

Blues People: Amiri Baraka as a Social Theorist

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The main objective for my talk today is to express my respect and admiration for Amiri Baraka as a social theorist, for Baraka's insights in *Blues People* on the relationships among music, race, politics, and identity remain fresh today despite the passage of forty-one years since its publication. I assign portions of this book in virtually every course I teach to remind my students that cultural studies and critical race theory didn't begin in the academy, but in twentieth century African American thought and intellectual practice from Du Bois to Garvey, Locke, Ellington, Ellison, and Baraka. *Blues People* is a brilliant and path-breaking book, not because all of its factual information is correct, or because all of its interpretive perspectives are unassailable, but because of the sheer audacity, scope, and originality of its interpretive perspective.

I am calling Amiri Baraka a social theorist because *Blues People* is defined by a set of macro-sociological questions and hypotheses that serve to frame its narrative trajectory and because Baraka himself begins the book by asking the reader to take it as "a strictly *theoretical* endeavor" which raises more questions than it answers.¹ I'd like to explore some of the key questions and hypotheses Baraka uses to frame *Blues People* and their resonance with contemporary issues in social theory and African American studies. Baraka's overriding interest is in:

1. The path the slave took to citizenship

He introduces this theme by saying (with echoes from the *Souls of Black Folk*:) “The Negro as slave is one thing. The Negro as American is quite another. But the *path* the slave took to ‘citizenship’ is what I want to look at. (ix). So already the reader notes that the subject of the book is not something static, but rather about a process, the transition of African Americans from property to citizens, from object to subject. Music will be the analogy through which he makes his case and his most central assumption is that something about the historical path from slave to citizen can be especially revealed through music.

In his words:

...if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro’s existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, *i.e.* about society as a whole.” (ix-x).

He doesn’t present an argument for this presumption, but then neither does the field of ethnomusicology, which also shares this presumption. Rather, he counts on the intuitive plausibility of this relationship and his first hand experience and knowledge that the blues have “a certain *weight* in the psyches of its inventors (x).”

2. Synthesis and Syncretism

The second through fourth chapters of *Blues People*, (entitled: The Negro as Property, African Slaves/American Slaves, and Afro-Christian Music and Religion) are concerned with the transformation of Africans into African Americans, that is the larger process of cultural encounter and synthesis into a distinctly African American cultural practice. How did Africans of various ethnic origins become American Negroes, he wonders, and convinces his reader of the immediate relevance of the question with a

cogent one-liner: “Undoubtedly, none of the African prisoners broke out into St. James Infirmary the minute the first of them was herded off the ship.” This leads to his prime historical hypothesis, that: “The beginning of the blues is the beginning of the American Negro” (xii).

Baraka’s analysis of African retentions in African American music and culture, shows a deep engagement with Herskovits’s *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), the book that put to rest the idea that Africans arrived in the U.S. without culture and without history. Baraka cites many of Herskovits’s examples of African retentions in black religious, musical, and daily life that can arguably be said to emanate from Dahomean and Yoruba culture. As critics have pointed out (Apter 1991). Herskovits overemphasized Dahomey and Yorubaland, leaving out the many cultural continuities from the BaKongo and Mande cultural areas that more recent scholarship have brought to light. Yet more important than the specifics of particular African retentions in Baraka’s analysis is his creative application of Herskovits concept of syncretism, and the Marxian concept of the dialectic. From Herskovits and anthropology comes the idea that superficially European forms can mask a deeper African cultural substance (p. 42), and from Hegel and Marx the idea of a dialectical synthesis in which the encounter of opposing forces will yield something “that must contain both ideas” (9). Throughout *Blues People* Baraka applies these two concepts to the history of black music to yield spectacularly insightful comments on the meaning and significance of the music.

Take, for example, his suggestion that Emancipation would “dictate the path the blues would take” (50-51). In the path from slave to citizen, there is no more important point in Baraka’s account than emancipation. Emancipation marked the moment when

African Americans were “isolated” from mainstream American society by virtue of no longer having an economic role and began to erect a “separate meta-society,” whose failing was the attempt of elites to emulate white society. Says Baraka, "What is so often forgotten in any discussion of the Negro's 'place' in American society is the fact that it was only as a slave that he really had one" (55). This isolation and separation is a crucial theme in remainder of the text, for Baraka argues that it is in this cultural separation post slavery that the “Negro's music lost a great many of the more superficial forms it had borrowed from the white man, and the forms that we recognize now as blues began to appear" (59). This assertion, serves to ground Baraka’s later arguments about blues and separation as the bedrock of African American cultural and musical authenticity, but what is so often missed in criticisms of Baraka’s essentialism in this regard, is that the beginning of the blues for Baraka, is already a moment of cultural synthesis, a moment that is defined by the reaction of Africans from different ethnic groups to the circumstances of white racism and oppression in America. As Baraka famously intoned, that moment when the man in the field looked up and “shouted ‘Oh Ahm tired a dis mess’... you can be sure he was an American.” (xii).

On re-reading *Blues People*, it is consequently not his essentialism that stands out to me, but the complexity with which he describes the relationship between African America and the white cultural mainstream, indeed, what seems to be his obsession with exposing the multiple layers of paradox and contradiction in American society, and the dynamic historical processes that sustain a recurring set of contradictions. This to me is at the core of his idea of the changing same. It does not matter really, in my opinion, that recent historical research into the 12 bar blues form has suggested that the musical form

did not become regularized and talked about as a genre until the turn of the 20th century, Baraka's point is macro-historical and theoretical: that the historical moment of emancipation and the forced entry of the formerly enslaved into the market economy, posed new problems and created new conditions which had an effect on music making in African America and well as on African American subjectivity itself. This is a position somewhat like Foucault's in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, which was first published six years later, in 1969.

The reason that Baraka always seems to be cast as an essentialist in *Blues People*, it seems to me, is because of his deeper turn to cultural nationalism and political activism *after* the book was written. What I'm interested in here are those moments in the text that reveal a tension between essentialism and a more social constructionist basis of black solidarity.

Yet, it is also true that there is a tendency towards social determinism in *Blues People*--that is, a predilection to map sociological variables to ethnic consciousness in too rigid a fashion. This is what most dates the text in relationship to current thinking in critical race theory and social constructionism. This tendency toward social determinism is particularly obvious in Baraka's discussion of class, which, to me, is where his argument is most undermined by essentialism. Here middle-classness is the ultimate marker of cultural inauthenticity, because the black middle class, according to Baraka dedicated itself to assimilation. As Baraka famously puts it: "The black middle class, from its inception (possibly ten seconds after the first Africans were herded off the boat) has formed almost exclusively around the proposition that it is better not to be black in a

country where being black is a liability" (123). There is no group that takes greater criticism in the text, not even white hipsters, or Bix Beiderbecke.

Baraka's apparent desire to purge himself of the middle class ambitions of his own upbringing seems to rigidify his argument about class in ways that do not do justice to the subtlety of the rest of his argument. Ralph Ellison seized on this weakness unmercifully to trivialize Baraka's larger argument:

"One would get the impression that there was a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro's preference in music. But what are we to say of a white-skinned Negro with brown freckles who owns sixteen oil wells sunk in a piece of Texas land once farmed by his ex-slave parents who were a blue-eyed, white-skinned, red headed (kinky) Negro woman from Virginia and a blue-gummed, black-skinned, curly-haired Negro male from Mississippi, and who not only sang bass in a Holy Roller church, played the market and voted Republican but collected blues recordings and was a walking depository of blues tradition? Jones's theory no more allows for the existence of such a Negro than it allows for himself; but that 'concord of sensibilities' which has been defined as the meaning of culture, allows for much more variety than Jones would admit." Ellison, 1964, *Shadow and Act*

Ellison was right to point out that people are more than the sum of their sociological categories, but misses Baraka's point entirely when he castigates him for not treating blues first as poetry, ritual, and art.

Baraka's main theoretical contribution in *Blues People* is precisely his sustained insistence that to get to the bottom of the significance of the blues it is not sufficient to treat music as simply an art form to be discussed in isolation from everyday life, but rather, he insists, music must be treated as a cultural practice that actively mediates among art, society and the individual. Aesthetics in this perspective are embedded in

larger cultural and historical processes, a position that is more anthropological than that of his contemporaries.

Ellison's second major criticism is that Baraka, by emphasizing separation, fails to account for the "the intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to the larger society." (253), or expressed in another manner by Jerry Watts, that Baraka's account does not sufficiently consider the impact of African American music on the mainstream white culture. One gets the idea from these criticisms that Baraka did not share Ellison's opinion that "it would be impossible to pinpoint the time when they (African Americans) were not shaping what Jones calls the mainstream of America music (Watts 2001). Yet there are many passages in *Blues People* that do consider the impact of black music on white America, and I find these among the most useful passages in getting my white students to think more deeply about their own relationships to black music.

Baraka's discussion of white minstrelsy suggests that just as black music is an important window into the consciousness of African America, so white musical performance of black music is an important window into how the "white man's concept of the Negro (Baraka 1963: 83)" changed over time. In one of the most frequently quoted passages in the book, Baraka considers the complexity of the cultural situation embedded in white minstrel performances of the cakewalk:

"If the cakewalk is a Negro dance caricaturing certain white customs, what is that dance when, say, a white theater company attempts to satirize it as a Negro dance? I find the idea of white minstrels in blackface satirizing a dance satirizing themselves a remarkable kind of irony--which, I suppose, is the whole point of minstrel shows." (86)

Baraka's incisiveness in passages like these not only lays bare the parody within a parody in white minstrelsy, but implicitly raises the larger question of what other white

misunderstandings of African American cultural performances may be embedded in mainstream American culture.

Another often quoted passage compares the alienation of black and white bebop musicians.

"The white beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The important idea here is that the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice. But the young Negro musician of the forties began to realize that merely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist."

A less often mentioned passage in *Blues People* suggests that the "cultural breakdown" (149) represented in the phenomenon of white musicians crossing the color line "reflected not so much the white American's increased understanding of the Negro, but rather the fact that the Negro had created a music that offered such a profound reflection of America that it could attract white Americans to want to play it or listen to it for exactly that reason" (149). This is not a perspective that is not cognizant of the impact of African America on white America, but one that views alienation as the ultimate wellspring of art.

Indeed, when Baraka suggests, that the main difference between black and white musicians is one of attitude or stance, he arrives at a point that can be said to have anticipated a social constructionist view of identity. Differences in attitude, as he's using it, could just as well be ascribed to the social experience of living as a black person under racism, as to a biological view of race. Baraka in *Blues People* is always concerned with what processes made people the way they are.

The alienated white musician at this historical moment in Baraka's thinking is a potential ally to the black musician who "took his alienation and made from it high art" (231). Bebop is the blues transformed to fit the needs of a "modern urban black American" who had now achieved "fluency with some of the canons of formal Western nonconformity"—an by so doing erected what he calls "a meta-culture" as isolated as their grandparents"(201). If white American popular culture remains a "shoddy cornucopia" at the end of *Blues People* it is not because as Ellison suggests, that Baraka has severed the "intricate network of connections" between black and white by performing "a delicate brain surgery with a switch-blade" (253), but because of his view of art and alienation. He had not as yet separated himself from the bohemian world he had enjoyed in the Greenwich Village of fifties, and had yet to embark on the artistic and political voyage that was to include the Black Arts Repertory Theater Theater/School, the Committee for a Unified Newark, and the Congress of Afrikan Peoples.

Conclusion

It has been my aim to explain why I have a profound respect for Amiri Baraka as a social theorist. The speculative history of African American music that he presented in *Blues People* in 1963 successfully articulated a number of crucial issues that foreshadow recent work cultural studies, poststructuralism, anthropology and ethnomusicology. Yet Baraka wrote this book, not with the institutional support of a university and the goal of a Ph.D., but with the help of an advance from William Morrow and a voracious and self-motivated intellect. That Baraka could distill the conceptual core of the academic literature around him and articulate a series of incisive hypotheses that continue to stimulate debate on the nature of black music and culture some forty years after its

publication is a rare and remarkable thing. That he did not resolve the ever present questions of essentialism and social determinism, or frame them in quite the well-documented way that is possible now, after thirty years' presence of African American studies in the academy, does not, in any way diminish its brilliance.

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¹ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America (I)* (New York: William Morrow, 1963)