

Musical Elements and Affiliation in Amiri Baraka's Assemblages of Home

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Abstract

Musical elements—including rhythm, beat, melody and harmony, syncopation and chromaticism, to name a few—all become coded in assemblages that in Amiri Baraka's poetry and drama become framing devices to the end of social activism. This paper explores the musical rhetorical features in Baraka's writing in light of what he called “conditioning” of racialization in his collections of essays from the 1960s titled *Home: Social Essays*. It asks: how did music—especially experimental free jazz—throughout his writing and performing career provide Baraka models of critical assemblages that explode conditioned racist assignments limiting one's sovereignty and opportunities according to a perceived spectrum of privilege and entitlement. Baraka was interested in redefining such racial conditioning so as to expose and satirize it, much as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* more recently does. Insofar as Baraka saw racism as a means of providing cheap labor and denying sovereignty to both African Americans and Africans in white-controlled colonies in the 1960s (including apartheid South Africa), he saw the big Marxist picture of struggle against exploitation predicated on conditioning that justified liberal beliefs in progress rather than immediate liberation. Baraka situates himself in the longstanding struggle between the self-serving sell-outs to what he calls “tokenism” (of a Booker T. Washington lineage) and the radicalism of a W. E. B. Du Bois lineage that would include Malcolm X and himself. This paper asks: how does music provide a radical technical means for embodying the temporality of a “deferred dream” and the assertion of a de-conditioned American present that feels like home.

Key words : free jazz, poetry, drama, dissidence/dissonance, conditioning, alienation, decolonization, emplacement