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The Song, For Real!

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the primacy of the song (both as content and form) in Amiri Baraka's poetics and limits its discussion to the collection entitled, *Funk Lore* (1996) and the album *Real Song* (1994) in dialogue with each other. In the context of the theories that value sound and music in terms of their cultural and historical rootedness, Baraka's "funk lore" means collective knowledge and behavior that incorporates body and kinetics. Baraka breaks the Western forms of reading and writing with his insistence on musicality, orality and performance, which are more than personal choices—the most distinctive of African American expressions. In his omniverse, the soundless ghosts represent the destructive force, whereas the ever-resisting creative spirit is represented by sound, voice, music and funk.

Keywords

Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore*, *Real Song*, African American Music, Cultural Sounds, Song and Resistance

Şarkının Ta Kendisi!

Öz

Bu makale Amiri Baraka'nın şiir anlayışında şarkıya (hem içerik hem de biçim anlamında) verilen önemi vurgulamaktadır. Makale, Baraka'nın şiir kitabı *Funk Lore* (1996) ile albüm olarak

kaydettiği *Real Song* (1994) üzerinde odaklanmaktadır. Ses ve müziği kültür ve tarihselliklerine göre değerlendiren kuramlar çerçevesinde incelendiğinde Baraka'nın "funk lore"/"funk bilgisi" kavramı, bedeni ve hareketi içeren toplumsal dağarcık ve davranış biçimleri anlamına gelmektedir. Şair müzikselliği, sözlü geleneği ve performansı şiire katarak Batı geleneğinin okuma ve yazma kalıplarını kırmaktadır. Bu özellikler kişisel olmanın ötesinde, en çarpıcı Afrikalı Amerikalı ifade biçimleridir. Baraka'nın şiir evreninde yıkıcı gücü sessiz hayaletler temsil ederken, buna sürekli direnen yaratıcı ruhu ise ses, müzik ve funk temsil etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore*, *Real Song*, Afrikalı Amerikalı Müziği, Ses-Kültür İlişkisi, Şarkı ve Direniş

It is Nature's voice in Cosmo-Sound

It is the everything and the subtle nothing

Of Omni-All

It is the ever quickening-presence of the Living Spirit

It is the Cosmo-bridge to the Dark Unknown Eternal.

—"The Outer Darkness," Sun Ra

Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political.

—"Listening," Jacques Attali

…starting from the idea of what type of sound I want to produce…

—"How to Truly Listen" Evelyn Glennie

This article attempts to explore Amiri Baraka's cosmology of "Funk Lore" as a broader signifier of Baraka's omniverse.[1] *Funk Lore* is the title of the collection of his poems published in 1996, but the term

seems to have a reference beyond that particular volume. Baraka's own primary research and scholarship of Black music, which later evolved into one of the early examples of jazz criticism, was preceded by W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in the chapter entitled, "The Sorrow Songs." Published in 1963, *Blues People*, which is academic scholarship by the token of its documentation and the use of formal language, was inspired by his professor Sterling Brown's approach to African American music as history, as Baraka tells on many occasions. Following *Blues People*, Baraka collected his commentaries, liner notes and essays on the music that he listened to in *Black Music* (1967). Baraka's insight is distinguishable in jazz/music criticism in that he is the earliest witness to see Black music as an evolving tradition, and articulate the unfolding of this musical continuity as it travelled from Africa to America, from the delta to the city, with many other nuances, conforming to the living conditions of the poor working-class people who made it. The underlying argument in *Blues People*, and later articulated in the essay entitled "The Changing Same," is that "The Negro's music changed as he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or (and this is equally important) *consistent attitudes within changed contexts*" (*Blues People* 153).

Since the 1970s, there has been a proliferation in self-conscious theorization of sound, reconsidering previous theoretical scholarship, and addressing cultural phenomena, ranging from Native American pow-wows to reggae from new perspectives.[2] In Murray Schafer's words, world's musical storehouse reveals the ways in which power operates: "History is a songbook for anyone who would listen to it… The world sings itself to death and back to life" (30). The term "soundscape" was introduced to mean a literal and/or metaphorical place defined by sounds. Such thinking about music and sound signify a general recognition and affirmation of sound as culturally and historically loaded and coded. The capacity of sound to produce metaphorical place and generate resources for resistance through an audience or an interpretive community is an issue to consider in the context where sounds are dislocated. As Christopher Winks states, "Black diasporic music communicates the wail of a specific historical experience: enslavement, struggle, and the arduous task of building pathways to a freedom to come" (191). Paul Gilroy points at the same collective memory that is animated by music, which "was cultural work that incorporated defensive and affirmative elements: working

over and working through the memories of slavery and colonialism, past sufferings and contemporary resistances so that they could provide resources for interpreting the present and imagining a better future…" (388).

Comparing sonic and visual senses, the sound artist Julian Henriques suggests that either sensory orientation implies an order, a regime that prioritizes certain forms of human experience. He observes that Western philosophical tradition has focused almost exclusively on the capacity of eyesight objectified in image and text, discarding other physiological senses.[3] Such privileging of mind over body, or mind/body dualism, he argues, has developed a regime, dictated our attention, understanding and experience: "The written—in space—tends to maintain the status quo, whereas the spoken—in time—often questions it" (466). The written, as the objectification of the visual sensory regime, is not open to change once it is recorded in a material form and, therefore, suitable for reproduction and commodification. On the other hand, the spoken/sound, which materializes in time, is changeable with each repetition, and more readily public, resisting commodification in the same sense (Henriques 460-463). There is also the possibility of scripting sound or music into "sheet music" which privileges one form of performance over another, especially in the world of classical music. Recording, likewise, confines the song in a single rendition. This way of commodification still belongs in the visual sensory regime.

Funk, as a special organization of sound that articulates the emotional and intellectual make-up of a community, is one of the later modes that African American musical continuum—in Baraka's terms, "changing same"—has evolved into. Tony Bolden digs into musicians' worlds and words to find out a funky pattern in accordance with Baraka's view of the "changing same," that it has other faces such as swing (as verb), beat (as verb), rhythm and groove triggered by feeling and kinetics (10-14). Considering musicians' explanations through the 1920s and 30s into the 40s and on, Bolden observes that Stevie Wonder turns inclusively back to the likes of Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald to connect swing to his own funky style: "while the two *styles* of music may differ as markedly as their respective historical periods, the emotional referents of 'swing' and 'funk' are as synonymous as the words 'red' and 'crimson'" (16). Due to its ever-present and ever-evolving characteristic in Black music,

Bolden explains funk as epistemology, a way of knowing and feeling, locating it under the skin, "a subcutaneous construct" (16).

In the context of these ideas on groove and sound in relation to cultural resistance, the funk element can be found in the codes of the earliest African American, even African music. Baraka terms it as "funk lore"; a body of funk-knowledge. Funk is more than "a songbook" (Shafer 30); it is a way of knowing through the body and kinetics, movements to the sound. Funk lore, in Baraka's omniverse, is the perspective whereby human history can be read. It finds its clearest expression in the collection entitled, *Funk Lore* (1996). Its poet, intending to be a "rhythm traveller,"[4] to come alive at different times and places with the sounds of his ways, leaves behind several recording albums. For the purposes of this article, the album entitled *Real Song* (1994), speaks best with the issues in relation to funk lore. The poet's mission, just like the African oral historian griot/djali, is to enlighten; to make the listeners recognize and understand the ways of the world and their own situations. Listeners should tune not only their ears but also their bodies to the song/poem to enter into their system, their thinking and consciousness. The "real song" takes on life only when people attend with their minds and bodies, "starting from the idea of what type of sound" the singer chooses (Glennie).

The Ghosts

The warring forces in Baraka's omniverse can be reduced into two as destructive and creative. Such categorization might sound too basic, but in the face of urgency such as when multitudes are faced with extinction or slavery, such a fundamental perspective functions as clarification. The destructive force tries to make Earth into Dirt ("Dig" 138), wiping off the sound, the spirit and *le souffle*, i.e. breath, and basically all the imperfect, and therefore traceable finger/footprint from all human accomplishments. The villains in Baraka's historical narrative have names but when they are not named, these large- and small-scale villains are indicated as ghosts. Ghosts lack voice, sound, substance, and content. They are disembodied, abstract and therefore signify non-existence, non-entity and death. They are devoid of the many elements that make up a people: spirit, song, sound, voice, gods, eyes, light, heat, beat, memory and history: "What is not funky is psychological, metaphysical / is the religion of squares, pretending no one / is anywhere" (Baraka *Funk Lore* 9). Ghosts fill their vacuum with

imperialist greed, keeping themselves busy "Enslaving // Humanity / in / Cannibal / Menus" (Baraka *Funk Lore* 42).

"Somebody Blew Up America" is a clear illustration of Baraka's identification of villains through the "who" question—resonant with Allen Ginsberg's anaphoric "who" clauses in *Howl*. William J. Harris and Aldon Nielsen historicize and contextualize the smear campaign against the poet caused by this poem, as does Piotr Gwiazda (477-484). Ironically, the terms of the polemic functioned self-reflexively to dramatize Baraka's life-long struggle against historical and institutional villains. The controversy that ended with the dissolving of the Poet Laureate position in New Jersey almost came to simulate the drama in the poem—the ghosts, whether they are the establishment critics or politicians, were seen in action. Both Gwiazda and John R. O. Gery evaluate the dark irony in Baraka's approach that incessantly moves from historical fact to conspiracy to the absurd, the comical and the tragic (Gwiazda 475-477; Gery 174), noting the literary and performative capacity of this significant response to 9/11, one of the major grotesque and terrifying blows against human life. The refrain "who" with its purely sound quality as "hoooo" is suggested to have links with white male dominance (Harris and Nielsen 185), and can also be evoking the "hoooo"ing of the ghosts.

The poem "Why It's Quiet in Some Churches" addresses the ideology of silence and ghosts. The epigraph, "*Just a Closeta Walk with Thee*" is the centuries-old African American gospel song, registering the stubbornness of the vernacular tongue "closeta" instead of the proper "closer." The gospel song with its accentuated beat, and the screams and shouts of its singer, stands as a contrast against the quiet church. The poem opens almost like the theatrical instructions of a stage where no sound is allowed. The speaker assuming to be the mouthpiece of Western mind, tells the story of how mother goddess, sexuality, life force, emotions, flesh, sound and motion are banished from the house of Western (and, almost synonymous with that) Christian Civilization:

> We changed the spelling of Prophet to Profit
>
> We changed Soul to Sole
>
> We covered spirit with a ghost
>
> We changed Sun to Son, and with the help of the right

> Farther and knowledge of What Goest? He cd get his rightful inheritance.
>
> No. we took the mother out. We burned broads from Salem to Troy. From Soweto to Philadelphia to transform the pyramid of life to a triangle of death. We took the head and nuts off the ankh and changed the life sign to a cemetery advertisement. Then had mfs wear death around the necks they would long for it so. We dis connected creativity and art. (*Funk Lore* 25)

The poem also comments on Western aesthetics with references to *Oedipus Rex* and modernism:

> We created tragedy by killing our fathers, fucking our mothers putting out our eyes, and wandering the world as an advertisement for "modernism"
>
> We separated thought from feeling. We thought feeling wd stop us thinking, or vice versa. But then I do want to bore you. And the cross roads we took recrossed, recrossed, and the cold north was not that any more, but we were anyway, and then to exist was only possible w/ the slandered smoke of tortured change… (*Funk Lore* 25-26)

Oedipus' tragedy is recognized as almost the writing degree zero of classic Western literature. Baraka rejects this privileged position of the Oedipal narrative and implies that this "first crazy Eddie, Eddie-puss" the clubfoot who blinded himself, actually contributes to "mediocrity" and weakness (Lecture 294). Such a characterization of Oedipus signifies a defected, mediocre and slow type of understanding. Traditional Greek classicism/classism is built on the Oedipus tragedy and Aristotelian patterns and relationships on which Western/European thoughts, forms and aesthetics expand. The metaphor of understanding in Oedipus operates in terms of sight, disregarding sound altogether. In the absence of the audio sensory regime, flesh is censored, sexuality loathed, dissent criminalized and slavery promoted by the hand of institutionalized religion. Interestingly, however, Baraka's anti-Western (i.e. non-European) challenge is Western, that is, grounded historically, geographically and culturally in the United States of America.

Ghosts should be avoided at all costs. In the persona of the Black comedian, Mantan Moreland, who inevitably became a part of the racist Hollywood industry, the poem "Masked Angel Costume" evokes ghosts disguised under masks and angel costumes. The uncanny feeling is even more immanent since the speaker may also be a ghost speaking from behind that masked angel costume, and the reader would better watch out. The warnings begin thus:

1 Never let a ghost
Ketch you
Never!
2 Avoid Death
Ghosts
Always
be
there!
3 Dead People
& Live People
Should not
Mix!
4 Ghosts think they
good lookin
Never stay to find out!
5 I am mentioned in the credits
but the ghost
got the
dough! (*Funk Lore* 11)

The cinematic spectacle is designed to deceive via visual signs of masks and costumes. But the poem's overarching reference is to John Coltrane's song, "Alabama," whereby the poem calls back the moment of civil rights struggle when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed as an evil backlash against the March in Washington

two weeks earlier. The poem ends with its allegiance to "the music / that moved / my feet" —these are not only the feet moving to Black music but also the feet of the marchers and the boycotters, and also the poetic feet (see also Nielsen "Alabama"). On a collision course with Hollywood's smiling face that disguises racism, the compass of Black music, here epitomized by the Coltrane song written for this specific horrifying occasion, has "never / failed" to strike the right chord in the poem's final movement. The sonic space of black music, in this sense, is revelatory, whereas the visual order is deceptive.

The Living Spirit

The importance of sound, voice, speech, and the spoken word means that poems are primarily to be experienced in real time, as they are performed. The self-conscious orality and performance of Baraka's works are rooted in African oral tradition of the griot and djali, in the Harlem Renaissance, and also in American avant-garde poetry. Baraka can be located in the tradition that Lorenzo Thomas traces in the article, "Neon Griot." Thomas historicizes the social and political functions of poetry readings and underlines the public and performative character of Black poetry specifically. He also chronicles the maturation of American poetic tradition through the innovations by the "New American Poetry" and Black Arts Movement, implementing jazz and performance into poetry (196-216). He concludes "All poetry is incomplete until it is read aloud" (218). Building on the legacy of these innovative poetic traditions, the contemporary poet, Thomas remarks, consciously designs the typology of the poem so that it functions like a score guiding the performance of the poem (211). Jerome Rothenberg's program for creative writing, which he compiled from his own practices in the 1960s, also pays attention to oral and performative aspects of poetry. The gist of Rothenberg's vision can be expressed as "questioning of preconceptions about writing and language," based on Western philosophical tradition and Indo-European language systems (Waldman and Wright 122).

In Baraka's omniverse, the creative force, the "Living Spirit" (Sun Ra 296), projects the Earth as an expression, a song of existence, sounding and breathing in the image of the Black musician, embodied as Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughan, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and other hero(in)es of the "changing same." It is the force of the people who "are struggling to make the Earth habitable for human beings,"

not just for a few but for all the people (Baraka Lecture 298). The poems, "Art Against Art Not" and "Funk Lore" clearly describe that funky essence and pulse that envelope past, present and future:

Whatever there *wasiswill*
Space encompasses, yet the
truth stares from it
invisible as most
of where we are

We are in the body of space
as space
in specific lives
& waves

Like foot prints breathing
you'd have to
Know
as you tune in with everything
possibility exists
alive (*Funk Lore* 53-54)

The space of body and the body of space carry the human print in the form of truth—or, one might say, evidence. One has to "know," to "tune in," to dig. In Audre Lorde's words, "poetry is not a luxury" but a way of knowing things past, present and future—"*wasiswill*" in multiple and spontaneous temporal dimensions. Although Lorde's immediate address is specifically to Black women to urge them to articulate their ideas and transfer them into revolutionary action, poetry's function for Lorde is complementary here: "I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight" (37). Real people and real song or poetry are antidotes to the "spookism," the ghost disease as described above.

Griot and djali are the ancient African counterparts for the town crier, or *tellal*, as it is called in these geographical parts. Griot and djali

function not only as the transmitter of collective memory of a people, but also as the commentator of life and events, as Baraka puts it—also echoing Lorde's terms as "revelatory distillation of experience" quoted above:

> …Djali's job was to light up the mind, to make the mind shine, to make the mind smile, to make the mind laugh, to make the mind laugh with what? Understanding. Recognition. *To understand history as a revelationary story*. So that the poet, or at least the poet, per, my own self, like I say, DOC-I-MEANT. Doesn't talk about what you might'a meant, doesn't talk about what I might've meant, which is why I say doc-I-meant. So the poet that I meant, that is Djali, has the first function to light up peoples' minds, to make them understand the world. (Lecture 297)

This view combines the weight of the message together with the significance of the medium, which is the djali's voice, instrument, and performance. The alchemy of music and consciousness, rhythm and message, or form and content make up the real song, which acts on and lights up people's minds. This lighting up is metaphorical, and given the advanced technology to scan the brain's electrical neuron activity, is literal, too.

The closing track in the album, *Real Song*, is entitled, "Real Song Is A Dangerous Number."[5] Although Baraka aims at a smiling and even laughing mode of funky gnosis, an understanding and recognizing smile, such a state of mind does come with its stakes. Jacques Attali's contextualization of the totalitarian state's interventions on sound is complementary to the song being "a dangerous number." State surveillance is not limited to the visual but also includes the auditory because subversive music "betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality" in conflict with the totalitarian "concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody… distrust of new languages, codes or instruments, [and] refusal of the abnormal…" (Attali 7). In Baraka's poem, the speaker claims himself to be Johnny Ace, Sam Cook, Otis Redding, Teddy Pendergrass, Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley, and John Lennon, as many voices of the same revolutionary music. Not only their revolutionary spirit but also their brutally interrupted short lives bring them together in the poet's "real song."

The stakes of refusing to make deals, and having their voice and image too strong, to paraphrase from the poem, are high. The speaker also claims to be the poets Larry Neal and Henry Dumas, and he implies that they died at the peak of their productivity *because* they sang the real song. This poem is an eerie reminder of the closeness of death for those who sing the real song including the poet himself, and it uncannily clashes with the fact that it is/was actually Baraka's birthday on the day of recording, as the cheers of the audience recorded live also indicate. Death's closeness casts a shadow on the real song, clarifies the stakes for the singer, affirming its collision with state sanctioned forms of exclusion, such as racism, colonialism, imperialism, chronic poverty and criminalization.

Such dark historical consciousness seems to be necessary for self-knowledge, if one takes a look at the history of colonialism and slavery opposed by democratic struggles and civic revolts, emblematically in Africa and America. Baraka's omniverse contains, in Aldon Nielsen's words, "the ancient African DNA" of Black music, the essence of Funk Lore, "mak[ing] it available for a recombinant 21st century lyric politics" ("Belief" 179). The kernel of this "lyric politics" is funk lore, is a form of "love supreme" which makes the people capable of creating and recreating themselves, as Baraka sings in "Funk Lore":

& now black again we are the
whole of night
with sparkling eyes staring
down
like jets
to push
evenings
ascension
that's why we are the blues
the train whistle
the rumble across
the invisible coming
drumming and screaming
that's why we are the

blues
& work & sing & leave
tales & is with spirit
that's why we are
the blues
black & alive
& so we show our motion
our breathing
we moon
reflected soul
that's why our spirit
make us
the blues
we is ourselves
the blues (*Funk Lore* 97)

Conclusion

Baraka understands the "real song" to be the marker of time as well as the modality in which the poem exists. Maintaining the independent and nonprofessional character of the town crier tradition, Baraka creates the sonic space where the universe is alive with traces, footprints and fingerprints. Listening to the vibrating evidence of a live universe is the lesson the listeners and readers are invited to take. Performance calls attention to itself as performance, in real time and as a physical event. The song is not private for the privileged ears of an Odysseus since the singer-poet-djali tells of what has happened, is happening and will happen, meant for all the people. The "doc-I-meant" materializes the context: "the train whistle / the rumble across / the invisible coming / drumming and screaming"—these are the sounds of the South that document its runaway slaves, people getting on trains northbound, carrying the music wherever they go. The poet chronicles and sings the song of a people to show them where they come from, where they go and how to belong to a place—a black and blue place where funk lore is rooted.

Notes

[1] *Omniverse* is the title for Sun Ra's 1979 album. I adapted Sun Ra's coinage, which is a play on the words universe and verse. The prefix omni- means all times, all places and all ways.

[2] See especially Michael Bull and Les Back's introduction, and articles by Paul Filmer, Murray Schafer and Julian Henriques in the same volume.

[3] This idea is related to "proprioception," which means the awareness of the stimuli produced and perceived in an organism, as connected to the bodily position and movement. The concept is also central to Charles Olson's poetics, as mentioned in the Introduction to this issue.

[4] See the short story, "Rhythm Travel."

[5] Unfortunately, I do not have access to *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka (1987), where this poem appears. Therefore, I cite the album, *Real Song* for the source of the poem.

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