

AMIRI BARAKA: THE RITUAL OF HISTORY AND THE SELF  
IN *THE SLAVE*<sup>1</sup>

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(Resumen)

Este ensayo examina una obra de teatro de Amiri Baraka que refleja su periodo de transición y su entrada definitiva en el lado Negro. Baraka llevó su autointrospección al teatro para ilustrar la necesidad de su comunidad de emprender el mismo viaje, y de darse cuenta del infierno de dolor en el que viven, así como para poder de esta manera abandonarlo. Vessels, el único personaje afroamericano en *The Slave*, es un claro reflejo y expresión de los principios del Arte Negro y de otras corrientes de los sesenta: su militancia es la afirmación de su movimiento más que una pausa, un movimiento continuo que acarrea un cambio. Por medio de la emoción que la poesía y la música de *The Slave* infunden, Baraka desencadena un proceso de liberación respecto de las formas de Occidente, y crea una nueva estética, en donde el ritual deviene el medio esencial en el camino hacia esa meta.

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*SYNOPSIS OF AMIRI BARAKA'S 'THE SLAVE' (1964)*

The play is described as "A Fable in a Prologue and Two Acts." An old field-slave, Walker Vessels, briefly introduces the play in the Prologue. As this character abandons the stage, while singing some blues, he transforms himself into the Black revolutionary Walker Vessels. Vessels returns to confront Grace, his former wife (a White woman) and to take their children with him. Throughout the play sounds of explosions are continuously heard in the background. Vessels kills Grace's husband (Easley) and Grace is reached by one of the explosions. At the end of the play a child's cry is heard and the spectator does not know whether the children have been killed or not. The play concludes with Vessels who again becomes the old field-slave who appeared in the Prologue.

I believe that it is necessary to agitate the masses, to shake men and winnow them as in a sieve, to throw against one another, in order to see if in this way their shells will not break and their spirits flow forth, whether they will not mingle and unite with one another, and whether the real collective spirit, the soul of humanity, may not thus be welded together. . . . I do not like to rub

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1. This essay is a section of one of the chapters of my PhD. dissertation, "The Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa: A Comparative Approach." U. of California, Los Angeles, 1991. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 1992.

against people but to clash against them; I do not like to approach people obliquely and glance at them at a tangent, but to meet them frontally and if possible split them in two. It is the best service I can do them. And there is no better preparation than in solitude.

Miguel de Unamuno

In his autobiography, Amiri Baraka recalls the years of his youth in the Air Force and in the University when he would spend many hours alone, thinking, reflecting, trying to go deep into himself in a journey of self-discovery: "I was stretched between two lives and perceptions (I've told you it was four BlackBrownYellowWhite--but actually it's two or the real side, the two extremes, the black and the white, with the middle two but their boxing gloves)."<sup>2</sup> Baraka, caught between those two extremes, finally decides to take sides and stay only with one: the Black one.

Baraka's period of transition and final decision to remain on the Black side is reflected in his plays *Dutchman* (where Clay, a whitened Black character, is killed) and *The Slave*, in which Walker Vessels, now already on the Black side, has made his final decision to become a revolutionary, after having left his White wife, and to fight for his people<sup>3</sup>. Adrienne Kennedy, who shares Baraka's same dilemma, did not decide for one side or the other. Her plays show her split self in an *agonic* struggle to reconcile the White and Black selves in herself, without having to reject one for the other.

If Kennedy shows us her actual pain in her plays (whereas Baraka reaches the phase in which pain has been transformed into a creative rage), Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell* testifies the tremendous agony he had gone through: "Shadow of a man. (Tied in a ditch, my own flesh burning in my nostrils. My body goes simple death, but what of my mind? Who created me to this pain?)."<sup>4</sup> Baraka did actually touch death in his inferno and the pain was so deep that it turned into the rage which poked him out of the ditch: "Once, as a child, I would weep for compassion and understanding. And Hell was the inferno of my frustration. But the world is clearer to me now, and many of its features, more easily definable" (*System* 154). It is only through self-introspection that Baraka touched his inner self and, after doing so, he felt ready to offer his best service to his community.

2. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Autobiography* page number) 49.

3. For further information on Amiri Baraka and the Black Theater Movement, see *The Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa: A Comparative Approach*, by Olga Barrios. Diss. U. of California, Los Angeles, 1991. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 1992).

4. Amiri Baraka, *The System of Dante's Hell* 112. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*System* page number).

Regarding Vessel's *agonic* character in *The Slave*, Baraka asserts: "I consciously wrote as deeply into my psyche as I could go . . . going so deep into myself was like descending into Hell" (*Autobiography* 166). It is this illustration of his self-introspection that Baraka took into his theater to show his community the need for them to perform the same journey and be aware of the hell they were living in, so that they could abandon it. Baraka defines the new revolutionary theater, as a theater that

must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these human beings, look into black skulls. . . . The Revolutionary theater must teach them their deaths. It must teach them about silence. It must kill any God anyone names except common sense. . . . [It] should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness--but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments.<sup>5</sup>

The new theater needed to raise consciousness in people so that they could see and understand themselves and their condition in order to make the appropriate corrections. The new theater needed to correct the deformation of African American history. The new theater needed to be born out of the death of past stereotypes created by a system that had undermined African Americans and their culture.

Referring to Baraka's *The Slave* and Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, Robert H. Grant confines both plays under the definition of "Black existentialist drama of ideas" (Grant 2). Grant's observation about the presence of a Western existentialism in Baraka's work is combined in the playwright with the African tradition--as it is revealed in the African American culture. Baraka himself exhibits this combination: "I Got. Blues. Steamshovel blues. . . . Blues. I Got. Abstract Expressionism blues. Existentialism blues. I Got. More blues, than you can shake your hiney at. . . . Kierkegaard blues, boy are they here, a wringing and twisting. Or, fool, the blues blues" (*System* 86). Baraka and Hansberry exhibit the African American's conflicts within the White society and their characters reveal not only the writer's inner struggle, but also "the failure of communication between Black and White, radical and moderate, 'liberal' and insurgent" (Grant 6).

Grant asserts that *The Slave* is a "drama of the self" that can be defined as a "psychological morality tale blending realism, political allegory and the theater of Cruelty" (Grant 19). And Baraka corroborates Grant's opinion when, referring to *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, *The Toilet* and *The Baptism*, he affirms: "I was definitely talking to myself, I was saying that I needed to get away from where I was, that the whole situation was not positive as far as I was concerned. It was a dialogue in which I was trying to clarify certain things."<sup>6</sup> Self introspection, then, is essential as the first step towards self-affirmation.

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5. Amiri Baraka, *Black Magic* 211.

6. James V. Hatch, Interview with Amiri Baraka.

Baraka recalls that in the 1960s Walt Whitman and the Surrealists were their prophets, but after his trip to Cuba--when he visited just after the Cuban revolution--he was "shaken more deeply than even [he] realized. The arguments [he] had had with [his] old poet comrades increased and intensified. It was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must *act!* One *could* act" (*Autobiography* 166). And this is Vessels' awareness in *The Slave*. Vessels has decided to become a revolutionary, leave aside the talking and take action. In Act II, Vessels tells Easley:

WALKER

... You never did anything concrete to avoid what's going on now. Your *sick liberal lip service* to whatever was the least filth. Your high ethic disapproval of the political.<sup>7</sup>

Vessels is tired of so much talking, of Western White liberals' emphasis on words (problem also presented by Hansberry in her play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*). Vessels realizes that social protest is not enough, "right is in the act! And the act itself has some place in the world . . . it makes some place for itself." (*Slave* 75). Time had come for him to take action and kill his whitened past.

If Baraka is talking to himself in *The Slave*, Easley and Mrs. Easley--Vessel's White ex-wife--might be considered as "personifications of aspects of [Vessel's] past emotional life, a symbolic dyad reflecting those Western values which mesmerize him yet, in spite of the brutality of his words and actions of the play" (Grant 19).<sup>8</sup> When Vessels attacks Easley's White liberalism, it is Baraka's attack on his own "liberal integrationist stance . . . [during] his early East Village days in New York, . . . [an assertion of his] new militant black revolutionist position."<sup>9</sup> Grant maintains that both

7. Amiri Baraka, *The Slave*, in *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1964) 74. My emphasis. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Slave* page number).

8. In this regard, Lloyd W. Brown claims that Easley symbolizes the White enemy outside that Vessels hates; but Easley also represents the 'Whiteness' that Vessels feels within himself. Lloyd W. Brown, *Amiri Baraka* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 147.

9. In a 1989 interview, Baraka recalled the past and how African-Americans would not let Whites participate in the Movement, which he considers a gross error:

Anybody who was progressive enough or intrepid enough would go there [East Village], but we wanted to be so revolutionary and at the same time we felt so guilty, because we had just left downtown, and many of us had been with White women and married to White women, that when we got up there we felt kind of guilty, embarrassed, so that helped. (Interview with the author).

And Brown asserts that Baraka's abandonment of Black nationalism and embracement

Matoseh's (in Hansberry's *Les Blancs*) and Vessels' rhetoric voices share a radicalism that approaches Black nationalist self-determination (Grant 11). Vessels affirms that he will accept "no other adviser except [his] own ego." (*Slave* 66). As claimed by the Black Power and Black Consciousness movements, self-determination was pivotal in the struggle for liberation; or as Baraka states, "the struggle against racial oppression is basically a struggle of national liberation."<sup>10</sup>

In the struggle for national consciousness, African Americans were encouraged by the new African nations to turn away from Western ideology and aesthetics. Consequently, the assassination of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba--who also appears as one of the characters in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964)--was a turning point which reinforced their struggle. Baraka himself testifies: "We identified especially with the new nations of Africa. Malcolm X had sounded that note clearly. And the assassination of Patrice Lumumba touched the African American intellectual and artist community at the point where nerve touched the bone."<sup>11</sup> First, it was Lumumba's assassination, and then Malcolm X's, that contributed to the burst of African Americans' pain in the form of rage and violence reflected in the themes and the language used by the playwrights of the Movement.

Baraka's vision of the relative failure of the Theater Movement in the 1960s parallels Vessels's political position presented in *The Slave*. Baraka considers that the relative failure of the Black Theater Movement and the Black Arts Movement lied on

[their] failure to build the political bases that would ensure their continuing life. Either [they] depended on the ruler's money, and when that failed, [they] did; or when the organizations which supported revolutionary black arts organizations split, or ran into problems, or were attacked by the state, as they constantly were, the black arts organizations suffered the same fate ("Theater" 236).

On the same line of thought, Werner Sollors observes that

instead of developing a political concept of Black liberation, Vessels merely follows the impulses of his own love-hate emotions, which he expresses with an insistent *larmoyance*. This flaw reduces Vessels's political potential to a nihilistic form of action-for-action's sake. However, although [Vessels] has no

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of socialism confirms his actual "lifelong radicalism." (Brown 147). It also confirms the practice of his theory of art and change; i.e., becoming, instead of remaining a static form and/or content.

10. Amiri Baraka, *Toward Ideological Clarity* 20.

11. Amiri Baraka, "Black Theater in the Sixties," 23. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by ("Theater" page number).

hopeful vision for a revolutionary future, he is fully aware of the mistakes of the liberals in the present (Sollors 136).

Nevertheless, it is that action itself that becomes the means of Vessels's liberation and knowledge<sup>12</sup>.

Floyd Gaffney points out that "Black victims [in Baraka's plays] acquire freedom through triumph of knowledge, reflected through their ritualized suffering and revolt." In this manner, *The Slave* expresses what Baraka advocates that theater should be, "positive in its expression of black pride, black identity and black nationhood" (Gaffney 29). This liberation and assertiveness is implied not only in a political struggle, but also in a new aesthetics and a new language that must be searched by the artist. *The Slave* becomes the expression of a balance between content and form, which, according to Kimberly Benston, is achieved through the ritual of dialogue (Grant 12). This ritualistic element is fundamental in the play, for it becomes Baraka's affirmation of that aesthetics.

Language, as examined earlier, is essential to a culture's own expression. The creation of a new language by the African American artists of the 1960s was one of their main goals. The effective form of culture, Baraka proclaims, is speech, for words have power:

The words of a language become something specific related to their individual users, but for the same reason, each culture has got its own language, because they have their own experience . . . and all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a powerful motley of experience.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, language needs to be infused with feeling, force and spirit in order to create a theater of world spirit, "where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening" (*Home* 212).

*The Slave*, then, becomes an expression of this language of unique experience of one's self and one's culture. Vessels is aware that he has been speaking a language which is not his, for, although he has learnt many words, "almost none of them are [his]" (*Slave* 53). Consequently, Vessels decides to adopt a new language: action. The spirit, force and feeling are shaped by the rage, violence and passion that originates through the ritual of dialogue.

Some scholarship suggests there are strong links between Baraka's theater and Artaud's theater of cruelty. Sanders affirms *The Slave* is "the pivotal play in [Baraka's]

12. Remember that Baraka sees his theater as a theater of victims.

13. LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Home: Social Essays*, 166, 168, 172. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Home* page number).

corpus and the first of his theater of cruelty plays, because it is primarily about becoming--becoming free" (Sanders 150). Like Artaud's, Baraka's attempt is to find a spiritual basis for meaning through theater, as a public genre that includes an audience. This ritual theater becomes a ceremony more than a spectacle, where the audience--which for Baraka and Artaud is a collective--is essential to the expression of the event (Sanders 129).

Baraka and the artists of the Theater Movement adopted the ritual because they thought rituals were more powerful than *talking heads*. They believed that Western theater was mainly talking in a drawing room, while life was taking place outside. African American artists wanted to get away from the drawing room model, which is what Vessels's poetry attempted to be and is undermined by Easley who calls it Vessels's "inept formless poetry. . . . The poetry of ritual drama." (*Slave* 55-56). When Baraka wrote about ritual drama, he was not aware he knew and understood what he meant. It was not until after he had written *The Slave* that he realized ritual was actually history, the lives of African Americans: "We perform our lives. We live our lives every day. We might think we do different things but a lot of the things we do are the same things: we get up, we go to school, we eat, . . . and we go to sleep, and then we get up again. The sun and the moon. The same." And he adds that people go through infinite changes, not in the sense of displacements; but in the sense of becoming. People have "to keep coming to keep going." It is the constant of always the same thing, but always changing. And this is what ritual means: "the constant of consciousness, and reconsciousness and re-reconsciousness."<sup>14</sup>

The structure of *The Slave* is circular, like the seasons cycle, like the sun and the moon. The play is introduced by Vessels dressed as an old field slave, and is the same character who closes it. This circular ending may seemingly imply that no change has occurred, and yet there has been a change; i.e., the achievement of consciousness; in this case, a recovery of a hidden and painful identity. That first change, first step, will lead to new changes, new consciousness and reconsciousness and re-reconsciousness.

The repetition that Baraka points out is one of the elements of ritual and an essential component of African American folk and musical tradition. Shelby Steele claims the new African American theater ritual is achieved through the repetition of symbols, values and patterns from drama to drama "rather than the traditional religious method of repeating a single ceremony until it becomes ritual" (Steele 33). And, besides repetition there are other literary devices used by African American artists in order to attain ritual, as formulated by Steele: symbol, allegory, language style, recurring themes and characterization. And these devices appear from play to play, rather than in every play (*Ibid*).

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14. Olga Barrios, Interview with Amiri Baraka. Subsequent allusions to this reference will be indicated by (Interview page number).

The old slave figure that appears in the prologue of Baraka's "Fable in a Prologue and Two Acts"--as Baraka denominates *The Slave*, mentions the need of a metalanguage, for "your brown is not [his] brown, etc. . . . We need some thing not included here." (*Slave* 45). Sanders asserts that this metalanguage the character speaks of is action itself. In addition, the violence which serves as the background of the play "emphasizes primarily the torment of the protagonists and reflects the more mangled communication than the uncompromising nature of the act that approaches as the dialogue comes to an end" (Sanders 153). Sanders believes that the child's cry at the end represents "the basic expression to which [Vessels] is reduced" and symbolically shows that a new language must come (Ibid).

The importance of the ritual of insult in African American culture is analyzed by Levine as a verbal art form. Insults and street language are present in most of the Movement plays, and Baraka's did especially emphasize their use, as observed in *The Slave*. The use of ritual insult, Levine maintains, was the perfect outlet for anger. The practice of ritual insult increased at a time when African Americans were particularly subjected to assaults and insults upon their dignity. Ritual language play (e.g., insult in the form of the dozens<sup>15</sup>) could be used "as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger; an ability that was often necessary for survival" (Levine 358). This is, precisely, how Vessels operates at the beginning of the play. He uses the ritual of insult, and the rhythm of the insults increases throughout the play. Finally, Vessels reaches a point where he realizes talk--e.g., insults--are not enough. He does not want to use verbal devices to control his anger, so that he becomes action itself. His selected action actually redeems him.

In the new language of action, the expression of hatred becomes a significant component. Baraka uses hate as an energy force in the character of Vessels. He also uses this force in plays such as *The Baptism* and *The Toilet*. Hate, though, is not a final result but a ritual means of expressing a feeling which leads to love. Glen Burns refers to Malcolm X who, like Baraka, understood hate as a *cleansing force*. Malcolm X discerned how to use any means which could offer African Americans a therapy to liberate their hatred. It is through the expression of that hate that Clay, in *Dutchman*, and Vessels, in *The Slave* recover their identity (Burns 278, 277).

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15. Some scholars have denominated the dozens as a *dialect insult*. Herber L. Foster asserts that the dozens possess a pattern of *interactive insult* and follows rules well recognized which allow an emotional outlet. At times, the dozens are rhymed couplets, other times, curses, insults and taunts. Usually, only two people participate in this verbal exchange, but more people can get involved--the participants might even play to the audience. Foster claims that the dozens have been usually referred to as a survival technique or ritualized game utilized to: "(1) express aggressive feelings; (2) develop verbal skills; (3) cut a boy free from matriarchal control; and (4) teach youths how to control their feelings and tempers" (Foster 221-212).



The hatred expressed by Vessels is not only against Whites but also against himself. He admits there are polluted elements comprising the pursuit of his political motives and actions--like "[dragging] piles of darkies out of their beds and [shooting] them for being in Rheingold ads." (*Slave* 66-67). Years later, Baraka has recognized that

all the white-hating is not necessary to love oneself. Unless [one] is insecure as [he was]. . . . The positive aspect of all that was clear, it represents struggle, the desire of liberation. The negative was the bashing together like children. And so, those structures could not last, the internal contradictions were so sharp. . . ."(*Autobiography* 322)

At that time, though, language served as a liberating force, a way to relieve the rage which was boiling inside and needed to be taken out. Once that phase was burnt, new changes arose in Baraka's work.

Spoken language as well as other literary or theatrical devices such as symbols serve in Baraka's writing as a liberating instrument, not only for his characters but also for African American history itself. Harold Cruse proclaims the African American's

one great and present hope is to know and understand his Afro-American history in the United States more profoundly. Failing that, and failing to create a new synthesis and a social theory of action, he will suffer the historical fate described by the philosopher who warned that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'." (Cruse 565)

The Art and Theater Movement of the 1960s attempted to confront and analyze African American history and, in prior years African Americans associated slavery with a past that they did not want to be related to, slavery in the 1960s acquired a new perspective and meaning.

In this line, Larry Neal mentions the "red-mouthed grinning field slave" who is the emblem of Vessels's army, and he explains: "The revolutionary army has taken one of the most hated symbols of the Afro-American past and radically altered its meaning. This is the supreme act of freedom, available only to those who have liberated themselves psychically" (Neal 35). Neal asserts that Vessels demands "a confrontation with history, a final shattering of bullshit illusions. His only salvation lies in confronting the physical and psychological forces that have made him and his people powerless. Therefore, he comes to understand that the world must be restructured along spiritual imperatives" (Neal 34-35). Moreover, the confrontation between the Black radical and the White liberal--as represented by Vessels and Easley--is a symbol of larger confrontations occurring between the Third World and Occident, between the colonizer and the colonized, between the slave master and the slave (Ibid).

The reversal of an acquired racist image, as it happens with the Signifying Monkey,<sup>16</sup> is part of the African American tradition in which signifying means "discourse modes of figuration themselves," as pointed out by Henry L. Gates. Signifying is synonymous with figuration and repetition is fundamental to the nature of signifying. Furthermore, signifying conveys the dwelling "at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language . . . [It is the African American] trope for repetition and revision, indeed [the] trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously." The use of signifying in the African American tradition implies the self-reflective nature of this tradition (Gates 52, 51, 52). In addition, Gates insists that African American literature needs to be analyzed comparatively, because this literature comprises texts of "complex double formal antecedent, the Western and the black" (Gates xxiv). In Baraka's play, the figure of the slave connotes a double-meaning. Thus, slavery literally means the enslavement of people, but in African American history it also conveys the meaning of slave rebellions in their struggle for freedom--not a passive acceptance of such a condition.

African American history, as a consequence, has experienced two kinds of slaves: the house slave--symbol of subjection, and the field slave--a rebellious potential who would take any chance to escape from his master. It is the latter type that opens *The Slave*. Thus, as pointed out by Brown, Vessels "represents both past and present (older and younger) militancy" (Brown 150). This differentiation, not established by Sollors, proves Sollors' statement is not totally applicable to the play. Sollors proclaims that Vessels is shown as the old field slave and interprets this character as one who "remains the eternal entertainer, the poet, the 'slave' unable to liberate either himself or others" (Sollors 137). Although a slave at the end, he forgets that Vessels is a militant slave, which does not mean he remains in bondage, and, as such, unable to liberate others or himself. As previously stated, Baraka believes that our history, our lives, are a ritual, but even in the repetition itself there are changes that keep us coming to keep us going.

If *The Slave* is tragic, Theodore R. Hudson affirms, its tragedy consists of Vessels being a victor at the same time he is enslaved, and he "no longer has a capacity for love and compassion: [Vessels] had gone from disaffection to specific rage against a social order to undifferentiated hate for all white people" (Hudson 156). Hudson is partly right in his assertion, for Vessels remains enslaved into his being forced to hate, but he has achieved self-recognition, which he did not possess at the beginning of the play. Furthermore, like the figure of the slave, hate conveys a double meaning. It is ritual to obtain love--consequently, a liberating force; and, in the process of that ritual,

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16. The Signifying Monkey tells the story of the monkey that uses childish devices to goad the lion into fighting the elephant. The monkey starts his signifying to getting the lion and the elephant into a fight. For a deeper and extensive analysis on this story and on the importance of signifying in African-American literary works see: Henry L. Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*.

it becomes a killing weapon--a destructive force, not only against others but also against one's self. These two principles of life and death, it seems, are inseparable, like the cycle of life. Baraka had descended deep into his own hell, to emerge with a new self. He had killed one part in himself in order to give birth to and create another. The moment recalls an image of the circle, of cycles, of ritualization in our lives.

Hudson's assertion that Vessels no longer has a capacity for love and compassion is not totally true. *The Slave* is neither one thing or the other. It comprises a major complexity for it exposes contradictions which are needed in the journey of self-introspection and self-discovery leading to self-affirmation. Vessels is not completely stripped from love, for he has returned for his children in spite of risks:

WALKER

. . . But I tell you now that I'm not lying and that in spite of all the things I've done that helped kill love in me, I still love those girls.

EASLEY

You mean, in spite of all the people you've killed.

WALKER

. . . In spite of the fact that I, Walker Vessels, single-handedly, and with no other adviser except my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other . . . despite the fact that I am being killed in my head each day and by now have no soul or heart or warmth, even in my long killer fingers, despite the fact that I have no other thing in the universe that I love or trust, but myself . . . despite or in spite, the respite, my dears, my dears, hear me, . . . despite all these things and in spite of all the drunken noises I'm making, despite . . . in spite of . . . I want those girls [his children], very, very much. (*Slave* 66-67).

Baraka explains why African Americans were still slaves in the 1960s:

We are slaves now because we do not yet want to be free badly enough to take freedom. We are slaves now, niggers and slaves, because we do not yet want to be anything else badly enough to force the issue. We are controlled by white power because we do not yet want to work hard enough to fight long enough to break white power's hold on us.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, he observes African Americans attempting to break from slavery, and this is what we see in Vessels's character and his action taken:

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17. Amiri Baraka, *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, 88. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Raise* page number).

We are self conscious now, because we are slaves trying to break from slavery. Trying to destroy slavery in the world and in our minds. If we could destroy it in our minds, our love for it, i.e., if we could see it continuously as evil, as the devil collecting and using our energies to pervert the world . . . then there would be no pause, no rhetoric, only action which is divine (*Raise* 147).

This attempt to break from slavery, through action, is what Vessels symbolizes. His militancy is the assertion of his motion rather than pause, a continuous motion that conveys change. Change can only happen through action--the field slave--not through pause, passivity and acceptance--the house slave.

Slavery also comprises another connotation. It refers to an African American history of oppression and pain, and of creation and joy as well. Music and songs have helped African Americans combat oppression as a means of self-expression, as the outlet and cry of their pain and their joy. Baraka claims that "the one peculiar referent to the drastic change in the Negro from slavery to 'citizenship' is [her/]his music."<sup>18</sup> The old slave field character, Vessels, ends his speech referring to *the blues people*:

#### WALKER

Or old, old blues people moaning in their sleep, singing, man, oh, nigger, nigger, you still here, as hard as nails, and takin' no shit from nobody. He say, yeah, yeah, he say yeah, yeah. He say, yeah, yeah, . . . goin' down slow, man. Goin' down slow. He say . . . yeah, heh . . .

*(Running down, growing anxiously less articulate, more "field hand" sounding, blankly lyrical, shuffles slowly around, across the stage . . .).*  
(*Slave* 45).

Baraka could not possibly have forgotten the reference to music, an intrinsic element to African American culture, which gives its members their identity. For this specific play, he needed to choose the blues.

The blues, Baraka insists, "was a kind of singing that utilized a language that was almost strictly American. It was not until the ex-slaves had mastered this language in whatever appropriation of it they made that blues began to be more evident than shouts and hollers" (*Blues* 63). The blues conveys the experience of a people and of a certain time. Ellison's definition of the blues as an "impulse to keep painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness," (Ellison 78-79) is perfectly applicable to the old field slave/Vessels of *The Slave*. Ellison adds: "As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (Ellison 79). And we can envision *The Slave* as a lyrical poem oozing pain at

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18. LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People* x. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Blues* page number).

the beginning, increasing its rhythm and ending up with a loud child's cry. A cry that can be voiced by a jazz saxophone--like Aishah Rahman did in her play *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, in which Charlie Parker's music is paralleled with a child's cry. The child's cry ending *The Slave* could certainly be the cry of a saxophone. Jazz, though developed out of the blues, still became a different kind of music. Baraka asserts that in the late 1950s and 1960s music took "more 'radical' changes and re-evaluations of social and emotional attitudes toward the general environment" (Ellison 235). This more radical stand is paralleled by Vessels's radical militancy.

To Baraka, music has always meant freedom: "Music is an emotional experience and a philosophical one. . . . Moving in the blue/black streets there was freedom, a possibility of becoming anything I could imagine. I was completely on my own (and even more so once I realized it) and everything in that world began and was defined by me, in me, by music" (*Autobiography* 48-50). With Baraka's personal experience, music, rhythm and movement could not be excluded from his play. Music infuses emotion, force, and spirit in language, as it becomes another liberating element. Throughout his conversation, Vessels transforms, fluctuates from laughter to anger, from tenderness to cruelty, from standard English to Black English; he even dances and makes up a song (*Slave* 59). Vessels's fluctuation of moods and gestures transports its quality to his speeches. Vessels uses every means he can to express himself. His taking action is not only shown in his overt militancy but implicit in his spoken and body language of gesture and movement as well. As if Vessels was himself a saxophone, crying all different notes and sounds that convey multiple moods. The play becomes a sea of musical, rhythmical sounds whose breathing commences to increase until it explodes in a final note: the simultaneous child's cry with the sounds of the explosions outside the house.

It does not seem strange to observe Baraka's ability using words as musical notes. Baraka was--and still is--a poet before he began writing plays. At a certain point, he realized his poetry had acquired a dramatic form composed by different voices (Interview). Infusing the emotion that poetry and music convey, Baraka creates a liberating process from Western form, and creates a new aesthetics, in which ritual becomes the essential means towards that goal. *The Slave* is Baraka's transitional play towards the search of new theatrical forms, as presented in plays such as *Great Goodness of Life* (1966), in which a multiple set is used; *Home on the Range* (1968), a play to be performed with the music of Albert Ayler improvised in the background; *Slave Ship, an Historical Pageant*, which has little dialogue, but mainly sounds, screams, smell effects, and instruments including the saxophone and African drums; and, finally, his plays of scientific socialism. Baraka's creativeness has not reached a full stop, for he keeps coming to keep going--trying new possibilities of expression. He has been awarded for his writings, and *The Slave* obtained the drama prize at the First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in the Spring of 1966 (Hudson 157).

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