FLAYING DUTCHMAN
Masochism, Minstrelsy, and the Gender Politics of Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman

by Matthew Rebhorn

In the April 4, 1964 review of Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman in The New Yorker, Edith Oliver writes that for about “three-quarters of the way, his play has a kind of deadly wit and passionate wild comedy that are his alone, and then, sad to say, he almost literally sends it all up in smoke, under what I feel is the mistaken impression that in order to have point and impact a good story must be given general and even symbolic implications” (78). Reacting specifically to Clay’s extended and angry monologue, Oliver continues, “There is no doubt that this anger is justified, but there is also no doubt, I think, that in this case it is inartistic, weakening the character and the play” (78). Oliver seems to be reacting against exactly the artistic project that Baraka was undertaking, against the precepts that Baraka and other black political activists characterized as being the central tenets underpinning the Black Arts Movement in 1964.

Houston Baker has noted of critics like Oliver and “the white intellectual establishment” that they have tended to downplay the importance of Baraka’s dramaturgy precisely because his “conception of Black as a country—a separate and progressive nation with values antithetical to those of white America—stands in marked contrast to the ideas set forth by Baldwin, Wright, Ellison, and others of the fifties” (106). Critics like Baker have noted that part of Baraka’s project is to defend a black dramaturgy produced by black artists for black audiences. Kimberly W. Benston’s seminal study of Baraka’s early drama argues that this playwright “discovered...a uniquely Afro-American persona and voice” (149) and points to Dutchman and Clay’s last speech as an important step in finding this voice. A. Robert Lee has suggested even more, contending that Baraka “single-handedly revolutionised black theatre in post-war America” (97), and that a play like Dutchman was an essential part of that revolution. To see the artistic mastery these critics exalt, we need only glance at the title of the piece. Baraka’s title evokes the legend of the Flying Dutchman, the doomed ship behind Richard Wagner’s Der Fliegende Holländer (1843), but through its ironic repositioning of the relationship between the doomed sailor and his lover onto Clay and his “loving” and erotic murderer Lula it also reveals how Baraka’s play offers a supple deconstruction of its operatic namesake. That the play is a masterpiece of subversive ideology and a genuine political statement is beyond question even if one went no further than a cursory examination of the text.
Yet, while suggesting the importance of Baraka in both the black dramatic tradition and in mainstream theater in general, I wish to delve deeper than these critics and look at the insufficiently explored gender dynamics involved in Baraka’s aesthetic project. Critics like Baker, Benston, and Lee have noted that Baraka does attempt to define a strong notion of black masculinity for black audiences through his re-conceptualization of a black political theater, but they have not fully examined how Baraka constructs that identity. As I hope to prove, Baraka stages two distinct but interrelated constructions of black masculinity and white femininity in the figures of Clay and Lula respectively, cultural constructions that are iterations of particular gender assumptions and that must necessarily be read through their complex interactions to get at the gender politics at work in this play. Following the lead of cultural critics like Kobena Mercer, Hazel V. Carby, and Robyn Wiegman whose recent work reveals the gendered precepts of black political statements, I shall argue that Baraka polices a notion of black nationalist masculinity precisely by abjectifying women and homosexuals in carefully deployed ways, but that the true constitution of this idea of black masculinity only surfaces in relation to the complex and anxious picture of white femininity Baraka stages in this play. From the initial gaze Lula fixes on Clay in the opening stage business, we see how Lula creates Clay as both a sexual object and a model, or in Laura Mulvey’s terms, as a scopophilic object and a narcissistic ideal. This anxious characterization of Lula allows her to embody white femininity, and through her “blackface” minstrel performance, to mimic the same black masculinity Baraka was after in Clay’s final monologue. By mapping out how race and gender categories circulate in Lula’s minstrel performance, however, we see the defining trait of Baraka’s new Dutchman of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, namely his unending and agonizing self-“flaying,” the way the black man, if he is a black man indeed, yearns to be “punished” by the agents of the white power structure. Likewise, by putting pressure on the scope of Lula’s complex performance, we witness how Lula’s own masochistic white femininity—the way she prods Clay to activate his abusive, virile subjectivity—forecloses the same sexual liberty and agency she achieved when she metaphorically “blacked up.” In this way, Baraka’s ironic treatment of Lula and Clay’s intricate, interrelated power plays not only illustrates the self-destructive tragedy of black nationalist masculinity, but also underscores the way white femininity’s trafficking in this currency of blackness as a method of empowerment is doomed, like the Dutchman Lula emulates, to suffer endlessly the scene of her own debilitation. As invested as he is in sketching out this entwined scene of devastation, however, Baraka still uses the denouement of Dutchman to hint at what an alternative, less disastrously “macho” masculinity—and identity—might look like, even as Lula begins to rehearse yet again the drama’s tragic pantomime with another young, unsuspecting, black victim.

Baraka began his political and aesthetic project when he left Greenwich Village and his wife Hettie Cohen to move to Harlem. There, he and several other black political activists united to form the Black Arts Repertory Theater/ School (BART/S). Although BART/S was soon shut down by the FBI for allegedly being a fundraising operation for the Black Power movement, during its short life it produced a practical mission statement focused on creating a particular black stage aesthetic for black
audiences. Staged American blackness until this moment had been an overwhelmingly alienating experience for performers and audience members alike. On stage, these men of color were seen as “darkies, strutters, and shouters in vaudeville and musical theater; as coons in popular song; as savages in world’s fair exhibits; as buffoons in amusement park concessions; as mascots in baseball parks; as dim-witted children in the early silent movies; [and] as rapists and beasts in D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation” (Nasaw 2). Furthermore, through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, black spectators at theatrical events were assigned the worst seats in the house in the upper balcony or gallery, the same seats cordoned off for those other social “untouchables”—prostitutes. What these excluded audience members saw on stage, therefore, was a panoply of stereotyped, racist images and constructions that aided in codifying a debased form of black identity not only in the Jim Crow South, but also in those northern urban centers where entertainments like vaudeville were prevalent and popular forms—New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston.

This is not to say that there were not “black theaters” extant by the time that Baraka formed BART/S. As early as the 1820s, British comedians, like Charles Mathews, were visiting what he called “the ‘Nigger’s (or Negroe’s) theatre,” or more properly the African Grove Theater in New York, and mimicking black performers like Ira Aldridge (Levine 14). Yet, it was not until 1904 when Robert Motts opened the Pekin Theater on Chicago’s South Side with an eclectic mix of black actors, playwrights, and musicians that black audiences could see musicals and plays written by black artists. By 1910, there were black theaters in most large cities, and while vulnerable to white “slumming,” these theaters catered to black audiences with black performers. As with Billy Kersands’ productions at the Elysium Theatre in New Orleans, these theaters were segregated so that the white patrons were treated with “secondary consideration” (quoted in Nasaw 50).

Unfortunately, even theaters as independent as Kersands’ continued to reproduce the established stereotypes of black identity common to white theaters. While Kersands employed black performers, they inevitably had to “black up” to conform to the image of blacks on stage. Inspired by the success of the Little Negro Theater Movement, W. E. B. Du Bois used his magazine Crisis both to critique theaters like Kersands’ for its minstrel stereotyping and to award prizes to gifted young playwrights like Eulalie Spencer, Zora Neale Hurston and Georgia Douglas Johnson who attempted to write their way out of these black minstrel images on stage. This attempt to escape the deleterious effects produced by black stereotyping and audience segregation, Du Bois argued in his essay, “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement,” created a theatrical counter-discourse revolving around four principles: about us, by us, for us, and near us. While drawing on the idea of an independently run black theater in areas where black patrons could frequent the playhouse with ease, Du Bois’ theatrical counter-discourse offered a new paradigm to refashion dominant “Negro Theater” types, overturning minstrelsy by concocting a black theatrical enterprise.

The founding of black theaters like the American Negro Theater in 1939, the Negro Playwrights Company in 1940, and the Negro Ensemble Company in 1957 began to live up to Du Bois’ theatrical counter-discourse. We can therefore locate Baraka’s
project and BART/S in general in this tradition. Although not drawing directly on Du Bois’ template, Baraka’s theatrical project shares the ideological blueprints of this vision, and attempted to make this theoretical construct a reality in Harlem in the mid-1960s. This actualized theatrical movement attempted to address issues that were relevant to black audiences, and more importantly, endeavored to discredit those alienating figures of staged black identity so common in the American cultural imagination. As Larry Neal, an avatar of the program, relates, the Black Arts Movement crystallized in BART/S was “radically opposed to any concept of art that alienates [a black man] from his community . . . . [I]t envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (29).

To achieve this end, Baraka engaged in innovative theatrical techniques—techniques built on earlier twentieth-century experimental dramaturgy. The great twentieth-century drama theorist and experimenter Antonin Artaud wrote that what modern society really needed was “a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart” (84). Theater, in Artaud’s view, should challenge us, jolt us into action, and offer a new arena of sensibility. Baraka seems to have followed this directive in his own dramaturgy. According to one anecdote, in order to attract black patrons to his theater in Harlem, Baraka staged a black man chasing a white man with a gun through the neighborhood. The chase wound up in the theater space trailing a host of excited, black spectators: the plays were then immediately performed, directly capitalizing on the audience’s activity and emotion (Elam 39). By thus jolting a decidedly black audience into action, Baraka was adopting Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” edicts that capitalize on the “public’s senses” rather than its “understanding” (85) and “seek[s] in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets” (85). While the public in this case was pouring from the streets into the theater, the same dynamics of emotional rather then intellectual engagement and action seem to underwrite both Artaud’s and Baraka’s aesthetics. Although earlier theatrical experiments had pushed for this same counter-cultural goal, a theater intended solely for black spectators asking for “twenty million spooks [to] storm America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons” (Baraka, Home 214) had not yet been imagined or idealized in this particular way or to this extent.

The dominant issue at the heart of this black cultural nationalism articulated by Baraka was the idea of a socially distinct identity. For Baraka and other cultural nationalists, self-fashioning was the key to defining black power and the creation of a black nation. Yet, as critics like Michelle Wallace have tellingly observed about just this project, the black man in the 1960s “found himself wondering why it had taken him so long to realize he had an old score to settle. Yes, yes he wanted freedom, equality, all of that. But what he really wanted was to be a man” (30).¹ In other words, masculinity defined the identity of black nationalists in the mid-1960s—and nationalists like Baraka were attempting to articulate just such an identity in prose, poetry, and drama.

It should come as no surprise then that Baraka should declare that Dutchman is really about “the difficulty of becoming a man in America” (Home 188). In Dutchman, Lula and Clay reiterate this point when they are talking about their fantasies of the
coming night. Lula invites Clay into her "dark living room" and teases Clay with the possibility that "we’ll sit and talk endlessly, endlessly." When Clay questions what they will talk about "endlessly," Lula says, "About what? About your manhood, what do you think? What do you think we’ve been talking about all this time?" (25). Not only is black nationalism about discovering a black identity, but as we see from this exchange, *Dutchman* and Baraka’s political and theatrical agenda focuses on defining and constructing black "manhood."

As critics like Mercer, Carby, and Wiegman have recently noted, however, the kind of black masculinity that artists and performers like Baraka were constructing in the 1960s had a particular flavor—an image of potent and aggressive machismo underscored by and contingent on its asserted distance from other more passive and "effeminized" subjects. Carby traces the genealogy of that construction of masculinity in her study of W. E. B. Du Bois. She shows how Du Bois contrasted Booker T. Washington’s "inadequate manliness and consequent lack of the attributes of leadership with a history of black male revolt and self-assertion led by such revolutionary figures as the maroons, Touissant L’Ouverture, Nat Turner, and other rebels against Washington’s acts of compromise . . . . These revolutionary figures appear in Du Bois’s narrative both as ‘true’ black men and genuine leaders of black men” (Carby 40). Carby goes on to point to Cornel West as the modern apotheosis of this revolutionary black masculinity, but one could easily add the name of Amiri Baraka to a list of black activists who draw on this gendered contrast between weak, effeminized compromise and strong, virile self-assertion as the basis for political revolution. To be a "true" black activist, in other words, demanded that one also had to be strong, uncompromising, and "macho." It is precisely this equation of power that Wiegman suggests that Baraka and Black Power employ to erase their own felt sense of effeminacy in the eyes of white, masculine culture, a solution whose calculus "transferred the problem inherent in the disjunction between masculine sameness and racial difference to the site of gender" (109). Kobena Mercer augments this point when he argues that this "macho" black masculinity emerging in the sixties "subjectively incorporates attributes associated with dominant definitions of manhood—such as being tough, in control, independent—in order to recuperate some degree of power or active influence over objective conditions of subordination created by racism" (143). Mercer goes on to note that the "macho" masculinity embraced by figures like Baraka ironically directs this recuperating aggression not at the white masculine hegemony, but "against fellow colonized men and women" (145).

I would argue that Baraka’s black masculinity not only exhibits notable "macho" traits, but also depends for its definition on being directed against those "colonized" subjects who are also abjected by dominant society. In short, Baraka’s black masculinity defines itself through the abjectification, or "othering," of queer men and women. This maneuver, however, constantly reveals its own shaky foundations, and thus in serious ways undermines and problematizes Baraka’s militant black masculinity.

By reading *Dutchman* through the lens of Baraka’s essay, “American Sexual Reference: Black Male,” Baraka’s abjectifying strategy in the play becomes clearer. Written in 1964, Baraka’s essay claims that “[m]ost American white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their faces are weak and blank, left without
the hurt that reality makes—anytime” (Home 216). He goes on to ask rhetorically, “Can you, for a second, imagine the average middle-class white man able to do somebody harm?” (Home 217). Baraka describes a set of traits with which to read Clay’s pronouncements in his long monologue towards the end of Dutchman. Clay spits at Lula: “I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. Even if they expected it” (33). Here, Baraka’s character defines his own masculinity by abjectifying queerness; the “weak-faced ofays” are the “fags” of the essay, men whose faces are “weak” and unable to do “harm” to anybody. Clay not only recognizes the “weak-faced ofays” as being separate from him, but also contemplates “murdering” them as he is squeezing Lula’s throat flat. The essay reveals the qualifications for manhood through negative example, and Baraka, in an almost point-for-point manner, uses these qualifications to evoke Clay’s masculinity.

Yet, if Baraka’s essay provides a useful key by which to decode Clay’s black masculinity, it also seems to problematize that notion. For in his essay, Baraka argues that the “long abiding characterization of the Western artist as usually ‘queer’ does not seem out of place” (Home 219). The implication is clear: the artist-figure, especially one influenced by Western mythology and literary styles, falls into the same queer category as white men in general. Throughout Dutchman, however, we see how Clay himself embodies precisely this kind of Western artist-figure. After all, even after Lula blasts him for “reading Chinese poetry” (8)—a particularly “effeminizing” hobby—Clay still freely and enthusiastically admits that in college he thought of himself as Baudelaire (19). Lula laughs openly, mocking his lack of masculinity and inability to see himself as first and foremost “a black nigger.” But Clay merely embraces his “effeminized” identity as a “black Baudelaire” all the more firmly.

Even at the height of Clay’s tirade, which most critics see as his main effort at defining his black masculinity, he stresses his own artistic merit and skill. Near the end, he declares:

With no more blues, except the very old ones, and not a watermelon in sight, the great missionary heart will have triumphed, and all of those ex-coons will be stand-up Western men, with eyes for clean hard useful lives, sober, pious and sane, and they’ll murder you. They’ll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own. They’ll cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation. (36)

Although we shall examine the ideological meaning of these lines later, what remains important to our understanding of Clay as an artist-figure is that this passage shows his mastery of stylistic devices typical of Western literature. While this monologue contains idiomastic language (“ex-coons” and “stand-up Western men”), compared to Clay’s earlier clipped and often monosyllabic answers to Lula’s carefully crafted dialogue, this speech is a metaphorically complex, metaphysically erudite pro-
nouncement. The violence of the last sentence belies the poetic lyricism of Clay’s monologue—“They’ll cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation” (36). Here, we see “cut your throat” punctuating his delivery with hard, terminal “t’s” which echo the violence of the image. We also witness the alliteration in the following clause, the “flesh” “falling” “from” bones. Lastly, we hear the influence of seventeenth-century and modern metaphysical poetry: the “falling flesh” seems to be a tipping of the hat in the direction of John Donne’s “A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy’s Day, Being the Shortest Day,” Abraham Cowley’s “The Change,” or George Herbert’s “Life,” while the bones becoming barren recalls the imagery of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land or Four Quartets.

If Clay regulates his own masculinity through the abjection of queer desire by insisting on his violence and virility, he also reveals his similarity to exactly the kind of poet-figure so mocked by Lula as being effeminate and lambasted by Baraka as being the apotheosis of queerness. Not surprisingly, in his final monologue, Clay tells Lula: “If I’m a middle-class fake white man . . . let me be. And let me be in the way I want” (34). The protagonist demonstrates Baraka’s troubling construction of black masculinity: while it involves an assertion of Clay’s own potent agency, the contents of this demand reveal Clay’s own troubling desire.

If Baraka has Clay desire his black masculinity by abjectifying white queerness, he also has Clay assert his identity by abjectifying femininity, by constructing black agency through the othering of white women. As with Baraka’s depiction of queerness, the feminine is also a complicated concept that discloses the fragility of the black masculinity Baraka wants to form.

Near the end of the play when Clay finally takes on the role of dominant male and slaps Lula “as hard as he can, across the mouth” (33), we can note a change in the tone, register, and rhetoric of Clay’s dialogue. After the slap, Clay’s violent language frequently ends with an exclamation point. When Clay shouts, “I’ll rip your lousy breasts off!” (34) and “When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder!” (35), his speech has moved from a meek, passive tone to a heated, aggressive one. Moreover, this change in tone is accompanied by a drastic change in rhetoric. While Clay addressed Lula as “lady” (14) and “ma’am” (20) in the beginning of the play, after he has lashed out at her, he calls her a “whore” twice—she is a “great liberal whore” (34) and a “loud whore” (35). Clay has not only moved Lula from being a “lady” to a “whore,” but he has also transformed himself from Lula’s passive, “tender big-eyed prey” (24) to an aggressive virile predator with a “pumping black heart” (34). Clay abjectifies Lula, elevating his own sense of identity through demeaning hers.

Yet, if Clay’s violence in Dutchman becomes the occasion for his linguistic assertion of black virility, the rest of the play discloses an amazing anxiety about the integrity of this black masculinity, an anxiety that problematizes any reading of this play as a realization of Baraka’s political and cultural ideology. When we first encounter Clay, he is characterized as being unsure and uncomfortable with exactly the kind of virility Baraka desired. His initial sexual banter with Lula comes off as awkward, and at one point Lula turns on him and exposes Clay’s ostensibly suave dialogue: “You think I want to pick you up, get you to take me somewhere and screw me, huh?” When Clay
responds quite meekly, “Is that the way I look?” Lula takes this as a cue to deflate Clay’s manhood. She attacks: “You look like you been trying to grow a beard. That’s exactly what you look like. You look like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard . . . . You look like death eating a soda cracker” (8). For a paragon of manhood, Clay is easily infantilized and effeminized; his inability to grow a beard and his living with his parents point to a man who, in Baraka’s terms, is less than a man. While Lula is undoubtedly challenging Clay to become assertive and engage in a playful, sexual dialogue, Clay does not seem up to the challenge: he balks again, saying, “Really? I look like that?” and admits that he was “embarrassed” at his ineptness (9). Clay’s insecure masculinity is also exposed when he and Lula are talking about names. Lula introduces herself as “Lena the Hyena.”

CLAY: The famous woman poet?
LULA: Poetess! The same!
CLAY: Well, you know so much about me . . . what’s my name?
LULA: Morris the Hyena.
CLAY: The famous woman poet?
LULA: The same. (14)

Here, Clay is constructed as a woman, the same as Lula. Masculinity is thus in jeopardy because it is so fluid and changeable, easily altered through language to its feminine opposite. If, as Baraka suggests, this play is about the construction of manhood, then it is simultaneously about how de rigueur manhood cannot help but reveal its own contrived nature and the anxiety that accompanies such a realization.

The anxious character of black masculinity becomes even more evident in The System of Dante’s Hell, a piece published within one year of Dutchman, and a work which helped define what William J. Harris calls Baraka’s “transitional period” (xxi). The novel rewrites the story of Dante’s descent and travels through the Inferno, exchanging a young, black man for Dante, and the streets of Harlem for the levels of Hell. Near the end of the novel, in the “Level of the Heretics,” the protagonist of this narrative meets a large black woman, Peaches, who makes sexual advances on him. We hear how she “came around and rubbed my tiny pecker with her fingers . . . . I saw the look she gave me and wanted somehow to protest, say, ‘I’m sorry. I fucked up. My mind, is screwy, I don’t know why. I can’t think. I’m sick. I’ve been fucked in the ass. I love books and smells and my own voice. You don’t want me. Please, Please, don’t want me’” (108). The black hero here is defined by his lack of masculinity—his “tiny pecker,” his queer effeminacy, his love of books, and most importantly, his strident desire for Peaches not to want him sexually. Later on, we hear that Peaches grabs his hat—a “blue ‘overseas cap’ they called it in the service. A cunt cap the white boys called it. Peaches had it and was laughing like kids in the playground doing the same thing to some unfortunate fag” (108). Baraka consolidates femininity (his “cunt cap”) and homosexuality (his characterization as an “unfortunate fag”) into a black man who could easily be Clay from Dutchman.
This anxiety about black male identity and integrity becomes metonymically reduced to an anxiety about castration in Baraka’s thought, an anxiety that Baraka privileges as being the key threat to black masculinity. In “American Sexual Reference: Black Male,” he argues that the black man is covered with sex smell, gesture, aura, because, for one reason, the white man has tried to keep the black man hidden the whole time he has been in America . . . . And when the possibility arose that these animals really might be men, then the ballcutting ceremony was trotted out immediately, just to make sure that these would-be men wouldn’t try any funnystuff. (Home 226)

Baraka raises two important issues here: one, black men are equated with their sexuality, their manhood, and two, this sexuality is threatening and leads to castration by white society. Baraka notes the way that white lynching of black men often involved castrating the victim and inserting the castrated genitalia into the dead man’s mouth: “Trying to strangle a man with his own sex organs, his own manhood: that is what white America has always tried to do to the black man—make him swallow his manhood” (Home 230). In fact, the threat of castration surfaces thirteen separate times in a relatively short essay—a fact that underscores Baraka’s obsession with the notion.

As Frantz Fanon argues in Black Skin, White Masks, the myths about violent and virile black sexuality were constructed as a method of anxiety management; this maneuver allowed the white colonial masters to allay their anxieties about black sexuality by providing them with the justifications for brutalizing the colonized “Other.” For Fanon this virile black “imago” constructed by the white hegemony is a phantasm that continually haunts the mind of the white colonizer (169-70). Eric Lott has argued that this anxiety surrounding “the power of the black penis in white American psychic life” was “obsessively reversed in white lynching rituals” in the mid- to late nineteenth century (9).2 We can read Baraka’s comments on black male sexuality, therefore, within a long tradition of interracial sexual politics, from the colonial sixteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. If Baraka’s essay reveals a fear of castration, in other words, there seems to be a good reason for that fear, a reason relating to the history of castration as a form of social and political control.

In the play itself, Lula embodies just this anxiety of castration, for while Baraka casts Lula as the temptress throughout most of the drama, Clay’s last angry monologue marks a change in the power dynamics at work in the play—a change in power that corporealizes the specter of castration. Clay derogates Lula’s obsession with the belly rub as a bogus expression of sexual desire. He lashes out: “The belly rub? You wanted to do the belly rub? Shit, you don’t even know how. You don’t know how. That ol’ dipty-dip shit you do, rolling your ass like an elephant. That’s not my kind of belly rub. Belly rub is not Queens. Belly rub is dark places, with big hats and overcoats held up with one arm. Belly rub hates you” (34). Clay’s deconstruction of Lula’s desire for
the belly rub acts as an assertion of his own power, for Clay knows about the real belly rub, “my kind of belly rub,” and uses this possession of knowledge to denigrate Lula’s posturing and to shore up his own empowered position. Lula, hitherto the temptress and active member of the pair, takes a backseat to Clay, who smoothly riffs, “Sorry, baby, I don’t think we could make it” (37). Clay asserts his own masculinity as superior to Lula’s femininity with his apology, but at just this moment, when Clay refuses Lula’s sexuality and makes the clearest assertion of his masculinity, Lula “plunges” a knife into his chest as he is bending over her—the ultimate castrating metaphor (Sanders 146; Piggford 150). We can find in this symbolic castration a hearkening back to the legend of la belle dame sans merci—the merciless woman—a trope of Western mythology and literature. Keats invokes her in his poem “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” but the figure can be traced through Nimue in Malory’s La Morte D’Arthur to Spencer’s Phaedria in The Faerie Queen to the Queen of Elfland in Sir Walter Scott’s Ballad of Thomas the Rhymner. The figure is generally understood to be a radiant woman who “entices young men into her arms to destroy them” (Anadolu-Okur 108). Baraka undermines this masculinity by having Lula metaphorically castrate Clay—enticing him into her arms—just at the moment of the protagonist’s clearest and most profound articulation of his own masculine identity. If indeed Clay asserts his manhood in Dutchman, then this manhood is always haunted by the specter of black male castration and the anxiety this phantasm propagates.

In fact, one can read Lula as being this anxiety-producing specter haunting Clay even at the very beginning of the play when, like a ghost, she peers in at him through the subway’s window. Before any words are spoken, the stage directions recount that the train Clay is on stops at a station. Clay looks up and “sees a woman’s face staring at him through the window” (4). Clay immediately feels awkward and embarrassed, but when he attempts to return the gaze, “the face would seem to be left behind” (4). The dynamic in this example seems obvious: as Laura Mulvey argues in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Clay becomes the scopophilic object of Lula’s pleasurable gaze. That Clay cannot return the scopophilic gaze places him in the feminized position created by the gender dynamics of this play. Baraka wants to underscore the importance of this encounter by making it a kind of dumb-show before “Scene One” of the play begins, and by having it dominate his character’s dialogue for the first seven pages of a relatively short thirty-eight page play. Clay’s career thus unfolds between this initial effeminizing maneuver and the final scene of castration, so that his character from start to finish appears objectified and effeminized.

Mulvey’s analysis helps us complicate further the gender dynamics operating within this text. While Lula seems to be the object of Clay’s affection and power in the scene of the belly rub, in her very physical sexual advances, and in her sexualized pageant of the night, she also possesses a certain amount of power when she gazes fixedly at Clay through the subway window. According to Mulvey, this gaze places Lula in the dominant, the “masculine” position; yet, the dominant male gaze that Mulvey elaborates on also allows the gazer to identify with the subject as if looking in a mirror—the subject becomes a “narcissistic ideal.” Mulvey argues that in doing so, “curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human
form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world” (17). In this play, therefore, the usual gender dynamic of visual pleasure is inverted; the “determining male gaze [which] projects its fantasy onto the female figure” (19) is flipped on its head, allowing the traditionally coded sexual object “an identification with the active point of view” (31)—and thus to appropriate its agency and power.

Lula’s assertion of agency also manifests itself thematically in the metaphors of performance and playwrighting. Clay believes that Lula is an actress, and says as much several times throughout the play. Clay muses, “You act like you’re on television already” (19), and he repeatedly asks, “You sure you’re not an actress?” (27). With her constant manipulation of language and action, however, Lula appears more like a playwright than an actress. She scripts the actual lines Clay must say: “Now, you say to me, ‘Lula, Lula, why don’t you go to this party with me tonight? Your turn, and let those be your lines’” (16). Later, we perceive exactly how effective Lula’s powerful playwrighting is, for she commands, “Say my name twice before you ask, and no huh’s,” to which Clay robotically responds, “Lula, Lula, why don’t you go to this party with me tonight?” (16). Lula’s power becomes evident in the way she controls language not only for herself, but also for the black man named “Clay” whom she deftly and precisely sculpts: she uses rhetoric to control the world and all of its inhabitants.

In this way, Lula’s assertion of active (male) agency, which appears in her manipulation and scripting of the rhetoric in the play, relates her directly to Baraka himself, for as a playwright, he, like Lula, scripts Clay’s words. Mimicry, as Homi Bhabha suggests, is “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85), and in Dutchman, we see how Lula’s action mimics or alludes to Baraka’s action as the playwright of the work, an empowering act of self-assertion. However, as Bhabha argues, this mimicry also undercuts the naturalness of the hierarchy of power by stressing the way power is and can be performed: Lula’s agency both alludes to the powerful agency that defines the playwright and through this allusion, undermines the ostensibly unassailable location of that power. I shall probe this de-stabilizing aspect of Lula’s power play later, but for now, I’d like to draw attention to the sexual and racial dynamic of Lula’s assertion of power: what is important about it is that this assertion of power can only occur through mimicking a black man.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, white men like T. D. Rice, George Washington Dixon, and Charles Mathews mimicked black men in minstrel shows, singing, dancing, and performing short skits of what they envisioned black culture to signify. Eric Lott’s perceptive study of blackface minstrelsy argues that “[f]igures such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Bayard Taylor were as attracted to blackface performance as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany were repelled by it. From ‘Oh! Susanna’ to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States” (4-5). While the tradition of minstrelsy has little direct bearing on Baraka’s play, exploring Lott’s expansive reading of blackface minstrelsy as a facet of the “white Imaginary” opens up the psychology behind Lula’s metaphoric “black-ing up.” As Lott demonstrates, blackface minstrelsy was a particular manifestation of
a desire to “try on the accents of ‘blackness’” and that this “cross-racial desire . . .
coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and self-protective derision with respect
to black people and their cultural practices” (6). This “love and theft,” I suggest,
undergirds Lula’s appropriation of black masculinity and casts her, surprisingly, as
a blackface minstrel wrestling with the idea of blackness throughout the drama.
Lula’s “belly rub,” and the “song” which accompanies it (30), as well as her black,
hipster language—the uses of words like “groove” to end Scene One or phrases such as “doing the nasty . . . like your ol’ rag-head mammy” (31)—all of these examples
make her an example of Lott’s blackface minstrel. “What is vitally important is that
minstrel performers reproduced not only what they supposed were the racial charac-
teristics of black Americans (minstrelsy’s content) but also what they supposed were
their principal cultural forms: dance, music, verbal play” (101). This line of argumen-
tation, while not applying the burnt cork directly to Lula’s face, shows her metaphor-
ically “blacking up” as a form of adulation and a method of empowerment.

The politics of this mimicry, or minstrel play-acting, become even clearer if we
realize how Lula not only attains agency through aligning herself with black masu-
cline power—with mimicking Baraka’s artistic power—but also maintains this power
and control by asserting a phallic position in her relationship with Clay. Thus, Lula
states: “You tried to make it with your sister when you were ten. But I succeeded a few
weeks ago” (9). To be sure, she immediately recants, admitting that she was lying, but
this suggestion of phallic power casts a serious shadow on Clay’s masculinity. The
idea that she might be able to “make it” with Clay’s sister both questions Clay’s manly
power and constructs an image of herself as powerfully phallic. As Lott notes, “the
minstrel man was the penis” (25) and the white appropriation of blackness was in
some attempts an expropriation, to use Marx’s term, of the power the black penis
implied. As a form of “cultural control,” this element of the minstrel show not only fits
Baraka’s obsession with “castration,” but also illuminates Lula’s maneuver. Lula’s
metaphoric minstrelsy here suggests yet another link with the psychology of min-
strelsy: by inferring phallic power—and black phallic power, at that—she is defining
her own sense of agency. While I am not arguing that Lula is “manly” in any biological
sense, and that I doubt whether she really desires Clay’s sister sexually, I do think it’s
worth recognizing that Lula’s intimation of phallic power not only solidifies her own
agency but also seriously disrupts Clay’s own masculine identity. Recalling the idea
of sexual mimicry developed by Judith Butler, we can thus see how this separation of
the phallic power associated with the penis from the actual physical organ makes “the
phallus (re)produce the spectre of the penis only to enact its vanishing, to reiterate and
exploit its perpetual vanishing as the very occasion of the phallus” (89).

Daniel Boyarin has taken Butler’s dyad between the penis and phallus and
suggested that like Jewish masculinity, black manhood has been denied the phallus
even though black men have been equated with the penis (224). In this way, one might
argue that Lula’s expropriation of power is one of (white) phallic masculinity, and has
little to do with black biology. Yet, the form this empowerment takes—with its hipster
language, black references, and pervasive sensuality—seems to demonstrate, in
opposition to Boyarin’s analysis, how Clay’s achieved manhood near the end of
*Dutchman* collapses phallic power and black virility onto one another to achieve a
form of black phallic power in Clay. In this way, Lula’s appropriation of the phallus is importantly the appropriation of a black phallus. Eric Lott has argued that minstrelsy, like the kind in which Lula engages, allows its artists who “immerse themselves in ‘blackness’ to indulge their felt sense of difference. It was an avenue that allowed them certain underground privileges (and accrued many demerits) which a more legitimate course would not have provided” (51). With this in mind, we see how Lula’s usurpation of the phallic phantasm cashes in on the powerful black sexual sign, but only by simultaneously wresting power away from that phallic “metonymy of presence” that so often defines black masculinity. As with Lula’s role as playwright, her adoption of Clay’s phallus signals her identification yet again with the black masculinity Baraka attempts to construct in Dutchman.

Lula’s usurpation of phallic power not only adds one more agonizing twist to the anxious knot of black male identity, but also fits Baraka’s statement in his essay, “The Revolutionary Theater,” that Clay in Dutchman, Walker in The Slave, and Ray in The Toilet are all “victims,” victims who are the counterparts to the heroes of white dramaturgy (Home 211). While Lula’s agency and power are stifled at the end by Clay’s monstrous monologue, Clay’s sudden assertion of masculine power and the subsequent demolishing of this power through castration effectively collapses heroism on top of victimization: to be a man, in other words, requires building one’s own sense of black virility and, by necessity, its immediate punishment by the white hegemony. By fusing these two effects, Baraka both conjures up and meditates on the idea that this victim’s status may define the strong, militant, black masculinity he was interested in exploring. In this way, as we shall discover, Baraka ironically privileges a masochistic desire as being one of the key features of a strong and independent black man.

Freud defines masochism as comprising a passive attitude towards sexual intercourse or one’s sexual partner. He qualifies this by adding that only in “extreme instances” does sexual gratification actually depend on suffering the physical or mental pain inflicted by the sexual partner (24). Freud’s interpretation rescues the term from its common understanding as an extreme form of self-flagellation or pleasurable and violent self-inflicted pain. Taking his cue from Krafft-Ebing, Freud postulates that masochism is the “most common and the most significant of all perversions” (23) since it is so easily expressed by subjects. More often than not, this form of masochism manifests itself in men who take the passive role in heterosexual relationships: Freud calls it feminine masochism. David Savran notes that in feminine masochism men perform the woman’s role; they embrace the sexual characteristics of femininity, like castration, passivity in sexual intercourse, and birthing metaphors and signs (28). Kaja Silverman develops this notion further by stating that it is a “specifically male pathology, so named because it positions its sufferer as a woman” (189). Clay’s castration and overall characterization make him a perfect feminine masochist. While I am not interested in masochism as a pathology or “perversion,” but simply as a suggestive model, I must agree with Silverman that a male subject, like Clay, cannot engage in feminine masochism without putting a great deal of pressure on his own masculinity.
If Clay seems to act the feminine masochist, however, then Lula also must in some ways mimic this masquerade. In a complex psychological power play, if Clay is victimized, then Lula, the “minstrel” who identifies with this self-hating black man, must also be characterized by his masochism. As the end of the play makes explicit, Lula was exploring Clay’s persona, pushing him to lash out and assert his own masculine power, to embody the iteration of black masculinity Baraka was after and that Lula was performing. We can read the apples Lula speaks of at the beginning of the play as symbols of temptation, for she is tempting Clay throughout to break through the shell of his “Uncle Tom” persona and embrace a dynamic idea of black masculinity, a black masculinity that will necessarily find its voice by defiantly opposing Lula’s white femininity. When Lula finally calls him “Uncle Tom Big Lip,” Clay slaps her and literally finds his own voice, saying, “Now shut up and let me talk” (33). This interchange underscores Lula’s objective, demonstrating that her repeated and subtle machinations were to get Clay to “talk” as a strong black man. This interchange also suggests that Lula’s objective was masochistic, for she desired Clay’s abuse as a provocation for murder.

Lula thus seems to mimic Clay’s masochism, but only to an extent. While both Lula and Clay evince masochistic traits in distinct ways, Lula’s masochism seems much closer to what Freud called “reflexive sadomasochism.” Unlike sadism or masochism understood independently, reflexive sadomasochism effectively bifurcates the subject’s ego between a sadistic, masculine identity and a masochistic, feminine one. Both dominating male and dominated female, active and passive, this reflexive sadomasochist always plays both roles, and in David Savran’s argument, uses “the reflexive position simultaneously to eroticize and to disavow both domination and submission” (189). Although Savran goes on to locate this form of reflexive sadomasochism in the protagonists of Sam Shepard’s drama of the 1960s and 1970s, I think we can see another subtle variation in Lula. Like Jeep, Crow, and Slim from Shepard’s oeuvre, Lula relentlessly reproduces her own subjectivity by seeking out subjugation and abuse from Clay, both verbally and physically. To be sure, Lula’s reproduction of power isn’t being used to shore up a sense of white male “toughness” as Savran suggests Shepard’s male figures do, but one cannot deny Lula’s strategy of empowerment hinges on her being able to take her abuse from Clay “like a man.” In other words, Baraka’s reflexive sadomasochist baits her victim into the role of dominator and uses this developed domination as a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of her empowering masquerade of manhood.

This aspect of Lula’s characterization, however, does not escape Baraka’s ironic treatment, for Lula’s murdering of Clay—her ultimate castrating gesture and sadistic assertion of power—only serves to diminish her own sense of agency. In the concluding moments of *Dutchman*, Lula’s power wavers. After she plunges the knife into Clay’s chest, she pushes his lifeless corpse to the ground and sets up the whole “show” again as another “young Negro of about twenty comes into the coach” (37). While we might expect a re-enactment of Clay’s temptation, Baraka introduces slight differences into this recapitulation. Lula levels a “long slow look” at the young black man who enters the subway car, making him drop his books, but then an “old Negro conductor” enters. Not only does he interrupt the attempted seduction, but he also does it with
"a sort of restrained soft shoe . . . half mumbling the words of some song" (38), an action that recalls minstrel gestures. Then the conductor greets the young man, and when Lula glares after him, he merely tips his hat at her. His soft shoe number and ironic tipping of the hat smack of carnivalesque transgression, a violation of decorum that upends Lula's power. Yet, this carnivalesque performance resonates at numerous levels simultaneously and it is only by coming to grips with the tissue of meanings involved in this concluding coup de théâtre that we can finally see the ways Baraka is staging these complex gender relations. In Mulvey’s terms, Lula's assertive scopophilic gaze is doubly disrupted by the old black man’s actions: it is broken when the conductor enters and skewed when he tips his hat. Lula’s agency comes from her ability to manipulate consciously the power of the gaze, but what Baraka shows in this recapitulation of her initial temptation is that Lula’s gaze has been thwarted. Even as Lula relinquishes her black masculine identification and embraces the white and feminine figure of temptation again, the conductor highlights the irony of Lula’s character: his disruptive, transgressive “blackness,” set next to Lula’s impotent whiteness, brings out in relief how Lula is not as assertive as she was when she mimicked Clay, when she metaphorically “blacked up.”

The whiteness that ironically fails to police its own power paradigm illuminates another aspect of Baraka’s staged black masculinity. The conductor’s action, a version of the black minstrel figure of Jim Crow, uses the white Imaginary’s construction of black culture through minstrel caricature in order to subvert that same white imagination: the conductor “jumps Jim Crow,” but his doing so disrupts Lula’s imminent seduction of another young black man on the train. In this way, Baraka begins to stage an alternative to the self-annihilating character of macho black nationalism. The black conductor dismisses entertaining the desire for the “belly rub,” dismisses playing into the phallic equation of blackness and manhood that Fanon stated so famously, and instead consciously embraces theemasculating attendant on performing a minstrel caricature. A shadowy doppelganger of the desperately self-hating Clay, Baraka’s conductor finds real disruptive agency in performing a disenfranchising set piece, and in this way begins to question the gender assumptions that lay at the foundation of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. As this conductor’s actions suggest, perhaps real power rests in consciously and meticulously controlling the performance of oneself and finding real strength in balancing between the culturally-conditioned dialectic of “male” and “female” performance.

Still, for all of the tantalizing possibilities Baraka raises about the nature of gender assumptions, this play is overwhelmingly interested in staging the tragedy of a particular iteration of black and white gender dynamics, although the playwright’s enticing feints in the direction of other gendered understandings may change the register of this “tragedy.” In other words, the black masculinity that dominates the scene finds its power in the violence and aggression of its articulation—in its alarming agency when Clay finally loses his temper or when Lula erotically prods her prey into action. Yet, as both of these examples make clear, the black masculinity at stake here is a damaging, destructive re-staging of the citational predecessor, while the white femininity in play here, by eroticizing and emulating this form of black masculinity,
can only relentlessly rehearse a pattern of disempowering enervation. In other words, while Wagner’s Dutchman is doomed to sail the seas until he can find the love of a woman, Baraka’s Dutchman is doomed to attempt to pierce the Veil that Du Bois made so famous. Moreover, this “new” Dutchman must attempt to achieve empowerment even as he unconsciously desires a victimized heroism at the hands of a white “minstrel” culture that can only stage over and over again how contingent its paradigm of power really is. I do not mean to suggest that there is a facile solution to this tangled knot of factors, but only to observe that perhaps the real tragedy of this notion of black masculinity that Baraka advanced in 1964 and that has been re-articulated, according to Angela Davis, in the gangsta rap and hip-hop of today, is the fact that it dooms itself through its inability to conceptualize a more lenient, fraternal form of male interaction to wander ceaselessly the psychological seas of self-loathing.

NOTES

1. Black women activists living through and writing about the Black Arts Movement have noted the way this black masculinity necessarily degraded black women. Angela Y. Davis states: “My relationship to the particular nationalism I embraced was rooted in political practice. The vortex of my practice was always the progressive, politicized Black community—though I frequently questioned my place as a Black woman in that community, even in the absence of a vocabulary with which to pose the relevant questions.” See “Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties” in Black Popular Culture (320). Davis reveals that the black community that was pushing for cultural nationalism, a community that she identified with and worked for, was so defined around the black male that she felt ostracized or “othered.” Kobena Mercer has recently reiterated this opinion of the Black Arts Movement, arguing that movements like this “sought to clear the ground for the cultural reconstruction of the black subject—but because of the masculinist form this took, it was done at the expense of black women, gays and lesbians.” See Mercer’s Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies (139).

2. See also Robyn Wiegman’s reading of black lynching in American Anatomies as “the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return” (81).

3. Fredric Jameson makes a similar argument in his seminal work, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism concerning Lacan’s idea of schizophrenia. He writes: “I have found Lacan’s account of schizophrenia useful here not because I have any way of knowing whether it has clinical accuracy but chiefly because—as description rather than diagnosis—it seems to me to offer a suggestive aesthetic model” (26).

4. I am thinking here specifically of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World and Peter Stallybrass’ and Allon White’s development of the carnivalesque in their The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.

WORKS CITED


Callaloo