

READING BARAKA'S AGGRESSIVE POETIC LANGUAGE IN *BLACK ART* IN LIGHT OF GATES' *THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY*

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Abstract:

LeRoi Jones A.K.A Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), a controversial African American writer, was known for his radical views and his uncompromising political engagement in public life. Due to those reasons, his literary works were widely examined. A number of studies dealt with his distinctive use of language and others highlighted the radical views in his literary works. However, the verbal aggressiveness of Baraka's poetic language is not approached yet. Therefore, the current paper aims at examining the verbal aggressiveness of poetic language in Baraka's 'Black Art' in light of *The Signifying Monkey*. Henry Gates's theory *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) offers useful insights in examining the poet's usage of verbal aggressiveness and obscenity and it frees the poems from the biased mainstream view of language. The study concludes that verbal aggressiveness in these poems is a signifying techniques of the African American vernacular, used by Baraka as a means to subvert the dominance of the standard English language which marginalized African Americans. Thus, Baraka employs a verbal aggressive language in his poetry to create a new discourse of resistance by re-signifying the language of the African American character.

Keywords: Le Roi Jones, The Signifying Monkey, Henry Gates, Black Arts Movement.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, Humans have shown a tendency to be aggressive. Thus, human aggression have been approached in a variety of disciplines. Bearing in mind that literature is a reflection of life, it is predicated that some literary works will exhibit physical and verbal aggression. verbal aggressiveness has been given a widely accepted definition by Infante & Wigley as "a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions" (1986, 61). Most importantly, it is considered to be a destructive trait and leads to nothing but a negative outcome.

The above mentioned information gives a clear idea about the widely accepted conventional way of looking at verbal aggressiveness, or in other words, it is how the white mainstream views it. Nevertheless, when looking at the same topic from the view point of the African American communities, the use of verbally aggressive language have developed under different circumstance and it is viewed in a completely different light.

Many scholars pinpointed an important African American ritualized speech activity which involves the use of verbal aggressiveness. William labov in his study, *Rules for Ritual Insults* says that different names were ascribed to the same activity, but the dozens, sounding, and signifying are the most common three, although the names are different, the activity itself is quite the same in different African American communities in terms of form and content of the insults themselves. (1997, 472) This ritualized speech activity is one among many differences between the standard English language and the African American vernacular, and it is one of the reasons behind the stigmatization of the African American vernacular by white speakers.

John McWhorter in his book, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca* (2016) affirms that racism is a significant reason behind the stigmatization of the African American vernacular. He adds that anyone who wants to be intellectually acknowledged, must avoid using the African American vernacular, and learn how to perfect the use of the standard language (26). Despite all the negative views against the African American vernacular, many African American writers utilized it in their literary works. Geneva Smitherman in her study, *The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and the New Black Poetry* (1973) states that the interrelationship between

language and culture obliged many African American writers to use the African American vernacular in their literary works. Chief among these writers is the father of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) (259-260).

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1934 as Everett LeRoy Jones, in a black middle-class family, LeRoi Jones A.K.A Amiri Baraka was a major African American literary figure. His life span is a representation of the unrest of a black intellectual man living in a racist society. His writing style is mainly divided into three stages: the first stage is his bohemian stage which was highly influenced by the avant-garde white beat poets, so, this was his 'writing white' stage. The second stage was his black nationalist stage in which the poet has completely abandoned his former life style, he even divorced his white wife and moved to Harlem embracing an uncompromising black self, so it was his 'writing black' stage. Finally, after the poet's famous embrace of the ethos of the Marxist thinking comes his third stage, in this stage the poet reached to the realization that the source of the problems lies in the power structure itself and not in the skin color, so it is his 'beyond color' stage. (Axelrod et al. 2012, 278-279)

Baraka was a prolific and polemical writer. As a result, lots of studies were conducted to evaluate his literary work, many of them tackled the political dimension in his writings, due to the poet's constant engagement in politics which caused sometimes his clashes with authorities. In a detailed book by Jerry Gafio Watts entitled, *AMIRI BARAKA The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, Watts examined Baraka's political and intellectual manifestations and actions in the 1980's. He traced Baraka's political thinking from the days of his Black nationalism to his embrace of Marxism to figure out the reasons behind his political ideas. Furthermore, Watts argued that Baraka has long believed in the virtue of political engagement which for him was based on a firm ground of political understanding. He added that the optimism of Baraka did not allow him to withdraw from his hope for a better society even after the decline of the black cultural nationalism. Watts maintained that Baraka's conversion to Marxism gave him a perfect chance to remain an optimist in the possibility of a better future. (2001)

Due to Baraka's persistent political writings and his extreme opposition to the injustice of society, he got the reputation of a dissident. Sørensen in a book chapter entitled, *Dissent as race war: The strange case of Amiri Baraka*, categorizes Baraka as "an Africanist, (Inter)Nationalist, Marxist, and masculinist dissident, critiquing both majority/hegemonic discourses and most liberal-humanist leftwing producing counter-discourses in the USA over the last fifty years" (2016, 77). The writer adds that Baraka has always attracted controversy by occupying dissident positions against the establishment and liberals. Sørensen looks at Baraka's play *Dutchman*, his poem 'Black Art' and his controversial poem 'Somebody Blew Up America' and confirms that Baraka was the archetype of a person who keeps on dissenting. The writer concludes that the reason behind his angry dissenter voice is that it was an expression of identity. (2016)

In the same vein, David Grundy examined the angry voice of Baraka in his book, *A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets*, where he dedicated the second chapter entitled "Poems That Kill: Amiri Baraka's Magic Words" to examine the developing manifestations of violence in three of Baraka's most famous poems 'Black Dada Nihilismus', 'Black Art' and 'Black People!' whereas, the current study examines verbal aggressiveness in the above-mentioned poems as a signifying technique of the African American vernacular. Grundy situates these poems alongside the Umbra poets to make it clear that these poems were not a sudden outburst of violence as they generally thought to be. The writer provides a detailed close-reading of the poems clarifying the ambiguities of references which help in enriching the overall effect of these poems. The writer also provides the historical context of these texts which helps in understanding how these poems effected and were affected by the political milieu of the 1960's (2019).

Other studies focused on Baraka's unique use of language as a means of empowerment. Some of these studies noted Baraka's employment of the Jazz techniques in his writing style. One of these studies is William Harris' *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. Harris discusses the process of Baraka's transformation from the poetics of his bohemian Avant-garde to his later ethnic poetics. Harris names Baraka's method of transformation "The Jazz aesthetic" which is a process that uses jazz variation as a paradigm for the conversion of social ideas and poetics that are originally white and turning them into black ones. Harris notices that, although, there are different modes of Jazz, Baraka chooses the aggressive mode of the saxophonist John Coltrane; he sees Coltrane as the destroyer of Western forms, he takes popular Western songs and "murders" them by using aggressive tunes. Baraka was doing the same thing in his poetry. Furthermore, Harris elaborates on what he meant

by the Jazz aesthetic or “Jazzification” and how can it be traced in Baraka’s poetry. He states that it follows a basic pattern, first Baraka inverts uncongenial bourgeois forms and ideas to make them black by turning them into their opposites and second he radically modifies avant-garde notions that he finds congenial but still white(1985).

A different aspect was explored by Vettorato in his article, *African Languages in Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento. From Loss to Possession*. The article looks at the poetic strategies employed by Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento to reconnect with their original culture. Vettorato notices that these poets have used African idioms in English poems to de-familiarize the reader with the text he is reading and forces the reader to be faced by the cultural and linguistic habits of the unfamiliar language. Vettorato clarifies that Baraka was a black nationalist who rejected invitations to assimilate to white American culture including its’ language. In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s Baraka’s works were radically national. Vettorato notices how Baraka used Swahili phrases which he picked from his encounter with Maulana Karenga, a Pan African thinker and leader who believed that African Americans must study Swahili to reconnect with their African roots. Vettorato concludes that Baraka’s use of Swahili had a ritual function and it helped him in blurring the lines between his poetical aims and his aesthetic writing (2014). As can be noted, Baraka’s literary works have been approached by a variety of ways. However, verbal aggressiveness of poetic language within the framework of the Signifying Monkey needs further attention.

2. The Signifying Monkey

The current paper approaches the verbal aggressive language in Baraka’s ‘Black Art’ through Henry Louis Gates’ concept of *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Gates is an African American Literary Scholar who has identified a distinctive African American linguistic practice in his theory, which involves the use of verbally aggressive and obscene language. He recognized the need for an African American literary theory, since he believed that biased Western theories are not valid means to appreciate African American experience. So, he articulated the first African American theory of criticism based on African culture and tradition. In the preface of his book, *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates declared that his book is a contribution “for the abolition of racist and sexist presuppositions in literary studies” (1988, xv).

The main focus of Gates’s theory is the concept of Signifyin(g), which Gates’s distinguishes from the traditional meaning of the term according to the standard usage. As apparent, Gates even uses an upper-case S and brackets to symbolize black speakers dropping of the final g, and to avoid confusion with the traditional term ‘signifying’. Gates says:

Signification, in standard English, denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey. It is a fundamental term in the standard English semantic order. Since Saussure, at least, the three terms signification, signifier, signified have been fundamental to our thinking about general linguistics and, of late, about criticism specifically. (1988, 75)

Nevertheless, Signifyin(g) for African Americans is far more complex. Gates best illustrates the concept by saying that “Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination” (44). Signifyin(g) is a verbal game using many strategies like insults, puns and metaphors and other techniques. Commenting on the African concept of signifying, Gates writes in the foreword to *The Anthology of Rap* that “Signifying is the grandparent of rap, and rap is signifying in a postmodern way” (2010). Both use the same linguistic verbal game, but the name has changed with the cross of time. They follow complicated linguistic patterns, and both are as much as they are humorous, they are extremely profane. This linguistic verbal game draw strength by talking about taboos, debunking stereotypes, and crossing redlines.

Signifying Monkey tales or “toasts “as normally referred to in black vernacular, are narrative poems which are usually performed by men in barrooms, in pool halls, and on street corners. Gates aptly points out that given the nature of these poems as “rituals of insult and naming, recorded versions have a phallogocentric bias” (54). These tales have three basic characters: the Monkey, the Lion and the Elephant. In almost, all the versions of the poem, the monkey reports to the lion some insults, presumably said by the elephant which outrages the lions who seeks revenge from the elephant. The lion demands an apology from the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces him.

Realizing that he has been duped, the Lion then returns to the Monkey to settle the score. The lion realizes that his mistake was taking the Monkey's words literally and failing to realize that the monkey was just Signifying. So, in this case, the monkey is the true king of the jungle because by the playful use of words, the monkey managed to trick stronger animals in the jungle (55).

According to Gates, "Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical figures, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis...". Gates goes on to assert that "to this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and cathechesis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying" (52). He adds that different black rhetorical tropes are subsumed under signifying like "Marking", "loud talking", "testifying", "specifying", "calling out one's name", "sounding", "rapping" and "playing the dozens" (Ibid). So, this figure symbolizes the black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community, the double meaning and the deliberate obscuring of the apparent (53).

Since, they were brought to America, Africans had to learn a new language, the language that marginalized them as the insignificant other and was spoken by their oppressors. They used this new language in a uniquely African American way. This makes perfect sense because, in order for them to express their resentment and anger at their situation, they had to send hidden messages to each other via their speech and oral songs. In this vein, African American Signifying is a defense mechanism and an exercise of power, especially in the absence of other forms of power.

3. Aggressiveness of Poetic Language in Baraka's *Black Art*

Published in the collection, *Black Magic* (1966), 'Black Art' is one of Baraka's most radical poems. The title of the poem recalls The Black Arts Movement. Many consider the poem to be the slogan of The Black Arts Movement, because, Baraka articulated the basic principles of the movement in the poem. It is a call for a specific kind of black art that would exemplify the black experience, an art that is highly engaged in political and social life, and at the same time could liberate the black minds from the prejudiced assumption of the Whites to encourage them to embrace their blackness. In 1968, in his influential essay on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal said:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. The Black Arts and Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is politics; the other with the art of politics (1968,29).

'Black Art' draws the readers' attention to its' unusual language. The reader can notice that Baraka resorts to very aggressive words and insults as he launches an attack against whites, Jews and even Blacks who assimilate to the white's establishment. David Grundy affirms that 'Black Art' is a "calls for a movement from political passivity to the revolutionary violence which will allow self-determination and in which poetry will participate" (2019,85). The poem is a unique poem in terms of subject matter as well as language, Baraka shocks the reader from the very first line of the poem when he says:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. (1-3)

The biting criticism to what Baraka deems as superficial poems surprises the reader. Baraka thinks that poems with no real purpose are no more than just bullshit. The choice of the term "bullshit" exposes the poet's urge, not to talk proper or to talk "white". Actually, the kind of terms a person chooses reveal the status of that person in his society. Baraka elaborates on this point in his essay, *Expressive Language*, published in his collection of social essays

entitled *Home*, where he says that “words like their users, have a hegemony”, ... “The social hegemony, one’s position in society, enforce more specifically one’s terms” (2009,192).Based on this, Baraka was deliberately adopting the image of an illiterate black person in order for him to break the rules of the proper talk as a way of subverting those rules along with the power of the ones who established those rules.

Instead of going with the flow, He craves poems that are edgy and powerful. He chooses “teeth”, “trees”, “lemons” to signify the kind of poems he is advocating. This shows that the poet wants poems that could bite like teeth, poems that are full of life like trees and poems that are so edgy and sharp like the taste of lemons. He wants poems that could express the realities of life as it is. Since, the reality of the black people situation is already miserable one so, the perfect language to convey this reality should not be soft.

Fuck poems
and they are useful, wd they shoot
come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after pissing. (5-9)

Baraka deliberately uses obscene language in his attack against useless poems. Smith in his article,*Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art*remarks that “Baraka calculatingly uses words commonly excluded from polite discourse “fuck,” “pissing,” “nigger,” “puke,”etc.” (1987,242). According to Gates’s theory, the Signifyin(g) Monkey, the use of such language is one of the African Americans techniques of signifying which Gates refers to as “rituals of insult and naming” (54). In addition to attacking and breaking the rules of the white main stream, African American Signifying sends double messages. In the previous lines, Baraka plays on the image of black masculinity. Grundy in his book,*A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets* suggests that these lines of the poem “adopt a rhetoric of masculinist liberation from ‘emasculated’ sexual frustration” (2019,87), since the black slaves were emasculated and deprived from their manhood. The poet’s reaction was a celebration of the African American man sexuality along with pouring his rage towards the whites at the same time, thereby he is sending double messages in the same line, which is a characteristic of the African American signifying.

Accordingly, Baraka refuses the refined language which he considers to be dead and unable to convey the rage he was feeling. Instead he is looking for words that are full of life. He is looking for poems that “breathes” and “shudders” and could “love” or even “shoot”. He personifies poems as if he wants his words to be physical entities that would come to live:

We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire. (9-12)

Baraka advocates the use of vulgar words, used by real people from the streets. He believes that this kind of speech is alive “coursing blood”. He capitalizes “Hearts” “Brains” “Souls” which shows his desperate desire to make his words come alive. This is the kind of language he is advocating no matter how obscene or vulgar it gets, because it is the only language that could express the truth and the build-up rage of African Americans. Additionally, this kind of language would be an act of Signifying on the standard language to subvert its rules allowing for the black vernacular to co-exist as a counter discourse in America.

Baraka’s anger is not limited to the whites and their establishments, he heavily attacks blacks who try be “white”:

We want poems
Like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
of the owner-jews. (12-15)

The preceding lines are “a reference to ‘a tavern on Harlem’s Lenox Avenue”, says Lorenzo Thomas, this tavern was a favorite place for black politicians who have connections to the Democratic Party during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Thomas 2008, 113). The poet criticized those black politician, he wanted to reveal their reality to the people

by utilizing verbally aggressive words in such expressions as “fists beating” or “dagger poems” as an African American signifying.

Black poems to
smear on girdle mamma mulatto bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck
between 'Elizabeth Taylor's toes. Stinking
Whores! (12-16)

The poet uses degrading description to show his abhorrence to black women who try desperately to be white. He calls them “mulatto bitches” and “Stinking Whores”. According to him, these women were brain-washed, so they try to be a copy of the whites, like “Elizabeth Taylor”, a very famous British actress, in the 1960's she was a star and an icon. He believes that these women think that whiteness is the only source of goodness and beauty to the extent that they hate their black identity and can't accept it as it is.

"poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
And take their weapons leaving them dead. (16-19)

Probably, the above-mentioned passage is the most aggressive in the whole poem. Baraka wants poems to be a weapon, he wants it to kill, shoot guns, assassinate and wrestle. This amount of verbal aggressiveness was difficult to be digested by many, which made the poem as David L. Smith confirms a “favorite target” for critics who viewed black aesthetic as anti-aesthetic (1987, 238). However, those critics who attacked the poem missed a very important point. Namely, that Baraka's verbal aggressiveness is no more than an act of deliberate Signifying upon the language. Thereby, those critics were fooled just like the lion in the narrative of the Signifying Monkey, which was duped by the Monkey when he took his words literally. In fact, according to Gates's theory, all of the poet's aggressive language was metaphoric in nature, he chooses the police to be his target because they are known to be the most brutal in their treatment to black people, besides his Signifying allows him to pour his rage in the least harmful way and this could achieve a cathartic relief for the African American people.

Remarkably, Baraka tries to pour out his rage in different ways, he even uses onomatopoeia in the line “rrrrrrrrrrrrrr Rrrrrrrrrrrrr . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh. . .rrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . .” to verbalize his rage, the sound he chooses is an angry sound. When Baraka reads the poem, the listener can recognize the extent of his rage, and can sense the frustration of the poet as he desperately wishes his words to come alive. He wishes his words to be “Setting fire and death to Whities ass”. This line shows his extreme hatred to the white race. In fact, Baraka was not shy to express his hatred towards white people. In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, Baraka says that “We hated white people so publicly for one reason, because we had been so publicly tied up with them before” (1983, 311). This hatred stems from a long history of enslavement and injustice.

Another negro leader
On the steps of the white house one
Kneeling between the sheriff's thighs
Negotiating coolly for his people.(30-33)

In the above-mentioned extract, Baraka ridicules in cynical attitude black leaders who sell their people to the White leaders, he uses very degrading descriptions to show his disappointment with them. He wishes for poems that would reveal the truth and “strip him naked” by exposing his lies and showing those hypocrites ugly truth to people.

Clean out the world for virtue and love,
Let there be no love poems written
Until love can exist freely and
Cleanly. (39-42)

After the use of aggressive and violent language, Baraka finally states that his aggressiveness is not arbitrary, he has a bigger aim. He wants to show that he was engaged in a process of creative destruction. In order for him to build something new, the old injustice order and values have to be eradicated or “cleaned out”. The process of “cleaning” requires strong action and language. and that’s exactly what he did. In addition to this, he maintains that there is no use of disguising the truth and act like everything is fine by writing “love poems”, a new set of value has to be implemented in the society, so that “love can exist freely and cleanly”. He never forgets to remind black people that what is being said about them in the institutionalized main stream is not the truth, he says “Let Black people understand That they are the lovers” which shows the poet’s effort in restoring black people’s pride in themselves.

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
Or LOUD (47-52)

In the final lines of the poem, Baraka invites black people to embrace their blackness and stand proud in the face of the whole world, and reject the prejudiced pre-assumptions about their blackness. He wishes for the whole world to be a black poem so that everybody can speak up and to have their own voice, which grows from being silent to “LOUD”.

4. Conclusion

The current study investigates the use of verbal aggressive language in Baraka’s ‘Black Art’ in light of Gates’ theory of *The Signifying Monkey*. In this poem, Baraka bluntly advocates the use of the rough vernacular and condemns proper talk or what he calls “white talk”. As he does so, he employs a language that is extensively aggressive and obscene which is normally not poetic. Applying Gates’ theory, the study concludes that Baraka was engaged in a linguistic verbal game of power. He does so by using different methods of the African American signifying process, all of which involve verbal aggressiveness. At times, he deliberately adopts the image of an illiterate black individual to break the rules of the standard English and encourages black people and writers to embrace their whole being including their vernacular no matter how vulgar, obscene or aggressive. The study also proves that his rationale for his blunt advocate for aggressive language in his poems is very tricky. According to Baraka, poems should tell the truth, and since the truth of the black people situation is unpleasant, so the language should match this truth. To achieve this, Baraka employs the African American signifying to obscure the meaning of his writing through the coded double message of the act. Thereby, the privileged white speaker of the standard English will be alienated from his own language which can give the black speaker a sense of victory. Overall, in light of Gates’ theory, Baraka’s verbal aggressiveness of ‘Black Art’ is a vital means of articulating Baraka’s discourse of resistance to the white-man biased discourse of language, which does not reflect the black man’s needs and desires.

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