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Research Article



Out of the Ordinary: The Artistic Rebellion and Resistance in Amiri Baraka's Tales

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Abstract

This paper embarks on an exploratory journey into the extraordinary world of Amiri Baraka, who is recognized for his short stories' books such as *Tales of the Out & the Gone* (2007) and *Tales* (1967). The primary objective of this study is to bring out the different levels of narratives and artistic expression used by Baraka, which show how he resists normality through art that defies convention. The method employed here includes closely reading and analyzing what Baraka has written with a view to reflecting rebellion, resistance as well as artistic innovation basing on different critical perspectives. Moreover, it also looks at wide range sources which have influenced his writing style and thematic concerns including bebop, free jazz, rhythm blues and science fiction among others. Therefore, its aim is to enhance understanding about literary achievements

made by Baraka besides their socio-political implications. However, this article goes beyond just interpreting literature because it provides an outlook on socio-cultural environment mirrored in these works while at the same time criticizing them too. The ultimate intention of this study is not only appreciation but also recognition for 'Out' and 'Gone' things according to Baraka since they are exceptional and significant thereby being able to challenge or defy social norms in any way possible.

Keywords: Artistic Innovation, Avant-garde, Free Jazz, Rhythm and Blues, Science Fiction, The Out and the Gone

Introduction:

Once the reader steps into the extraordinary world of Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), where the ordinary is irrelevant, and limitless artistic expression prevails, numerous forms of resistance are revealed. Both the collections of stories, *Tales of the Out & the Gone* (2007) and *Tales* (1967) are peculiar narratives of resistance influenced by a bold combination of several forms of expression, such as the disruptive notes of bebop and free jazz, the revolutionary potential of rhythm and blues, and the otherworldly realm of science fiction. In addition to the individual forms of expression in Baraka's works, one can also consider more general implications for society and politics, which are simultaneously represented and countered in his narratives. The 'Out' and the 'Gone', representing the extraordinary and profound, are not just themes in Baraka's work, but a philosophy for challenging societal conventions. This exploration goes beyond literary analysis, highlighting the transformative power of art and its potential to effect radical change. In essence, this journey serves as a tribute to Baraka's significant contributions to American literature and to the broader discourse on artistic rebellion and resistance.

Baraka describes the Out in the opening pages of his 2007 short story compilation entitled *Tales of the Out & the Gone* as "out of the ordinary," the Gone as a journey "even farther 'Out,' crazier, wilder, deeper" (10,12). This conceptual structure serves as a flame for Baraka's unyielding desire to design a medium that matches the inventiveness of bebop as well as free jazz. The Out and the Gone, serving as a desire to burst outside of traditional airports, turn into figurative destinations out of which Baraka's creativity blossoms, providing a sort of space that 'makes do' and providing an essential resistance against all that racism encloses.

In *Tales 1967*, Baraka finds a literary parallel for his experience of the Out and the Gone. These works are an example of Baraka's commitment to pushing artistic boundaries while subtly critiquing the socio-political landscape, especially around race and class. This book has 16 short stories that paint humans trying to live beyond what is considered normal or average life "out." One of them is "Screamers" which shows how rhythm & blues can be combined with revolt so as to mirror communities' feelings that only through embracing cacophonous social disarray can they find solace in resisting it. Lynn Hope's saxophone acts like a metaphor for revolution hence showing music's transforming power when used as a weapon against oppression. In "Answers in Progress" sci-fi impact is clearly seen where space men search for Art Blakey records thereby breaking free from traditional story telling limits. What this implies is that Baraka ventures into

theoretical realms so as to challenge new ideas which signify wider battlefields against societal norms.

The poem "In Memory of Radio" from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) describes how Baraka's initial experience with radio shaped his artistic attitude. The mystical and elusive character Lamont Cranston, also known as The Shadow, represents the undiscovered land brought about by radio. This serves as a symbol for the transformative power of art which changes Baraka's view and makes him question social norms through his own artistic expression. Science fiction poses another problem for Baraka because it is set in future times and tells imaginative stories. "Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke" offer different realities to him through their works (Harris 483). The distinction between reality and non-reality becomes unclear when space travelers are sent on a quest for Art Blakey records in the short story "Answers in Progress". In this sense, science fiction serves as a tool for unconventional channels of artistic expression that go beyond what is considered normal, according to Baraka's worldview.

Tales of the Out & the Gone and *Tales* 1967 serve as canvases on which Baraka blends the various inspirations that have shaped his artistic career to create stories that are thought-provoking, provocative, and transcendent. In the genre of rhythm and blues, where the unusual and revolutionary strains of music become a powerful force for societal change, Baraka's quest for the Out and the Gone finds echo. In *Tales* 1967, Baraka's short tale "Screamers" eloquently depicts the transformational impact of rhythm and blues in Newark, where saxophonists Jay McNeely and Lynn Hope in particular create a unique sound revolt among honkers. Jay McNeely defies convention by proposing a social structure for the impoverished that is similar to what Bird and Dizzy proposed for the middle class. Baraka captures this defiance perfectly when he calls attention to the dada art produced inside the framework of rhythm and blues, calling the Mona Lisa with the mustache on McNeely's back 'crude yet simple.'

The best example is in the same story, where Lynn Hope appears as a character who does much more than just make art: He becomes an instigator of rebellion. Hope manages to gather hundreds of young Blacks on the streets against the police, playing a single disturbing note. For Baraka, this mix of music and revolt, this wild scream, is the best type of revolution. "Hucklebucking into the fallen capital" resonates a symbolic expression that gives relief from an outpouring of tyranny (Jones, *Tales* 79). Resonating with Baraka's life-long dedication to the Out and the Gone, the stories here in *Tales of the Out & the Gone* are a monument to the belief that radical art can serve as the conduit of uncommon resistance.

Baraka's artistic journey still unfolds before the reader as a convoluted trek into the pages of *Tales of the Out & the Gone* and *Tales* 1967, with inspirations of the avant-garde, the unorthodox, and the rebellious. His ability to mix these inspirations is evidence of his will to deliver work that would not conform and be placed in any classical compartment. Baraka's early exposure to radio and science fiction and fantasy films helped shape his later avant-garde works and would also influence his later work greatly. Baraka reflects on the godlike esteem accorded to radio crime-drama characters such as Lamont Cranston, aka "The Shadow," in "In Memory of Radio," from *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. The early curiosity of figures with their hypnotic powers and dual identities had left a mark of probing his potential investigative area in

the future on Baraka. He learned how to pretend from the radio but it did not give him the prophetic vision he was looking for. He does not understand all the lessons from radio until much later in his life, that evil has to be done away with, and he leaves that view into his adulthood. The other major influence during Baraka's childhood is that of science fiction, which gives a new dimension to his thought concerning the world.

Baraka imbibed from all these futuristic writings, from writers like Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke, making them the canons of his own speculative fiction. Baraka was able to bring science fiction into Black culture, as in his short story "Answers in Progress," written in *Tales* 1967, with spacemen looking for Art Blakey records, and "Heathen Technology at the End of the Twentieth Century," where people are "dismetaphored" by higher powers (Harris 484). These are the stories through which societal oppression, control, and the pursuit of emancipation can be scrutinized, and these are themes that are found relevant to most of Baraka's works.

The allure of Hollywood-dominated commercial fantasy films of the 1950s gives extra reason for Baraka's artistry. His play *Dutchman* (1964), based on the short story "Conrad Loomis & the Clothes Ray" in *Tales of the Out & the Gone* and Albert Lewin's *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951), also thrives on the symbolic and surreal features that each film carries. Baraka sketches out fanciful storylines to probe issues of economic greed, which he ultimately took to the bank with indictments of social systems and conventions. Honors on John Coltrane, the avant-garde musician who showed how to "murder the popular song" and tear down flimsy Western traditions in *Black Music* (Jones 174). Baraka was informed by Coltrane in ways that went far beyond destruction; he was a catalyst for the creation of new, more intricate forms of expression. Considerable attention is given to Thelonious Monk's influence, particularly in the short story "A Monk Story" in *Tales of the Out & the Gone* which stresses the point of intersection of avant-garde and black culture. As Robin Kelley rightly pointed out, "Monk embraced these elements in his own playing and exaggerated them" (4). Baraka could have probably shifted between his black and avant-garde hat because Monk was able to embrace swing music's avant-garde elements.

In *Tales of the Out & the Gone*, the 1998 short story "Conrad Loomis & the Clothes Ray" voices the same allusion to the 1951 motion picture *The Man in the White Suit*, when Baraka shows his critical study of social structures and capitalist greed are indefinitely shaped by such fantasy films. It seems that Baraka was involved with films of a fantastic orientation that served as a vehicle for these concepts, which are an amalgam of capitalist critique and social commentary. Thus, in "Conrad Loomis & the Clothes Ray", the reader finds a character devising clothing out of light; yet the plot truly thickens when the main character of the film is forewarned of how capital, with its stifling power, is closing off the explosion of this creative, world-altering invention. These two stories are more of a metaphor for how capitalism constraints work in suppressing creativity and progress. In these stories, Baraka uses symbols to make a mediatory mark between the socio-economic background and the limiting factors that come as a result of the existing power systems; he bridges imagination with reality.

As one delves further into Baraka's artistic endeavors, especially *Tales* 1967, one begins to grasp the nature of the relationship among racial, ethnic, and economic identities as they are

expressed in his works. Baraka's story is so densely packed with twists that reflect the confrontations and clashes involved in the experience of black migrants becoming urban working-class citizens. Louise McGhee is a middle-class, college-educated mother who plays her part within the complexities that exist as the dynamics of identity in this symbolic short story, "Uncle Tom's Cabin: Alternate Ending" in *Tales* 1967. She epitomizes the double task of maintaining white middle-class ideals and combating racism simultaneously. Behavior and speech, however, portray a struggle that is cut across racial lines, since these more subtly reveal the complex connections between Miss Columbe's Italian American "sangwich," Miss Davises' black southern "sammich," and Miss Orbach's unknown Newark Jewish version. This linguistic paradox serves as a sign for the greater struggles that shape the experience of the urban working class.

The short story "Uncle Tom's Cabin: Alternate Ending" finds a microcosm of the social struggle in the detailed variation of the middle-class pronunciation. In that, the fact that Louise McGhee stands firmly on virtues of white middle class pronunciation while standing against racism on behalf of her son brings out the complexity of the fight against oppression. The struggles over language between "sammich" and "sangwich" become emblematic of the larger struggles involving identities related to race, ethnicity, and class:

“Sangwich, my Christ. That's worse than sammich. Though you better not let me hear you saying sammich either...like those Davises.”

“I don't say sammich, mamma.”

“What's the word then?”

“Sandwich” (Jones, *Tales* 39).

Baraka's examination of identity is made all the more complex by the fact that the passage intimates the presence of Italians and Jews in Newark. The most subtle of the shifting identifications of the city working class is metaphorically equivalent to a confrontation of the black experience in the South against the Italian-American dialect and a buried Jewish representation of Newark.

The dialogue between Louise McGhee and her son serves as an example of how subtle speech patterns might illuminate the complex process of identity construction in the sociocultural context of Newark. Through the informal definition the Italian American vernacular has for "sangwich" and the way it contrasts with the black "sammich," Baraka reveals layers of cross-cultural dialogue and tension. He does create a narrative that moves beyond just an illustrative exposition of language differences into a reflection on his own life and the intricacies of the many populations in Newark. What it results in, in turn, is an incisive and expressive description of the struggle and intermingling of racial and cultural identities in which the important aspects of black migrants in transition to the urban working class come out very strongly. This dynamism, as described in the narrative of Baraka, is in fact only a microcosm of the much larger socio-political framework within which identity markers have been used as instruments of negotiation and affirmation. It is the complexity of such intersections of racial, ethnic, and class identities that really brings alive the subtle dance between assimilation and resistance, ultimately creating quite a rich array for Baraka to explore within the context of his general subject of the out and the gone.

Baraka's base was broad and unusual, extending from the immersive tales of radio—where the mysterious Lamont Cranston of *The Shadow* excited early inklings about political poetry—to the visionary vistas of science fiction, which offered alternate glasses for looking at the world. As revealed in the story "Screamers," rhythm and blues launched as a sound revolt, a tool through which a people found a tool of resistance against tyranny. Even *Dutchman*, the apparently trite 1950s commercial fantasy movie, was turned to challenge any comfortable ideas of high art. Among these unlikely sources, progressive bebop and free jazz were to evolve as ovens of artistic experiment. Figures like John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk inspired him and would encourage Baraka to take apart traditional genres and pile up his work with a heady brew of linguistic inventiveness. These were the two major sources: Coltrane in his bold subversion of Western musical traditions and Monk in his infusion of avant-garde elements into traditional jazz, both of which introduced more subtle and developed creative expression.

The result of Baraka's search of avant-garde movements and of diverse creative genres is high bebop and free jazz. Figures like John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk come to the fore as symbols of hope in Baraka's search for the Out and the Gone. At the bottom of all that Baraka finds there is the message that Coltrane teaches how to make destruction of popular song and that there should be destruction of weak Western traditions. And therein, perhaps, lies the real beauty of Coltrane's philosophy: it shows how destruction is a way to the real. While being of the avant-garde scene, the pianist of the Bebop revolution, Monk, now gains close identification with Baraka. Monk's personal style, which incorporates avant-garde elements in swing, allows Baraka to negotiate the complexities of being black and avant-garde simultaneously. In the short fiction "A Monk Story," from *Tales of the Out & the Gone*, Baraka has a post-mortem chat with Monk. For him, this meeting was a watershed moment in which Monk's sharp melodies and rhythms enable Baraka's own journey through phrasing, grammar, and metaphor. Actually, *Black Music* (1968) even suggested that Monk added "deepness and musical completeness" to Baraka's work (Jones 39). Baraka is a testament to the symbiotic link of word music complexity in Baraka, inspired by Monk, who was out and gone.

Outness, according to Baraka, is saying "no" to the mainstream. That stance is encapsulated in a poignant line from "The Author's Introduction": "Sartre said if you say something's wrong in the world and you don't know what it is, that's art. On the other hand, if you say something's wrong in the world and you do know what it is, that's social protest. At least that's what our enemies say. Fuck them!" (Baraka, *Tales of the Out* 13). This final statement is quintessential Baraka – vile language, perfect timing, and tremendous resistance. Baraka is famous not just for the clarity for which he articulates his thoughts but for his brave refusal to kowtow to culture convention and capital, never hesitant to sound a loud "No!"

In reality, Baraka's is a bold form of resistance that unsatisfactorily retreats from adherence and existing customs. His pioneering spirit, with influences ranging from science fiction to rhythm and blues, at the apex of a refined bebop and free jazz, merges into a gleaming unity. Monk's influence is a rich fusion of music and speech, a deep, comprehensive form of artistic reflection. Amiri Baraka's exploration of the linguistic complexity held within the word "sammich," "sangwich," and "sandwich" goes a long way in demystifying the layered fabric of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic identity that forms his mottled resistance by art. Following an

inquiry into the journey of Amiri Baraka, this paper suggests that art, at its utmost form of expression, is the force behind societal change. Baraka's uncompromising resistance to flow, ability to negotiate extremes of expression, and unwavering commitment to the out and gone are thus testimonies of the power of transformation in art. In that domain of resistance through artistic expressions, Baraka finally not only finds his voice but also appeals to other people to resist the status quo, to level with societal injustices, and finally look forward to a world where art will have to bring a radical change in society. In Baraka's hands, the out and the gone would develop not merely as creative themes but as a philosophy-the cry to break away from the normal, embrace the extraordinary, and introduce a fresh era of society consciousness.

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