

## **“A Simple Knife Thrust”: The Complicated Power of Purgative Ritual in *Madheart***

Susan Stone-Lawrence

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### **Abstract**

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) consciously combined art with politics throughout his extensive career as a provocative and revolutionary artist, but he may never have managed to assert his Black Power aesthetic had he not resolved his inner conflict over his outwardly compromising association with Eurocentric ideals and white affiliations, including the white wife he left upon news of the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. This essay examines how *Madheart*, a purgative ritual Baraka wrote in 1966, helped him resolve his conflicted conscience sufficiently to support his initial decisive break from his formerly Bohemian lifestyle and consequent adoption of the militant separatism he would sustain until the 1974 inauguration of the Marxist-Leninist phase of his career. Despite his adamant defiance of Western cultural values, Baraka utilized Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty techniques, supplemented by Bertolt Brecht’s distancing effect, both of which he appropriated to better suit his own needs than the theorists’ original intentions. The combination of these techniques in *Madheart* enables his quasi-autobiographical Black Man to exorcize the pernicious Devil Lady through unequivocal violence, a mixture of elevated speech with profanity, and mockery of the cultural icons he rejects to accomplish a moment of transcendent catharsis.

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## **“A Simple Knife Thrust”: The Complicated Power of Purgative Ritual in *Madheart***

*The New York Times* obituary posted on the paper’s website January 9, 2014, identifies Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) as “a poet and playwright of pulsating rage” (Fox 2014). From his canonical 1964 play, *Dutchman*, to the controversy over his 2002 poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” Baraka maintained an incendiary presence as a provocative and revolutionary artist. As recently as “A Post-Racial Anthology?” in 2013, the poet/playwright declared the primacy of the political and its necessity as a theme for black people. But he may never have managed to assert his Black Power aesthetic had he not resolved his inner conflict over his outwardly compromising personal association with Eurocentric ideals and white affiliations, including the white wife he left upon news of the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 (Jones 1990, 222). In a 2002 interview with Joyce A. Joyce, Baraka identified how the play *Madheart*, written in 1966 and a constituent of his 1969 *Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black*

*Man* anthology of cultural nationalist plays, represents his divorce from Hettie Cohen, his white first wife, and separation of himself from white society (2005, 139).

This essay examines the value of Baraka's art as a means to accomplish personal change for himself and argues that *Madheart* presents a purgative ritual – a cleansing ceremony intended to remove impurities. This theatrical version of a purgative ritual offers a metaphysical purification process rivaling the literal vomiting experienced following ingestion of certain rainforest plants. Its plot centers on the quasi-autobiographical main character, Black Man, killing his nemesis, Devil Lady, an action which helped Baraka resolve his conflicted conscience sufficiently to support his initial decisive break from his formerly Bohemian lifestyle and consequent adoption of the militant separatism he would sustain until the 1974 inauguration of the Marxist-Leninist phase of his career (Harris 2000, xv). In quest for catharsis, Baraka utilized Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty techniques, supplemented by Bertolt Brecht's distancing effect, both of which he appropriated to suit better his own needs than the theorists' original intentions. The practical means by which Baraka enables his Black Man to exorcize the pernicious Devil Lady include unequivocal violence, a mixture of elevated speech with profanity, and mockery of the cultural icons he rejects.

Other scholars, including Harry J. Elam, Jr. (1997), who specifically discusses *A Black Mass* (1965) and *Slave Ship* (1967) in his *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*, have examined Baraka's use of ritual drama to engage audiences and promote social change in the community. Henry C. Lacey's *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* describes *Madheart* specifically as "an exorcistic work," but Lacey contends this play was intended for "collective exorcism" instead of for the sake of the playwright's "own psyche" (1981, 143; italics in the original). Yet, the two may go more hand in hand than Lacey acknowledges because, as Elam states, "black Americans are more often conditioned by internal and external sociocultural factors to think of themselves as representative of their particular group" (1997, 121). Kimberly W. Benston supports the notion of expression by a single African American as reflective of the struggle of the whole culture when he notes in the Preface to his *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* that "the active journey from lonely individuation to fulfilling communality is the fundamental progress of Baraka's work: the salvation of his own soul and that of his people are inextricable" (1976a, xviii). Ruminating upon this deeply personal resonance of some of Baraka's overtly political works in the chapter on "LeRoi Jones" in her *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves*, Leslie Catherine Sanders observes how Baraka inspired younger writers in the Black Arts Movement by his "conscious, carefully articulated search for the structures that informed his personal history and for the forms that truthfully expressed, first, his own experience and, second, collectively, the experience of his people" (1988, 121, 123).

Perhaps the most significant moment of Baraka's autobiography, which Sanders deems "a kind of *Bildungsroman* for the Black Arts Movement" (1988, 121), occurred February 21, 1965, when -- in response to the assassination of Malcolm X -- the as yet called LeRoi Jones left his white wife, biracial daughters, and assembled multicultural friends, lovers, and collaborators in Greenwich Village, "hurling denunciations at the place of [his] intellectual birth" (Baraka

1997, 326). He moved to Harlem, where, in March, he had already established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (295). This short-lived enterprise imploded by the end of the year (328-329), but the impression it made in the minds of individuals affiliated and desiring affiliation with the broader Black Arts Movement across the nation inspired Jimmy Garrett, head of the Black Student Union at San Francisco State College (SFSC), to invite Baraka to serve as a faculty member in the first Black Studies program (Joyce 2005, 137, 135). In 1966, in answer to this invitation, the poet/playwright wrote *Madheart*; the drama, symbolic of its author's emergence as a cultural nationalist, received its first production, in May 1967, at SFSC (Baraka 1969b, 65, 67).

During his year as visiting professor in San Francisco, Baraka worked with the newly formed Black Panthers (Joyce, 2005, 137), and he met Maulana Karenga (Zabel 2004, 20), whose Kawaida doctrine of cultural nationalism informs *Madheart*. Karenga's theories also dominated the early years of Baraka's dual romantic and political partnership with his second wife. While still LeRoi Jones, he met Sylvia Robinson when she acted and danced in the May 1966 production of another of his *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, *A Black Mass* (Zabel 2004, 20). The couple married in a Yoruba ceremony in 1968, and she became Amina Baraka that same year, when he legally changed his name to Amiri Baraka – a modified version of his newly adopted Sunni Muslim appellation, Ameer Barakat (20). Thus, the seemingly drastic transformation from LeRoi Jones, the Beat poet of the late Fifties and early Sixties, to the militant poet/playwright Amiri Baraka can be traced back to the transitional period marked by the creation of his pivotal play, *Dutchman* (1964) -- “the opening salvo” of the Black Arts Movement in drama (Sell 2007, 265).

In 1964, LeRoi Jones and his newly Black Nationalist cohorts struggled with ambivalence. As Baraka's 1997 autobiography recounts, most of them “were all hooked up to white women” (250). He recalls, “We talked a black militance and took the stance that most of the shit happening downtown was white bullshit and most of the people were too. The fact that we, ourselves, were down there was a contradiction we were not quite ready to act upon, though we discussed it endlessly” (291). Larry Neal, Baraka's cohort in the Black Power struggle and co-editor of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* --where *Madheart* first appeared in publication the year before its 1969 inclusion in *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, describes this conflicted dynamic as “the psychic vortex” through which black consciousness views American and European ideals as “at once objects of disdain and admiration” (1976, xi-xii). Sanders terms the “attraction to both black and white culture” a “[d]ouble consciousness,” which “emerges as a kind of masochism” in Baraka because “white culture so succeeds in destroying his sense of himself that he cannot affirm himself in black culture” (Sanders 1988, 125).

Baraka's term in this limbo continued even beyond his much vaunted departure from Greenwich Village. His 1978 introduction to *The Motion of History and Other Plays* disapproves of his youthful mindset of “searching, confused” and deliberating about acting (12), and his 1966 essay “The Revolutionary Theatre” calls for “a theatre of assault” with “actual explosions and actual brutality” rather than “the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds” (1979, 132). Clearly, Baraka grew to consider the stage a venue where he could dispel doubt within black consciousness and effect cultural change. In his plays, he uses

his own experiences to represent the black condition as he “externalizes his conflicts and brings them to a resolution” through an Artaudian process of “exorcism” (Sanders 1988, 126).

Significantly, as Charles D. Peavy has claimed, in a number of Baraka’s plays, the demon in need of purging, “the chief impediment to the black male’s realization of his identity is the white woman” (1978, 168). In *Our Terribleness*, a book of poetry and photography, includes Baraka’s instructions for replacing the white woman with the black woman for the sake of “the creation of the nation” as follows: “Draw away from the diseased body . . . STEP 1/Embrace the blackness, the alternative . . . STEP 2” (and Fundi 1970). This concept comprises the plot of *Madheart* on its most basic level: Black Man kills Devil Lady and joins together with Black Woman, “who, in turn, embodies and symbolizes both all black women and black culture and society” (Sanders 1988, 165-66), to promote the Kawaida doctrine that Baraka and his organizational affiliates at the time espoused.

Perhaps, “[d]raw[ing] away from the diseased body” does not require putting it to death (Baraka and Fundi 1970), but Clay’s speech in *Dutchman* prescribes “a simple knife thrust” as the antidote to neurosis (Baraka 1964, 35). In *Dutchman*’s descendant play, *Madheart*, “Baraka uses violence therapeutically” in a way that makes “a dramatized exorcism” through which the playwright surgically removes the tumor resulting from “the violence that has been done to the Black image and to Black minds” (Williams 1985, 22). Since Baraka not only wrote the play but directed its first production, J. L. Moreno would say he had two opportunities to experience the “healing effect” of “active catharsis” achieved as more immediate in the artists who create a work than the “passive” or “secondary catharsis” realized by spectators (1940, 209, 227).

Considering the extensive history behind the haunting of the protagonist Black Man, whether presented in the unofficial prequel to the play or evident in the personal life of its creator, one might view *Dutchman* as backstory and the events of its plot as the establishing incident of *Madheart*. Whereas *Dutchman*’s Clay does not heed his own advice, in *Madheart*, Black Man consciously performs a violent ritual in pursuit of “ultimate exorcism of the corrupting” Devil Lady in order to “purge himself” (Benston 1976b, 225, 226). Due to Baraka’s personal need for purgation -- his conflicted conscience and ambivalence about race in the mid-sixties -- Clay serves as a cautionary tale and precursor to Black Man. As a metaphor for “the racial struggle for domination that white society imposes on blacks,” Devil Lady appears as “a grotesque, magical version” of *Dutchman*’s Lula (Sanders 1988, 165). A number of writers have analyzed the connection between the two She-Devil archetypes, calling Clay’s hip white murderer a “forerunner” of Devil Lady (Benston 1976b, 222), considering Devil Lady “a Black nationalist extension of Lula” (Sollors 1978, 214, 215), or identifying the name of Lula as “an allusion” to “Lilith, the demon woman of the Talmudic tradition” and deeming Devil Lady a “reincarnated” Lula and “the latest avatar of the Lilith type” (Peavy 1978, 168, 169). In her essay, “A Nation’s Meta-language: Misogyny in Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* and *The Slave*,” Beth McCoy effectively ties the title *Madheart* to Clay’s invocation of “the pure heart, the pumping black heart” incomprehensible by Lula (1998, 60).

Certainly, in *Madheart*’s opening, Black Man initially responds to Devil Lady by turning toward her “slowly” with his arms “straight out, parallel to the floor” as though in a mummy-like

trance about to walk to her enthralled, suggesting an established routine of his complying with her will (Baraka 1969b, 69). But this time, Black Man snaps out of it and engages her in verbal debate until he realizes that he must kill her (69, 70). Otherwise, her seductive power would bring about his demise (Peavy 1978, 169). After declaring the death of Devil Lady as his intention on the second page of text, Black Man spends the majority of the play engaged in the rigorous ordeal of achieving the act's fruition.

In a short script of nineteen pages, *Madheart* contains at least five attempts at murdering Devil Lady (to varying degrees of success). Baraka includes jarring Theater of Cruelty production elements in order to aesthetically enhance the physical violence he depicts. Falsetto singing by disembodied Voices to the accompaniment of flashing lights and a mixture of music consisting of a "fanfare of drums," "dissonant horns," and "slow, insinuating, nasty blues" establish an otherworldly and anti-Eurocentric momentousness to supplement the elaborate ritual of sword waving and slow motion movement of the first attempt (Baraka 1969b,70-71). The second try comes quickly after the first as Black Man magically gesticulates, recites a curse, and so deliberately stakes Devil Lady through the heart in a frenzy of sexual violence and disdain that he skewers her to the stage with a "thud" when the wooden tip of his weapon "crashes deep in the floor" beneath her body (71). Aglow with what he perceives as the fulfillment of his purgative dream -- already on the third page of the text -- but desiring another fix, Black Man does not notice the entrance of Black Woman, Mother, and Sister, who will aid and/or impede the progress of his mission by their presence, dramatically extending the duration and scope of the purgative ritual process.

The way "male chauvinism was glorified as a form of African culture" further complicates this dramatic scenario as it did the revolution in real life (Baraka 1997, xiv). Acknowledgment and regret of this fact would become the persistent focus of Baraka's 1996 introduction to the second edition of his autobiography, in which he admits this flaw in the cultural nationalist movement and praises the women in the militant organizations, who stood "shoulder to shoulder against black people's enemies" and "also had to go toe to toe" with their men, "battling day after day against" a nationalist male agenda of inculcation of females in Afrocentric ways as part of the indoctrination of fellow blacks viewed as necessary for the growth of the movement (Baraka 1997, 387). Jerry G. Watts (2001) explains this situation in *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, noting that the relationship between Black Man and Black Woman models the "primitive sexism" within Kawaida doctrine that upheld the ability of black men "to dominate 'their women' in a manner similar to the way that the white man controlled 'his woman'" (Watts 343). In Baraka's work, the union between the black man and the black woman, albeit imbalanced, signifies "not only love and creation but self-acceptance," whereas sexual relations "between black men and white women signify a lack of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, stymied or misappropriated creative energy, narcissism, and self-degradation" (Sanders 1988, 134).

Iconic of this pathology, Devil Lady, whom Mother and Sister adore and seek to emulate, continues talking "from beyond the grave," despite stage directions referring to her as "the dead woman" (Baraka 1969b, 72-73). Similar subsequent stage directions sustain the perception of Devil Lady's cadaverous status without contradiction from any further dialogue spoken by her.

Based upon this evidence, a verbal order from Black Woman to “be still in the grave where you have fun” seems to provide the actual cause of the evil white woman’s demise, despite Black Man’s numerous acts of violence that precede and follow the moment that Devil Lady speaks her last words, screams, “writhes and stiffens in death” (75). Nevertheless, Black Man stakes Devil Lady again to “make sure” as if the repetition of the violent motion has greater significance for the playwright’s release (and that of his protagonist) than the righteous completion of the deed itself (77).

Accordingly, Black Man uses his repeated ritual acts of purgative violence to reinforce the new status quo he establishes by his refusal to succumb to Devil Lady’s spell in the opening sequence of the play, to prove his loyalty to Black Woman by obliging her with one last execution in reply to her suggestion that Devil Lady is “not dead” (Baraka 1969b, 84), and to break the hold Devil Lady has over Mother and Sister. Writing about drama therapy and citing the practice of poking a voodoo doll as an example, Dr. Robert J. Landy defines ritual as “a symbolic action repeated in a prescribed way to perpetuate the status quo, to affirm a common bond among members of a community, and to defend an individual or group against danger” (1994, 69). Lamentably, although Black Man definitively exorcises Devil Lady when she goes up in smoke upon her body’s fall off stage, he fails to rid his assimilationist Sister and Mother of her influence, despite how he aggressively yanks the blond wig “off Sister’s head” (Baraka 1969b, 76), “grabs” and “tosses her to the floor” (85); threatens to kill Mother (83), “grabs” her “by the arm,” “drags her” to see what happened to Devil Lady, and “shakes” her “violently” (84); and sprays them both with a fire hose “until they fall out” in his determination to “save them or kill them” (87). The arduousness of killing Devil Lady, and the lack of closure afforded by the continued dependency of Mother and Sister upon her as an idol, not only build dramatic tension and serve to complicate the plot of the play in an intensely satisfying way, but also testify to the legitimacy of the Black Power struggle represented and honor the validity of those who struggle.

Additional complexities presented in *Madheart* include the irony that, at least in certain significant instances, words command greater power than do physical acts of violence. Although Baraka presents Mother and Sister as violent toward each other and permits Mother to beat Black Man’s chest while weeping (1969b, 78), Devil Lady does not overtly display physical violence, nor does Black Woman. Nevertheless, despite their lack of recourse to physical force, Black Woman and Devil Lady pose greater threats to Black Man’s masculinity than those raised by Mother and Sister, who merely wound his separatist pride by their failure to sever their umbilical connection to whiteness. Black Woman—whose words, when judged by the previously mentioned evidence of the stage directions, seem to kill Devil Lady more effectively than any of Black Man’s repetitive stabbing attempts—verbally challenges Black Man to dominate her in subversion of the oppressive legacy of the white man (75). By her abstention from fighting back, even when abused by Black Man issuing “the slap heard around the world” (McCoy 1998, 72), which he repeats to total four times, and forcing her to the ground to “submit” (Baraka 1969b, 81-82), Black Woman participates in a brutal “marriage ceremony” (Benston 1976b, 229), which serves as “the final phase in the achievement of Black Man’s identity” (Peavy 1978, 172).

Given the crucial role she plays in helping Black Man rid himself of Devil Lady and replace that negative presence with a generative one, it makes sense that Black Woman has greater than three times the average amount of lines of all the other characters except for Black Man. Baraka's lead male character has the most speeches in the play, a number equal to the total lines of Mother, Sister, and Devil Lady combined. Therefore, Black Woman and Black Man's messages command the most stage time. Despite her dominating presence (even in death) throughout much of the play, Devil Lady speaks less frequently than all of the other *Madheart* characters with the exception of the disembodied Voices, not named in the cast list, who twice "howl" and "moan" evocative litanies amidst experimental light and sound cues (Baraka 1969b, 70). The haunting quality of her limited speech further dehumanizes Devil Lady as a vile demon requiring annihilation.

The first to speak in the beginning of the play, the Devil Lady issues the decree, "You need pain," to Black Man (69). In a symbolic transfer of power, which occurs during the course of the play, Black Man has the last word at the end. After overcoming his enslavement to Devil Lady's wiles, he vows that he and Black Woman, who has eclipsed Devil Lady by becoming Black Man's partner and now carries his "seed" (81), will work together to do what they can to cure Mother and Sister of their lingering attachment to Devil Lady and her white ways (87). In a direct answer to Devil Lady's introductory slur addressing Black Man as "ol' nigger devil" (69), Baraka concludes *Madheart* with the line "All of us, black people" (87). The dignity of this line echoes the names of the drama's hero and heroine in affirming a unity and kindred humanity which by definition excludes the spectral creature, Devil Lady.

In an Artaudian way, the limited dialogue utilized in *Madheart* carries increased weight. Contrary to the widespread misconception that Artaud opposed the presence of language in his Theater of Cruelty, the visionary theorist actually advocated "considerably reducing" words or "using them in an incantatory way" to restore "poetry and imagination" to their former eminence (1995, 266). He promoted "a virulent" and "dangerous side of poetry" as "a dissociative and anarchic force" (266-67). Similarly—although he later berated philosophical questioning of the comparative legitimacy of the word and the act, declaring, "the act is more legitimate, it is principal!" (1978, 12)—Baraka's 1964 essay, "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," sets up a distinction between active speech and the counter-productive language of European tradition that has historically reduced art and God to "artifacts" deprived of what Baraka calls "the verb process, the doing, the coming into being" (2009, 198).

Suggestive of the J. L. Austin concept of "performative utterances," which "*make* things happen" instead of just describing them (O'Neill 2004, 163), frequently, the characters in *Madheart*, particularly in the case of Black Man, announce their actions as if the word is the necessary precursor to the act. This habit recalls Baraka's empowering declaration, as stated in his introduction to *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, to "change the world before your eyes" (1969a, viii), a thought he follows with the incantation "izm-el-azam" from *A Black Mass* before the affirmation, "yes, say it, say it." The playwright signs this introduction using "Ameer Baraka," the first version of his Afrocentric conversion name, despite the presence of "LeRoi Jones" on the book's spine, copyright, and title page (viii). Regardless of his insistence upon the

supremacy of action as central to the revolution, Baraka obviously understood the magical potency of words (and names).

Black Man manifests his thoughts out loud. He asks Devil Lady, “Why aren’t you dead?” to which she answers, “I am dead and can never die” (Baraka 1969b, 69-70). Realizing that Devil Lady should be dead, and he must be the one to kill her, Black Man, throughout the play, proclaims that he will/has already/will again kill her (69-70). Devil Lady makes her own pronouncement, “I come back from the dead ‘cause I wanna,” but, based on the status of these as her last words, her attempt at prophecy is less effective than his, unless one considers Black Man’s inability to purge completely Devil Lady’s influence from Mother’s and Sister’s lives as the successful fulfillment of her statement (75).

The nearest Black Man comes to the ultimate expulsion of Devil Lady from his life occurs through the culmination of the poetic mixed with violent ritual of his philippic and final disposal of the demon’s body. For his climactic wrathful display, Baraka’s proxy orders Devil Lady to “Die, you bitch, and drag your mozarts into your nasty hole. Your mozarts stravinskys stupid white sculpture corny paintings deathfiddles, all your crawling jive, drag it in and down with you, your office-buildings blow up in your pussy” (1969b, 83-84). Black Man finishes the anti-Eurocentric diatribe of curses by stomping Devil Lady in the face, dragging her to the edge of the stage and sending her to “the pit of deadchange” (83-84). Like the way Black Woman’s words appear to end effectively Devil Lady’s cycle of returning from the dead, Black Man’s poetic denouncing of all that he disavows from the culture Devil Lady embodies proves itself just as powerful or more conclusively so than any sword, arrows, stake through the heart, knife thrust, or shove into “the pit of deadchange” (83-84). Through his vitriolic pronouncements, Black Man simultaneously disposes of Eurocentric effluvium and imagistically blocks the white woman’s desolate genitalia from exercising its seductive claim on his procreative energies, which he has chosen to instead bestow upon Black Woman, who has won his attention with her alluring question: “Is there any flesh sweeter, any lips fatter and redder, any thighs more full of orgasms?” about her superior, fecund attractions (75).

As in the excerpted rant, elsewhere in *Madheart*, Devil Lady’s rejected vagina is frequently referred to as a “hole,” a word with the negative connotations of a void. This idea fits the recurring imagery of death surrounding her figure in the dialogue associations of “snow” “caves” “stone” and “cold” whiteness (71). Baraka, in his dismissal of what he perceived as the stagnant Western mentality which substituted “artifact worship for the lightning awareness of the art process” (Baraka 2009, 198), writes extremely vulgar metaphors for Black Man to deliver in communication of the putrescence associated with Devil Lady’s harmful sexuality. He says her “stale pussy weeps paper roses” (Baraka 1969b, 69), and he declares, “Broomsticks thrust up there return embossed with zombie gold” (73).

Black Man’s reference to Devil Lady as an “old punctured sore with the pus rolled out” (Baraka 1969b, 73) conjures Artaud’s example of pus as an ugly association with whiteness, which he offers in his determination to prove the unnecessary historical bias toward white as good and black as bad. In *The Theater and Its Double*, the Theater of Cruelty theorist makes the anti-Eurocentric assertion that “if we think Negroes smell bad, we are ignorant of the fact



that anywhere but in Europe it is we whites who ‘smell bad.’ And I would even say that we give off an odor as white as the gathering of pus in an infected wound” (1958, 9). Mother’s self-mocking dialogue that reflects negatively on her and her topic of discussion, describing her preferred white boys as “sof” and sweet as a pimple,” echoes this same pus imagery (Baraka 1969b, 77). The presence in Baraka’s dialogue of such grotesque imagery as the oozing sore and the pimple suggests that, in addition to their obviously shared anti-imperialist politics as expressed in his citation of the Theater of Cruelty visionary as inspiration for “The Revolutionary Theatre” (1979, 130), Baraka felt an attachment to the part of Artaud that rhapsodized about bodily discharges (including urine, feces, semen, sweat, menses, and blood) in numerous works and depicted extreme feats of corporeal desecration like the exploding vulva in *Spurt of Blood* and the literal emasculations performed upon themselves by the frenzied worshippers in *Heliogabalus*. Intending to use such content to mortify and humble would-be complacent bourgeois sensibilities, Artaud opposed the kind of cold sterility of the “Iceberg Christians” (sic) and “the Woolworth heir’s cement condom” Black Man combats (Baraka 1969b, 71-72).

In addition to using profanity and revolting imagery to jar audiences awake to other perspectives and to register his distaste for what he chooses to reject through his purgative ritual, Baraka defies predominating assumptions about Eurocentric standards of beauty and morality through his satirical presentation of Devil Lady and her assimilationist minions, Mother and Sister. Far from an emblem of virginal purity, Devil Lady rolls about on her back, “panting,” and exposing herself with “skirt raised” (Baraka 1969b,70). As foils to the Afrocentric ideal of natural beauty and decency that Black Woman embodies, Sister and Mother in their blond and red wigs, the former enslaved to mod fashion and proud of her “perfumed hole” and the latter guilty of the alcoholism forbidden by Islam, appear as humorously ridiculous figures (85).

Mocking the culture he seeks to subvert, Baraka goes so far as committing blasphemy against the Christian faith with his specification of a rendering of Jesus with a “cross in the background” that his stage directions indicate appears “pasted over” Devil Lady’s “pussy space” (1969b,70). Logistically, this means Black Man treats the icon like a voodoo doll when he stabs arrows into Devil Lady’s “hole” (71). When viewed in the context of David L. Eng’s notion that “Whiteness -- in its refusal to be named and its refusal to be seen -- represents itself as *the* universal and unmarked standard, a ubiquitous norm from which all else and all others are viewed as a regrettable deviation” (2001, 138), Black Man seems to achieve the dubious goal of literally pinning down elusive whiteness. He metaphorically rapes Devil Lady and, by virtue of the “cardboard” cut-out of Christ that his thrusting also violates, the theological basis her supposedly civilized culture uses as justification for its global conquest. Doing so fixes the villains under scrutiny with the undeniable stench of their decay “sickening the air” (Baraka 1969b, 77). Furthermore, the audacity of Devil Lady’s pronouncement that her “pussy rules the world” lifts her character to a mythical height from which she must come down, while the bold declaration itself exposes her insidious nature in much the same way her lifted skirt reveals the perforated Savior (70).

The humiliation of Devil Lady incorporates parody of the culture she represents, beginning with the soundtrack of “honky-tonk calliope music” that sets the tone for interrogative

mockery of her power starting from the beginning of the play (Baraka 1969b, 69). The list of other icons mocked in *Madheart* includes Tony Bennett, Beethoven, Peter Gunn, Batman and Robin, and Andy Warhol's Pop Art soup cans, all of which Mother either calls upon for aid or conjures to express her desperation over the upheaval to her world caused by Black Man and Black Woman (83). The reverse of Black Woman's modesty, Mother's materialistic and hedonistic excesses represented in her speech about partying, convert her into "a barker, selling young black ass," and her strategy for survival involves marrying Sister to a white man (72, 83). The play juxtaposes this crass immorality with the mammy stereotype Mother embodies by pulling a lunch box out of her bra and chasing the ritualistically revived and screaming Sister around the stage, attempting to nurture her with a cure-all pot of collard greens (85-86). Through imagining this scene, the playwright challenges assumptions about the strength of the black family as a refuge against racism.

Reading significance into the (*A Morality Play*) subtitle of *Madheart*, Peavy interprets this "'soul' food" moment as a Eucharistic event and an instance of what he deems "a good deal of mythology, both Christian and non-Christian" presented in the play (1978, 173). To him, Black Man's penultimate act of spraying Mother and Sister with his "fire-hose phallus" serves this theme as a sort of "Baptism" (173). But the moment might rather recall the trials faced by Civil Rights marchers. If so, this episode holds the Black Arts Movement responsible for getting Mother's and Sister's "heads relined" and puts the Movement's fire-hose-wielding representative, Black Man, in the position of the racist oppressor. Ironically, this locus parallels Baraka's cultural nationalist policies of that time, which also disapproved of desegregation (Baraka 1969b, 77).

By resisting Black Man's efforts to cleanse them (metaphorically and literally) of the contamination resulting from their persistent attachment to Devil Lady's white ways, Mother and Sister fulfill an essential need of the playwright in pursuit of purgative ritual. Unlike Black Woman and Devil Lady, whose names demographically define and set them up as contradictory projections of Black Man's racialized ideals of womanhood, Mother and Sister are simply named according to their relationship to Black Man. Since their kinship to him allows them to serve as extensions of Black Man's own psyche, Baraka can use Mother and Sister to contain the conflicted part of himself his purgative process will not allow the exemplar Black Man to harbor. Mother and Sister keep the playwright's potential qualms about his course of action occupied while his nationalist superhero alter-ego executes his insurgent mission free from vacillation. Baraka only permits Black Man brief instances of indecision and other displays of weakness: his nearly becoming re-enthralled to Devil Lady in the beginning of the play, his momentary expression of doubt about being with "A black woman!" and the temporary guilt he suffers about presumably killing Sister (Baraka 1969b, 69, 74, 78). Conveniently, Mother and Sister hover like ghosts of Black Man's conflicted emotions he is not quite ready to let go. Otherwise, they never would have appeared on the third page of the script, and the play would conclude with Black Man basking in the afterglow of his initial skewering of Devil Lady, the catharsis in this hypothetical scenario. Actually dealing with Mother and Sister allows Black Man to wrestle with vestigial uncertainty about his decision to separate from Devil Lady, much like his two female relatives wrestle with each other early in the play (74-75).

Another paradoxical way that *Madheart* operates in service of its purgative ritual aims is through a combination of both pathos-inducing and objectivity-promoting elements. Sanders diagnoses that despite its suggestion of “an Artaudian *mise en scène*, the play is overtly didactic in the tradition of the morality play” indicated by its subtitle (1988, 166). Usually, Theater of Cruelty methods are understood as appropriate for stimulating catharsis. Due to their expected encouragement of heightened objectivity, distancing methods are considered incongruous with the purgative process. However, Baraka’s use of archetypal character names (incidentally, not so unlike the ones Artaud uses in *Spurt of Blood*) helps the playwright detach the participants in the violent purgative ritual from the actual persons upon whom the dramatic characters are based. Black Man can repetitively murder Devil Lady because he is not LeRoi killing Hettie.

Baraka blends his use of the capacity of “broad caricature and satire to moralize and condemn” with the “the inherent ability of myth to dramatize conflicts and to simplify complicated theories” (Williams 1985, 15). In accordance with Brecht’s insistence that actors “be able to criticize” their characters (quoted in Krasner 2008, 171), Baraka creates critical distance to help focus on the sociopolitical circumstances for which his characters serve as metaphors. In much the same way that he repurposes Theater of Cruelty techniques “to induce the spectators’ participation and compel their activism” instead of ridding them “of the propensity to act” (Elam 1997, 93), Baraka tailors the Brechtian theories he adopts to more appropriately suit his uses. By sympathizing with his Black Man, he diverges from Brecht’s directive “to resist identifying with the protagonist” (Krasner 2008, 170). As implied by Sanders’s statement that in *Slave Ship* of the following year “the emotional journey afforded the audience finally equals that of the character in the play” (1988, 166), the balance in *Madheart* still tips in favor of purging the turmoil from the quasi-autobiographical main character. The cumulative result allows enough distance to make the play’s purgative violence tolerable without allowing Black Man and Black Woman’s Kawaïda politics to overwhelm the ability of the play’s ritual magic to reach the subconscious.

While *Madheart* clearly sets up Devil Lady as the nemesis to the tandem of Black Man and Black Woman, who fight the demon’s influence over Mother and Sister, the play allows for other dynamic pairings as well. For example, as African American females who are designated by the cast list as in their “twenties,” Black Woman and Sister match up against one another in the battle of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric versions of beauty (Baraka 1969b, 67). Discerning the relationship between the remaining duo requires revisiting *Dutchman*, the Obie Award-winning, unofficial prequel to *Madheart*. Numerous scholars have identified Black Man as a reincarnated Clay and written about the retributive power of his reversal of Lula’s murder of his predecessor, but he is not the only descendant of the doomed young lead in *Dutchman*. Mother, wearing a bourgeois “business suit” and prone to rants that belie her deep resentment of the racial status quo her habits routinely uphold, is the only other *Madheart* character Baraka provides with poetic dialogue rivaling the resplendent brilliance of Clay’s climactic, canonical *Dutchman* monologue. As part of the duo she forms with Sister, Mother allows the playwright to accommodate (until he feels enabled to vanquish) his own self-doubt about exorcizing Devil Lady and the real life parallel she symbolizes. Individually, Mother, by her affinity with Clay, provides Black Man the opportunity to rescue and rehabilitate the lingering three-button-jacket-and-tie-wearing part of his soul, however stubbornly it clings to the effort “to

keep from being sane” instead of applying the antidote of “a simple knife thrust” to cure assimilationist neurosis (Baraka, 1964, 35).

Baraka’s autobiography describes how, prior to the definitive break from his Bohemian lifestyle of the late Fifties and early Sixties, he dwelled “within the circle of white poets of all faiths and flags” but had lost his connection to blackness (1997, 231). Concerning such issues of racial self-identification, Baraka said *Madheart* deals with “trying to disconnect from the old kinds of ideas that Negroes have about themselves and about Black people” (Joyce 2005, 139). The play also represents “a kind of forceful self-removal from a context that [he] had come to think was not only corrupt, but self-destructive” (139). Baraka’s cultural nationalist works like *Madheart* promoted the imperative “for Blacks to build self-confidence, to be more self-assertive, and to become aggressive in meeting violence with violence” (Williams 1985, 161). If part of the therapeutic “magic” of drama is that it allows its participants to “achieve a certain satisfaction by controlling a reality which is literally beyond their control” (Landy 1994, 70), Baraka must have felt empowered by having his Black Man repetitively kill Devil Lady despite the unresolved complications arising from her tenacious hold on Mother and Sister.

Near the conclusion of her autobiography, Baraka’s ex-wife and partial inspiration for the characters Lula and Devil Lady, Hettie Jones, reflects upon the cultural nationalist struggles of The Sixties and questions what would have happened “if this rage had *not* been expressed.” She admits that “those times -- and the psychological advances of the Black Power movement” were “a necessary phase in African-American, and ultimately American, history” (1990, 237-38).

Certainly, Baraka made his personal life political and “enacted for himself and for his audience the cruelty of which Artaud speaks” (1988, 131). In *Madheart*, Baraka’s techniques of the presentation of unequivocal violence, the mixture of elevated speech with profanity, and the mockery of Eurocentric cultural icons helped their author purge his inner chaos and achieve the goal of disparaging the values he rejected, while upholding those he chose to replace them. Between the obstacles preceding it and the incomplete resolution following its enactment, for the transcendent moment of Black Man’s rant and shove of Devil Lady’s corpse off stage into an explosion of smoke and light, the ritual feels complete in its indispensable cleansing power.

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**Susan Stone-Lawrence** is a PhD in Fine Arts student of History/Theory/Criticism and Playwriting at Texas Tech University. *Theatre Survey* published her book review of *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* by

James F. Wilson in its Fall 2012 issue. As a long-term admirer of Amiri Baraka, Susan wrote her University of Central Florida master's thesis, "'This Stuff Is Finished': Amiri Baraka's Renunciation of the Ghosts of White Women and Homosexuals Past," about the poet/playwright's use of archetypal characters to affirm his mid-1960s cultural nationalist political stance. In the process of writing her own personal purgative ritual plays, Susan looks to *Madheart* for inspiration.