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Historiography in “Beginnings: Malcolm” by Amiri Baraka

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Aimiri Baraka’s concern with the history of black people in his poem “Beginnings: Malcolm”. The writers try to shed some light on the way Baraka’s historiography challenges the white supremacist discourses through a rewriting of the African American past that blurs the boundaries of myth and history, fact and fiction, in a postmodern manner. It is argued that through the use of the central African myth of Esu/Elegba and drawing on traditions of Christianity and Western literature/culture, Baraka’s poem offers an uncanny insight into the past.

Keywords: Aimiri Baraka; “Beginnings: Malcolm”; historiography African American; myth of Esu/Elegba

1. INTRODUCTION

Fredric Jameson in his *Cultural Turn* (1998) accuses postmodernism of “historical amnesia and the stifling of the sense of history itself” (90). However, Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) rejects the ahistoricity ascribed to postmodernism, insisting upon the fact that while postmodernism is obsessed with history, this obsession rather than a nostalgic return to the past focuses on a “critical revisiting” (xii). In fact, she argues, after the advent of postmodernism in the 60s, while the enthusiasm of the contemporary world to look upon the past and its history never decreased, this review was mostly done from behind the critical glasses of postmodern historiography.

In the first step, postmodern historiography challenged the idea of the “end of history” that, as Simon Malpas points out, rather than the stop in the occurrence of events meant that the ways in which the past were historicized and produced had ended (89). This shaking of the foundations of history in fact emanated from the postmodern focus on language and problematizing the question of reference. As Hutcheon elaborates, postmodernism rather than denying the existence of the past insists that we can know it just through its textual remains which refer to themselves rather than an outside reality (155). In other words, language, as it becomes quite clear in the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction refers to itself, not to an extratextual reality.

Therefore, the distinction that was previously made between history and fiction as two distinct worlds of reality and fantasy became meaningless. In fact, while postmodern theorists acknowledge the paradox that “any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative, with the fictions that render possible any claim to ‘truth’, however provisional,” what they add is that no narrative can be “a natural master narrative;” “there are no natural hierarchies, there are only those we construct” (Hutcheon 13). This displacing of previous centers provided discursive margins with a chance to challenge the reality of the past and its ‘truths,’ and also it gave them the opportunity of adding their own narratives. This made the coincidence of postmodernism with the most heated moments of racial struggle in America a timely one.

The African-American nation of America as the indispensable discursive margin of this society made use of this opportunity in the 60s to reinforce its fight against racism through discursive challenges that were posed to the white, ruling, and supremacist center of this society. This black “counter-culture” (Hutcheon 62) in its merging of the political and the aesthetic in order to pose discursive challenge distinguished itself by making use of such black cultural elements as music, myth, and vernacular. From a historiographic point of view, this was just rewriting the past through discourses, but through methods too.

One of the most prominent literary figures of the black counter-culture from 60s on was LeRoi Jones (1936-2014). After his adherence to the Black Arts Movement, LeRoi Jones moved to Harlem and turning into one of the spiritual leaders of the black racial struggles assumed the Islamic name of Amiri Baraka. His literary production as a black artist has been a broad record of dominant racist discourses and discursive methods, one based upon new conceptions of literature and history. Along with other literary figures in the Black Arts Movement, his use of black cultural elements and oral heritage has been an effort to rewrite the racist discourse of black cultural inferiority. It was a fight against the systems of the white academic world that had so long deemed anything black inferior.

2. DISCUSSION

In an interview with Kalamu Ya Salam Baraka states that “if you adopt a certain form, that form is going to push you into a certain content because the form is not just the form, the form itself is content. There is content in form and in your choice of form [...] the shaping itself (of the forms) is a choice and that choice is ideological” (3). This artistic merging of content and form is carried on most appropriately in “Beginnings: Malcolm” through the African myth of Esu, Elegba, or Elegbara. In this poem, published in 2003, Baraka’s historiography revolves around the concept and structure of a black myth that, as Henry Louis Gates in his *Signifying Monkey* (1995) interprets it, is the myth of rewriting and discourse (21).

“Beginnings: Malcolm” is a historiographic recounting of the black past, i.e. the first encounters black people had with white slave traders, the 60s and its racial struggles, Malcolm X as one of their most prominent leaders, and finally the present time and Baraka, the black poet himself. His choice of a mythical story-teller that is the representative of discourse ironically hints at the postmodern equivalency of history with story. This indispensable character to black oral culture — that survived transition to the New World in the character of the Signifying Monkey (Gates 42) — is a liminal being that dwells at the border which divides gods from men to interpret the divine signs that gods inscribe for men to determine their destinies (78).

Gates believes that the importance orality has over writing in African culture — as this culture and its remaining literature are mostly oral ones — is due to the priority Legba's oral interpretation had over the written signs (21). In fact, Legba or Esu is a "hermeneutical trickster" that because of his role in connecting signs to truth or understanding is called "discourse" itself (Gates 21). The trickster narratives in which Legba, or later the Signifying Monkey, appears are true emblems of how African thought was aware of the discursive nature of truth. As Ann Doueihi in "Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story in Trickster Narratives" states, trickster stories because of their conscious manipulation of listeners to believe a lie or trick for truth, are tremendously illuminating since they "open us to the way our minds function to construct an apparently solid but ultimately illusory reality out of what is on another level a play of signs" (198).

The focus on such a character and the outlook it ensues are invaluable to Baraka's historiography of the black past; he challenges the legitimacy of the remaining histories of the past by presenting a review of it from a different point of view, hinting at the constructed nature of history and the truths it presents. In a mode of historiography in which Legba is central, Baraka recreates the past from a black point of view. Therefore, beginning to narrate the past in the form of an oral story that deviates from white conventional norms of writing history seems to be the most appropriate form. It is the story of the past remembered from a communal point of view that simultaneously draws on western symbols and elements. The following lines exemplify Baraka's attempt to intimate the history of black people through an uncanny merging of images from Christianity, literary/fictitious/fictional Western tradition and the history of colonialism/slavery. Note how the arrival of European ships — bringing in the colonizers and carrying back black slaves — at the coasts of Africa with their 'fictitious' claim of civilizing (Christening) mission and its 'actual' apocalyptic consequence for black people is invoked through a merging of echoes from the Bible, Western literature and Western dehumanization of black people.

when the Beast emerged from the western sea as a *fictitious* ghost who was
an *actual* ghost to the niggers He carried in his pouch of filth his Moby Dick
ship called Jesus... (emphasis added, 1-4)

The oral, performative mode of the poem is also evident in the music by Duke Ellington that Baraka has chosen to accompany the poem. This deviation from conventions, as another level of rewriting of white standards, is present in the punctuation of the poem. The sentences rather than full stops are separated with commas that mark breath pauses, a quality Baraka owes to William Carlos Williams that taught him to "talk verse," "spoken verse," like jazz singers (Davids 65).

Another cultural element Baraka draws on throughout is repetition and revision that Gates believes to be at the core of black literary conventions and the art of black Signification (xxi), one that, unlike the white term which means "making meaning," by revolving around repetition and then revision and subversion is about the "ways of making meaning" (46). The word repeated, with different connotations, right in the very first line of the poem is "Beast" that throughout the poem refers to three persons: the white slave trader, Legba, and Malcolm X before his spiritual and political transformation.

This repetition with different connotations not only points to the constructedness of meaning, but also presents a rewriting of the word and in fact the discourse that regarded the Africans as primitive beasts and justified slavery and inhuman treatment of them.

Fittingly, Baraka's historiography and revision of the word "Beast" are done by drawing on two very famous allusions to the classic western literature and Christianity: Moby Dick and Captain Ahab's hunting adventure, and also the number 666 in the Bible or the Satan that emerged from the sea to seduce Jesus (Berry 97). In fact, Baraka focuses on the irony that dominates Moby Dick's story: though Captain Ahab is sailing his ship to hunt a beastlike whale, it is inferred that the real beast is Captain Ahab himself, and Moby Dick is the emblem of pure innocence.

What makes the history of slavery ironic is that while the white discourses justified the cruel treatment of the slaves by representing the people with African descent as apelike, uncivilized beasts, the real beasts were the white slave traders that ruined the slaves' lives, scattered their families, chained their bodies in the suffocating dark ship cellars, and finally either drowned their dead rotting bodies in the sea, or killed them under the hot sun of the plantations (Berry 99).

The Book of Revelation refers to the 666 as the beast that emerged from the sea to seduce Jesus, and ruin innocence (Berry 97). In fact, Baraka in his reversal of the story of Christianity's dominance of ungodly black beasts, rewrites history by depicting the white man as the Beast that under the false cover of Christianity seduced and caged the "black Satan" that was in fact an angle.

By this black, or red Satan, he means Legba: "and the one legged man who was the Beast / caught the big red Satan and threw him in a cage". This falling prey to the white man's trap is the result of treason that Baraka presents in another reversal of a Christian story and image. Like Jesus who was arrested because of the trickery of one of his apostles, the black man is also sold and caged because of the treason of his brothers who could not resist the temptations of money:

like an African he though, his brother had sold the Beast had bought, he had no
soul, and they'd created money, the animal king, the coin, the khan, the con, hard
currency, the cold return, was a ghost

[...]

and poor Satan thrown from heaven where he was white burned bright red as he
fell through the night... (13-16, 19-21)

In this historiography, the white man is the evil force that draws Legba down from his innocent, godly state, and imprisons him.

At this point, Baraka ties this line of historiography and rewriting to another pivotal moment in the history of the black nation of America: the 60s and Malcolm X, one of the most important leaders of racial struggles in America. Legba, the black god, is looking for "the redman:"

... he was Sisyphus too, Elegba if you insist, legs thrown akimbo, looking for
Detroit, the redman (24-26)

“The redman” is Malcolm’s title before his political, and spiritual conversion. Born in 1925 in Nebraska, and living the difficult life of being both black and orphan, in his youth he experienced prison several times for illegal acts. Peter Louis Goldman in his book *The Life and Death of Malcolm X* (1979) recounts that not only “the prison authorities typed him early on as ‘arrogant’ and ‘uncooperative’”, but also in prison he was known as “Satan” or “Detroit Red” that besides the color of his hair referred to his being “an incorrigible hard-timer, with his mind [...] in a ‘fog bag’ and his gut in a state of permanent mutinous rage” (33). Legba is looking for the redman who is a “devil, a nigger, a villainous buck / a spirit / and an injune”.

Baraka’s depiction of Malcolm in the cage reminds one of how Legba fell down from the sky and was imprisoned. In his rewriting of white discourses, Baraka intimates that Malcolm was a Satan not because he was a black man and an essential villain — or the beast that white discourses made — but because he was not in fact truly black. He denied the existence of Legba, the black spirit: “he said the ghost is not real, and / neither is God”. In an ironic rewriting, rather than Jesus, Legba is the prophet that saves him from the prison of not being himself and not being black, quite ironically, by leading him toward Islam rather than Christianity. Malcolm was no more the beast he was before:

But when the Prophet called his name, and appeared in the cage and his rage turned to love and Allah released him, [...] He swore to uphold the holy almighty soul (33-37)

While Christianity had turned the blacks into slaves, Islam turned them into militant fighters; the belief in the black Spirit changed Malcolm from a red Satan into a black warrior that for the first time in the history of black man bravely fought the real Beast, the white man. Baraka himself after his conversion to Islam changed his name from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka that meant the “warrior of blessings”. In fact, many black people chose Islam as a rewriting of Christianity that had denied them voice and identity. In other words, conversion to Islam was mostly a political act:

Thought God released him, cold eyed and mannish a cold nigger punk a murderous skunk sold dope, found the Beast number and played it like a game, till the Beast really came until the Lamb called his name, and freed him no longer the zoot suit Satan nigger in jail unleashed him on the Beast (38-45)

Baraka’s historiography reveals itself in the rewriting of the common conceptions of its narration; he narrates the history of Malcolm’s life, as a pivotal moment in black history, in the words chosen from black slang and vernacular. All the words, “nigger punk”, “skunk”, and “dope” rewrite history not only from a black point of view, but also in a black language, the language of the downtrodden that are ready to rebel against the “Beast” oppressor.

The black prophet, Jesus-like, resists the temptations of the Beast: and the Beast who was a man and the ghost who never existed sat across the evil of money and glistened with evil like slobbering pain. They called and he turned but he was never the same. (48-52)

Again in the manner of a prophet, and as repeated in many other poems by Baraka, what exists at the core of this black rebellion and rage is love. The black prophet fights because there is no other way to confront the Beast but fight:

Even then, when he had left that cage of sin the Lamb sent a nightingale, wearing
the red crescent of Marvin Gaye, mercy mercy me, O Lamb of Allah of black
sheep, of woolly feeling, oh nigger with only three pennies

worth of Dis in the devil's world (53-59)

By opposing the black man as the emblem of love that is accompanied with such signs as the "nightingale" and the "red crescent", with the antagonists whose desire is "suffocating fire", referring to the bullets that killed Malcolm, once again Baraka elaborates on the word "Beast" and the discourses that depended upon it. In fact, Baraka rewrites the history and discourses that represented Malcolm and the similar black activists as violent and aggressive by applying the word "Beast" to those who assassinated "the handsome young minister," as Betty, Malcolm's wife, refers to him. In a historical parody of the oppressors and their ways, Baraka insists upon the words prophet as "not the profit, the good not the / gut, bread is not pain, money is the jewelry of the bowels" (65-67)). In other words, the black prophet not only resists the Devil's temptations, but also he never resigns to be made use of.

The last part of the poem is the unexpected result Baraka brings; he poses himself as the last piece that completes his historiography. Like Betty, Malcolm's wife, the poet's wife, Amina, is accompanying him on his journey. Baraka declares himself as another prophet:

Was Black Betty there, Betty, beautiful, looking into the Prophet's eyes following
him inside blackness with the tales of her fire with the fiery tail with the kiss
divine, like the poet's Amina, sitting there staring at the once Satanic issue, like joy
from a hidden fissure in the earth, oh woman of the beginning, oh wife of the
Prophet, O, Lover! (68-76)

It is important to note that if Malcolm after being saved by the messenger of the gods, Legba, turned into a prophet, Baraka is a prophet because besides his attempts to awake his people, he is a Legba himself; as a poet he rewrites discourses and discursive signs that have always oppressed black people. As Gates explains, Legba is the divine messenger whose duty of decoding signs and interpreting them to determine men's destiny reminds one of discourse. Baraka too as a poet attempts to connect old signs from black history to new truths.

3. CONCLUSION

Baraka as a black poet and a 'black Legba' plays upon the words through black vernacular and oral conventions to rebel against the official history of the past with its conventional structures, to undermine the discourses that so long have 'made' the reality of black inferiority and subjugation. This quality turns him into a prophet that decodes signs to interpret a better destiny for his people whereby to lead them toward a better destiny.

What makes Legba or Esu the most appropriate structure for black rebellion against the past is the discursive outlook this myth gives to black thought toward reality. In the African sculptures that remain, Legba keeps a calabash in his hand in which he keeps “ase” (Gates 7). Gates defines “ase” as “logos, as the word as understanding,” as “the founding substance by which Olodumare, the supreme Yoruban god, created the universe”(7). Like Malcom X of the poem’s title discussed here, Baraka too as a poet and prophet living at a postmodern age, in the guise of Legba connects words to new understandings and meanings to lead his people toward a better future.

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