scholarship on this issue, are primarily histories of BAM and the Black Power Movement. The scholarship of Nielsen and Harris respectively are theoretical, but they focus their attention on the musical and linguistic composition of Baraka's work. My focus will be both historical and theoretical— that is, I will examine the ways in which Marxism emerges in the poetry, theory, and organizations of Baraka. I find it important to present a theoretical argument that does not challenge the histories and theories of BAM and Black Power Movement scholarship , for these histories have shaped much of how one views both movements; on the contrary, this project serves as a means to undergird the variety of scholarship pertaining to both movements and to also encourage revisions and expansions of my project.

Unfortunately, this project does not cover the influence of women artists of BAM and how this specter of Marxism may have infused itself into their poetry. Such a project needs to be explored. I can only hope that this essay may assist any ambitious scholar willing to take on the task. If not, it is my desire to extend this essay into a larger project that will take on such a task. Indeed, much of the scholarship on BAM deals primarily with the men of the movement; sadly, such a focus may be an influence of the political and cultural milieu of the time, as it pertained to both the position of women and the production of scholarship.

Chapter 1: Debating Ideology

Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.
—Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Volume I.

For Marxism...it was not so much its notion of 'science' over all other forms of socialist theory, nor its promise of a world to win, that may have struck a resonating chord in the hearts of black Marxists. It was, instead, Marx's and Engel's famous encomium of the proletarians having nothing to lose but their chains. Such a call has obvious affinity for a people who have been so strongly identified with chattel slavery.
—Lewis Gordon, *Existentialia Africana*.

The fact that I became a Communist is not startling to me, as much of a stompdown cultural nationalist as I at one time was...Certainly...my writing tells much of the story. Who I was, who I wanted to become, and what became of all that.
—Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroy Jones /Amiri Baraka*.

In the July 1975 issue of *Black World* (formerly *Negro Digest*), poet, playwright, and activist, Amiri Baraka, explains in “Why I Changed My Ideology” how he decided to make the seemingly drastic shift from Black cultural nationalism to “scientific socialism” and “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung Thought” (35).¹ In part, Baraka’s move from cultural nationalism to Marxism came through an understanding “that it was the [capitalist] system that oppressed [Black people], and that it could not only utilize whites, who *seem* to be in control of it, but that it could also utilize Blacks” (32, my emphasis). His reasoning is not solely based on one’s relation to the means of production (i.e. class); it is also based on what he was observing in his native city of Newark, New Jersey during the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly as it related to the political and social ascendancy of the Black

¹ Black cultural nationalism will be, from this point forward, referred to as cultural nationalism.

petit bourgeoisie. “Increasingly,” writes Baraka, “we found, especially in places like Newark—where we have wall-to-wall Black bureaucrats, with Mercedes Benz, afro, hip sideburns, Cardin suits, humpback high heels, Lincolns, who are mayors, superintendents of schools, council presidents, police chiefs, hospital directors, head of poverty programs, chief judges—that was these very blacks who were now in charge of the oppression and exploitation” (31-32). As Komozi Woodard notes in *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (1999), Baraka witnessed the cooptation and corruption of Black political officials through his attempt to construct the Kawaida Towers, a potential apartment complex in Newark, and his assistance in the election of Kenneth Gibson, the first Black mayor of Newark.² Baraka’s disgust with Black politicians is expressed in his “Election Day (Newark, New Jersey),” in which the speaker states in the last stanza:

Victorious candidate, we are your lowly slovenly ignorant
people, and we
Need no help. We are merely the scorekeepers for your hip
enterprises. Oh,

² Baraka’s Spirit House and Committee for United Newark (CFUN) raised funds for the campaign of Kenneth Gibson, especially during the November 1969 Black and Puerto Rican Convention. During this time, according to Woodard, Baraka and Gibson “journeyed to Chicago to meet with Jesse Jackson and Carl Stokes [the first Black mayor of Cleveland, and one of the first Black mayors of a major city] about endorsements and support for [Gibson’s] race” (147). After Baraka and Jackson acculturated Gibson to “contemporary...militant ethos [and] new black urban politics” and assisted Gibson with his mayoral victory on June 16, 1970 by recruiting the help of prominent names including Bill Cosby and Dick Gregory, Gibson betrayed Baraka when Baraka, under the auspices of the Congress of African People, attempted to construct the Kawaida Towers. According to Baraka “Gibson would do nothing but burp when he was told [about the people who would immorally profit off of the construction of the Towers]” (248).

victorious roundshouldered nigger candidate
Daughter of a victorious roundshouldered nigger
mother-father. We are no
bodies. (*Black Fire* 298)

Clearly, the speaker of the poem believes that the Black candidate is an opportunist who uses the Black vote as a means of securing his victory. The Black candidate accepts this—Black people are indeed “no bodies” to him and they do not need any assistance performing this task; they are simply scorekeepers to him, not mothers, fathers—despite the idea that placing “mother” and “father” so close together conveys the sound of “mother fucker.”

Fascinatingly, Baraka’s political concerns and ideological interests are not dissimilar from the ones expressed by Langston Hughes in Hughes’s poem, “White Man” (1936). The speaker of the poem, a Black proletarian, discovers that the subject of the poem, a white man, may be lying about his name:

I hear your name ain’t really White
Man.
I hear it’s something Marx wrote down
Fifty years ago—
That rich people don’t like to read. Is that true, White Man?...
is your name spelled
C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-S-T?
Are you always a White Man?
Huh? (*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* 194)

In the last two lines, Hughes establishes two concepts that complicate the racial dynamics of capitalism. The first concept deals with the duality of the subject, the White Man: the White Man is not simply a Caucasian male, he is also a capitalist. According to the speaker of the poem, the White Man could use his race and his relation to the means of production to his advantage to further exploit the speaker and other proletarians. The second and more nuanced reading of the last two lines suggest that the capitalist is not “always a White Man.” Class exploitation is not exclusively executed by the white capitalist, for capitalists are not always white; on the contrary, the exploitation of the Black proletarian can equally (and possibly more effectively) be executed by a non-white capitalist.

Baraka’s criticism about the shortcomings of cultural nationalism facilitated his ideological embracement of Marxism. His criticism about the cultural nationalist movement was not solely a local or national concern. For Baraka, cultural nationalism and, on a broader ideological level, Pan-Africanism did not adequately address “the full emergence of neo-colonialism—that is, the rule of Imperialism through native agents, not only throughout Afrika [sic], and the rest of the Third World, [but] we also saw this plague spread throughout the United States, under the guise of Black Power...these developments along with others, made us re-evaluate our position” (32) give date somewhere in this sentence: we need to know when in Baraka’s career that this occurred. Being known as the central figure in the Black Arts Movement—a period that is usually chronologically configured as the time between 1965 to 1975—Baraka’s ideological, political, and possibly aesthetic

departure from this movement may have signaled the beginning of the end of BAM.³ Indeed, poet and co-founder of the Black owned publishing company, Third World Press, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), did not receive the news of Baraka's departure well.⁴ In an October 1974 issue of *Black World*—an issue that has an interesting photo of Karl Marx positioned in a way as if Madhubuti is suggesting that Marxism, embodied by Marx, is the *primary* threat to Black nationalism—Madhubuti, in his article, “Enemy: From the White Left, White Right and In-Between,” raises a provocative and emphatic inquiry, specifically directed at Black Marxists, Black nationalists, and “Pan-Afrikanists”: “The question still remains—will we define our struggle for ourselves or continuously be defined by *our enemy*?” (36, my emphasis). With this inquiry, Madhubuti directly challenges not only Black Marxists who

³ Kalamu Ya Salaam, in his “A Primer of the Black Arts Movement,” argues that it was the “death” of the widely circulated Black literary magazine, *Negro Digest/Black World* that marked the end of BAM (42-43). While *Negro Digest/Black World* was an important publication—possibly the most widely circulated Black publication in US history—Salaam and Smethurst respectively note that *The Journal of Black Poetry*, *Soulbook*, and *Black Dialogue* were crucial to the success and circulation of BAM artists. While it is not my intention to place such a heavy focus on the end of BAM with Baraka's departure, it is important to note that Baraka played a vital role in the perpetuation of BAM ideologies, particularly in his travels to the campus of San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University), Fisk University, Merritt College, and other places that established BAM institutions because of the direct and indirect influence of Baraka. Lastly, as Larry Neal mentions in his essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” “[t]he term ‘Black Arts’ is of ancient origin, but it was first used in a positive sense by LeRoi Jones...” (31).

⁴ I refer to Madhubuti as the co-founder of Third World Press, despite the fact that Madhubuti is oftentimes credited as the sole founder of the publication. As James Smethurst describes in his extensive and exhaustive study of BAM, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Madhubuti used “[t]he model of [Charles and Margaret Buroughs] DuSable Museum” (197). Furthermore, and more to the point, the DuSable paradigm influenced Madhubuti to found Third World Press with the assistance of Carolyn Rodgers and Jahari Amini. The extent of Rodgers' and Amini's influence has not been fully explained; however, they clearly had a role in the founding and the publication choices of Third World Press (197).

rhetorically evoke notions of “world revolution...Black workers, and so on,” but he challenges Marxism on philosophical grounds (38). Madhubuti argues that Black Marxists like Baraka assume that they have now reached a philosophical consciousness in which they are able to view the world objectively, scientifically, dialectically, and historically. Madhubuti rejects such assumptions as absurd.

Moreover, by referring to Marxism as the collective (“our”) enemy of Blacks, Madhubuti posits that the objective nature of Marxism cannot be divorced from its authors, who happen to be two white Germans by the names of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Madhubuti continues on this point by offering the following:

The real crisis we face in the Black movement is the constant battle over white-supremacist imperial ideology—whether it’s Communist or capitalist, it still belongs to the white boy...We so readily quote Marx, Guevara, Castro, Lenin, Trotsky, and Apetheker, not realizing that these are just another set of white boys who are just as racist as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, etc., each using his own special system of control, which is both steeped in and based on white supremacy. (38)

In the above passage, it is clear that Madhubuti does not view Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Fidel Castro as persons of color and, most importantly, as Third World revolutionaries. Interestingly in the same article, however, he is not reluctant to classify China—a country that applied Marxism to its unique peasant situation under Mao Zedong, and a country that fully embraced Marxist doctrines at the time—as an exception to his belief that socialist-communist countries were controlled by and created for whites. As Mark Smith, the director of operations for the African

Liberation Day (ADL) 1972 mobilization efforts, points out, Madhubuti does not directly address the claims made in various Marxist texts, and much of Madhubuti's criticisms are based on mischaracterizations of Marxism and straw-men arguments; even Baraka, attempting to reveal the contradictory nature of Madhubuti's criticisms of Marxism, argues that "while Madhubuti ridiculed black leftists for engaging the political writings of nonblack authors, much of the dietary and lifestyle regimen he advocated was predicated on white hippie counter culture" (Johnson 159).

Madhubuti's vehement position on the ideological, political, and philosophical merits of Marxism, as well as his concern for the way in which Black Marxists culturally and politically viewed themselves, represents the ways in which cultural nationalists doggedly fought to establish their own revolutionary and aesthetic praxis—a praxis that would exclude and repudiate, at least explicitly, any Western (read: white) influence.

While these pieces, in conjunction with the political and organization milieu of the early 1970s, mark Baraka's official explanation for his change in ideology as well as his formal departure from cultural nationalism, his change from cultural nationalism to Marxism has antecedents that can be found not only within his biography, but also within his ideological influences. It is my argument that these antecedents manifest themselves in his cultural nationalist poetry.⁵ Furthermore,

⁵ One can argue that such antecedents can be found in the poetry of Baraka's Beat Period; I do not challenge this reasonable and worthwhile project. However, given the explicit repudiation of Western cultural, philosophy, and politics from a number of prominent activists, artists, and theorists associated with BAM and the Black Power Movement, the attempt to discover how Western aesthetic and philosophical practices find their way into BAM poetry challenges the rigid cultural

these ideological influences and aesthetic manifestations, which have internal and external contradictions, function dialectically in a way that anticipates his shift from cultural nationalism to Marxism.

nationalism expressed in their seemingly fundamental disagreements with Western practices.

Chapter 2: Baraka's "Encounters" with Marxism

One of the most difficult tasks offered by William J. Harris, editor of *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1999), is one of neatly configuring Baraka's aesthetic biography. In this reader, Harris structures Baraka's "periods" in the following way: The Beat Period (1957-1962), The Transitional Period (1963-1965), The Black Nationalist Period (1965-1974), and the Third World Marxist Period (1974-present) (xi-viii). However, a close reading of a few of Baraka's text during these periods suggests that there is much overlap between what Baraka does aesthetically during his Third World Marxist Period and his Beat Period—the same can be said about the way in which The Black Nationalist Period regresses to Baraka's Beat Period, while simultaneously speaking to his Third World Marxist Period. Such an arrangement provides complexity and nuance to Harris's attempt to construct an aesthetic time line of Baraka's work.

Baraka's move from cultural nationalism to Marxism could have been anticipated, starting from the time he spent in what he calls the "Error Force" (Air Force). Baraka was discharged due to his alleged penchant for communist texts. While stationed in Puerto Rico, Baraka, a voracious reader at this time, would read "[a] book on Buddhism and *The Communist Manifesto* in the same afternoon (*The Autobiography of Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka* 166). Moreover, Baraka's discharge from the Air Force was precipitated by the numerous copies of the Communist publication, *The Partisan Review* in his possession (176). Once discharged, and after spending time among Beat poets in Greenwich Village including Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Jack Kerouac, Baraka, along with former Black communist,

Harold Cruse, and chair of “the most militant NAACP chapter in the States...in Monroe, North Carolina,” Robert Williams, made a trip to Cuba under the auspices a coalition of Black writers, scholars, and activists known as the Fair Play for Cuba Committee—indeed, this was the trip that “was a turning point in [Baraka’s] life” (243-249). During his time in Cuba, Baraka also read *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* by the American socialist writer, Leo Huberman, and Marxist economist, Paul Sweezy (“Cuba Libre”135). What may have been the catalyst for Baraka’s change in aesthetic expression and political activism occurs when the Mexican poet, Jamie Shelley, vehemently questioning Baraka’s lack of political initiative in his poetry, states the following: “You want to cultivate your soul? In that [bourgeois] ugliness you live in, you want to cultivate your soul? Well, we’ve got millions of starving people to feed, and that moves me enough to make poems out of” (“Cuba Libre” 147). Albeit brief, Baraka’s involvement in the communist and Marxist milieu of Cuban culture and politics, and Shelley’s application of the term “bourgeois” to Baraka’s aesthetic project may have ensconced a class analysis that resonated with Baraka as he moved through his cultural nationalist period. In his interview with Kimberly Benston, Baraka conveys how Cuba affected him:

See, when I went to Cuba, it was like a revelation to me. Suddenly, there I was in Cuba and, at first, I didn’t understand that that was real stuff, that people actually could make a revolution, that you can actually *seize* countries. There I was down there with whole lot of young dudes my own age who were walking around with guns—they just did it. It blew my mind; I was never the same...So when I came back I was *completely* turned around and began to go

on a really aggressive attack as far as politics was concerned (“Amiri Baraka: An Interview” 306-307, emphasis in original).

These encounters and readings in which Baraka participated provide some of the biographical influences that may have led Baraka to embrace Marxism as the primarily philosophical window through which he now views race and class relations.

Baraka’s encounters with Marxism also extend beyond his readings of Marxist texts; expressions of his Marxist beliefs seem to find themselves in Baraka’s editing and publishing selections of certain cultural nationalist works. I speak specifically of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by both Baraka and Larry Neal. Within this anthology, there are a number of works that evoke the statements and philosophical premises of Marx and Marxisms. Harold Cruse’s essay in *Black Fire*, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” while being an excoriating critique of Western Marxism, notes, in passing, that Third World revolutions “might be Maoism or Castroism” (40). Going a step beyond Madhubuti but similar in his critique, Cruse is not willing to acknowledge the influence of Marxism on these Third World revolutions. *Black Fire* also contains poetry that focuses on the plight of the Black industrial worker, such as Richard Thomas’s “The Worker” and Calvin Hernton’s “Jitterbugging In The Streets,” in which the speaker of Hernton’s poem states with the same emphasis as Marx and Engels in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party (The Communist Manifesto)* (1848), “*There is a specter haunting America*”—a specter that could be interpreted as the unique racist legacy of America itself that has shifted from personal acts of racism to institutional practices of racism in the predominately Black urban cities of the 1960s (207). Lastly, in

another evocation of *The Communist Manifesto* found in *Black Fire*, Julia Field's narrator in her short story, "Not Your Singing, Dancing Spade," quips "Ah chicken-eaters of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose except your shame" (482). Not only do these literatures speak to the way in which Marxism creeps into the aesthetic crevices of *Black Fire*, but it suggests how Marxism has directly or indirectly influenced the writings of these artists. These artists, through their explicit presentation of cultural nationalist themes, encounter Marxism, and it is through this encounter that the specter of Marxism finds its way into the literature itself. Furthermore, since Baraka was the editor of *Black Fire*, one may possibly observe Baraka's affinity and admiration for references to Marx and Marxism via his selections.

Chapter 3: Malcolm and Marxism

Again, if we are to accept Harris's configuration of Baraka's aesthetic biography, then one may conclude that a number of (not all) Baraka's direct encounters with Marxism take place during his Beat and Transitional Period when he had yet to fully embrace cultural nationalism as an aesthetic exercise and philosophy. For Baraka, the death of Malcolm X facilitates his shift from bohemia (i.e. The Beat Period) to cultural nationalism. It was Malcolm, according to Baraka in "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of a Black Nation" (1965), who "had begun to call for Black National Consciousness. And moved this consciousness into the broadest possible arena" (161). However, it was not necessarily the Malcolm who learned under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), which appealed to the notion of a Black Nation, Black National Consciousness, and specifically to the artists and activists of BAM. Rather, it was the Malcolm "who [was] preaching political engagement and finally, national sovereignty" (161). The NOI, according to Jeffrey Ogbar in *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, was a Black nationalist organization that was radical in terms of its rhetoric, particularly from its charismatic national spokesman, Malcolm X, but was inactive in terms of grassroots activism. Surprisingly, while being the national spokesman for the NOI, "Malcolm was critical of the [NOI's] inactivity, remarking that he knew many blacks thought the Muslims were a lot of talk and little action...He later explained that the NOI's philosophy was a political 'straightjacket' that limited black activism" (60). Malcolm understood the appeal he engendered once leaving the NOI. Speaking to the *New York Times* reporter,

Theodore Jones, Malcolm felt that the NOI labeled him a marked man because of the autonomy Malcolm demonstrated after his separation from the organization: “I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else’s control. I feel what I’m thinking and saying now is for myself. Before, it was for and by the guidance of Elijah Muhammad. Now I think with my own mind, sir” (*February 1965: The Final Speeches* 173). This is not to ignore the clear admiration certain Black nationalist and cultural nationalist have of the Malcolm who was essentially the face of the NOI; it is, however, the Malcolm who separated himself from the NOI that the cultural nationalists lauded and appreciated more than the Malcolm who was philosophically and ideologically associated with and connected to the teachings of Muhammad. Malcolm’s influence is, indeed, undeniable not only when one examines the life, politics, and art of Baraka, but when one examines the entire BAM. Archie Shepp’s 1969 album, *Poem for Malcolm*; Margaret Walker poem, “For Malcolm X;” *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and the Death of Malcolm X*, edited by Dudley Randall; and Ed Bullins 1971 play, “Malcolm ’71, or Publishing Blackness,” are only a few examples of Malcolm’s influence on BAM. Bullin’s play requires a few comments, for it slightly departs from how Malcolm was viewed by BAM artists and activists.

The plot of the play situates the character, Blackman, also named “Bossblack...the Blackrevolutionarysoulnationtimeliberator,” as an expert of Blackness. “A Blackman sits at a literary/looking desk. Books of Blackness, revolution, nation/building, Black poetry, drama, literature, music, How-to-be-Black, etc.” (135). The character, Whitegirl (Sharon Stover), calls Blackman to see if he

would be interested in assisting with an anthology that traces “the radical beginnings of this century...with the anarchists, wobblies, nihilists, etc...and coming up through the colored peoples’ struggle...and up to the Black revolutionary Panther communalism Now generation” (136). While patiently listening to Whitegirl’s request, Whitegirl’s dog, Malcolm, barks while she is explaining who she would like to contribute to the anthology. Intrigued by the name of the dog, Blackman asks, “Who is [the dog] named after?,” in which Whitegirl hesitantly responds, “After Malcolm X;” the play ends with Blackman softly hanging up the phone. The play’s plot does more than just show how meaningless Malcolm’s legacy has become, at least in the eyes of whites. Blackman attempts to retain some of Blackness’s and Malcolm X’s integrity by hanging up the phone, thereby refusing to contribute to Whitegirl’s anthology. The plot also places Malcolm’s legacy—and this includes the “Black revolutionary Panther communalism Now generation” groups that view themselves as ideological extensions of Malcolm’s message—under the larger rubric of Leftism, something that a number of prominent BAM artists refused to acknowledge.¹

¹ William Sales, Jr.’s chapter “Malcolm X’s Organizational Legacy” in his *From Civil Rights to Black Power Liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (1994) writes about the ways in which organizations like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party, and the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) attributed parts of their organizational and political philosophy to Malcolm X. Although Marxist in orientation during the early part of the 1970s, Baraka’s Congress of Afrikan People (CAP) assigns some of its political aims as extensions of Malcolm’s political and organizational program. The ALSC also adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, which shows the attempts of Black radical organizations to wed Malcolm with Marxism. Also see Cedric Johnson’s *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*.

Nevertheless, a number of BAM activists and participants acknowledge Malcolm's assassination as the starting point and catalysts of BAM. Kalamu Ya Salaam, in his "A Primer of the Black Arts Movement," posits that "[t]he Black Arts Movement began in 1965, catalyzed into action by the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965" (40). Baraka's 1994 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," supports Salaam's thesis by focusing primarily on the political environment of the time: "The month after Malcolm's assassination a group of [BAM artists and I] arrived in Harlem, this time to seek permanent residence and to avenge Malcolm's murder" (496). Not surprisingly, BAM theorist, artist, and activist, Larry Neal, not only offers a similar historical starting point for BAM, he also provides his reader a working definition of BAM. It is worth quoting Neal at length in order to fully reveal the aesthetic, intellectual, and political project of BAM:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art *of* politics. (29, my emphasis)

According to Neal, there is something that is quite intrinsic in the relationship between the Black artist and his community: the Black artist cannot be alienated or estranged from his community. This presumes, of course, that the artist is not only a part of his community, but that he represents the community and that, quite possibly, *he is his community, and his community is him.*

The obvious projects that are shared between BAM and the Black Power Movement are “self-determination and nationhood.” For BAM artists, these projects are a direct result of Malcolm’s articulation of Black nationalism and self-determination. In his statement “A Declaration of Independence”—a statement that signaled his official separation from the NOI—Malcolm, while presenting his new organization to the media, Muslim Mosque, Inc., states that the organization’s political philosophy is Black nationalism. For Malcolm, Black nationalism means

[Blacks] must control the political and the politicians of [their] community. They must no longer take orders from outside forces;” furthermore, “the best solution [for Blacks] is complete separation, with our people going back home, to our own African homeland. But separation back to Africa is still a long-range program, and while it has yet to materialize, 22 million of our people, who are still here in America need better food, clothing, housing, education, and jobs *right now.* (20-21, emphasis in original)

Therefore, according to Malcolm, while permanent nationhood in Africa is the primary goal, the immediate goal is temporary nationhood in America. Baraka’s stance on nationhood was not dissimilar from Malcolm’s, specifically in Baraka’s “It’s Nation Time,” in which the speaker implores his audience that “when the

brothers take over the school/ help niggers/ come out niggers....come together and unity unify” and that Black people must “build it” (i.e. a Black nation) (198, 200). Clearly Baraka and Malcolm shared the same ideological and political space during the former’s cultural nationalist period.

However, there may be a danger in Neal’s comparison of the projects of the Black Power Movement and BAM. While he argues that the goals of both movements are for self-determination and nationhood, nationhood and self-determination are not fundamentally the same concepts. On the contrary, they are quite distinct political positions. For Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles Hamilton in their seminal work, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Black Power “calls for black people to consolidate behind their own, so that they can *bargain* from a position of strength...The ultimate values and goals are not domination or exploitation of other groups, but rather an effective share in the total power of the society” (47, my emphasis). Carmichael and Hamilton, in these remarks, do not suggest that Blacks should separate from the national and political order of the United States, nor do they suggest that a separate nation should be established for Blacks; rather, it is essential for Blacks to influence and control officials they have chosen to represent them. Additionally, Blacks must possess and support their institutions. Martin Luther King, Jr., writing about the political viability of Black Power, finds that “Black Power, in its broad and positive meaning, is a call to black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals. No one can deny that the Negro is in dire need of this kind of legitimate power. Indeed, one of the greatest problems that the Negro confronts is his

lack of power” (*I Am Because We Are* 287). Similar to Carmichael and Hamilton, King does not suggest that Blacks separate themselves from whites by building a separate Black nation, for it is important to note that “self-determination *generally* fell short of territorial separatism and strict black nationalism, although black nationalist groups were also Black Power adherents” (124, my emphasis). What King, Carmichael, and Hamilton articulate is a stance that focuses on self-determination, not the kind of nationhood Malcolm supported. In other words, one could be a subscriber to Black Power and not a nationalist, but a nationalist could be, and oftentimes was, a subscriber to Black Power.

While certain adherents of BAM and the Black Power Movement couch their beliefs in nationhood and self-determination in the rhetoric and political philosophy of Malcolm X as well as in the poetic expression Baraka, these ideas have historical antecedents that can be traced specifically to Marxism, and these antecedents complicate the reading of Malcolm’s biography and lead to a fuller reading of Baraka’s cultural nationalist poetry. To put it another way, the idea of self-determination and nationhood for Blacks was not unique to the discourse of the 1960s and 1970s—this stance was presented by Stalin, at the behest of Lenin, and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). During the 1930s, the CPUSA’s stance on what was called the “Negro Question” was that Blacks Americans should have their own nation primarily within the southern portion of the United States, for that is where most Blacks resided. Its stance, however, had its origins in Stalin’s *Marxism and the National Question* (1913), in which Stalin writes, “[a] nation is primarily a community of people,” but “it is not racial, nor is it tribal” (Stalin). Despite this

qualification, Stalin still “argues that it is important for socialists to defend the ‘right’ to national self-determination” (Dawahare 75). However, this “right” to self-determination within a nation-state is not outside of the Marxist-Leninist historical progression of socialism; as a matter of fact, it facilitates socialism. C.L.R. James, in a 1967 talk on Black Power given in London, and speaking about the charismatic disposition of Carmichael, summarized the Marxist-Leninist stance on Black Power, self-determination, and nationhood:

The position was this: the independent struggle of the Negro people for their democratic rights and equality with the rest of the American nation not only had to be defended and advocated by the Marxist movement. The Marxist movement had to understand that *such independent struggles were a contributory factor to the socialist revolution*. Let me restate that as crudely as possible: the American Negroes in fighting for their democratic rights were making an indispensable addition to the struggle for socialism in the US.

(James, emphasis in original)

Therefore, while Madhubuti, Neal, and other BAM artists and activists attempted to repudiate the Western, specifically Marxist, influence on BAM, their stance cannot, at least historically and theoretically, be entirely separated from Marxism. This is not to say that there are not novel and unique dynamics and characteristics to what the BAM artists attempted to do. It is to say, however, that such repudiation only illuminates the theoretical, historical, and political space these two camps shared.

However, even without examining the CPUSA’s stance on the Negro question or Stalin’s stance on nationalism, one can still consider the last months of Malcolm’s

life in order to see how Malcolm philosophically evolved, and how Marxism and socialism influenced this evolution. “Malcolm’s life,” according to Baraka in his 1995 essay, “Malcolm As Ideology,” “was shaped by a continuous ideological development, if we take the whole of that development into consideration...then not only will we get a deeper biographical portrait of Malcolm, one that is not static and ‘ideal’ but in motion, the vita and the bios” (506). Essentially, Malcolm shifted his economic and political stance: he went from being a proponent of Black capitalism, which was an ideological residue from his time as the national spokesman for the NOI, to becoming anti-capitalist due to his talks and readings of different socialist and Marxist publications as well as his travels to Cuba, various African nations, and different countries in the Middle East. This is not to suggest that Malcolm was in any way a Marxist or a socialist—indeed, Malcolm affirms this point. In Malcolm’s final appearance on radio, he answers an accusation made by Stan Bernard, in which Bernard accuses Malcolm of “breaking bread with the communists downtown;” that is, Malcolm was published in the Marxist publication *The Militant* and had spoken at a number of socialist and Marxist functions. Malcolm’s penchant for reading *The Militant*, however, was largely unavoidable, considering that Malcolm’s two organizations, Moslem Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity were located in New York. According to James Smethurst in “Poetry and Sympathy: New York, the Left, and the Rise of Black Arts,” “the CPUSA newspaper the *Worker*, and the [Socialist Workers Party] newspaper the *Militant* were more concentrated in New York than anywhere else. And nowhere else...was there such a density of past and present Communists, Trotskyists, and Socialists, black and white” (266).

Malcolm vehemently responds by challenging Bernard's logic: "I spoke in a church...Does that make me a Methodist...I speak on any platform" (Breitman 179). While Malcolm rejects the accusation made by Bernard, it is certainly the case that *The Militant* was one of Malcolm's favorite publications. According to the FBI files on Malcolm, the unnamed author of the file, summarizing George Breitman's *Malcolm X, The Man and His Ideas*, indicates that "Malcolm X was a revolutionary and became *increasingly* more anticapitalist and more prosocialist. He read the Socialist Worker Party publication, 'The Militant,' and urged other Negroes to do likewise" (Carson 448-449). Malcolm, a voracious reader himself, also examined the history of two Marxist revolutions, the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution.

For Malcolm X, as well as...for Marx, [scientific laws that spur revolutionary change] were discoverable through the study and analysis of history.

Malcolm X rooted his knowledge in history. He did not approach history as an unconnected and unique sequence of facts. Rather he saw history as a means by which contemporary problems could be analyzed by revealing the causes which created them....[he] was familiar with the histories of...the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution. His historical studies taught him that ordinary people could change society for the better and that revolution was possible for Black people. (Sales 56)

What is intriguing about the above passage is that Malcolm looks to specific Marxist revolutions in order to draw historical connections between these revolutions and the revolutionary possibilities of Blacks. Furthermore, and most importantly, Malcolm

may have used these readings of history as a modified paradigm to apply to the plight Blacks faced in the United States. Similar to the way certain Marxist texts impacted Baraka's move from cultural nationalism to Marxism, a few of Malcolm's reading preferences began to have an impact on the way Malcolm viewed the world.

For Malcolm, however, it was not simply the reading of particular Leftist and Marxist texts that affected his intellectual evolution, for many of Malcolm's travels to Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East played a crucial role in this evolution.² Indeed, these trips played a similar role for Malcolm as the trip to Cuba played for Baraka. These trips resulted in a firmer examination of the capitalist mode of production by Malcolm. For example, after Malcolm's two visits to Africa in 1964, "Malcolm X frequently described capitalism as a 'blood sucker.'" Malcolm offers the following:

It is impossible for capitalism to survive, primarily because the system of capitalism needs some blood to suck. Capitalism used to be like an eagle, but now it's more like a vulture...As the nations of the world free themselves, then capitalism has less victims, less to suck, and it becomes weaker and weaker. It is only a matter of time in my opinion before it will collapse completely. (qtd. in Sales 75)

²Malcolm's trips to the above countries also catalyzed his shift from Black nationalism to Pan-Africanism. While Malcolm's move from Black nationalism to Pan-Africanism has been examined by, among others, Williams Sales, Jr., I find that exploring the Marxist influence on Malcolm's life and seeing how this played a fundamental role in Baraka's aesthetic production during his cultural nationalist period places both men under the larger rubric of the Left, although much of the scholarship on these and similar topics, until recently, have separated both Malcolm and Baraka from broader conversations of the Left, despite the fact that both men were significantly involved in Leftist politics.

The concept of capitalism functioning as a blood sucker is not a unique one, especially for Marx who describes capital in *Das Kapital, Vol. I* as “dead labour [sic] which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him” (342). While no one is certain if Malcolm read Marx, one can observe the striking similarities between Marx’s and Malcolm’s description of capitalism. Most importantly, however, is the idea that although one cannot measure the precise influence Marxism had on Malcolm, Marxism functions as a hovering spirit that opens political and ideological spaces for complex thought. For the purposes of my argument, it is fascinating how this spirit of Marxism not only participates in the political and intellectual evolution of the so-called “catalyst of BAM” (i.e. Malcolm X), but how this spirit moves from Malcolm’s political thought to Baraka’s poetry.

Chapter 4: The Aesthetic Presence of Marxism

The Marxist spirit that influenced the philosophical position of Malcolm during his final eleven months manifests itself dialectically in the cultural nationalist poetry of Baraka. It may be beneficial, however, to clearly define what is meant by the dialectical, specifically *dialectical materialism*. Oftentimes, dialectical materialism is referred to as the *philosophy* of Marxism—this is in stark contrast to what is known as historical materialism, which is the scientific foundation of Marxism. Interestingly, the concept of dialectical materialism, “is the cross-breed from the union of two bourgeois philosophies: the mechanistic *materialism* of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, and Hegel’s idealist *dialectics*” (Bottomore 120). Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* (1883) provides its readers with the three fundamental laws that govern the process of dialectical materialism: “[t]he law of the transformation of quantity into quality and *vice versa*; [t]he law of the interpenetration of opposites; [and] [t]he law of the negation of the negation[;]” this process, however, specifically deals with “the history of nature and human sciences” (Engels).¹ It is, therefore, necessary to see how the process outlined by Engels can be transferred to poetry without reducing the complexity of Baraka’s poetry to socialist realism.² For my usage, the poetic application of dialectical materialism emphasizes

¹ “The law of the negation of the negation” is often referred to as the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

² Socialist realism is a form of realism that was popular in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin’s leadership, in which the purpose of this form of art was to perpetuate the cause of socialism. Boris Ieremeevich Vladimirski’s oil painting, “Roses for Stalin,” shows Stalin with a bouquet of roses surrounded by satisfied and delighted children, thereby depicting the policies enacted by Stalin’s regime as positive and absolutely necessary. One can possibly expand this definition to suggest

the internal contradictions within the poem as well as the external contradictions between the poem and the historical moment in which the poem finds itself; and it is through these contradictions that the poem arrives at its synthesis: the poem challenging its explicit content by pointing to what the poem *is not saying*, the Marxism that finds itself embedded in Baraka's poetry.³ Furthermore, it may be important to note that during his cultural nationalist period, Baraka was not unfamiliar with the dialectical. David L. Smith notes that "Baraka was a serious student of Hegel;" however, Smith argues that "one would expect more of an understanding of dialectical development than [Baraka's] stark either/or attitudes [his cultural nationalist poem's] suggest. He clearly values the product of developed political consciousness over the process of developing one" (238). Smith's first assertion is quite accurate, especially when one considers that found in Baraka's cultural nationalist book of poetry *Black Magic* (1969), which contains, according to Neal, the BAM manifesto, "Black Art" and "A Poem for Black Hearts" (both will be examined later), is the poem "HEGEL." Smith's second assertion pertaining to the lack of dialectical development in Baraka's cultural nationalist poetry is based, I argue, on a surface reading of Baraka's cultural nationalist poetry. Given the controversial nature and abrasive tone of much of his cultural nationalist poetry, one

that socialist realism is any art that has elements of socialism such as a focus on the industrial proletariat, working class revolution, and capitalist exploitation.

³ This is similar to the Fredric Jameson's argument outlined in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), in which he argues that Marxism is the "untranscendable horizon' that subsumes" all forms of literary theory (10). Specifically, Jameson places an emphasis on sub-texts and how they historically and ideologically establish the "unspoken." For my argument, I examine how the dialectical moving throughout Baraka's cultural nationalist poetry illuminates the Marxism within the poetry itself.

understands how a surface reading of Baraka's poetry would lend itself to a primary focus on the explicit content he employs. However, given his intellectual and ideological background, I argue that Baraka's cultural nationalist poetry does develop dialectically, particularly in the dialectical term Baraka uses known as the "changing-same."⁴

The specter of both Malcolm and Marxism may not have a better poetic representation than in Baraka's "A Poem For Black Hearts," which is a poem that is, on its surface, dedicated to Malcolm, but functions dialectically between the spiritual and material representation of Malcolm as well as the spiritual and material representation of Black people. Throughout the poem, there is interplay between Malcolm's words and image, and how both represent Malcolm's symbolic presence and meaning to Black people:

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke
the face of some dumb white man. For
Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
all black and strong in his image
of ourselves, For Malcolm's words

⁴ Baraka's concept of the what he calls the "Changing-Same" is found in his 1966 essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music), in which Baraka writes, "The blues impulse transferred...containing a race, and its expression. *Primal* (mixtures...transfers and imitations). Through its many changes, it remained the exact replication of *The Black Man In The West*" (186). Here, he analyzes how jazz and R&B while reinventing themselves as musical genres remain the same through their historical foundation of not only Africa but of Black people in the West. One can also see this concept in his early work, *Blues People* (1963). The changing-same is similar to the dialectical in the sense that while that out of the dialectical emerges a synthesis that functions as the engine of history, the thesis and antithesis are preserved through the dialectical process.

fire darts, the victor's tireless
thrusts, words hung above the world...(104)

These lines emphasize the dialectical developing through enjambment in lines four to five (“all black and strong in his image/ of ourselves”). The enjambment places a focus on both the individual image of Malcolm (“his image”) and the Black community (“of ourselves”); that is, while there is a visual separation via enjambment of “his image” from “ourselves”—an image which may imply Malcolm’s material, physical presence being gone as a result of his assassination—the image of Malcolm is profoundly connected to the concept of “ourselves.” Malcolm’s image is so connected to “ourselves” that it is “*of ourselves*”: Malcolm is indeed “all black and strong” as an individual, but this image and his existence, material and ideal, only exists and can only be sustained through the communal notion “of ourselves.” This may suggest how the community constitutes the individual while the individual constitutes the community; specifically, it speaks to the title of the poem itself: this is a poem for both Black hearts and Malcolm X, and the two cannot be divorced. Moreover, while there is a clear visual separation between the two concepts (e.g. the individual and community as represented by “his image” and “ourselves”), the use of enjambment amplifies the tone of these lines, thereby emphasizing the wedding between the “his image” and “of ourselves.”

The poem immediately succeeding “A Poem For Black Hearts” is the clarion call for BAM, Baraka’s powerful poem, “Black Art.” The dialectical arrangement of the poem begins in the first three lines: “Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step” (106). In these lines, the speaker transforms the

poem into an object while simultaneously calling into question the prior (and future) idealistic composition of the poetic project. Poems are, for the speaker, “bullshit”—i.e. meaningless—unless they are the specific objects he describes “piled on a step.” The speaker seems to feel that poems are inactive, idealistic, sentimental, and do not deal with material reality, that is, prior to this poem; hence, the speaker’s need to *transform* the poem into the material. While one can only speculate why the speaker selects these objects, the image of “teeth...piled on step” anticipates the action poems are supposed to take—actions that are described throughout the entirety of the poem. Furthermore, teeth, lemons, or trees piled onto a step may indicate that poems are indeed worthless unless they have the ability to cause violence (teeth), impede one’s progress (trees), or cause someone to stumble (lemons); this is in spite of the fact that it is difficult to interpret the worth or exchange-value of these objects themselves (the concept of the use-value and exchange-value within this poem will be discussed later). Although poems may be worthless and idealistic unless they are objects, when poems are useless, they are indeed a specific object—bullshit. In other words, poems have more significance when they take the form of “teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step” rather than “bullshit.”

Throughout the poem, the speaker informs his audience about what poems do and especially about what poems *are*. The importance of the verb, “are,” is only apparent when the speaker tells the audience what a poem is *like*. Lines eleven to twelve is the only time when the speaker uses a simile to describe a poem: “We want poems / *like* fists beating niggers out of Jocks” (106, my emphasis). The image of a fist is immediately associated not only with the symbolic gesture of defiance and

power for the Black Power Movement, but on a smaller, more personal level, it is associated with the human body. When lines eleven to twelve are juxtaposed with the first three lines of the poem, one discovers the speaker's reluctance to associate the ideal of a poem with a material association with the human body, for if poems *are* fists rather than *like* fists, there may be the possibility of turning the fist, in both its symbolism of Black Power as well as its association with the human body, into an object that is useful. This may be the reason why the speaker, in lines forty-five to forty-nine, refers to Black people not as objects, but as

the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
All the loveliness here in the world (107)

What is intriguing is found in line forty-eight (“Are poems & poets”). The initial reading of this line, along with the prior lines, may undermine the argument about the speaker's reluctance to reduce Black people into objects, particularly a poem. However, when one focuses on the capitalization of “Are,” the reading becomes dialectical. While one may read the idea that Black people *are* poems—and given the emphasis placed on what poems are and what they are supposed to do, Black people becoming the object, not the subject of “Black Art”—“Are” suggests that *poems are Black people* rather than Black people being poems. To put it another way, poems become the object for and of Black people. Moreover, this poem, “Black Art,” becomes the object for Black people. More than a manifesto, as Neal describes “The

Black Arts Movement,” this and other “Black poems” become useful objects in the possession of Black people.

Indeed, the speaker echoes this sentiment when he abrasively declares in line five and six, “Fuck poems / and they are useful.” The usefulness of a poem takes center stage, for poems, according to the speaker, need to “kill,” “shoot guns,” “wrestle cops into alleys / and take their weapons leaving them dead.” Essentially, poems must take action. This is not dissimilar from the cry of Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) in which he writes in his last theses, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (173). The usefulness of a poem leads one to Marx’s analysis of use-value in *Das Kapital, Vol. I*. Marx presents the following definition of use-value:

The usefulness of a thing makes it use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter. It is therefore the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond, which is the use-value of the useful thing...When examining use-values, we always assume we are dealing with definite quantities, such as dozens of watches, yards of linen, or tons of iron....Use-values are only realized in use or in consumption. They constitute the material content of wealth, whatever its social form may be. (126)

The unique usefulness of poems for the speaker deviates from what Marx may have had in mind when it comes to the usefulness of an object. Marx is clearly thinking of actual material items—indeed, items whose usefulness “does not dangle in mid-air.”

Since a poem is not a material item in the real sense of the term, the speaker is attempting to *reconceptualize* not only the use-value of art, particularly poems, but use-value itself. For the speaker, the usefulness of an object—real or ideal—cannot solely be planted in material existence; the aesthetic (i.e. poems), for the speaker, must have use-value as well. The usefulness of poems cannot be “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” because this “character of the commodity does not...arise from its use-value” (Marx 163, 164). If this is the case, the initial ideal, nonmaterial composition of the poem does not matter as much as how useful the poem is.

There is a point to be made, however, about the potential labor process of “poems”. The poems engage in a unique labor process; again, according to the speaker in lines nineteen through twenty-three:

We want ‘poems that kill.’ Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. (106)

This unique exertion of the poems’ labor power is use to control a quantitative exchange, which is the *cell* of capital, according to Marx.⁵ In order for the usefulness of poems to be realized, poems must perform the above labor tasks—that is, poems labor in order to be quantitatively exchanged for “This Poem,” thereby turning both poems and This Poem into a commodity.

⁵ The exercise of labor for the purpose of exchange is known as *labor power*. Labor is distinct from labor power in the sense that the former is “the actual exercise of human productive powers to alter the use value of, and add value to, commodities” (Bottomore 265).

Poems in “Black Art,” however, become commodities in the traditional Marxian sense of the term. For Marx in *Grundrisse*, a commodity is an item that is produced for the primary purpose of exchange. He provides his reader with an example in order to elucidate this point:

[W]hen the peasant takes a wandering tailor, of the kind that existed in times past, into his house, and gives him the material to make clothes with...The man who takes the cloth I supplied to him and makes me an article of clothing out of it gives me a use value. But instead of giving it directly in objective form, he gives it in the form of activity. I give him a completed use value; he completes another for me. The difference between *previous, objectified labour* and *living, present labour* here appears as a merely *formal* difference between the different *tenses* of labour, at one time in the perfect and at another in the present...(Marx, emphasis in original)

The power of the commodity is to satisfy a human want—i.e. use-value—and dictate its exchange with another commodity. The exchange Marx outlines functions on a quantitative basis: X amount of a certain commodity is exchanged for Y amount of a certain commodity. In “Black Art,” the speaker indicates the first power of the commodity, which is to satisfy a human want, and he informs his audience of this want in lines fifty to fifty-one: “We *want* a black poem. And a / Black World” (107, my emphasis). The only indication the speaker provides of exchange, however, is only when, in lines fifty-three to fifty-five, “All Black People Speak This Poem / Silently / or LOUD” (107). The quantitative exchange that takes place within the poem is between the plural “poems” and the singular, capitalized “This Poem.” While

the speaker states that there must be poems to perform a multitude of actions, their labor power is exchanged for the singular poem, “Black Art.”

It is here that the dialectical between the use-value and exchange-value of poems and “This Poem” becomes apparent. As Fredric Jameson notes in *Marxism in Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1971), “The fundamental formal problem of the dialectical...is precisely that of continuity” (50).⁶ This continuity emerges when examining the dialectical development of *poems* and This Poem. Even though the speaker informs the audience of the quantitative difference between *poems* and This Poem, he does not provide the qualitative difference. It is the case that the speaker wants “All Black People to Speak This Poem/ Silently/ or LOUD,” which seems to place an emphasis on This Poem (i.e. “Black Art”); however, most of the poem deals with the speaker’s desire to have *poems* that perform specific acts. Therefore, what is unveiled is the continuous exchange between the singular (“This Poem”) and the plural (“poems”).

⁶ Although Jameson in this passage is referring to the dialectical writer, I extend his remark to that of the dialectical process itself. Since the dialectical for Marx and Hegel is the engine of life (for Marx, it is the economy; for Hegel, it is the Absolute Spirit), both writers do not provide a reasonable conclusion to the end of this process. Marx attempts to do it with his concept of communism—i.e. classes ceasing to exist—but if one is to argue that a mode of production is not solely the economy but is the economy and everything that possibly emerges from it (e.g. culture, society, etc.), then one may conclude that a classless mode of production is still a mode of production nonetheless. Consequently, this mode of production like other modes of production will have internal contradictions that will develop and work themselves out dialectically, moving society into another stage of history.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Beyond Baraka's biographical influences lies the ideological and aesthetic terrain of Marxism he encounters. Also, one may be able to read Baraka's biography within a peculiar format of historical materialism, particularly when read in the chronological order Harris provides. Undoubtedly, Baraka's interactions with Leftists and Marxists alike made such a transition from cultural nationalism to Marxism nearly inevitable. Indeed, it is shown through his most explicitly radical cultural nationalist period—a period in which one witnesses the sheer genius of Baraka's use of the dialectical.

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