

Dramatizing Death Threats: Amiri Baraka's Nuyorican Trio

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Abstract

All of Amiri Baraka's dramatic work challenges traditional representations of American theatre, and given the scholarship that does exist on Baraka, critics tend to agree. If, by contrast, scholars have considered the later works artistically unworthy of criticism or attention, this essay endeavors to set the record straight by unveiling their theatrical potentialities as part of the case for a re-evaluation of Baraka's 1990s work. Essentially, this essay breaks the critical deadlock, offering in-depth analyses of *Jack Pot Melting: A Commercial*, *The Election Machine Warehouse*, and *General Hag's Skeezag*, all published in the '90s and performed together for the Nuyorican Poets Café Theater in 1996. Rather than depict onstage killing or murder as with Baraka's earlier drama, these plays present America's threat of death.

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In critical scholarship, the periods delineating shifts in Baraka's political ideologies have been repeatedly oversimplified. Too often, his legacy is frozen far in the past, and commentators rarely explore his latest works. In Daniel Matlin's 2013 *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis*, for example, the chapter on Baraka, speciously titled "Be Even Blacker: Amiri Baraka's Names and Places," drops off shortly after 1974, as if the named writer/activist ceases to exist in any place after this particular year (2013). In fact, most contemporary critics treat Baraka as though he did not continue writing. In *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, Jerry Gafio Watts justifies his decision to neglect Baraka's later work: "[B]y ending my study with the mid-1980s, I have been able to concentrate on Baraka's creative life and political involvements during the height of his prominence" (2001, 464). Much like Watt's describes, too often, critical responses to Baraka's work compartmentalize his output and much of what is written regards Baraka during the 1960s or 1970s. I argue that this critical marginalization is more a backlash regarding Baraka's politics, and not necessarily a reduction in the quantity or quality of his dramatic work. Though it would not be apparent from the majority of scholarship regarding his drama, Baraka continued to produce revolutionary plays throughout the 1990s and up to his death.

Beginning with *Dutchman*, Baraka began to present representations of murder, killing, and death on the American stage to politicize viewers and expose truths surrounding racism and Black oppression. As he embraced Nationalism as a militant activist, though, and continued to

break from mainstream American theatre with representations of justifiable homicide against whites, his plays were either hailed as innovative and influential or targeted as hateful propaganda. Still, despite criticisms, Baraka's 1960s drama sought to legitimize Black rage as a force to overturn the tide of white supremacy in America. By staging a deadly apocalyptic race war in *The Slave*, along with a slave uprising responsible for the death of a white God in *Slave Ship*, Baraka provoked Black audiences both to question their complacency and to struggle for change. In essence, his early plays echo the fury of Malcolm X and offer an alternative to peaceful protest. Since his start as a playwright, Baraka's choice had always been to fight the ideological myth that the American Dream pertains to Blacks. Though, as he embraced new political ideologies, the focus of his dramatic message shifted as well. With his denunciation of Nationalism and subsequent conversion to Marxism in 1974, Baraka began to dramatize Capitalism as the critical enemy in the fight for Black self-determination and liberation. Throughout his Marxist drama, which he continued to write up until his death, Baraka challenges audiences and the myths surrounding American Capitalism. *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production?*, for example, presents the destruction of Capitalism by armed unity and struggle.

During the 1990s, Baraka continued to explore themes of murder and death in revolutionary plays inspired by his Marxist ideology. Moreover, despite the lack of critical attention given to these plays, his commitment to provoke audiences through drama seemed to intensify as a new decade dawned. However, in 1992, tragedy struck Baraka's family; as a dreadful example of life mirroring Baraka's representations of violence in art, Baraka's youngest son was shot in the head and severely wounded. To investigate Baraka's dramatic evolution in light of such tragedy, this essay offers in-depth analyses of *Jack Pot Melting: A Commercial*, *The Election Machine Warehouse*, and *General Hag's Skeezag*, all published in the '90s and performed together for the Nuyorican Poets Café Theater in 1996. Miguel Algarín's Nuyorican Poets Café, founded in 1973, adheres to Baraka's mission to fight "Big capital," and offers a communal space for revolutionary writers to produce their work.

These plays present families united as weapons against the enemy and further push Baraka's revolutionary agenda. In an interview with Derrick I. M. Gilbert published in Gilbert's 1998 edited collection, *Catch the Fire!!!: a Cross-Generational Anthology of Contemporary African-American Poetry*, Baraka reflects upon what he considers to be the importance of writing about family. I find his answer central when pursuing an analysis of his Nuyorican trio:

What you're really asking is; 'What do I think about writing about ourselves?' And that's essential. I don't know how you can talk about anything else, you know, I mean at base—although there's all kinds of variations. But I think it's a basic kind of thing, and I think the question now is how you take this superstructure back. You know, since the sixties, they've lied to us about everybody and everything. (Gilbert 1998, 57)

Here, while continuing to reference his own Marxist ideology by questioning how to defeat an institutional/political superstructure, Baraka puts forward yet another new solution—to embrace family, and in so doing, oneself in art. By embracing these personal elements, Baraka suggests the writer can begin to erase the lies (sold and distributed by an American Capitalist society).

Undeniably, this is what Baraka promotes through his play trio. This shifting notion of how to combat the enemy makes sense when paired with two distinct aspects of Baraka's life up to this point: the flagrant backlash he received after converting to Third World Marxism and his evolving feelings toward (and discussion of) his own family in light of his son's shooting. It might be said that Baraka's Nuyorican trio serves as an example to a prophecy he made in the early 80s: "For Black Theater... this is a critical and dangerous time. But no matter what these racists do—we are not intimidated. By the end of the '80s they will be wishing the '60s would return! For Black Theater, like Black people, adversity will only make us stronger and finally invincible" (2011, 8). Though very little is written about the Nuyorican Trio, a closer study of these plays reveals their power. While Baraka continued to dramatize conditions in the struggle for liberation for both Blacks and the working-class, rather than depict onstage killing or murder, these plays present collective family units as a means of defense against America's threat of death. Far from taming or muting his Marxist fervor, the three plays analyzed within these pages warn audiences of the very real danger present in America. Unlike his drama of the past, these plays forego reactionary forms of killing as a means of self defense and focus on exposing the deadly American bourgeoisie as a major threat to the proletariat. Each play presents characters, and thereby audiences, with a unique death threat, while simultaneously attacking different aspects of the Capitalist American society. *Jack Pot Melting* and *The Election Machine Warehouse* tackle the mainstream American media in different eras, while *General Hag* presents the urban drug trade as a metaphor for political corruption.

Jack Pot Melting: A Commercial

All three of the short plays, which appeared for the first time on Nuyorican's stage in 1996, are irrefutably anti-mainstream. In the same year the plays were produced for Nuyorican, in a Keynote address entitled "The Role of The Writer in Establishing a Unified Writers Organization," delivered in Johannesburg, South Africa on 21 March 1996, Baraka urges writers to continue to fight against the mainstream: "No more complaining that Big capital won't let our writing or other art undermine them sufficiently. That they won't publish our books which tell them to die or produce our plays, exhibit our paintings which show ways big capital can be destroyed" (2011, 166). The answer for Baraka, just as it had been in the '60s, with the establishment of Harlem's BARTS and Newark's Spirit House, is to partake in a sort of guerilla warfare with regard to theatre production—"We must give plays in our living room (discussions in our basement or backyard)" (Baraka 2011, 416). With Algarín and the Nuyorican Poets Café, Baraka found a like-minded anti-mainstream activist and, ultimately, a new home in which to stage his drama.

Rome Neal directed the plays for Nuyorican and the evening opened with the shortest of the trio, *Jack Pot Melting: A Commercial*. In this one act play, set in separate apartments, characters labeled as Brother and Sister speak with each other over the telephone as they view Capitalist caricatures of themselves on their televisions. As with most of Baraka's drama, the play grows more ominous; as their television alter egos distract Brother and Sister by both selling and spreading distorted lies regarding the value of American Capitalism, bloodthirsty dogs growl and bark outside their respective apartments, symbolizing the rapacious greed of American Capitalism.

Though TV Brother and TV Sister enact their commercial on television, the play ultimately serves as Baraka's own commercial, urging audiences to recognize American Capitalism's threat to genuine democracy and self-determination for Blacks. The "Jack Pot" within the title represents capital and the myth of the American dream—a fable that suggests that living in or landing on American soil is equivalent to hitting the proverbial "jackpot." According to William Blum, an oppositional leading expert on American foreign policy and author of *America's Deadliest Export: Democracy: The Truth about US Foreign Policy and Everything Else*:

No matter how many times they're lied to, [Americans] still often underestimate the government's capacity for deceit, clinging to the belief that their leaders somehow mean well. As long as people believe that their elected leaders are well intentioned, the leaders can, and do, get away with murder. Literally. This belief is the most significant of...myths. (2013, 13)

Melting puts forth the same message for American theatergoing audiences.

More specifically, and echoing Baraka's *Home on the Range* from 1968, *Melting* addresses the negative effects of television in America. In her essay "Evolution or Revolution in Black Theater: A Look at the Cultural Nationalist Agenda in Select Plays by Amiri Baraka," Sandra Shannon notes that in *Home on the Range*, "Baraka warns his black viewers against television's mind altering influence" (2003, 283). Despite Baraka's shift towards Marxism, the clear comparison between an early play driven by a Nationalist agenda with his '90s work written long after his denunciation of Nationalism, reinforces Baraka's ongoing determination to present a revolutionary drama well beyond the 1960s; because he maintains that television in the '90s is still controlled by a Capitalist, white America, his enemy has not changed. As *Melting* opens, Brother enters his apartment and turns on the television, revealing the "Large head of [a] black man on TV bearing his likeness" (Baraka 1991, 64). On stage, TV Brother directly addresses his doppelganger and introduces his television program: "Welcome to the gray nasty show, live from the stick's bottom. The wind is here standing, yes, the murderer's eyes" (Baraka 1991, 64). The play's message remains exigent today, as Baraka unveils his attack on contemporary mainstream media, suggesting that within America mass conglomerates control broadcasting to dictate distorted truths, thereby murdering/massacring black American's ability to be self-determining.

The play seems to situate itself around 1991, the year it was first published, though in performance the year can certainly remain indeterminate. In his essay "the Black Theater Movement & The Black Consciousness Movement," also written in 1991, Baraka declares, "Film and television have replaced live drama in the main and large audience theater is strictly commerce aimed at tourists as part of middle class vacations" (2011, 107). *Melting* attacks television and positions itself within a concept of Black solidarity to right this wrong. The branding of his characters as Sister and Brother serve as a representation of both Black family and community. Essentially, the character titles carry a dual meaning. While they do eventually name themselves as Ben and Gloria, the character names of Brother and Sister invite Black solidarity and allow for audiences to connect. To take a case in point, in his *New York*

Times review of the Nuyorican trio from November 20th, 1996, Lawrence Van Gelder fails to offer the characters' given names, drawing greater significance to the nondescript titles: "[A] young man called Brother and a young woman called Sister are astonished to see how they are depicted on television" (1996, 1). Taken more literally, as common delineations for siblings, the labels recall two members of a family unit, while a more colloquial reading, which decodes these monikers as friendly designations for people of color within a Black vernacular tradition, reflects the Black community. Essentially, no matter which way they are interpreted, the character titles in *Melting* allow audiences to connect with what unfolds on stage and relate with Brother and Sister as a united, collective community.

By contrast, the televised Capitalist caricatures of Brother and Sister reveal Baraka's disdain for mainstream American broadcasters' manipulation of content and image. The dueling mirror images offer so much potential in performance; in the world of *Melting*, TV Brother and Sister are depicted as whitewashed Capitalists broadcast via television to sell the American myth of the great white way. As the TV personalities continue their sales pitch, Brother and Sister receive knocks on their respective doors. Sister reveals, "My God, it's some dogs," as stage directions confirm, "*Dogs are slowly building up their vicious growling*" (Baraka 1991, 66). As the ominous threat of attack by bloodthirsty dogs rises, TV Brother and Sister bring forth two white puppies named Fame and Fortune. Again, the American mainstream media controls content and image. The very real threat of violence posed by vicious dogs is whitewashed on television as the puppies appear on screen.

As the play nears its end, Baraka draws his audience's attention towards the importance of family and community. Sister reveals how frightened she is, and Brother responds, "Hey, we've got friends who'd help. People. Families" (Baraka 1991, 67). Despite Brother's claim, however, Sister retorts, "Why'd you leave that party early, anyway? I was looking for you" (Baraka 1991, 67). In this case, knowledge of Baraka's earlier drama helps unpack this seemingly innocuous line. There is more behind Sister's comment than might originally be apparent. First performed in 1979, Baraka's *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production?* places factory workers in direct confrontation with a monopoly Capitalist. In the fictional factory of Colonel Motors (obviously satirizing other American conglomerates, such as General Motors) Donna and Reg stand united in resistance to the oppressive tactics of MM (Masked Man or Money's Master). As the play comes to a close, Donna and Reg exit the factory and exclaim, 'we gotta party to go to ... party of a new type' (Baraka *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 1991, 301). Throughout the 1970s, this represents Baraka's ultimate battle cry:

The central task of Marxist-Leninists inside this country is to build a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist communist party, based on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung thought, an antirevisionist vanguard party, to lead the working class in the destruction of the United States bourgeois state apparatus, and the transformation of the means of production from privately owned and profit oriented to publicly owned, state property. (Baraka 1984,28)

In *Melting*, though Brother maintains he knows people and families who can help, Sister offers an allusion to a legitimate political alternative—in the form of a progressive Marxist party—to combat the oppressive American government.

Despite prevailing assumptions, Baraka's revolutionary plays clearly extend well into the 1990s, as *Melting* draws from his earlier work. Throughout the play, Baraka vehemently critiques the American social economic system as the supreme ruler of mainstream media, and presents the threat it poses to democracy, freedom, and self-determination for all working people, especially black Americans *The Election Machine Warehouse*, for which Baraka mined his childhood to depict American Capitalism and the mainstream media in an altogether different context, time, and place, addresses similar themes.

The Election Machine Warehouse

In his 1994 essay "Revolutionary Art," Baraka remarks:

Even those of us who claim revolutionary stances spend most of our time talking about our enemies... When we criticize them, we expend our energy and force on them, rather than on the creation of the new, the transformative, rather than with the creation of what does not yet exist, which we must swear to bring into being, if we are truly revolutionary. (2011,139)

Baraka references his desire to experiment with new forms of art; as a result, his final published play, presented as part of the Nuyorican trio, presents direct memories of autobiographical dramatic representation. While he continues to name American Capitalism as the enemy, Baraka drastically changes his dramatic style by basing *The Election Machine Warehouse* solely on his real life memories of childhood. So many of Baraka's earlier plays, such as *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, or *Madheart*, directly draw from or touch on autobiographical elements, but a close study of *Election* reveals a more intimate connection with the real life past of its sometimes enigmatic revolutionary author.

Set in Baraka's hometown of Newark, New Jersey, *Election*, much like *Melting*, promotes the themes of family and community, only this time in a different context; this particular play traces the history and threat of a manipulative and oppressive America through a lens of the past. The title references Baraka's childhood, situating the play in a time directly following the depression. In an interview with social activist and Civil Rights leader Julian Bond, Baraka provides details regarding the play's background as well as his motivations for writing it:

I even have a play called *The Election Machine Warehouse* 'cause my grandfather, that was his job. He was a Republican—and that's the job they gave him, night watchman in the election machine factory. My sister and I used to jump on top of those machines and run up and down. It was a whole block long, all the election machines in the county were in there. We would run up and down on the top of those machines. And I would wonder—you know, I wrote this play where the radio was—you know, the radio was what was happening. (2013)

Essentially, *Election* represents another Marxist dramatization of a Black American family victimized by the depression and Capitalism. When comparing scenes with the above interview and Baraka's *Autobiography*, the vignettes presented within the play mirror Baraka's past and family. With its setting in an election machine warehouse, the play addresses the politics of the time and specifically criticizes "the New Deal" as a precursor responsible for modern day American Capitalism. As with *Melting*, *Election* also attacks the American mainstream media, only this time Baraka targets radio. By grouping the two plays together on the same stage, as in the 1996 Nuyorican production, Baraka is able to attack different varieties of media, and does not limit his critique to one form. The radio broadcasts in *Election* brainwash their victims, the loyal listeners, and ultimately display the growing threat of American Capitalism.

Set in a warehouse, *Election* can be read as a memory play, as both Baraka and his dramatic creation, the narrative Voice, present respective recollections before the main story begins. The play opens with the juxtaposition between the narrative Voice delivering realistic historical accounts of slavery set against the vacuous Jack Benny radio show, in which Benny's Black chauffeur Rochester is caricatured as a racially stereotyped buffoon. Representing another clear link between Baraka's Nationalist and Marxist writings, or, more specifically, this trio and Baraka's previous drama, earlier in his career, Baraka penned *Jello*,—published by Third World Press in 1970—a satirical drama based on the same Jack Benny radio show. Within *Jello*, Rochester, Benny's otherwise loyal Black chauffeur, turns militant and accosts/robs Benny, as well other members of the show, thereby gaining revenge on these symbols of white America. *Election*, however, focuses on the ominous threat of American Capitalism's propensity to manipulate and control. The radio station broadcasting the Jack Benny show, for example, taunts and distracts its audience, while dictating a subliminal racist agenda. In contrast, the juxtaposing Voice delivers a harrowing narration detailing the horrors of chattel slavery:

The American slave trade, therefore, meant the elimination of at least sixty million Negroes from their motherland. The Muhammadan slave trade meant the forcible migration of nearly as many more. . . . It would be conservative, then, to say that the slave trade cost Negro Africa one hundred million souls. (Baraka 1997,121)

The anonymous narrator recalls historic traumatic events while Baraka sets up the story of his childhood to unfold on stage. In his introduction to *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays*, first published in 1978, Kimberly Benston also references this consistent dual quest by Baraka to probe both his own identity and African-American traditions through his work. Accordingly in *Election*, Baraka casts a shadow that is at once personal and political: "*Figure of a boy moving quickly, almost unseen through machines like forest, a runaway. We hear his panting breath and dogs barking in the distance... A ghost sweeps among the machines while making a moaning sound. A boy pursues stealthily. They disappear*" (Baraka 1997, 121). Both the boy and the ghost carry dual meanings, as symbols of slavery and representations of Baraka's memories; the boy can be interpreted as a runaway slave and a representation of Baraka as a child, while the ghost stands as a clear symbol of the haunting memory of slavery and, more personally, Baraka's grandfather, still moaning among the machines as the clear inspiration for the play. In addition, the sounds of barking dogs ring forth the horrors of slavery while remaining reminiscent of the dogs from *Melting*.

The incontestable autobiographical nature of this dramatic piece, influenced by his own childhood, provides further evidence that Baraka continued to produce revolutionary drama within the '90s and saw an advantage in dramatizing an overt, strong Black family unit as a necessary force to combat the threat posed by American Capitalism. What remains unique for Baraka here is that these characters signify theatrical representations of Baraka's real life family. While connections between Baraka and some of his previous dramatic characters, such as Clay from *Dutchman*, can be easily drawn, the boy in *Election* is Baraka as a child; though their given names are slightly altered, each member of Baraka's immediate family depicted within the play is realistically recreated for the stage. However, despite the author's clear individual connection with his characters, perhaps the lack of distinct names suggest an ethnic political agenda. Much like the names in *Melting*, throughout the published script of *Election*, Baraka favors more impersonal labels—Father, Mother, Grandmother, Grandfather/Watchman. In this way, Baraka allows audiences to better relate to his personal story as another warning against the American mainstream.

In Scene 2 of *Election*, Baraka once again promotes the trio's underlying theme regarding America's threat of death to the proletariat. The family's discussion throughout the play reveals Grandfather/Watchman as a Republican and criticizes him for his old values. Father ridicules, "A lotta black people still think the Republicans freed them" (Baraka 1997, 122). This statement stems from the fact that Republican President Abraham Lincoln held office as Black Americans fought to abolish slavery alongside Northern white soldiers during the Civil War. The President in 1940, however, was the Democratic Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and it is his policies, commonly termed "the New Deal," which *Election* takes to task. While Roosevelt's domestic and economic programs positioned to offer relief, recovery, and reform, did, in fact, help America pull through The Great Depression, they also set a political machine in motion, which prompted the modern American Imperialist/Capitalist monster Baraka detests. As a means of foreshadowing an impending nightmare, while the family debates Grandfather's politics, the radio announces its first warning to Baraka's characters, and audience—"You think I'm a killer, wait till you get ahold of my son. He's the real gangbuster!" (Baraka 1997, 122). Though the message in this instance is meant as part of an actual radio program, the underlying meaning suggests America's rising threat, as it transitioned from depression to global superpower.

While the American depression of the 1930s was a difficult time for all, Baraka's *Election* dramatizes the oppressive hardships felt by black Americans during this time. Scene 5 presents a flashback to the 1930s in which the Grandfather/Watchman loses his business at the hands of a white merchant. The repressive and dominating Jim Crow South left little opportunity for Blacks as the nation struggled to find its economic footing. Blacks were denied self-determination and ownership, as a slave mentality continued to rule. As an additional example of this system of oppression, within Scene 6, a banker lectures Grandfather/Watchman regarding black America's inability to thrive amid American Capitalism:

You can't run a business and be friends with colored people. That's why you people fail in business, too soft. Don't know how to crack the whip. You can't be rich unless you can get high off it. Unless you can pray to it. Worship it. Money is Heaven and God and

whiskey and women! And the colored don't understand. But wait a few years. A few will. Just wait. I predict that. (Baraka 1997, 129)

At this stage, Grandfather/Watchman remains defenseless, since he holds no real power to combat the racist Capitalist regime. Despite the banker's lecture, Grandfather/Watchman looks to the Black community for strength and proposes a necessary alternative: "so we must be able to go to the ballot box. We must support each other. We must support colored business and the colored church. We must get in politics and join together and finally take office" (Baraka 1997, 130). At its essence, Grandfather/Watchman proposes unity and struggle, a consistent phrase employed by Baraka as he continued to navigate the twists and turns of his own shifting ideologies. However, just as Mother and Father advance to join Grandfather/Watchman in unified defiance, Baraka repeats his warnings to his audience. Representing the American Democrats, as their symbol of hard work and struggle, and thereby the rising threat of New Deal politics, a "NEGRO DONKEY/Dog enters" to antagonize the family (Baraka 1997, 135). As the stage directions detail, the Donkey/Dog stands as the enemy and a metaphor for the threat posed by mainstream American politics. Baraka's siren awakens the audience to the threat of America, as the Donkey/Dog, once again reminiscent of the bloodthirsty dogs from *Melting*, threatens violence.

With the threat of violence steadily rising, *Election* suddenly takes a turn for the worse, as, Baraka reaches back to *Dutchman*, and focuses on America's prevailing threat towards the proletariat. In a ritual mock lynching, Grandfather/Watchman is slowly hoisted up a "light pole" with a noose around his neck as both the Donkey/Dog and banker salute (Baraka 1997, 131). Baraka relentlessly and continually stages such threats to provoke audiences. For refusing simply to accept his token position as night watchman of the election machine warehouse, the Grandfather/Watchman pays the price, and is attacked. The attack takes its toll, for the next time the audience sees him, Grandfather/Watchman is confined to a wheelchair (Baraka 1997, 133). With Grandfather/Watchman out of the way, Father is now offered a job with the United States Post Office. By blindly and graciously accepting his own token position, Father acknowledges his status as a modern-day slave and aligns himself with the enemy.

To end *Election*, Baraka uses clear symbols which represent American Capitalism's takeover. Benston claims, "The Barakan pursuit of selfhood is typically framed in terms of a substitution of Afro-American for Western culture as one's nourishing influence" (1978). In *Election*, though, Western culture wins. Father does not resist, and remains seduced by his new job and the Capitalist mainstream. In fact, Father gleefully brings gifts from the Post Office, and eagerly shares them with his family. The Boy receives a subway token and an apple; the tainted fruit is no different than one of Lula's apples from *Dutchman*—a poisoned symbol meant to lure its victim towards complacency and compliance. In effect, the token carries the same message, inviting the Boy to join his father in complicity. Next, the young Girl receives a little Black doll brandishing a knife. Symbolizing the media's distorted depictions of Blacks, the insulting doll literally cuts deep as the knife wounds each member of the family. Mother receives a photograph of her children posed in space suits with Kate Smith, a 1940s singer and star of radio. The image serves as another symbol of the mainstream media's ability to usurp control; as Mother declares, "It looks like Kate Smith is their mother or something" (Baraka 1997, 138).

Finally, Father receives a button labeling him as “Deacon” (Baraka 1997, 139). Once again, Father gladly accepts this token as a newly ordained convert and slave to American Capitalism. He announces, “But my new job is my real present. The Post Office!” (Baraka 1997, 139). As the lights fade, the radio announcer presents the station’s call letters, “W.H.Y.,” and then, right before blackout, the audience hears their final warning as “*the faint horrible laughter of the radio trio, quickly and deadly*” (Baraka 1997, 139).

The vast majority of threats depicted in *Election* come quickly, presenting overt deadly messages, and purposefully so. Baraka’s memories of his family’s struggle serve as strategic warnings to contemporary audiences. All three plays presented for the Nuyorican promote a dramatic revolutionary agenda and pose the problem of resistance for Blacks in America. Regarding these specific productions from 1996, Gelder acknowledges, “Good casts make these plays flash with bitterness, rage, puzzlement, disdain, love, history, satire, poetry, humor, hope and sadness....and they constitute a welcome update on Mr. Baraka” (1996, 1).

General Hag’s Skeezag

Like Gelder, the reviewer for the *New York Amsterdam News* offers rare commentary on Baraka’s Nuyorican trio. In an article titled “‘General Hag’s Skeezag,’ Baraka at his best,” published on October 26th, 1996, an anonymous critic opines:

Of the three [plays], “General Hag’s Skeezag” is clearly the monster piece. The acting is brisk and motivated, the script crackles with wit, sarcasm and astute, if cynical, observation....Published but never mounted, it’s one of Baraka’s best plays. It’s definitive Baraka and I’m glad Nuyorican has mounted it. (1996)

Much like *Melting* and *Election*, *General* first and foremost sets out to warn Black audiences about the deadly threat of Capitalism. Though the three plays share a similar theme (and should, in my opinion, remain linked as with the Nuyorican production) unlike the others, *General* also tackles the American drug trade as a metaphor for corruption and the bourgeoisies’ immeasurable hunger for control and capital. When analyzing the play, it bears repeating that Baraka’s son fell victim to the drug trade, tragically shot and wounded by an alleged dealer in 1992, the very same year *General* was first published. It is no secret that the rampant drug culture in America, where ‘kingpins’ or ‘drug lords’ control the product and distribute wealth and power as they see fit, often stands as a significant metaphor for American Capitalism. While it remains difficult to pin down exactly when each play was completed, and it is safe to say that *Melting*, published in 1991, was penned before his son’s shooting, the three plays which premiered at the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1996 present the death threat Capitalist America poses to the masses; a threat which became all too real for Baraka and his family after his son’s shooting. Undeniably, then, *Melting*, *Election*, and *General Hag* link together as revolutionary anti-Capitalist theatre, written to awaken audiences of the ‘90s to a new era of mass consumption and commercial tyranny.

Essentially, *General* lays out the layers of power within the sale and distribution of drugs to present another unique death threat imposed by America. As the play opens, Charles Blank, a

“rival” would-be Black Capitalist, seemingly engages in robbing Samuel Burgess, a middle-aged white proprietor of a religious book and merchandise shop (Baraka 1992, 183). Joe Seth, significantly listed in the play’s character descriptions as a “young black messenger,” serves as the play’s protagonist (Baraka 1992, 182). Joe, as the messenger and linchpin principally responsible for revealing Baraka’s critique of the American drug trade as a metaphor for American Capitalism, comes to the shop, and ostensibly disrupts the robbery. As the plot unfolds, Charles and Burgess reveal their twisted bond, while Joe attempts to break free. Near the end, General Hag enters the shop to secure a fix as an innocent Black family happens upon the danger.

General directly links its title character with a key symbol of American Imperialism, thus continuing the trio’s attack on the American Capitalist establishment. Indeed, a telling addendum to the published play notes, “It may be helpful—though it is not essential—to recall that a General Alexander Haig was prominent in national affairs during the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan” (Baraka 1992, 181). Alexander M. Haig, Jr. served as White House Chief of Staff for Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, as well as United States Secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan. The titular General Hag represents a satirical caricature of the real life Haig, and, by extension, the American Imperialist military more generally. Once again, as part of his trio, Baraka tackles an altogether unique time and place with this particular play. Given Haig’s connections to Reagan, *General* seems to situate itself within Washington during the time of Reagan’s presidency. In the published play’s character descriptions, General Hag is listed as “a general who at one time was Secretary of State” (Baraka 1992, 183). Though, given Haig’s long reign and continued position of power within American politics, as well as his connection to Reagan’s Vice-President, future President from 1989-1993, George H.W. Bush, the 1996 staging of *General Hag* also suggests a powerful indictment of the failures of the American government.

Once again, as with *Election*, Baraka employs heavy symbolism in order to present his critique of Capitalist culture. As Joe reaches the shop, he proceeds to bang on the door to be let in, unaware of the potential danger lurking within. Suddenly, Burgess opens the door, and is quickly revealed as another of Baraka’s potent images. Burgess mirrors American Imperialism; he symbolizes American foreign policy by seeking ownership outside of his own domain and culture. Dressed in a leopard-skin cloth African dashiki and labeled as “*Brother Burgess*” on the store’s sign, the white shop owner claims control over a distinct African heritage (Baraka 1992, 184). Much like the radio and televisions from *Melting* and *Election*, Burgess signifies the American Capitalist oppressor, with a propensity to usurp, manipulate and control. And, though he initially hides behind a myth of kindness, seemingly attempting to protect Joe, by the end, his appetite for power through capital is revealed. Addressing this contention between perceived intentions in his critique of American democracy, Blum argues, “Washington’s ambition for world domination is driven not by the cause of a deeper democracy or freedom, a more just world, ending poverty or violence, or a more liveable [sic] planet, but rather by economics and ideology” (2013, 5). At its core, *General* lifts the veil of this American myth to expose a similar conclusion to American audiences. Despite Burgess’ halfhearted effort to keep him out, Joe is finally invited in by a mysterious stranger. Charles, described as “*a slender, tall black man in a blue business suit, impeccably tailored,*” appears from the shadows with gun in hand (Baraka

1992, 185). The suit represents the character's desperate attempt to join the power elite; if he looks the part, he will soon play the part.

Aligning with both *Melting* and *Election*, Baraka's last play in the trio reaches back to draw further connections between the past and what he considers a modern-day American slavery, where the proletariat are dominated by the real owners of the means to production. As Burgess and Charles converse, they begin to compare their Capitalist conquests. Recalling the American holocaust of slavery's middle passage, Burgess declares, "Remember the hold of the ship in the dark when you were inside chained and stinking? I owned the ship" (Baraka 1992, 194). Charles fires back, "so you don't remember how I caught the niggers and sold them to you?" (Baraka 1992, 194). Within this line of dialogue, Baraka continues to critique wannabe Black Capitalists who willingly participate as members in the Capitalist regime only to serve the owners and their agenda. In an essay from 1999, Baraka reaffirms, "And this remains the key contradiction between the revolutionary wing of Black artists and the retrograde trend. The retros, the buppies, neo cons, displayers of extreme negrossity cannot, will not, understand that we are not attachments to imperialism's fingers" (2013,246). Essentially, though, Charles holds no real power and, as a result, focuses his attention on Joe in order to project some semblance of authority. Charles turns on Joe and warns, "Maybe I'll kill you. Not just rob you, but kill you" (Baraka 1992, 195). This threat of death reaches the audience as well, as Baraka drives home his message.

Moreover, as the play continues, Baraka echoes *Election*'s statement on tokenism, or America's attempt to mollify its minions and subjects in symbolic effort alone. Interestingly, this term also reaches back to what is often considered a precursor to Baraka's Nationalist period. Regarding Baraka's use of the word in his article "Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents," the term caught on and both the article and the expression were used and acknowledged by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the radio a few weeks after the article was published in 1962 (Jones 1997,199-200). Further linking Baraka's messages of the past to his more recent work, *General* depicts a symbolic gesture as clear cut tokenism. Burgess grows tired of his back and forth dealings with Charles, and decides to pay him off. Burgess brandishes his wallet and proceeds to offer Charles four hundred dollars. Despite Burgess' endless wealth, however, the token seems to appease Charles with regard to his dealings with Burgess; nevertheless, Charles continues to harass Joe and begins to question Joe's relationship and duty to Burgess. At this point, the pecking order of the drug game—the very same game that led to Baraka's son receiving a bullet to the head—is detailed for the audience. In an essay entitled "Newark, My Newark," written in 1998, Baraka shares his family's personal tragedy involving the shooting of his youngest son, Ahi. Baraka's narrative reveals both his connection with family and ultimate heartbreak:

In June 1992, Amina and I gave a Father's Day gathering at our home and brought together close friends and their children with music and poetry and rounds of good feelings and pledges of recommitment to the family. After the gathering, our son, Amiri was taking a group of girls home when, at a traffic stop, a group of youths approached the car and pulled him out, robbed him, and took the car keys. Amiri, outraged, ran into one of his older brother's friends, who got the money and keys returned. But Amiri, still

fuming, came home and got his younger brother and some of his pals to go back. They didn't realize that these boys were drug dealers, and when the car our boys were in approached the spot where Amiri had been victimized, shots rang out from a .357 magnum handgun. The huge slug tore through the car door, and even though Ahi ducked, the bullet struck him at an angle on the side of his head and whipped around, still under his skin, until it stopped, bulging horribly out over his eye! The bullet did not, thank whatever, penetrate his skull, and this is the only good luck we claim.

Even though the bullet was removed and Ahi lay in therapy for months, he was visibly damaged by that hideous crime. The boy who did the shooting was captured and jailed and later, when he got out, shot down, presumably by some competitors in the same business. But Ahi's speech is impaired, and the effects of his injury are protracted if not permanent. (2011,467-468)

General remains Baraka's harshest commentary on the drug trade in Black communities; here, Baraka explicitly blames the white, American establishment for the drug scourge. Burgess, who sits at the top of America's power elite, controls both Charles, the aspiring assimilationist drug-pusher hooked by an inaccessible American dream, and Joe, the innocent but complacent messenger, who is exploited and used to deliver dope to the white upper-class. In truth, under Burgess' dictatorship, no one is safe: the United States government, the white upper-class elite, the petite bourgeoisie, the working-class, and the under-classes are all targets to be regulated by the allocation and sale of Burgess' pure white powder.

In the end, it is the concept of family that ultimately frees Joe from his bondage of servitude within the drug trade. Joe is to deliver two pounds of product to General Al Hag, who Joe refers to as "the Secretary of Snakes of the United States of America" (Baraka 1992, 204). However, a Black family approaches the shop and enters to ask for directions. The Swing family, consisting of Fred, the father, Harriet, the mother, and Mal, their son, represent a strong united family and reestablish Baraka's message concerning the power of family unity to combat American Capitalism. After hearing their surname, Joe pronounces, "Really, that's a coincidence, ain't it. I got people in my family, somewhere named Swings" (Baraka 1992, 203). Here, Baraka once again dramatizes a relation between Black family and community, and further links *General* to the concepts and themes of family unity found in both *Melting* and *Election*.

In the play's last moments, Joe both confirms and embraces his role as messenger, while referencing Baraka's newly presented weapon in the struggle for liberation: family unity. Suddenly, General Hag bursts into the shop, both demanding and proceeding to get high. In scathing satire, Hag is written as over the top, scrounging for the box of heroin decorated in America's red, white, and blue. Despite Hag's exaggerated antics, with the guiltless family as witness, a "sense of danger" rises (Baraka 1992, 206). As Hag sinks deeper into his addiction, Harriet exposes her fear: "there's no chance they won't let us out of here, is it?" (Baraka 1992, 208). Her dread is justified as Burgess once again reveals the threat of death. He orders, "Joe, don't let those people get outa here. Mr. Blank, will you help restrain everyone?" (Baraka 1992, 209). The threat is finally shattered as Joe disregards Burgess' demands and embraces his communal bond within the family: "No, nobody getting in their way. Them *my* relatives. Nobody

getting in their way” (Baraka 1992, 209). United, Joe, Frank, Harriet, and Mal exit the shop, and in so doing, leave behind the system of oppression dictated by the fat white man deceitfully cloaked in African ancestry.

Baraka brings his trio to a close, while reinforcing the importance of sharing the message of family unity as a means to Black liberation. How should the message spread? Through writing, of course. As they exit the shop, Joe declares, “I always wanted to be a writer. I always did” (Baraka 1992, 210). The son, as a symbol of hope through family unity, replies, “Well, right on!” (Baraka 1992, 210). Given Joe’s desire and declaration to write on, the dual meaning embedded within the son’s last message is hard to miss. Though *General* echoes the themes of *Melting* and *Election*, and, through its use of symbolism, certainly presents audiences with a threat and warning of American Capitalism, its unique ending presents a rare onstage acknowledgment of Baraka’s need to express a revolutionary model through dramatic writing.

Conclusion

As tragedy often can, Baraka’s death has made this study of his rather neglected dramatic works all the more urgent. His output rivals that of W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes. In terms of theatre, Baraka is widely deemed the father of the Black Arts Movement (BAM)—despite renowned scholar Henry Louis Gates’ opinion that the BAM is the shortest living movement coming out of black America—contemporary playwrights remain inspired and influenced by the expressive politics born from Baraka’s theatrical models. Though Baraka continued to write drama until his death, it may seem curious why so few choose to engage with his later or recent theatrical work. As I have tried to reveal through the detailed analyses included within this essay, Baraka’s drama of the 1990s does undergo an important shift, and yet most academics and theatre practitioners alike have neglected to address the later work. In an interview from 1993, Maya Angelou asked Baraka how he would describe himself politically. He answered:

I’m still a Marxist, and I think it shapes my art in the sense that I am trying to get to the material base of whatever is going on—whatever I am describing, whatever event or circumstance or phenomenon I am trying to illuminate. I’m always looking for a concrete time and place and condition. I want to know why things are the way they are and how they became that way. (1994, 262-263)

His answer here helps establish the crucial link between Baraka’s Nuyorican trio. In each play, Baraka explores Marxism through the presentation of a Black American family and/or community within a distinct and concrete time, place, and condition. Of course, following the fall of European Communism in 1989, Marxist art became even more marginalized and Baraka’s artistic position became more questionable. As I traveled through these texts, though, I saw what Baraka saw; America’s real lack of change. Baraka himself said it best, and the title of this study gets to the heart of this: his plays suggest the threat of America, in whatever form. Though Baraka’s drama may never instigate a mass revolution, his plays remain revolutionary and radical for subverting mainstream theatrical ideals. Broadway serves as a microcosm of Capitalist America and the American mainstream. They will not produce Baraka’s work because

his work consistently challenges what they promote. To be certain, Baraka made sure he remained controversial, and his work sets out to reveal much of this controversy. The more controversy he spun, the less likely theatre producers were willing to take the risk. We must not forget, however, that minorities in America remain underprivileged in this regard. Baraka is not the only artist neglected in the American mainstream art scene. The powers that be seem to think that revolutionary political art and agendas are a bit easier to swallow when filtered through systems or executives representing the very thing this art attempts to subvert. To perform Baraka's plays now as potential challenges to the mainstream seems appropriately responsive, as all of his dramatic works set out to teach and expose.

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